

## WOMEN FOUNDED WINCHESTER HOSPITAL

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

The women of Winchester, though not unique in founding a hospital, were extraordinary, taking a tremendous, untried step to introduce a new and costly venture in town. They were encouraged by the local doctors who saw that they were the ones to do it.

Before there was a hospital, medical care in Winchester rested in the hands of its individual resident doctors. Emergency cases requiring hospitalization had to be taken out of town. Those who needed prolonged care and could afford it could hire private nurses. In other homes, people could not afford it. Many caregivers, if there were any available, lacked any knowledge of how to nurse the ill or even tend their newborns. Further, all too many residents lacked an understanding of good nutrition and even sanitation.



*The Visiting Nurse Association  
Board of Directors at the cornerstone  
ceremony for Winchester Hospital*

The Winchester Board of Health addressed many matters of public health. However, none of the Board's activities addressed the need for improved home health care and the lack of a hospital. Another solution was needed. Fortunately, there was already a model they could follow.

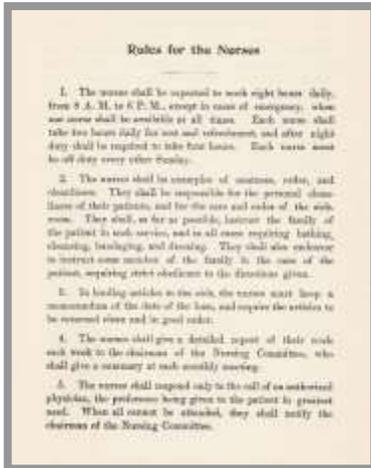
After the Interactive Visiting Nurse Association of Boston was founded in 1886, some other Massachusetts communities followed suit. In Winchester the program began when Cornelia McAvoy Houghton, a doctor's wife who was herself a nurse, asked the cooperation of The Fortnightly (women's club) in kindling public opinion in its favor. Accordingly, a committee was appointed, a meeting was held, and a Visiting Nurse Association (VNA) was born in 1899.

### THE ANGELS OF THE TOWN

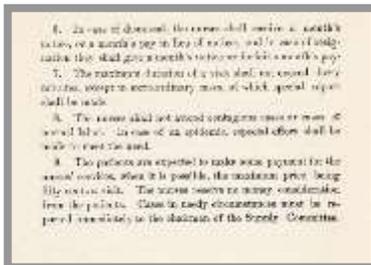
On March 15, 1899, Winchester's first visiting nurse, Ellen McArdle, made her first round of nursing visits to patients at home. She made over 100 calls every month that first year, responding only to requests by authorized physicians. That May, Dr. George Mead reported on the great good McArdle was doing and the invaluable help she had been to him. After hearing that in some cases of emergency an unemployed nurse in town had given her services, the board then engaged an emergency nurse. Soon all the doctors were calling on the nurses for assistance.

In the second year, to meet the growing demand, the Association added a second regular visiting nurse and engaged Tekla Enholm, a graduate of the New England Hospital. Garbed in a uniform

provided by the Association, the nurses made 4,462 visits to 461 patients, an average of 372 visits per month. Annually, the number of visits ranged between 3,000 and 4,000.



The first duty of “the angels of the town,” as first VNA president Mary Coit called them, was to the poor, making no distinction due to ethnicity or creed. “Our skilled nurses go from house to house ministering to the sick, lifting by their cheerful presence the cloud of discouragement that must so often hang heavily over the spirits of those to whom sickness means suffering without the alleviations which money can bring.”



Within two years, both McArdele and Enholm resigned. Other nurses filled in until 1901, when Flora Stevens, age 34, and Bernice Billings, age 22, were engaged. Though other nurses might be called in for emergencies or temporary help, these two carried on the home visits through 1913. The nurses received \$60 per month, and a house to live in where the Association installed a telephone, “so that quick communication may be had between the physicians and our nurses, which in emergency cases is of great importance.”

The Association’s aim was “to give to the sick, and especially to those of limited means, the best home nursing under existing circumstances,” whatever the need was.

“If a poor woman lies sick unto death, and the doctor says she must have constant care, day and night, or she will die, the Association does not stop after giving the care of the visiting nurse, nor does it waste time in trying to find some relative competent to pay a nurse. It says, ‘We will save the woman if we can and make inquiries afterward.’ If a baby is born into a home where no preparations for its coming have been made, the ministrations of the Visiting Nurse do not cease with her professional duties, but include the provision of a suitable layette for the child. When a nurse is called to care for a woman dying of consumption, whose last days are harassed by anxiety for her boys who will be left orphans when she is dead, the Association interests itself to provide homes for them,” wrote Mary L. D. Johnson, Visiting Nurse Association Secretary in 1905.

The work was recognized to be arduous. “The [nursing] profession is full of enthusiastic and self-denying members. And those who choose this special branch of the service must do it from other motives than for the financial returns it brings,” the Association reported in 1902.

If it rained, if it snowed, if it was bitter cold, the nurses traversed the town to visit their patients. The experiences of those first nurses were likely similar to those of the nurses of a decade or two later who recalled making their rounds on foot.

“When we first started, we had to walk. We had no way of transportation, only a bus [streetcar], and if we would take care of a patient and if it was time for the bus, you lost the bus and had to walk from one end of the town to the other to your next call. I used to have about nine calls a day. There were only three of us when I first started, and then it grew up to where we had about four district nurses. I loved district nursing because it was a way of helping poor, and at the time we had no welfare, and the people had to depend on organizations,” Catherine O’Loughlin, a visiting nurse in 1913, recalled.



“I used to walk to Myopia Hill in 1921 when I was in district nursing, up that hill and down Cambridge Street,” Valerie Timmins, a Winchester Hospital Nurse, remembered. “There was no such thing as the dole or anything of that sort. Mrs. Donnelly let me out of the Ford at the corner of Church Street, and I had to carry a milk can half full of lamb stew the whole length of Cambridge Street, down to this two-family house. It was wintertime. I had to go through the snow and all. It was the heaviest thing I ever carried.”

### TALKING ABOUT A HOSPITAL



*Adaline B. Church, M.D.*

Cornelia Houghton, who first suggested that Winchester have a visiting nurse program, was a trained nurse who settled in Winchester as a doctor’s wife. Dr. Adaline Church, who practiced and taught obstetrics in Boston, acted as an advisor. Dr. Fredrika Moore leant her support, after moving to town in 1911, and when the hospital was formed, became an officer.

Otherwise, the women who began and ran the VNA were not professional medical or business women but basically club women with experience in running community and charitable programs. The first two presidents, Mary Coit and Ellen Metcalf, were ministers’ wives. The third, Katherine Pond, was a single woman, formerly the town’s librarian.

Concern for the welfare of others, determination to fill a need, and dedication to a good cause, combined with the support of the community, led to their success. Once the nursing service was begun, local doctors began talking to the Association about the need for an operating room. This gradually developed into talks about founding a hospital.

Starting a hospital was more daunting than managing a few nurses, providing their supplies, and offering some social services to the needy. Though agreeing with the doctors about the need, for several years the women of the Association decided they could not afford the venture.

In 1908, their hopes were raised by the promise of a \$50,000 gift for a hospital. A group of men formed a corporation and tried to raise a matching \$50,000. Failing, they had to return the gift.

### COTTAGE HOSPITAL

Unable to build, the women decided in 1911 to rent a house, fit it up as a hospital, and run it for two years, according to a VNA report, to “prove the experiment whether or not a Hospital was wanted in Winchester, and if it could be made a success.”



*Todd House Cottage Hospital*



On March 8, 1912, a service of prayer, led by the Rev. John W. Suter and shared by six clergymen of the town, dedicated the hospital to its work. On March 11, it was ready to receive its first patients. During the first month it had twenty-six patients and ten operations.

The cottage hospital was small. On one side of the first floor were the operating room, the ether room, and the sterilizing room. On the other side were two rooms for three beds each, a dining room, kitchen, and a small sun parlor. On the second floor were two rooms with two beds each, two private rooms, a maternity room, and a nursery. The third floor contained five rooms for the use of the superintendent and nurses.

The hospital was staffed not by doctors but only nurses. During its first six months the hospital depended on qualified graduate nurses. Finding this very expensive, the VNA started a training school for nurses, which continued through 1932. Doctors provided the instruction, and the students trained in the hospital under the supervisor of nurses.

The community helped support the hospital. Donations came in the form of furniture, medical equipment, clothing, towels, soap, teapots, dishes, a basket of peaches, a barrel of potatoes, other fresh and canned fruits and vegetables, jellies, pickles, a planting garden, a ton of coal, and many other items, as well as labor and discounts on tradesmen’s and laundry bills, as well as cash.

The experiment was a success. It proved that Winchester needed and wanted a hospital. But the building also proved to be inadequate. It was too small. It had no elevator. Doctors had to carry patients from the operating room to the rooms upstairs. The nurses’ quarters on the third floor were suffocatingly hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

## WINCHESTER HOSPITAL

The VNA then had the challenge of raising money to build a permanent hospital building. Although the first attempt to raise an endowment in 1909 had failed, the VNA determined that the next effort would succeed—and it did. The Board of Directors consulted with Kendall, Taylor & Co., Architects, and chose a lot of nearly five acres on Highland Avenue and Fairmount Street, sufficiently large enough for future expansion.

At a public meeting on Donation Day, October 2, 1913, the Board announced its decision in Town Hall. Its goal was to raise \$100,000. Many citizens and doctors spoke in favor of a modern hospital building and pledged themselves to its support. The next Monday, a committee of 110 women, afoot and in automobiles, canvassed the town, visiting businesses, factories, and residences. They collected \$24,000 in cash and pledges. Even the school children saved their pennies and gave them to the teachers to add to the collection.

It was still not enough money, but the women were determined to go forward. In November, the Board voted to lease its present site for another year and half but also to purchase the Fairmount Street lot and build a hospital as soon as the amount of money they could raise would seem to warrant it. During the spring of 1915, a second canvas was made by the men supporting the hospital. They raised \$38,380. Other appeals went out to the community.

Still short of the goal, the Board decided that fall not to begin the building. However, in the spring of 1916, the Building Committee decided to begin at once, in the belief that the sight of something tangible rising on the lot would encourage people to make the last needed donations. A \$10,000 bequest for the new Nurses' Home also encouraged the Committee to go forward.



*Townpeople clustered around orator Gov. Samuel McCall (right of the post) at the cornerstone ceremony*

On the morning of May 18, 1916, the cornerstone was laid. It was then announced that the building fund would receive the \$50,000 formerly offered. With the help of additional gifts, the hospital was completed free of debt at a cost (for land and buildings but not furnishings) of \$96,178.26. On May 18, 1917, when the hospital opened for inspection, members of the Visiting Nurse Association committees, Sunbonnet Sisters (a girls' club devoted to helping the hospital), Winton Club (a women's club pledged to supply the hospital linens), and the Sigma Beta and En Ka high school sororities escorted visitors through the new facility. The hospital was first occupied by patients on May 28, 1917.

After the hospital opened, it immediately faced trials with the American entry into World War I (and consequent loss of staff) and the Spanish Influenza epidemic, but it survived. Like the hospital's construction, its survival was a joint effort with the community. When staff could not work, the help was there. Former nurses volunteered to take the place of both visiting and hospital nurses. Other women went into the hospital and took care of the cooking, cleaning and laundry work.

The hospital continued to be managed by women through 1926 when men were first introduced onto the Board of Directors. Originally, nurses were the only medical hospital staff. A dietetical housekeeper was added after the move to the new building. Doctors gave lectures at the training school but were not on staff until a roentgenologist (radiologist) was needed in 1924. During 1928-1929, the physicians who resided and practiced in Winchester were formed into a regular medical staff.



The continuing success of the hospital is due to a number of factors, but it all began with the work of a band of courageous and noble women who tried an experiment in 1912 to improve health care in their community.

### VNA CARRIES ON



After the hospital was founded, the VNA maintained two sets of nurses, hospital nurses and visiting nurses, who continued their rounds of home visits around the town.

During the Great Depression, several steps were taken to improve the financial condition of the hospital. One of these was the separation of the Hospital from the Visiting Nurse Association. The VNA continued its work as a separate entity until 1975 when it merged with the Visiting Nurse Associations of Lexington and Arlington into Tri-Community Health Services, Inc., later known as the Visiting Nurse and Community Health Foundation, Inc.

*Nurse Alice Gormley in a 1920 newspaper photograph<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 11, 2002 and March 31, 2012. This revision supersedes all previous articles. Knight also authored a detailed history of the hospital, *Winchester Hospital: Our First 100 Years*, published by the hospital in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *The Winchester Star* published a description of Mrs. Gormley's routine on Oct. 1, 1920.