

'THE THIRD NURSES RESIDENCE, VGH'- Bethune Building

BY Gloria Stephens, March 2020

In order to tell the story of the Bethune building, it is important to start at the beginning of what nurses had to endure with regard to their accommodation after a formal hospital was originally built to serve the citizens of Halifax and Nova Scotia. This would be about 1859 when the first wooden hospital was built on the south common, called the 'City Hospital', a complete failure for many reasons of which none will be discussed here. After much bickering among doctors and City officials an 'improved' hospital was built in 1867 called the 'Provincial & City hospital. Several recommendations were made in the hopes of improving patient care and

better working conditions for staff, especially the doctors. Here is one such recommendation from the Annual Report, requesting two 'Trained' nurses.

Between 1867 and 1887 the situation

The Medical Board would recommend the employment of two trained nurses. These by example and precept would soon make an efficient corps of the carefully selected untrained nurses now on duty. The expense would not be great, and the results be very shortly satisfactory.

The Medical Board suggests that, as soon as available, dining rooms be arranged for convalescent patients.

The prime necessity of an ambulance system in connection with a Hospital has been recognized in all cities where accidents frequently

To the experience and superintendence of Mrs. Horne, the Matron, is due the internal cleanliness of the institution and the excellently prepared dietary, as well as in a large degree the discipline of the employes.

The employes in general give satisfaction.

In conclusion, the Medical Board would express their thanks to your Honorable Board for the courtesy and consideration they have received from you; their gratification that a friendly conference with you has placed our mutual relationship on a satisfactory basis; and venture to hope that the improvements suggested in this report will so far merit your approbation as to ensure their accomplishment.

With the advantages at its disposal, the Medical Board, without overstepping the bounds of modesty, feel competent to undertake, with as fair an earnest of success as any institution of a similar nature can claim, any professional duties which may be demanded, and assure the public at large that no citizen need seek relief from any foreign source. They have, at their own home, a fully equipped and thoroughly reliable institution.

Very respectfully,

D. DEW. HARRINGTON, M.D., Sec'y. WILLIAM J. ALMON, M.D.,
Chairman of the Board.

within the hospital remained the same especially with regard to nurses, still untrained for the most part, very little pay and absolutely no consideration for their accommodation or their welfare. In fact the nurses' shared empty beds on the patient wards, that is, one would get up, go on duty and the night nurse would then sleep in the same bed. How they managed their personal care was not

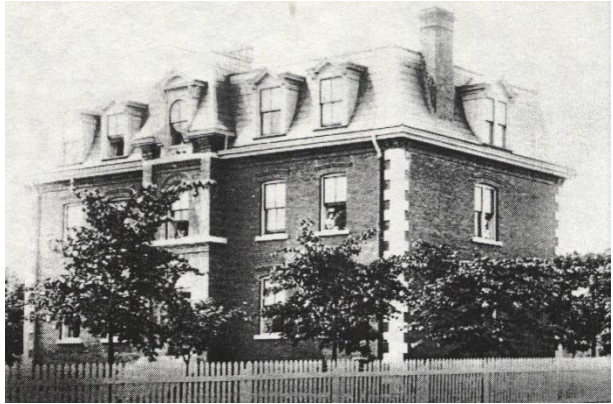
documented in the report. Queen Victoria celebrated her Jubilee in 1887 and to honour her the hospital name was changed to Victoria General hospital and has remained such.

Also, at this time, wings were added to the centre portion of the hospital, which was given the separate name of 'Jubilee building' and the bed capacity increased from 80 to 140 beds. A separate apartment was made for the 'House Surgeon' in a wing but no accommodation as yet for nurses so they continued to use the empty ward beds for sleeping.



VICTORIA GENERAL HOSPITAL 1900

With the hospital bed increase and doctors beginning to specialize into either medicine or surgery, thus demanding more of the nurse, the problem of staffing became a major issue. In 1890 the first organized nursing school in the Maritimes was developed at the VG with the 'Lady Superintendent' being Julie Purdy from New Brunswick, a graduate of Boston. She demanded that a 'proper' nurse's residence be built immediately. So an existing house, close to the hospital, was purchased for this intent. Twenty student nurses were housed in this 'Home', including the Lady Superintendent who would supervise the students not only in the hospital but in the residence as well.



Here are some of the 'rules' that had to be adhered to: *"duty to take care of your health – avoid chills,- 8 hours sleep a night; outdoor exercises daily,- wash hands frequently;- hair above collar or netted;- no jewelry or flowers worn if in uniform;- no wearing uniform on the street- no visitors or smoking in room; no paper combings, eatables thrown into 'SLOP JAR' which must be emptied daily- lights out 10:30 pm- room always open for inspection by Superintendent- walls not defaced in any way- room aired & dusted daily, time off Sunday to attend church and one evening a week until 9 pm for courting"*.

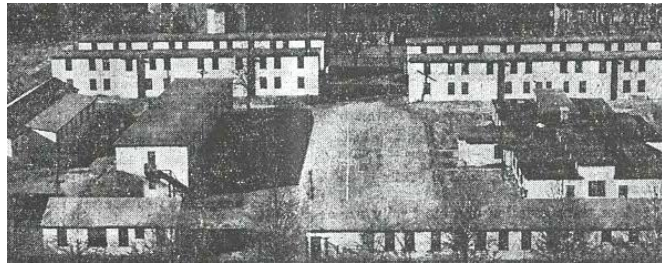


The bed capacity, services and technology was again increased and again requiring more staff. To meet the demand, the student nursing classes were increased causing the need for a larger residence. So this residence, picture to the left, was erected which was angled at the north wing of the hospital and parallel with Morris Street. This nurse's residence (2nd one) remained until 1951. One nice addition connected to this residence was a four court tennis court which was well used by all staff. The courts eventually became a parking lot.

The old VG hospital was demolished and on the same area a new hospital was built, titled the Victoria General Building and opened in 1948. At

the time it was the tallest hospital in Canada.

As well the Nurses Residence (2nd one) was demolished in 1949. The student nurses were moved to the 'Cathedral Barracks' which had several two level, long wooden buildings behind the All Saints Cathedral. During World War 2 these buildings were occupied by the Women's Army Corps (CWAC). After the war (1945) these buildings- were used for a Polio Clinic, School for Social Workers, sleeping rooms for unmarried male Dalhousie University students-medical interns and residents, study rooms and a temporary residence for the VGH nursing students, while the new residence was being built.



Everyone had to double up while living in the Barracks, and occasionally there were three students to a room, which made it difficult when one was on night-duty and trying to sleep during the day, as the students were in ‘bunk-beds’. The rules ‘of residence’ still prevailed. Perhaps there was one advantage to living here - it was easier to ‘sneak out’ of an evening, just slide down the ramp. A little more difficult getting back in but a friend would throw down ‘sneakers’ making it a bit easier to climb up than with high-heels.



The Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing’s third ‘Nurses Residence’ replaced the second one on approximately the same area, angled to the ‘new’



Victoria Hospital (Opened 1948) and parallel to University Avenue.

Why the need for a new residence? The Victoria building had 13 stories, 500 beds. It was equipped with the most up-to-date technology for administering patient care, so with all this, staffing became an immediate problem once again. Consequently the best way to increase the nursing capabilities to answer the call, was to increase the ‘student body’, therefore

requiring more and better accommodations.

The third Nurses Residence was opened in late 1952 and the first class to enter was the 1953A class. The design for the new residence, was a 9 story above ground, low-rise architect style



modern building with the height of 32.68 meters. The lower level was planned for storage lockers for the student’s personal items; large classrooms equipped to assist the nursing student in learning

basic ‘nursing care’, a large auditorium with audio-visual equipment



with raised platforms for lectures as well as several smaller classrooms.

The main floor level, entered by a middle door and at each end of the building. Immediately adjacent to the front door was a glassed-in reception office. This area also functioned as an ‘in-house’ mail room, communications centre and where the student nurses were required to sign out and in, meeting the curfew times. There was always a ‘House-Mother’ to check you out and in and she really had your interest ‘at heart’. Sometimes this became awkward: if she thought that a chap you were seeing, in her estimation, did not make the mark, when he called again, she would say ‘oh you’re not the one she is expecting’.

The first and second floors used to accommodate Head Nurses and Nursing Supervisors who were unmarried and wished to live in residence. Their suites were in the wings and contained a bedroom, living room, bathroom and a very small kitchenette as their main meals were in the hospital’s main cafeteria.



Behind the glassed-in office at the front door and through ‘double-doors’ was a huge hard-wood floor room and called ‘the reception/ballroom’ with the capacity of 100 folks. Nurses’ dances, receptions, special ceremonies were carried out in the room. It was also a place for the students to gather when off duty as the place had comfortable furniture, small tables and chairs and a piano.

The Ballroom to this day is used on the first Tuesday of a month for the VGH School of Nursing Alumni meetings. This Alumni has functioned for 100 years without breaks and as far as can be determined, is the only hospital nurse alumni to do so.

The rest of the main floor had offices, a ‘sick-bay’ room for students. All the other floors were individual student rooms. Each room had a window, bed, sink, closet, writing desk, lamps, one chair and a set of drawers. All clothes had to be labelled and put into a personal labelled laundry bag as the hospital did the student’s laundry. For baths and showers there was a common room on each wing and each floor and this caused considerable problems when everyone was trying to leave the residence at the same time. There was a curfew in place and everyone had to be in residence and if not, a discipline action was in place, which usually was the loss to one or several ‘late-leaves’. Quite a challenge. Each wing also had a boxed in telephone and there was always a student who would ‘hog the phone’, to everyone’s disgust. Each wing had a small kitchenette supplied with milk, coffee, tea, juice and bread, so the students could have a snack.



Many changes occurred during the 1970’s. By 1972 male nursing students, interns and residents were given rooms on the second floor and two wings were designated on the 5th floor to male and female areas. The Nurse’s Library, in the basement was refurbished by Dr. Archibald Piper in memory of his wife Adele, VG graduate of class 1965. All of the first floor was made into offices for the School of Nursing and the second floor converted to training areas for Respiratory Therapy, Radiological Technicians and Life Support Training Programs.

By 1983 all education services were amalgamated within the Nurses Residence under the title; ‘Education Services Division’ with Jean (Higgins) Magee, VG class 1956B, as the first Director. Towards the end of the 1980’s all floors except 5, 6 and 7, were designated into offices of some kind. Students from Halifax area were actually requested to stay home while in the nursing program and if for some reason this was not possible they could rent a room in the residence for \$100 a month and purchase meal tickets in the hospital cafeteria. So now all allied health students were allowed to live in the residence.

The Board of Governors made the decision in the late 1980’s, to rename the Nurses Residence to be the Bethune building in honour of Dr. Clarence M. Bethune who was the administrator of the VG hospital from 1945 to 1969 when he returned from serving during WW2. The VGH School of Nursing Alumni sent many letters debating that the building should be named after an outstanding nurse and names were submitted, to no avail, the letters were not even answered. *Copies of these letters are stored in the School of Nursing Alumni/Archives, in an anteroom off the Ballroom.*

This concludes the story/saga of the building now known province wide, as the Bethune building and its future is again at stake because of decisions to completely change the VG site. The activities within this building are enormous with ‘Skills Labs’ in the basement, lectures, meetings and events in the ballroom almost daily. In one of the ante-room off the ballroom is the prestigious VGH School of Nursing Archives having received the Phyllis Blakeley Archival Award and a medal from the International Congress of Archives, both in the 1990’s. From 1952 to the present the VGH School of Nursing is still very active within the Bethune/Nurses Residence. There is a plaque outside on the wall at the entrance: “NURSES RESIDENCE, VGH”.