THE ROAD TO THE RN

Originally located in the nurses' residence, this Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass window now is located in Rochester General Hospital's chapel. It is dedicated to the memory of Isabella Graham Hart.

THE REGISTERED NURSING PROFESSION OWES ITS START TO CIVIC - MINDED VISIONARIES IN ROCHESTER. **BY SALLY PARKER**

Nursing was nothing new in 1903, when New York recognized it as a profession in its own right; women had been nursing the sick for centuries. They delivered babies, tended to the dying, ensured comfort for the injured and ill. Their central role during life's major passages was understood without question.

But when New York legislators passed the Nurse Registration Act, conveying the R.N. status to nurses with formal training, nursing and the women and men who practiced it rose to a whole new level—and transformed American health care.

"For individual men and women and also women of color who entered nursing, it was access to education, it was access to special knowledge that really elevated their status in their particular communities," says Patricia D'Antonio, director of the Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.

Elizabeth Casson Kernohan, 1886

A NEED FOR NURSES

In 1822, wealthy women of the city organized the Rochester Female Charitable Society. They saw a great need for medical care and provisions for the poor as construction of the Erie Canal began, bringing immigrants and others with few resources. The women brought household goods, clothing, food and funds for medicine to the homes of Rochester's poorest residents.

Informal nurse training programs likely existed by the mid-19th century. During those years, the charitable society staffed and outfitted temporary hospitals during epidemics, and they hired nurses to work in a residence for homeless women. When Rochester City Hospital opened in 1864, and the society was put in charge, they "regularly hired women that they called nurses to attend the destitute sick," write Teresa Lehr and Philip Maples in To Serve the Community, a history of Rochester General's first 150 years.

The earliest record of nurses in Rochester appears in the 1845 city directory, they write, noting that nursing at this time was "learned at the bedsides of ill or dying family members or neighbors."

Marcina Sherman-Ricker, Susan B. Anthony's doctor, was one of six nursing grads from Rochester City Hospital's classes of 1883 and '84 to go on to become a doctor.

TRAINING SCHOOLS

In early 1880, a doctor at Rochester City Hospital approached the board of lady managers with a proposal to open a formal nurse training school modeled after others in bigger cities.

By this time, the hospital had moved from hiring nurses for individual cases to keeping them on staff. A few had worked at the hospital for quite some time. At first, the managers dismissed the idea of a formal training school— an idea proposed by Dr. William Ely. They were happy with the crew they had. In the summer of 1880, Ely pressed again, and other medical staff chimed in, assuring the board that well-qualified superintending nurses were available.

Formal training schools for nurses had opened elsewhere in the 1860s. Nurse education advanced to the next level with three that opened in 1873: Bellevue in New York City, Massachusetts General in Boston and the State Hospital in New Haven, Conn. These schools insisted on independence and autonomy: Not only were they supported by endowments of their own, but they were run by nurses.

The lady managers at Rochester City Hospital agreed. In 1880, Aurora Smith, a Bellevue graduate, became the first superintendent of the first hospital nurse training school in Rochester.

Early applicants had to be single women, ages 22 to 35, with a good education, perfect health and "unexceptionable moral character." They worked at the hospital for three months before being fully enrolled in the program. Then they assumed the duties of the former nurses, receiving $10 a month and free room and board. Within two years, all of the hospital's nurses were students in the school—replacing existing staff, many who had been there for years.

Five nursing schools were operating in Rochester by 1908, Lehr and Maples write: St. Mary's Hospital, the Rochester Homeopathic Hospital (later Genesee), Hahnemann Hospital (Highland) and Whitbeck's Private Hospital (Park Avenue). When the University of Rochester's nursing school opened in 1925, it was one of the first in the country housed in a university.

"Rochester has a very important yet largely ignored place in the history of nursing and health care," D'Antonio says. "They were among the leaders in the early education of nurses."

NURSING MILESTONES

Rochester's role in the nursing profession

- **1896: Local nurses are part of a group of 20 who form the nucleus of what becomes the American Nurses Association.**
- **1899: Rochester hospital superintendents Eva Allerton and Sophia Palmer recommend forming a state nurses' organization; the New York State Nurses Association begins in 1901, the first such group.**
- **1900: The American Journal of Nursing launches here; Palmer is the editor for its first 20 years.**
- **1900: Monroe County Association of Nurses forms, the first of its kind and the forerunner of today's Genesee Valley Nurses Association.**
- **1900: The National League for Nurse Education starts in Rochester.**
- **1902: Wording for the state's Nurse Registration Act is hammered out during a meeting of the state Nurses Association at Rochester City Hospital. "Registered nurse" is chosen as the profession's title.**

Rochester City Hospital superintendents Eva Allerton and Sophia Palmer recommended forming a state nurses' organization, which resulted in the New York State Nurses Association in 1901, the first such group.

R.N. STATUS

By the 1890s, nursing leaders across the state were noting with concern a proliferation of nurse training schools that lacked a standard curriculum. A digital exhibit on Rochester Regional Health's website notes that at the time, there were 15,000 untrained nurses and 2,500 formally trained nurses in New York whose training "consisted of anywhere from six months to three years in a formal hospital setting."

Rochester hospital superintendents Eva Allerton and Sophia Palmer helped form the New York State Nurses Association in 1901. Its main objective was to push for legislation requiring licensure. At the association's quarterly meeting on Oct. 21, 1902, held at Rochester City Hospital, nursing leaders came from across the state to formulate a bill that would "establish a uniform and definite basis for the practice of nursing."

Reformer Susan B. Anthony made a point of being present that day. In the push for nurse licensure, Anthony saw another opening for women's rights to advance. Her doctor, Marcina Sherman-Ricker, had graduated from Rochester City Hospital's nurse training school in 1884. She was not the first graduate of the school. She was one of six nursing grads in classes of 1883 and 84 to go on to become a doctor.

Anthony herself had experience in medical care. She studied to be a homeopath and cared for her brother for many weeks after he was shot, says Deborah Hughes, president and CEO of the National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House. When they had tuberculosis, two of her sisters chose to live with Anthony and her sister Mary.

"She really understood what it was to do home care," Hughes says.

Though in frail health, Anthony stayed for both morning and afternoon sessions of the association meeting. The American Journal of Nursing later wrote about her remarks to those gathered: Anthony said there were no trained nurses when she started her work for women's rights. She recounted the struggle of women physicians to get their degrees. And she encouraged her audience to remember how powerful they were and to keep pushing for progress.

Toward the end of the day, the discussion turned toward what title nurses should have: nurse, registered nurse, trained nurse or registered graduate nurse. "Registered nurse," championed by Palmer, superintendent of Rochester City Hospital, carried the vote 37 to 2. Like the evolution of the MD designation before it, the R.N. would come to signify advanced classroom and practical training conforming to standards understood around the world.

The Nurse Registration Act, sponsored by state Sen. William Armstrong, passed the legislature in April 1903. It held that any resident of the state who was over 21, was "of good moral character" and held a diploma from a hospital or sanitarium that offered a Regents-certified course of at least two years would become a registered nurse. New R.N.s would have to pass a certification exam.

The specific curriculum required in nursing schools was not spelled out in the law, however, and it took some time to hammer out. Minimum standards were set at first, so schools that were lagging could catch up, and the more robust programs could continue to push forward and innovate. As editor of the American Journal of Nursing, Palmer wrote: "A training school that cannot conform to the simple requirements of the Regents is, for these days, a pretty poor school."

Recognizing nursing as a profession forever altered health care and the lives of those who practice it, D'Antonio says.

"It was access to valued, respected, privileged knowledge and work," she says. "And in exchange for that access, I'd argue they transformed the American health care system."

Surgeries, treatments and patient care in hospitals "could only get more complicated if you had educated men and women following patients before and after procedures," she adds.

Higher standards in nursing extended the reach of public health care, too, making it more effective and available.

"Now you had educated women, including women of color, working within communities to spread knowledge about infectious diseases, about infant care, about maternal care, about the care of children—knowledge that communities knew was valuable but didn't have access to until you had nurses working in those communities," D'Antonio says. "So it was transformational."

Last year, New York passed a law requiring R.N.s to earn a bachelor's degree within 10 years of licensure. Anthony, ever the champion, would not be surprised, Hughes says.

"She very clearly said a day would come when every nurse would have a college education—the point of that being the profession would have gained greater respect," she says.

"It was the call for the profession itself to build these requirements."

Early nursing during surgery