

**THE LONG STRUGGLE of the
VICTORIA GENERAL HOSPITAL, HALIFAX, NS**

By Gloria Stephens, March 2018

Halifax was founded in 1749 and a small ill-equipped hospital was built where the Government House now stands. Throughout the years other small buildings were called hospitals but were also used as prisons and asylums with only the poor using the facilities as even doctors hated to visit. Between 1749 and 1855 there was no progress in providing reasonable health care facilities for the citizens of Halifax. There was a distinct separation between the poor and the 'well-to-do', as they hired a doctor and a nurse to take care of family members at home, therefore having no idea how the 'other half' lived or died, nor cared, it seems.

A few doctors in 1840 tried to interest the City Council in building a proper public hospital, separate from the 'Poor House', well equipped, staffed with trained nurses and medical doctors, to no avail.

Four years later, October 16, 1844 'talks' for a public hospital in Halifax took place between doctors and City Council about the possibility of having a much needed hospital, separate from the 'Poor Houses. This meeting took place at the Acadian School House on Argyle Street.

The Acadian School on Argyle Street was the idea of the Duke of Kent, Prince Edward in 1814 for marginalized people of Halifax. The school was established by Walter Bromley a British officer and reformer. The school welcomed all- women, blacks, immigrants, Protestants and Catholics. Four hundred were enrolled and he taught adults at night because they worked during the day. Bromley also taught the Mi'kmaq and tried to elevate their standing in the community.



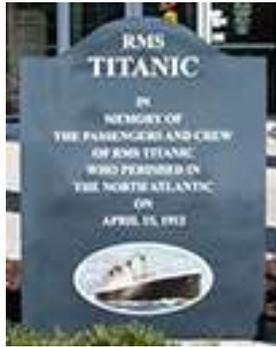
ANNA LEONOWENS

The school became a 'Girl's School' in 1870. Joseph Howe was a graduate of this school. The building was first used as a theatre, then a church and then converted to a school which was opened in 1818. It was the first school in Canada to offer free education and therefore can be called the 'first National School'.



The next use of the building was an art school conducted by Anna Leonowens, of Dartmouth. She established the Art School after her time as the Governess to the children of the King of Siam. She is credited with starting, and conducting for a time, the 'Victorian School of Art & Design' in Halifax which now has degrees for the graduates. Also, in tribute to her achievements in Halifax, a Gallery in her name was developed in 1968. Anna was also President of the Halifax Suffrage Association in 1895.

Continuing with the story of the building: the next change the building received was the purchase by John Snow. He converted the building into a mortuary and funeral home. This mortuary was used extensively during two disasters: the sinking of the Titanic when many famous people were sent here including John Jacob Astor; and then during the Halifax Explosion, 1917. Snow's handled many of the 2000 who died. (Snow's is still in operation, now on Lacewood Drive, 2017 having moved from Windsor Street. In front of the building is this monument about Snow's involvement in the Titanic story).



Since 1975 the building on Argyle Street has been a seafood restaurant called the Five Fishermen, "dining with ghosts". (There are many stories of the building being haunted. The building still exists 2018.)

Rushing ahead to 1855, finally a legislative act passed to erect a building at the corners of Tower and South Streets, on a boggy field that had a brook running diagonally through and was used for sports-lovers shooting ducks. The population were not too pleased with this decision, to lose the area for sports and the site too far out of the city area. After another two years discussion, to get the building started in 1857, the Mayor, Hugh Bell gave a year's salary to purchase the land.

By 1859, on the South Common a red brick building was erected called City Hospital with 50 beds. This stood practically vacant up to 1865 because of poor construction, no heat to speak of, stoves smoked, water limited, poor drainage and insufficient staff.



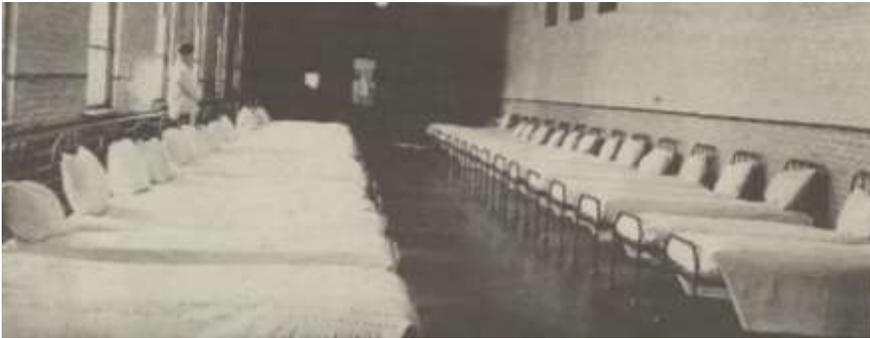
The Architect was William Gordon and the builder was Robert Davies Gordon. Nine thousand and thirty five pounds was allotted for the construction. An additional sum from Council was needed in 1858

CITY HOSPITAL 1859

of 4500 pounds in order to complete the building. At the time the population of Halifax was 20,000. The City Council gave 5000 pounds toward the construction of the foundation.

There were major problems from the beginning: the 24 coal and wood stoves used for heating all smoked, not enough gas or water to meet the needs, inadequate and untrained staff, (nurses slept in shifts and shared beds; records indicated that the male nurse slept in the bathroom.) Doctors practically avoided patients due to a dispute regarding the amount of time the medical attendants had in the hospital and so the hospital remained nearly vacant from 1860 to about 1865. The dispute involved two groups of doctors, one saying the work in the hospital should be no fee and restricted to 6 months on a rotation basis by the doctors, and the other group wanting payment for services and a restriction as to who would have privileges. The building cost \$38,000 to build and this was borne wholly by the City. It is recorded that in the basement of the hospital there were patients who were delirious, had alcohol tremors, or communicable diseases. The insane cases were chained to iron rings on the walls or held in wire cages. Patients in the wards did not have it much better as the beds were very close with straw filled mattresses, skimpy bedding and iron beds, and the noise level was most disturbing. Absolutely no privacy.

PUBLIC PATIENT WARD in the CITY HOSPITAL -1859



At this time, in Halifax, the streets were gravel so there was lots of mud; manure from horses and animals, rotting

garbage and open sewers contributed to the unpleasant odors. Sometime later, the city started building wooden sidewalks and enclosed the sewers.

There is a recorded story that four mutineers from the barque “Saladin”, Johnson, Anderson, Jones and Hazelton, were hanged in front of the hospital. The men were brought to Halifax from Marie Joseph, where the ship was stranded by the war ship “Fair Rosamond” and the men were held in the Bridewell, a combined prison and asylum, on Spring Garden Road until hung, July 30th. 1844.



BARRINGTON STREET

1863 – Dr. Alexander Forrest as Chair of the Medical Society declared that a separate hospital from the poor must be built. This subject was first discussed by doctors in 1840 to 1844 but nothing substantial was done about it. At this time Dr. Forrest reported: “The Poor Asylum at present, the only establishment in the city into which cases requiring hospital

treatment can be admitted, was never intended to be used as a hospital and is totally unfitted for such a purpose owing to its being over-crowded by those admitted suffering from poverty only”.

Dr. Alexander Forrest (1806 -1876) hailed from Lanark-Shire, Scotland where he obtained his medical degree. He married Barbara Rose MacKenzie. Alexander is buried in Camp Hill Cemetery.



1865 or 66 – Dr. Charles Tupper (Premier NS May 11, 1864 – July 3, 1867) petitioned the government several times to improve the hospital facilities in all respects, including staff, equipment and sanitary conditions. He also suggested the closure of the ‘Poor House’ on Spring Garden Rd. and to build a new asylum on South St. The Poor House on Spring Garden Road was destroyed by fire in 1882 but rebuilt in 1886 on the same site. (*Charles Tupper was also Prime Minister of Canada, 1896, for a short time, ten weeks. He was also ‘Father of Confederation’, among many other political positions. Tupper hailed from Amherst and came to Halifax for political reasons but he quickly established a successful medical practice. He was appointed City Medical Officer and took a very active part in the epidemic of the Asiatic cholera. He influenced the founding of Dalhousie Medical School, the closure of Bridewell as a hospital and the founding of the City hospital. He died in England. Dal University commemorates his work as a physician by naming a building after him. While in Halifax he lived on the Armdale estate on the North West Arm.*)



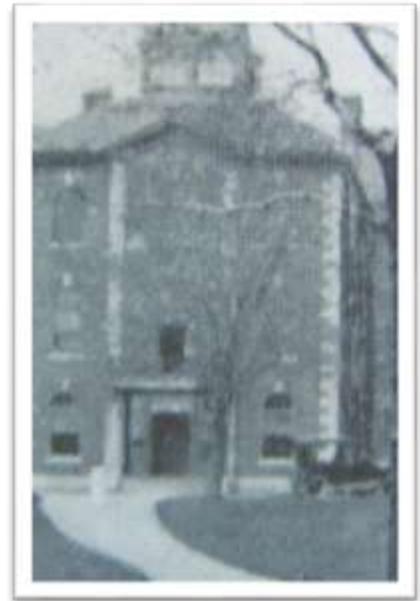
SIR C. TUPPER

1867 – Provincial & City Hospital opened in April in Halifax. It was a modest red brick building with an 80- bed capacity hospital, operating rooms and a third floor for private patients. Mr. Isaac Hubley, a farmer, 36 years old, suffering from ‘scrofulous’ condition of the ankle joint for possible surgery was the first patient for admission, April 24, 1867. He was under the care of Dr. W. H. Slayter and after consultations, no surgery was performed. His foot was put into a splint and he was discharged ‘unimproved’ after three months in hospital.



Dr. W. B. Slayter

The second admission, ten days later, April 24, was a medical patient ‘suffering from the disease common at the time’, Henry Leslie, a sailor, aged 26. This patient was under the care of Dr. R. S. Black. Leslie was discharged, May 16, condition improved. The total admissions during 1867 was 227. Physicians at this time started to ‘specialize’ into either medicine or surgery. Hence a ‘friendly’ competition between medicine and surgery physicians began. Surgery



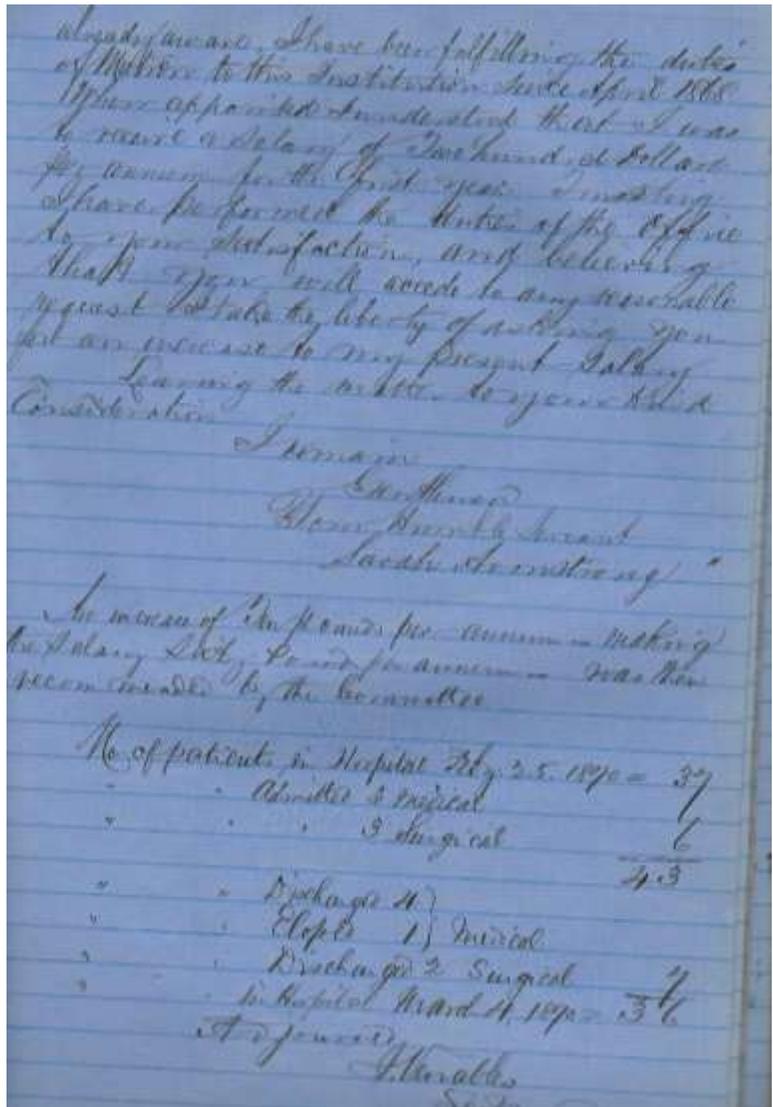
and medicine were going through major changes now, with the idea that aseptic technique and the possibility of an anaesthetic for surgery were big advances. With the Provincial & City Hospital becoming more organized, the way was cleared for Dalhousie University to develop a medical faculty.

The first House Surgeon was Dr. James Venables, a graduate from Harvard, and served as Secretary of the Committee of Management. He also served as the Medical Superintendent and the hospital apothecary. His annual salary was \$600. A Hospital Commission and Medical Board was also appointed at this time. Infectious diseases were in a wooden cottage behind the hospital.

An original Minute Book of 1867 is stored in the VG School of Nursing Alumni/Archives, Bethune Building, copy of page below:

The Matron at the time was Sarah Armstrong and in February 1870 requested an increase in her annual salary to \$200, annually according to the minutes of February 10, 1870, and signed by Dr. Venables, as Secretary.

The nurses kept excellent records of the patients' histories which are preserved to this day in ledgers. Example: a 22 year old woman admitted with a 'social disease' and occupation listed as 'of ill repute', hot packs applied but treatment suddenly discontinued as the 'patient was expelled from hospital due to misconduct'. There was no nonsense accepted in either the patient or the staff. Discipline was maintained 'with an iron hand', especially from the Matron. A Mr. Joseph Alexander was appointed as the sole male nurse at a salary of 40 pounds per year. The hospital and Dalhousie Medical School were now closely associated and have remained so. The medical students obtained critical patient care experiences in a controlled environment. Still this hospital was really a 'charity institution'.



The patients were almost exclusively the infirm and diseased indigents which were shunned by the middle and upper class citizens of the day. In fact there was a 'social gap' between doctor and patient, therefore, class biases were often shown in the

hospital documentation of the patient's physical histories. As an example; remarks were made, by the doctor, about the patient's moral habits, addictions, their body filth and their crude language. One chart read: 'patient is a hard-drinker with irregular habits' another; 'patient addicted to sexual intercourse' and yet another; 'the wife of a notorious Rockhead jailbird'. Because of limited staff the patients were required to assist in care of others, where possible.

During this time and up until about 1880, physicians were not convinced of the value of antiseptics in surgery in spite of Dr. Lister's successes from 1860 onward. They would operate with bare hands and wear street clothes, just taking off their top jacket. The infection rate was extremely high with many not recovering. Treatment was limited, using specific compresses which the nurses would have to change routinely. Nurses often became infected by nursing these patients as aseptic technique principles, at the time, were just being discovered and practiced.

Dr A. P. Reid, a McGill graduate 1858, was the first Dean of



the Halifax Medical College 1870s. He was also the Medical Superintendent of both the Mount Hope and Victoria General Hospitals 1892 - 1898. He was acquainted with Dr. Joseph Lister. Dr. Reid was the first medical doctor in Canada to apply Lister's antiseptic principles (carbolic spray) during surgery in October 1869 at the Provincial & City Hospital, Halifax. He was known



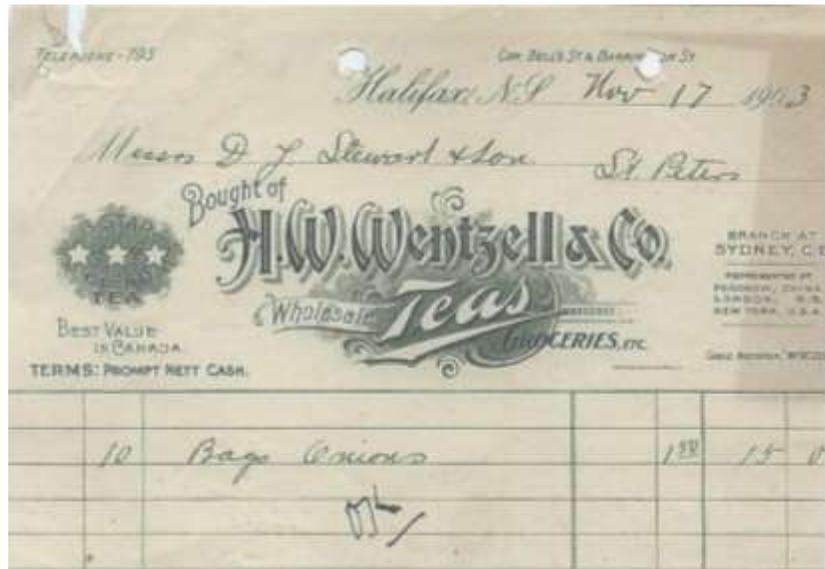
as an eccentric person but he contributed greatly to the field of medicine and medical education in the Halifax area.

(Picture of the carbolic spray is from the Medical History Society NS Archives, Abby Lane. This particular one belonged to Dr. John Stewart of the VG and was a gift from Dr. Joseph Lister, a personal friend. Dr. J. Stewart was Lister's dresser in 1875, a clinical clerk in 1876 and a surgeon with Lister in 1877 - 1878. Stewart then taught at Dalhousie University. He had an office on South Street, Halifax. During WW1, Stewart was Lt. Col. in charge of #7 Dalhousie Medical Unit, overseas.

The use of carbolic spray was the beginning of practices to prevent surgical wound infections in the hospital.

Here is a copy of an original 'bill of sale' for the hospital in 1903.

In the minutes of May 7, 1867, there was a request for an additional nurse for the hospital.



The first meeting of the Board of Managers, 1867, ordered the purchase of instruments, bedding, 4 bundles of straw to fill mattresses and the 2nd meeting- 4 thermometers, supply of chloroform, a nurse, 2 sherry, 12 brandy; and then at a later meeting ordered a stethoscope, rectal tubes, operating room table, and a set of eye instruments.

By 1875 there was a new Matron in the hospital, Sarah Meagher who sent a notice to the Board that “nurses would no longer be scrubbing floors and other maintenance work around the hospital as they were too occupied with patient care.”

Twenty years has passed since the 1867 hospital was built by an Act of Legislation, the Provincial & City Hospital (1867) was renovated and then known as the Victoria General Hospital (VG) in 1887: *“in recognition of the Jubilee of Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria”*. *“Authorized the Governor-in-Council to expand a sum not exceeding twenty thousand dollars in alternating, repairing, enlarging, extending and equipping or otherwise improving the hospital”*. The middle section of the hospital was now called the Jubilee building and in 1892 was raised to have a third floor for private patients. It was a red brick building with separate wards for medicine and surgery as well as separate wards for women and men.



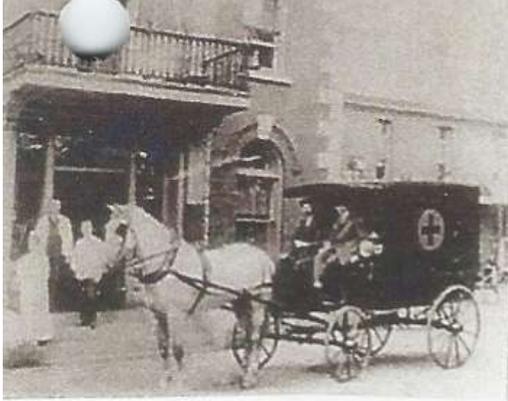
JUBILEE BUILDING

A separate apartment was made for the House Surgeon but no accommodation for nurses. This did not occur until 1890. The nurses slept in empty beds on the wards.

Class biases existed still as the poor were shunned by the upper and middle class, as the hospital was clearly separated into public wards and private rooms, for those who could pay. Also, the ‘social biases’ between doctor and patient from the 1867 era continued as well. There was also documentation about a few incidences between patient and nurse. If this was investigated to be true the nurse was suspended and sometimes for good, from the hospital. The management of the hospital was about to change; the Board of Commissioners and the Board of Public Charities were changed and the hospital became a Provincial Institution. With the expansion of the facilities there was an improvement in some services. Doctors continued to specialize in either medicine or surgery.

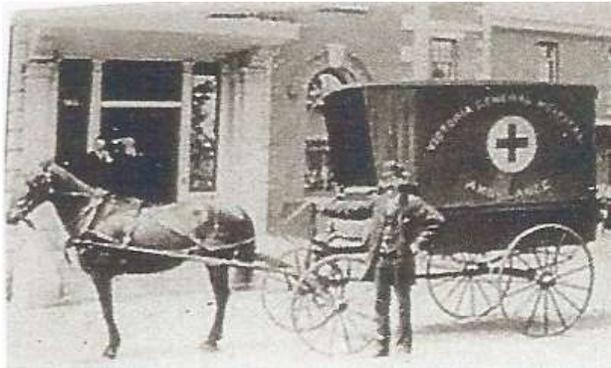
Still remained the problem of untrained and uninformed nursing staff. Public confidence in hospital care was still not a hundred percent by ‘a long shot’, for the elite especially. Behind the hospital was a small ‘cottage’ for cases of delirium, and infectious cases. There now was a slight improvement in the ‘standards of cleanliness’ but not in the care of these types of cases.as they were treated, not much better than animals.

The first attempt in having an ambulance service was in 1887, with 179 calls the first year, 79 were for accidents. Hay was grown, to feed the horses, in the extensive area in front of the hospital. These horses were large and faster than cart horses.



1887 White horse in front of Jubilee building

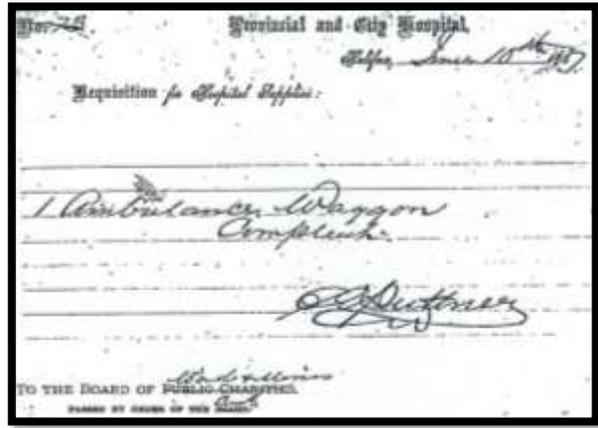
In 1890 a black horse was added, plus another driver. The drivers had to be prompt and fast between calls. If they did not measure up to the demands of the Hospital Superintendent they were discharged.



Inside the ambulance was a stretcher on runners which prevented the stretcher from moving side to side. The sheets to cover the patient were red. There was a seat attached to the wall, for the Intern, who always went with the ambulance. Under the seat was a First-Aid box plus a bottle of brandy. Later the brandy was replaced by 'Spirits of Ammonia'.

cover the patient were red. There was a seat

The first requisition order for the ambulance was March 10th, 1887 and signed by the hospital accountant, Dr. Charles Puttner, who was also in charge of the X-ray department and the Pharmacy. He had the full authority to send the ambulance, so solely on his decision to decide if the request was legitimate or not.



By 1888 north and south wings were added to the main building increasing the bed capacity

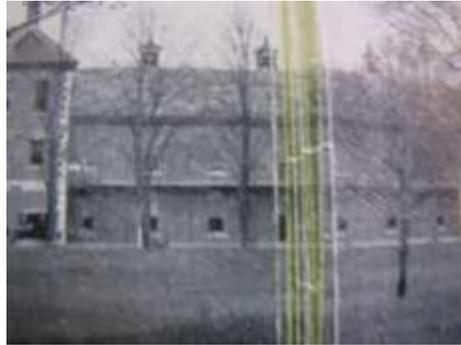


VICTORIA GENERAL 1990

from 80 to 120. Other additions were: a dining area, improved laundry facilities and accommodation for ‘house staff’. The public wards were less crowded, the beds uniform in design with better mattresses as the straw was replaced. A wheelchair and an ambulance was added for easier transportation of patients. Both north and south wings had balconies on each floor for the use of patients as it was then believed that patients would recover sooner if exposed to fresh air and sunlight.



In the picture is Jean MacIsaac, RN, on a balcony, with children Ivan Symonds, at her feet and Billy Daniels, standing, from Ward 51, the Children’s Ward.



Here is a wheelchair used at the time, which was also filled with straw, as were the mattresses. (The wheelchair is housed in the VG Alumni Archives, Bethune building)



Dr. H. S. Jacques, House Surgeon, was appointed to the position of Medical Superintendent, 1890, a complete change in administration of the hospital. The ‘Lady Superintendent’ was Julia Purdy. She held the position for two years.

As time went on the hospital gradually shed its image as a place to be avoided but if to succeed the middle-class had to look at the hospital as a respectable place to receive treatment. This did not actively happen until about 1910 or later.



His Excellency, The Right Honourable Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, Governor General of Canada inspected the entire hospital in 1891 and in doing so suggested that a ‘hot air chamber’ be installed to disinfect beds and bedding. Also from the report of the Inspector of Public Institutions: *“I think I may now congratulate the government upon finishing and equipping and the public upon possessing one of the best, if not in some respects the best hospital in America”*.

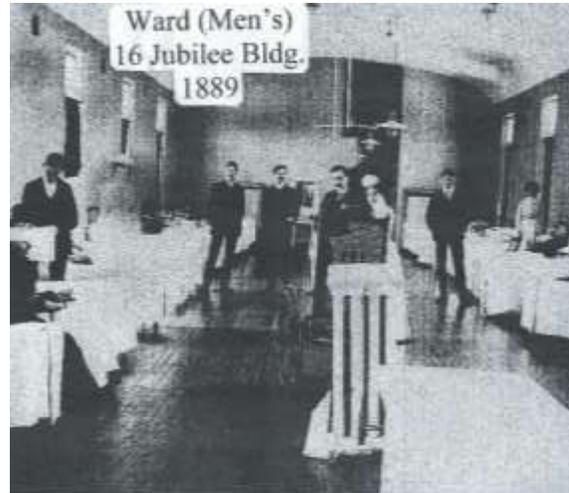
Ward #16, for men & Urology; Ward #45 for women; Jubilee building and Ward 64 and Ward #36 for Eye cases and the bottom floor for men surgical and Wards #42 & 44 for women surgical.



Dr. H. S. Jacques, Superintendent, 1890-1892

Dr Jacques was forward thinking and in 1890 he initiated the opening of the Training School for Nurses at the Victoria General Hospital, among the first in Canada. He

was a member of the Executive Council of NS. *Seems surprising that a doctor was the one to start a nursing training school but seems that occurred in many places across Canada.*



The VG School of Nursing, as it was known in later years, graduated about 5000 nurses

many of whom became nationally known as they promoted and expanded the image of the nurse and nursing professionalism.

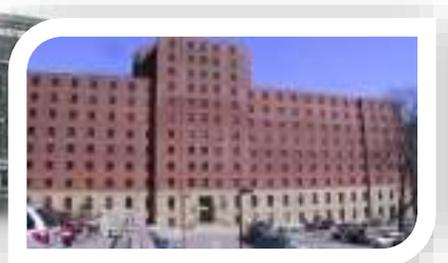


VICTORIA BUILDING

and a new residence built on the same site and opened in 1952. The School closed in

The hospital building remained about the same for several years. In 1922 a Private Pavilion was built for the private patient and that changed direction several times as to the services within.

A major structural change to the site occurred in 1948 when the old hospital was removed and a completely new building erected, the Victoria building. Another structural change to the area was the old Nurses 'Residence removed



1995 and the building now used for offices and clinics and called 'The Bethune building', after Dr. Bethune. A disappointment to the nurses, they wanted it named after a nurse as it was their 'home' for many years.

In 1967 another structure added to the Victoria building called the Centennial building. As well there have been other changes to the site and many new disciplines, departments and technology added as the years passed. In 2004 the VG School of Nursing Alumni inserted a stained-glass window in the Centennial building, to honour the nurses.



The hospital continued to improve in every direction: medical and nursing staff, equipment-keeping up with technology changes for 160 years. The Victoria General Hospital having had a negative and a positive influence on the citizens of Halifax and the Province and yet provided and is still providing care to the citizens. The VG was a hospital that had a reputation Canada wide of being a “Stalwart leader in innovative health care, a beacon of hope and a pride of being associated”.

There have been many ‘health breakthroughs’ in this hospital, in the health system and the people of Nova Scotia should be proud of this institution and thankful for its existence as it had a long and arduous struggle to get to where it is today.



VICTORIA L GENERAL HOSPITAL

1890