Hospital Beginnings

Following a cholera epidemic in 1849, the founders of the Boston City Hospital realized the need to provide medical care to more citizens, especially the working poor. Built between 1816-1823, the privately owned Massachusetts General Hospital did not have the space and resources to meet the demand of Boston’s growing population. Ground was broken September 8, 1861 for a new building on Fillmore Street in the South End. Boston-based architect J.F. Bryant was the architect.

When it was dedicated on May 24, 1865, the Boston City Hospital consisted of three buildings, a central administration facility flanked by a surgical and a medical pavilions that faced Harrison Avenue and Waverley Square.

Hospital Changes

During the following decades, the Boston City Hospital added many new medical and surgical positions (1876), Burns’ home (1884-5), a library (1892), an updated ambulance service (1892), a South Department for infectious disease (1895), Vose House for Nurses (1897-1901), and a pathology building that was later replaced by the Maloney Institute of Pathology. From the hospital's founding, three medical schools—Harvard, Tufts, and Boston University—maintained medical, surgical, and research services.

As the Boston City Hospital expanded, a new infirmary wing was added to the existing hospital in 1904. The new building did not accommodate the growing number of patients that required care.

Hospitalinto the 21st Century

In 1968 the Boston City Hospital created the Maxwell Finland Laboratory for Infectious Diseases in honor of the former director of the Thorndike Laboratory. In a move to streamline finances and services in 1975, the remaining labs and teaching and clinical responsibility for the Boston City Hospital were transferred to Boston University. Finally in July 1996, the University Hospital and the Boston City Hospital, both teaching hospitals for the Boston University School of Medicine, were merged into the Boston Medical Center.

Thorndike Laboratory

By 1929 the hospital established the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory, one of the most eminent research facilities in the nation with oversight by the Harvard Medical Service. It was the first general clinical research facility in a municipal hospital in the United States.

Physicians Dr. Frances Weld Pusey, Dr. George Minot, and Dr. William Castle were its first three directors, and in 1934 the Nobel Prize in Medicine (Physiology) was awarded to Dr. Minot for his discovery of the treatment for pernicious anemia. In further work on this disease, Dr. Castle identified the gastric intrinsic factor in the pathogenesis of pernicious anemia. He also helped establish the Thorndike as the birthplace of modern hematology.

An operating room in the Boston City Hospital in the 1860s that was used for surgery in the early 1800s. The photo gives a glimpse of the treatment for pernicious anemia, a disease that was not completely understood until the 20th century.