Boston City Hospital
1863-2006

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 1818-1823, 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 9, 1861 for a new building on filled-in land in the South End. Boston-based Gridley J.F. Bryant was the architect.

1910 postcard

Harvard Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine–public domain, 1910

When it was dedicated on May 24, 1863, the Boston City Hospital consisted of three buildings, a central administration facility flanked by a surgical and a medical pavilion that faced Harrison Avenue and Worcester Square.

The administration building displays the French Renaissance style fashionable at the time of the hospital's opening in 1863. Colonnades to the left and right connect with surgical and medical buildings. A modern view of the same 1870 panorama shows refurbished surgical and medical pavilions BCD and FGH flanking the glass façade of the Moakley Center, a cancer and ambulatory care facility. The top of the red brick Menino Pavilion is behind and to the right.

Kenneth Flaherty

This 1909 rendering shows the full range of the Boston City Hospital's development forty-six years after its birth.

Archives of the Boston University School of Medicine Alumni Medical Library

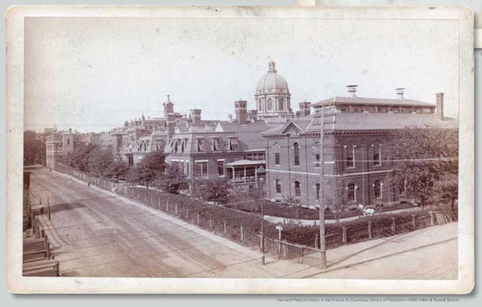
Hospital Changes

During the following decades, the Boston City Hospital added many new medical and surgical pavilions (1870s), nurses' homes (1884-5), a library (1891), an updated ambulance stable (1892), a South Department for infectious disease (1895), Vose House for Nurses (1897-1901), and a pathology building that was later replaced by the Mallory 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 after its beginning in 1864, it added new facilities like the one shown here (right) to accommodate its recovering patients. Notice the heat radiators next to one of the nurses.

Boston Public Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston City Hospital Collection

Hospital wards, medical buildings, and outpatient facilities lined Springfield Street at the left in this 1875 view toward Harrison Avenue from Albany Street. The vantage point of the photo today is from the former Mallory Institute of Pathology, now Jean Yawkey Place, looking toward the Menino Pavilion and Moakley Building.



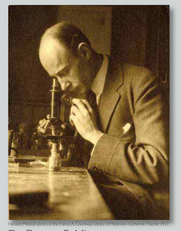
Harvard Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine—1869 Allen & Rosser, Boston

An operating room in the Boston City Hospital in the 1890s is bathed in natural light from the dome above. The photograph shows the early lack of antiseptic measures prevalent at the time. Lister's insistence on sterilizing procedures was still in dispute.

Thorndike Laboratory

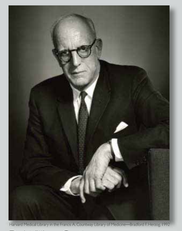
By 1923 the hospital established the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory, one of the most eminent research facilities in the nation with oversight by the Harvard Medical Service. It was the first general clinical research facility in a municipal hospital in the United States.

Dr. Frances W. Peabody

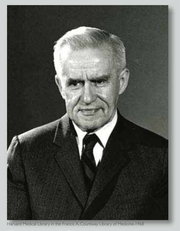


Dr. George R. Minot

Physicians Dr. Frances Weld Peabody, 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.



Dr. William Castle

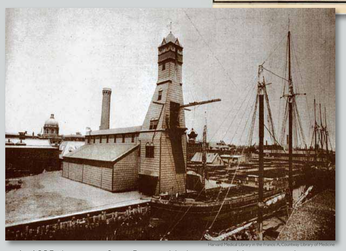


Dr. Maxwell Finland

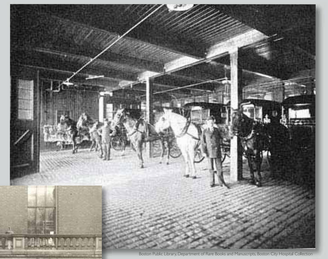
An aerial view taken in the 1950s reveals the extent to which water from Fort Point Channel and Boston Harbor projected into the South End. The Mallory Institute of Pathology marks the spot where the channel disappeared under Massachusetts Avenue. Most of the surrounding land was filled in to create space for new homes, businesses, and hospitals.

Map Reproduction Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library

This map indicates the proposed railway tunnels and business streets around the Boston peninsula in 1914. The Boston City Hospital complex is clustered at the extreme bottom left of the map just above the finger of South Bay (today's Fort Point Channel). It was built on landfill that helped the city to expand.



In 1895 the water from Boston Harbor wound its way to the edges of the Boston City Hospital through South Bay and the Roxbury Canal. In this photo, workers are unloading coal into a storage building behind the hospital's boiler house.

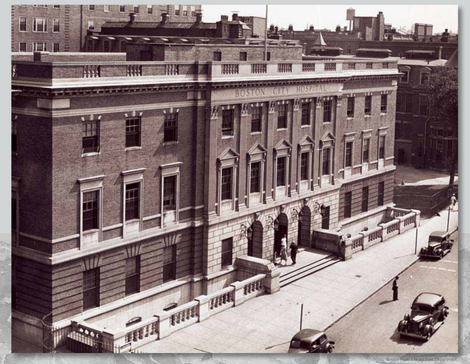


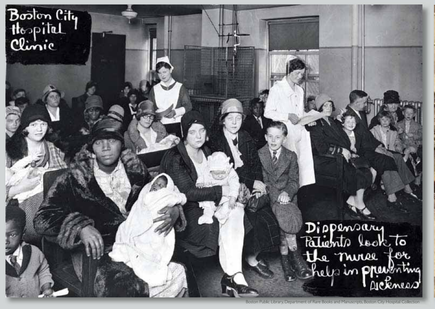
The hospital ambulance facilities began with a stable of horses, which were gradually replaced by motor-driven vehicles. New ambulance stations grew up around the city as the population grew.

Prior to 1896, the practice of pathology had taken place in the basement rooms of the Boston City Hospital's library and at Harvard Medical School facilities. The same year, hospital trustees established a new building exclusively devoted to the practice, teaching, and research of this important field of medicine. The new building had its own autopsy amphitheater, clinical laboratories, mortuary, and mortuary chapel arranged in the shape of an H.

Before patients were admitted to the Boston City Hospital, they checked in at a waiting room shown here for further instruction. It was also an opportunity for friends and family to get more information about patients who had already been admitted to the hospital.

Tent wards were set up at the hospital during the summer to provide sunshine and fresh air for convalescing patients like the children shown here.





Boston Public Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston City Hospital Collection

Archives of the Boston University School of Medicine Alumni Medical Library

A 1930 aerial reveals the dome of the Administration Building in the center of the hospital complex. Among the buildings that existed at the time were:

1 1896 Pathology Bldg.
2 Former Medical Pavilion
3 Administration
4 Former Surgical Pavilion
5 Operating Theatre
6 Thorndike Laboratory
7 Out-Patient Building
8 BU School of Medicine
9 BU School of Public Health

In 1934, the Boston City Hospital demolished the domed structure that served as its first administration building and replaced it with this new building (left) that abutted Harrison Avenue. It became the new entryway to the evolving hospital complex.

Into 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 1973, 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.

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