

## Professional Nurses in Early Miami, 1896-1925

by Christine Ardalan

From the time Miami was a frontier in the 1880s and 1890s, women played decisive roles in the health care of both their families and their community. The frontierswomen's practice of midwifery along with their ability to cure and care with the limited available resources became the foundation of women's involvement in health care during the era of Miami's early growth. The decade following the founding of the new city in 1896 brought many changes to Miami, including the beginnings of institutionalized health care. Midwives who practiced outside the realm of professional medicine were either controlled or discredited; in the process, their voices have been lost. Likewise, the story of the trained nurse, who worked within the realm of professionalized medicine, has been overshadowed by the history of medicine in Miami.

Before Miami was chartered as a city in 1896, it was little more than an outpost at the mouth of the Miami River. Two small communities, Lemon City to the north and Coconut Grove to the south, attracted those seeking a frontier life. Miami author Helen Muir expounds upon the vital roles women played in curing and caring in the frontier community:

If you got a toothache, you headed for Brickell's [trading post at the mouth of the Miami River] and the toothache drops never failed to ease the pain. Any other disability was taken care of at home by your wife or mother. If she or the rest of the women called into consultation could not cure you, they loaded you on a sail boat and prayed for a good wind to get you to Key West.<sup>1</sup>

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Significantly, Muir alludes to a supportive network of women responsible for the health care of the community. Thus, in the sparsely populated area, accessible only by boat, the residents of the area greatly relied upon the women to keep them healthy.

### **A Doctor's Voice**

In 1954, John DuPuis, a pioneer doctor who arrived in Miami in 1898, published a history of early medicine in Dade County. His book is valuable because it is one of the few surviving primary records of early medicine in South Florida. Contained in his account are both his medical experiences as well as what he considered to be the medical milestones occurring in the new frontier city. However, in spite of his factual style and methodical documentation of early records, his history does not provide a holistic picture of the medical care in early Miami. A consideration of nurses' perspectives, absent in his account, would surely offer a more comprehensive medical history. So while the history of medicine through doctors has been recorded in Miami, little has been written about the history of nurses.

Although DuPuis admitted that physicians were "handicapped" without the assistance of nurses, these "helpers" remained undeveloped, unexplored figures in his account. Indeed, while DuPuis explicitly indicated how he relied on nurses for their supportive roles in treating patients before there was a public hospital, he affords them only a cursory mention in his history. DuPuis's history reflects the prevalent perspective of historians up to the 1960s; ordinary people were neglected in place of famous names, places and events.

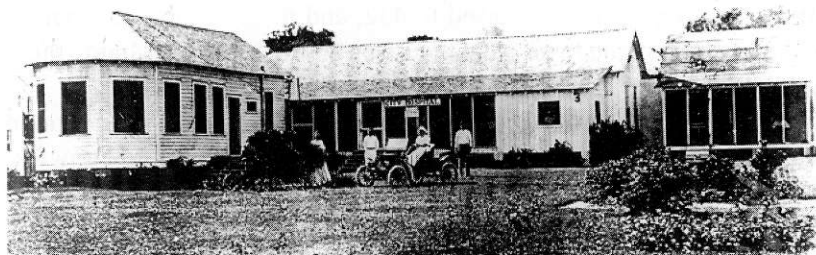
When DuPuis does mention nurses, it is often in condescending fashion. For instance, in discussing his first forceps delivery, the first procedure of that kind in Miami, he noted how a practical nurse, described as an elderly white woman, was hired to take care of the house and assist the doctor. However, she was unwilling to cooperate with the new surgical intervention. Suddenly and quietly, the unnamed nurse disappeared from the site. In DuPuis's eyes her stubbornness was a reflection of her backwardness. He was exasperated that she did not endorse this procedure. DuPuis records that, upon leaving, the nurse remarked to nearby residents that "she did not believe in any such doings as that doctor was going to do." The nurse obviously was not comfortable in participating in a delivery she did not understand. While

Dr. DuPuis noted this particular instance, the voices of many nurses who resisted medical advancements in favor of more traditional methods are lost to history forever.

Although the historical record here is silent, the act of resistance by the anonymous nurse demonstrates a power that historian and theorist Michel Foucault contends “comes from below . . . not [from] an institution, and not a structure.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the historian is asked to consider the power operating at different levels and to examine the silences that can recreate nurses’ roles. As historian Linda Kerber points out:

When we find silences we seek not simply to find still voices, but to discern how it was possible to write history from which women’s voices have been excluded: when we find spaces that seem empty, we ask how boundaries have been imposed and maintained.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the nurse who disappeared at the first delivery is not to be dismissed as irrelevant or erased from the pages of history. Her resistance can tell another story, one that is not apparent when dominant authoritative voices have documented the history. Examining the silences allows women to be brought into the picture and shows how institutionalized relations of inequality between women and men shaped the development of this community, the lives of nurses, and the health care profession in general.



**Nurse Harley describes the City Hospital of Miami: “The first little hospital was a low rambling, dingy, white frame structure on Biscayne Boulevard facing a few fishing docks on the waterfront immediately east of the Boulevard.” Originally organized in 1908 as the Friendly Hospital, this building became the City Hospital in 1911. The building on the left was leased for additional beds and the annex on the right was added in 1910 as an operating room. (Photograph from *History of Early Medicine* by Dr. John DuPuis, Privately Published, 1954, p. 67)**

## History of Nursing in the United States

Nurses' perspective can be better appreciated if their stories in Miami are placed within the context of nursing within the United States. The crude and unstructured hospitals of the Civil War underscored the need for organized nursing schools. Together with the American Medical Association (AMA),<sup>4</sup> socially prominent women who had cared for the wounded in the war supported the movement to train nurses. In the 1869 AMA meeting in New Orleans, it was proposed "that every large and well-organized hospital should have a school for the training of nurses."<sup>5</sup> By 1873 three nurse training schools were organized: Bellevue Training School in New York City, the Connecticut Training School in New Haven, and the Boston Training School. These three schools were initially based on the "Nightingale" model of a training school. Florence Nightingale developed the first organized training program for nurses in London; her institution was independent from the hospital and financed by the Nightingale fund.<sup>6</sup> Thus the early nursing schools were created independently of the hospitals.

Lack of endowment, however, caused nursing schools to become absorbed by hospitals. Many hospitals soon realized that nursing schools could be created to serve their own needs: "Nursing care became the major product dispensed by the hospitals. The real function of the school of nursing became *not education* but *service*."<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the training schools proliferated, especially as there was not a standard of admission or graduation. By 1879 there were 11 training schools; in 1900 the number had increased to 432, and in 1915, one year before attempts were made to institute the first training school in Miami, there were about 1,509 new schools in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of an important era in nursing education began in 1893, the year of the World's Fair in Chicago. Ethel Bedford Fenwick, who had founded the British Nurses Association in 1888, visited the World's Fair to encourage American nursing leaders to organize into a professional body. Fenwick wanted "her profession of nursing to be brought into the same category, if not on level, with the medical profession."<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, the American Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nursing was founded. The first task was to organize standards of admission to the nursing schools. In 1896, the year that Flagler's train opened up the new city of Miami to points north, the Nurses' Associated Alumnae of the United States and Canada was

formed with the specific intention of securing legislation to differentiate between the trained and untrained nurse.<sup>10</sup> In Florida, an act requiring the state registration of Nurses was passed in 1913, making it “unlawful to practice professional nursing as a registered nurse without a certificate.”<sup>11</sup> A short time prior to the passing of this act, the first meeting of all graduate nurses was held in 1912 in Dade County. DuPuis lists sixteen charter members. During her tenure as superintendent of the City Hospital in Miami, Lillah B. Harley insisted that new nurses who came to Miami join the Association so that their credentials could be verified.<sup>12</sup>

Piecing together the fragmented accounts and references to nursing in early Miami opens, at least partially, a window into the professional lives of some early nurses. For example, Mildred Hamilton appears in many records but has never been recognized for her nursing accomplishments. Willie May, the first nurse in charge of the Friendly Hospital (which became the City Hospital, and later Jackson Memorial Hospital) offers a perspective on the dichotomy between the doctor and nurse relationship. An oral history from the descendants of Ida and Clara Vihlen illustrates how they were able to combine their domestic responsibilities with their nursing work. Certainly the reconstruction of the lives of a few named nurses improves upon the collective identity of the nurses who were vitally important to the containment of the yellow fever epidemic of 1899-1900. However, without their own voices, their own perspectives or their own language, the historical record falls short. What did it mean to be a nurse in early Miami?

### **A Nurse’s Voice**

Lillah B. Harley provides the answer to this question. Harley began nursing at the City Hospital in late 1913, became the superintendent in June 1916, and maintained that position until 1920. She recorded her memories of the early



**Miss Willie May (right) and Miss Cantlin sitting on the steps of the City Hospital, ca. 1911. (Courtesy Dr. William M. Straight)**

hospital to the secretary of the nursing school in 1950. The intention was for her to trace the history of the early City Hospital. However, in her recollections, she documented much more than the medical milestones of the early City Hospital; not surprisingly, she revealed a great deal about herself. Nursing was her life, her love and her family.

Harley's love of nursing and her dotting respect for doctors was evident in her description of the early City Hospital. Her very wording conveyed the gratification of her profession.

The first little hospital was a low rambling, dingy, white frame structure on Biscayne Boulevard facing a few fishing docks on the waterfront immediately east of the Boulevard. I can see it now and feel again the *thrill* of satisfaction which came when a patient from a fishing boat was resuscitated on the front porch, as many were in emergencies.<sup>13</sup>

The hospital elicited warm memories in Harley: "I have an abiding affection for that first hospital, and also for the improved buildings to which we later moved, as they were in every sense *my home*." Harley's life revolved around the hospital as she "assumed the operating responsibilities . . . under the direction of Dr. John L. North." Harley had the utmost respect for Dr. North.

[Dr. North's] life was one of love and charity and consideration for the weak, and suffering. He was respected universally for these humane qualities and was also held in the highest esteem by his colleagues as a man of rare ability in diagnosis and treatment.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Harley turned for support and guidance to Dr. North and Dr. Sayle "whose daily visits were like benedictions."<sup>15</sup> Harley, in fact, became the symbolic mother caring for her symbolic children under the guidance of the patriarch symbol.

In my training as a nurse I had learned to work hard – even to the point of drudgery at times. I later put this into practice at the City Hospital – sometimes I worked all day after having been up all night, as one would do for *her own family*.<sup>16</sup>

Harley's selfless commitment to hard work was a quality attributed to the ideal nurse in popular journals of the time. A 1915 article in *Good Housekeeping*, "Your Daughter's Career," promoted and reaffirmed the essential qualities deemed necessary for nursing:

Unless she has the fundamental qualities – physical, intellectual, and spiritual – which will be demanding day in and day out, she might as well weed herself out before the ruthless process of life does that weeding for her. . . . The self forgetting which others' suffering enforce is more powerful remedy than any medicine yet compounded.<sup>17</sup>

True to the article, Harley was not self-serving; rather, she acknowledged the industrious efforts of her staff at the City Hospital, "those who worked with me and under me were equally self-sacrificing in time and attention."<sup>18</sup> However, she does not mention the details or even the names of any of the women workers in her accounts. Just as women like herself were deemed "unimportant" in written histories, it seems women were not important in her history, either.

The staff employed at the city hospital consisted of a graduate nurse for night duty, a combination cook and maid, an orderly and myself, special nurses being called in when necessary. As the hospital census increased, a practical nurse was employed who had been a former patient.<sup>19</sup>

The doctors' names, however, were engraved in her memory. In addition to Dr. North and Dr. C. F. Sayle, she recalled that "Dr. E. K. Jaudon, County Physician . . . comes to mind. Dr. Jaudon was never too weary to call on the sick poor."<sup>20</sup> By specifying the doctors, but merging the women together in her memory, Harley is indirectly revealing the power imbalance.

However, there was one nurse that Harley specified, only because it was unusual for a man to perform nursing duties. Thus, George Atherton, the "first orderly and male nurse,"



**Mrs. F. Stone at the City Hospital, 1920. (Courtesy Dr. William M. Straight)**

received more recognition than his female counterparts combined. Harley recalled that Atherton

[W]as a Princeton man with a license to practice law, but he remained with us always ready for an emergency day or night. . . . During his early life he had served in the Navy and following his discharge worked for several years as a nurse in Massachusetts's General Hospital. We were fortunate back in 1916 to have the advantage of his broad experience at a small cost.<sup>21</sup>

When Atherton joined the City Hospital staff, he was not subject to the same societal pressures and expectations as female nurses. The most notable difference was his marital status; he was married and had children. In fact, Harley revealed that "he used my car to go back and forth from home, for his wife and children lived so far from the hospital that otherwise he would not have been easily available."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Harley provided for the hospital as if she were working for her own family. She needed two five-passenger Ford cars for transportation of everyday materials and people to and from the hospital. Whereas the city fathers furnished the gasoline, she bought the cars and funded many supplies from her own salary! She accomplished this feat by buying on her own credit; she noted that "since my salary was small, purchases were made on the installment plan."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, until the Board



**The City Hospital moved to this building in 1917, which eventually became Jackson Memorial Hospital. (HASF, Matlack Collection C35)**



of Trustees was established, the city council sometimes neglected to appropriate money for such everyday items as food. Harley "went food shopping and often [the hospital] had no credit. So sometimes [even the] hospital food came out of her own pocket."<sup>24</sup> Aina Royce, who took Harley's place as superintendent, recalled that "Miss Harley did the cooking too, when she'd wake up and find no cooks in the kitchen."<sup>25</sup> Harley, however, considered these contributions not as a burden, but as part of her duty as a nurse.

It was a pleasure for me to spend all I earned to run the hospital (my home) as efficiently as I had knowledge to do. All my salary was spent on hospital management magazines, nursing magazines, books, [and] two vitrolas, one each for nurse and patients.<sup>26</sup>

Harley evidently kept pace with the growing institutionalization of nursing because she noted that "doctors and nurses were flocking to the city, [and she] recognized the need for securing proper nursing credentials."<sup>27</sup> She insisted that new nurses join the Dade County Nurses Association so that their credentials could be checked. All the while she still considered the hospital to be her family. She worked at the hospital for more than six years, spending the first four without a vacation. In fact, Harley's first leave from the hospital was prompted by her sickness at the time of the great influenza epidemic of 1918.

In that year the City Hospital also had to cope with the impact of World War I. Harley remembers how Miami was affected with this national crisis:

During World War I the hospital had a contract with the Federal Government to admit and care for all acute cases that could not be sent to the Marine Hospital in Key West. The hospital staff consisted of one registered nurse on duty besides myself with many private citizens. Mrs. Anna L. Andrus, suffrage worker and W.C.T.U. [Women's Christian Temperance Union] member volunteered and help with nursing.<sup>28</sup>

While nurses like Marie Jackson, RN, had left the operating room to join the Red Cross for war duty, women in the community volunteered

to help with the nursing in the hospital. World War 1 also affected the actual building of the new hospital. With a shortage of both building material and skilled labor, the construction of the new City Hospital was delayed.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, the new hospital was opened on June 25, 1918, during the great influenza epidemic. Nonetheless, Harley was proud to be appointed superintendent of this newly constructed City Hospital: "To me that was a happy day which I cherish."<sup>30</sup>

Even before the new hospital was constructed, Harley had attempted to start the first nursing school in Miami at the old City Hospital in 1916.<sup>31</sup> With an initial class of six nursing students, Harley recalled that by 1918, "we had six to ten student nurses on duty at small pay." The "small pay" of the first student nurses was expected, substantiating the notion that student nurses were a source of cheap labor. Under the guidance of Dr. North and Dr. Sayle, the school "as an organization was taking form."<sup>32</sup> Nationally, early nurse leaders rallied against this input from the doctors. Lavinia Dock, a national radical nurse leader, argued that working with physicians and administrators on joint committees would not give nurses autonomy.<sup>33</sup> By seeking male approval rather than liberation, she believed nurses would remain in subordinated positions. Miami's new nursing school, like those nationwide, did not heed her warning. The school was incorporated on January 8, 1919.<sup>34</sup> While Drs. Sayle and North taught subjects required by state boards, Harley taught nursing principles and ethics. What had once been learned and shared through experience was now formally taught.

From the start, this first nursing school experienced several problems. Ainah Royce, who replaced Harley as Superintendent of the hospital, recounted:

The type of applicant lacked the necessary requirements; it was difficult to interest the doctors in teaching; and [in] supporting the plan; and finally the setting up of forms and records as required by the State Board of [Nurse] Examiners and maintaining same was more than could be done. — So the effort failed.<sup>35</sup>

There were problems not only with the nursing school but also in the organization of the hospital, which had to conform to the regulations set by the American Hospital Association and the American College of Surgeons. In 1920, Mayor William P. Smith appointed a Board of Trust-

ees, comprised of “men and women [who] were representative of the best in business and social life of the City, and they took a very active interest in all Hospital affairs.”<sup>36</sup> In 1920, Miss Francis Stone, a well known hospital organizer and a graduate of the Presbyterian Hospital of New York, was hired for two months to reorganize the hospital.<sup>37</sup> One of her recommendations was to “junk all the buildings and move nearer town.”<sup>38</sup>

In recollecting her final days at the hospital, Harley matter-of-factly states: “In March, 1920, I resigned from the hospital and Miss Ainah Royce was secured after my departure.”<sup>39</sup> One can only speculate how she felt when she left her “family.” Certainly, her memory was colored with nostalgia – at the time of her interview, Jackson Memorial Hospital had, of course, grown significantly. Harley commented, “Surely this hospital, with its magnificent outlay, could never look back to the time when nurses held umbrellas over hospitals beds to protect patients against rain dripping through the roof.” The poignancy lies in the fact that she did not see the nurses’ contribution as significant: she attributed changes in her “old home . . . [the] modern discoveries or methods,” indeed, the growth of the hospital, to “the men whose labors have made the present possible.”<sup>40</sup>

It is only by listening to the actual voice of Lillah Harley that the historian can begin to understand the intrinsic subtleties of early nursing in Miami. A description of famous people or important buildings could not possibly capture this nurse’s love for her profession or her admiration for the doctors. Indeed, it is clear from her own voice that she contributed to her own marginalization. While she played an essential role in the history of the hospital, to Harley it was “the men whose labors have made the present possible” while “doctors’ daily visits were like benedictions.” Ironically, she was given a voice, but *by chance* she voiced how she was really marginalized.



**Lillah B. Harley, October 1964.  
(Courtesy Dr. William M. Straight)**

## Endnotes

1. Helen Muir, *Miami USA* (Miami: The Pickering Press, 1953),  
 2. The very ill were sometimes taken to Key West by boat, a thriving town (well known as a wrecking center) with established doctors as early as 1829.

2. Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 94.

3. Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *U.S. History as Women's History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 7.

4. The American Medical Association (AMA) was founded in 1848 to set enforceable standards for regular practice. The AMA urged states to pass a law for licensing doctors. Florida's was passed in 1889. *The Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida, 1889* (Tallahassee: Bowen, 1889), 113.

5. Patricia M. Donahue, *Nursing: The Finest Art* (St. Louis, MO: Mosby, 1983), 308.

6. Florence Nightingale was lionized as the compassionate nurse who, in the hour of the soldiers' desperate need, brought relief to the men involved in the Crimean War in southern Russia (1854-56), a conflict pitting England and France against Russia. Her experience at Crimea empowered her to do more for humanity. She was an intellectual, educated, well traveled and accomplished member of the upper class, who not only elevated the status of the nurse and the soldier, but also promoted reforms in the army, public health nursing and sanitation of India. Nightingale scholars Martha Vicinus and Bea Nergard describe her as the "engine that drove the machinery of sanitation." Her status enabled her to work through a great many people to achieve her goals, even though after the Crimean War she spent the rest of her life as an invalid. Martha Vicinus and Bea Nergard, eds., *Ever Yours: Florence Nightingale Selected Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 10.

7. Donahue, *Nursing: The Finest Art*, 319.

8. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 197.

9. Nurse historian Gerald Bowman noted that there was conflict between Fenwick and Nightingale's philosophy for training nurses.

Fenwick wanted only registered nurses to be allowed to practice but Nightingale believed that requirement would preclude over 40,000 nurses already in practice. Nightingale further asserted that to place nursing on an equal level with medicine would seriously damage the profession. Gerald Bowman, *The Lamp and the Book: The Story of the R.C.N. [Royal College of Nurses] 1916-1966* (London: Queen Ann Press, 1967), 4.

10. The successor of the Nurses' Associated Alumnae of the United States became the American Nurses' Association in 1911.

11. *Laws of the State of Florida adopted by the Legislature of Florida 1913* (Tallahassee: Appleyard, 1913), 313.

12. Lillah B. Harley, "Miami City Hospital – Its Early History," as told to Susan Burkhardt, March 30, 1950. Manuscript in the Archives of Jackson Memorial Hospital, School of Nursing.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. *Ibid.*, 4.

16. *Ibid.*, 3 (emphasis added by the author).

17. Sarah Comstock, "Your Daughter's Career," *Good Housekeeping* 61 (December 1915): 731, 736.

18. Harley, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 2.

20. *Ibid.*, 3.

21. Al Pagel, "It Started in a Livery Stable," *Miami Herald*, 6 August 1967, p.5.

22. Harley, 5.

23. *Ibid.*, 3.

24. Jean Voltz, "Supervising Hospital Here in 1920 as a Difficult Job," *Miami Herald*, 26 April 1953, p. 13-F.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Harley, 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 3.

28. Harley, 6.

29. Dr. William M. Straight, "Jackson Memorial Hospital: A Half Century of Community Service," *Journal of the Florida Medical Association* 54 (August 1967): 788.

30. Harley, 4.

31. Straight, 788.

32. Harley, 4.

33. Lavinia Dock (1858-1956) worked relentlessly for the women's vote. She also worked with Lillian Wald at the Henry Street settlement house in New York. She was outspoken, and shocked many people when she wrote about venereal disease in the *Hygiene and Morality* journal (1910). A prolific author, she wrote many articles and a four volume *History of Nursing*. For biographical information on Dock see Patricia M. Donahue, *Nursing: The Finest Art* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1983), 357.

34. Harley notes that the incorporation is recorded in the Dade County Court House in Book 22, page 285.

35. Ainah Royce to Miss Richel, "Reminiscences," 1954, Manuscript in the Archives of Jackson Memorial Hospital, School of Nursing, 6.

36. Ibid.

37. Untitled, Archives of Jackson Memorial Hospital, School of Nursing.

38. Voltz, p. 13-F.

39. Harley, 7.

40. Ibid.