

1844-1994



*Our*

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# *Our Medical Heritage*



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Lancaster City & County Medical Society

## Section 1

# *The History of the Lancaster City & County Medical Society*



LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA, 1844



## Chapter 13

# *The Lancaster County Hospital County Home Has Long Colorful History*

The second oldest hospital in the United States sits in the 900 block of E. King Street, part of the county's Conestoga View nursing home complex.

That site and the historic building trace their origin to 1797, when an act of the state Legislature provided for the erection of "Houses of Employment and Support of the Poor" in Lancaster and Chester counties.

Six reputable citizens were chosen as directors (including Dr. Edward Hand) to designate a site for the Lancaster County building. The site chosen was the one on which Conestoga View sits today, just east of Lancaster City limits. Eighty-nine acres were purchased from Matthias Slauch for \$8,500.

The first building, which remains today on the west side of the plot, was authorized in 1799 and erected in 1800-1801 at a cost of approximately \$15,000. This structure is classified as the second oldest hospital extant in the United States, antedated only by Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia (founded approximately 1750).



**OLD COUNTY HOSPITAL**  
900 E. KING ST. LANCASTER, PA  
PLANNED IN 1799 AND OCCUPIED IN 1801. IT IS THE SECOND  
OLDEST HOSPITAL STANDING IN THE UNITED STATES.

During its first year of operation, 84 paupers were given support; 29 were discharged, and 20 died. Total expenditure from November 1800 to October 1801; was \$4,037. All dollars amounts are approximate since the monetary exchange in those early days were recorded in pounds and shillings, and the conversion rate varied.



This building was continually used as the House for Employment and Support of the Poor until 1876, when a new almshouse was completed just east of the old. The original structure progressively was used as a house for the indigent, as a hospital for the physically ill, as nurses quarters and lately as county government offices.

The first "physician and surgeon" hired to attend the House of Employment was Dr. John J. Perkins, on December 2, 1800, for an annual salary of \$90.

Consulting physicians nominated were Dr. Edward Hand and Dr. Frederick Kuhn. Dr. Perkins resigned in 1801 and was succeeded by Dr. George Moore. His duties included a weekly visit (oftener if necessary) for a salary of \$100 per year.

The appointment of these physicians and the employment of a steward and matron (Melchior Mellinger and his wife) to supervise the physical comfort of the inmates entitled the House of Poor and Employment to be designated a hospital. The rules and ordinances governing the House of Employment were adopted in July 1800, and filled ten pages.

Within several years a separate building, called the Commodius House, was erected as a hospital for the sick. The location, cost and opening date are not available, but Margaret Herrington was paid \$4.53 for one month and four days as matron on December 31, 1806.

An interesting entry in the board minutes of April 3, 1809, showed Mrs. Catharine Curry as matron at a salary of \$4.00 per month. If her husband visited her apartment at the home, his meals would be charged to her account. In November 1809, there were 28 men, 20 women and three children living in the hospital.

In 1811, the living conditions and dining fare at the home must have upset a significant group of taxpayers since the board ordered the home not to operate in such a manner that it induced others to envy the plight of the pauper. Hence, the following bill of fare was ordered:

BREAKFAST: Rye or barley coffee, cocoa, brown soup or tea and bread molasses and milk.

DINNER: 1/2 lb. fresh bread, vegetable soup (barley, rice, samp).

SUPPER: Mush, milk, brown soup, tea or cocoa and "leftovers" from dinner.

Molasses and sugar are to be used only three times per week and no coffee (except for the sick) but rye and barley coffee.

Indian Corn is both wholesome and cheap and bread must have at least one third Indian corn meal in it. Whiskey is not to be given in the home except under doctor's orders, but those doing outdoor work (especially during harvest times), women doing wash and the baker on baking day were allowed one or more gills (approximately 5 oz.) per day.



By 1820, the institution's population had grown to 218 men, women and children, and history adds the following notation: "admissions 28, discharges 19, deaths 6 and elopements 5."

Another aid to the poor conducted by the Home was so-called "Outdoor Relief," for which qualified needy persons received \$1 to \$5 per month (average \$1.60). In 1857, 105 persons were granted such relief and the census of the Home and Hospital was 241, including 29 children.

In 1830, a brick building was erected as an asylum for the insane.

Years later, remnants of the wooden pillars, with iron rings attached were found in a subbasement, which traditions says were used to shackle the most violent, uncontrollable patients. Similar rings were also to be seen in the basement of the original hospital.

In 1882, a fire in a barn on a farm a half-mile distant started the asylum shingles on fire. Pandemonium reigned. Inmates were evacuated in straight-jackets and handcuffs, while others escaped.

The original asylum was enlarged in 1866 to include larger quarters for the mentally ill and hospital floors for men and women. In the mid-twentieth century Dr. James Hammers introduced insulin shock therapy for certain mental illnesses, with mixed success. It was abandoned about a year later. Dr. Hammers also introduced occupational therapy for his patients.

The insane were cared for here until 1942, when the State of Pennsylvania ordered all such patients transferred to state institutions.

The next building to be built (1874-76) at a cost of \$113,000, was designated the "Poor House or County Home." It was a large building with



**LANCASTER COUNTY ALMS HOUSE AND HOSPITAL**



high steps (within the memory of many Lancastrians) and housed the indigent removed from the original building (1800-01). It consisted of four stories, a kitchen, dining room and a chapel. This structure was torn down when the present building was completed in 1969.

A new building was erected in 1898-1899 to provide beds for hospital patients. This structure was situated between the Home and the insane asylum. Marble floors and steps adorned the first floor. This building was also demolished in 1969.

Conestoga View, the present building of eight floors, was built by D. M. Warfel Associates and was dedicated in August 1969. At its opening, it provided for approximately 330 residents and included administrative offices, kitchen and cafeteria, chapel, pharmacy, laundry, podiatry, eye and dental clinics, morgue and other offices.

Within a few years the unfinished 7th and 8th floors were furnished and the resident capacity rose to 452. Employees of Conestoga View totalled 523.

Early in the history of the County Home a farm was established behind the buildings on both sides of Conestoga River. It provided hemp, flax, meat, milk, poultry, hay, grain and vegetables. A bridge, erected in 1843, spanned the river and connected the two areas of the farm. This bridge was wide enough to drive a team and wagon across. The bridge no longer exists.

A tenant tended the farm with labor derived from healthy inmates of the Home and prisoners of the jail. Over the years (e.g. 1882, 1900, 1902) several barns on the premises burned but were promptly rebuilt, although their locations seem to have changed at times. The farm was finally abandoned in 1969 with the opening of Conestoga View.

A "Potter's Field" occupied a site in the southwest portion of the farm. There have been no burials there since the 1970s.

Medical directors in the 60 years include Drs. James Hammers, Karl Buri, Charles Peterson, and Julius Sandhaus.

Administrators (or acting administrators) in the last 60 years include Aaron Palmer, Elvin Simmons, Rev. Charles Wonderly, Carl Weaver, Steve Guiland, Jack Bieher, Randy Sipe, Florence Hackman Vaitl, Richard Oakley, Larry Epting, Mark Quinlan, Ray Young and most recent (11/93) Carol Kniseley.

Historic jottings from the property reveal some interesting facts:

- In 1806 - George Hensell was paid \$10 to make five coffins and the directors received \$20 a year.
- In 1837 - Cords of wood were purchased for \$2.37 per 1/2 cord.
- In 1840 - Coal was bought for \$4.74/ton, whiskey for 31-1/4 cents/gallon.
- In 1854 - A cholera epidemic occurred resulting in 28 deaths. Later the board approved a gift of \$50 to five people principally involved in the epidemic in appreciation of their services.
- In 1855 - William Taylor was selected as superintendent at a salary of \$500/year. The board suggested the removal of the almshouse



property to a greater distance from the city. This was rejected by Judge Henry Long.

- In 1856 - A nurse was paid \$4/month.
- In 1864 - A "moral Director" was appointed whose duties included giving instructions in English and German to prisoners and paupers, and to promote their moral and religious obligations.
- In 1865 - Paupers who would not labor were given meat only four times a week.
- In 1882 - A smallpox epidemic involved the Home and County Isolation Hospital

Much of this material was obtained from Lancaster County Historical Society Journal Vol. LV-No. 4(1951), George Kirchner (longtime employee of Lancaster County Home), Etta Bishop and several past and present employees of the Home/Hospital. My gratitude extends to all -*Editor*.

### *Heart Haven*

Heart Haven was started in 1950 by the Lancaster Heart Association for the care of children with heart disease, especially rheumatic heart disease. Doctors were assigned to care for these patients on a rotation basis. Children with rheumatic fever, after the acute phase had subsided, were admitted for chronic care. School was arranged for the children in small groups and individually. The sedimentation rate was the yardstick of activity of rheumatic fever and children were kept at rest until this result had returned to normal and all physical signs of disease activity had subsided. Heart Haven was under the direction of Dr. J. Howard Esbenshade and the head nurse was Mrs. Kathryn Hawk, who lived there. Dr. Esbenshade and Paul Murray had been the promoters of Heart Haven. During its 18 years of operation it had provided free services to a majority of its patients.