

History

A Brief History of Portsmouth Hospital

By the time of the Revolution, Portsmouth had dominated the mercantile, political, and cultural life of New Hampshire for over a century. The oldest and most populous city of the state, Portsmouth was also in the vanguard of medical progress thanks to the genius of men like Dr. Hall Jackson, who pioneered the use of digitalis in America, taught smallpox inoculation throughout the

Northeast, and achieved prominence as a skilled and daring surgeon.

Although Portsmouth was the largest community in New Hampshire and boasted the highest doctor/patient ratio in the state, those "hospitals" that were set up from time to time were temporary expedients and never intended to serve as permanent facilities. For example, it is recorded that in April, 1766, the selectmen of Portsmouth agreed to allow Dr. Hall Jackson to use the Town Pest House, on Shapleigh's Island, as a hospital



Pest House, Shapleigh's Island

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for the purpose of conducting classes of inoculation with smallpox. (These "classes" were really courses of inoculation with the actual virus of smallpox; Dr. Jenner's safer and simpler process using the cowpox virus, vaccinia, had not yet been developed.) The Pest House was one of a series of relatively isolated dwellings rented as necessary by the city government, and typically staffed with a couple who were immune to smallpox. Victims of contagion were taken to the Pest House where they could be cared for, yet



Pest House, Shapleigh's Island

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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isolated from the rest of the community for the duration of the infection. It is important to remember that throughout the 18th century and for most of the 19th, long-term medical care was almost always rendered in the patient's home. Very occasionally the physician's residence might be used, and still less often might care be given in a designated building or hospital set aside for the injured or ill. The concept of hospitalization, then, was intended primarily for the isolation of the sick, especially in epidemics, and only sec-



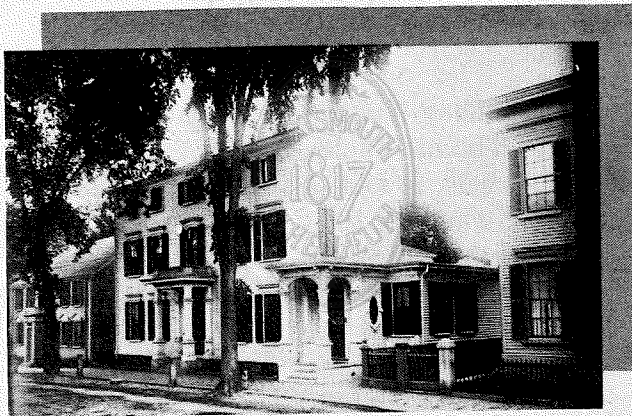
Early Doctor's House

ondarily to allow for increased efficiency of care.

A hundred years later, Portsmouth still had no permanent hospital, and still provided care at home for most patients. But medical practice was changing; the "century of the surgeon" and the development of nursing as a profession combined to make the consolidation of patients a desirable alternative to the fragmented and inefficient practices of home care. The story of Portsmouth Hospital was about to begin.

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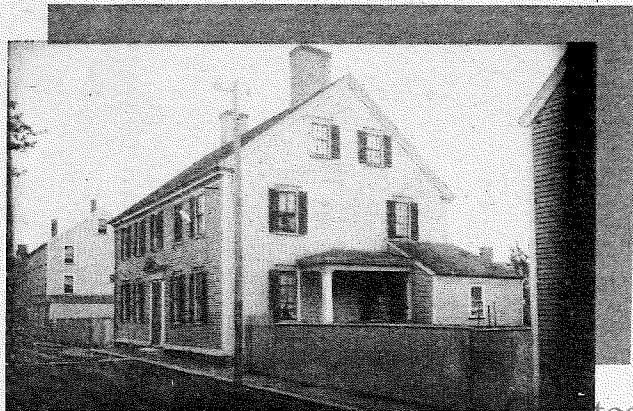
In 1877 a mariner named William H. Parks, presumably a widower, sought to provide suitable shelter and guidance for his "motherless children" while he was at sea. Mr. Parks was more than just a mariner, for he effectively led a group of benefactors and supporters who together made his dream a reality: a "Society for Orphans and Destitute Children" was set up. Within two years, in 1879, another beneficent gentleman, a master brewer named George A. Bilbruck, purchased and donated to the Society for Chil-



Early Doctor's House

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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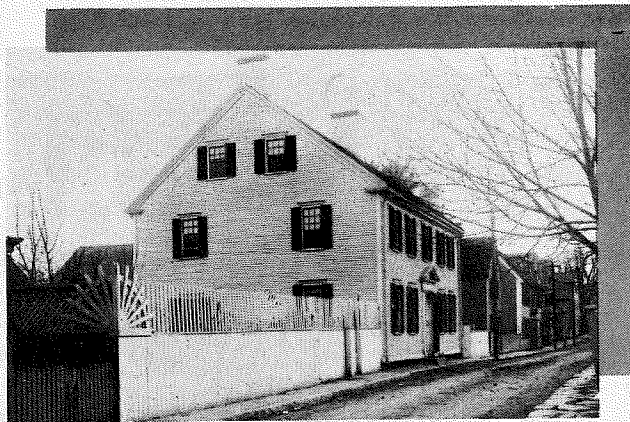
First Cottage Hospital (Thomas Bailey Aldrich House)

dren the Bailey House (now famous as the home of Thomas Bailey Aldrich) at 51 Court Street. It was, in fact, a sign of the vitality and good works of the Society (and, perhaps, of the numbers of needy children in Portsmouth) that just four years later, in 1883, Mr. George B. Chase of Boston donated his larger and more commodious house to the directors of the Society. (It was no coincidence, of course, that the homes of Hall Jackson, George Chase, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich were practically next door to each

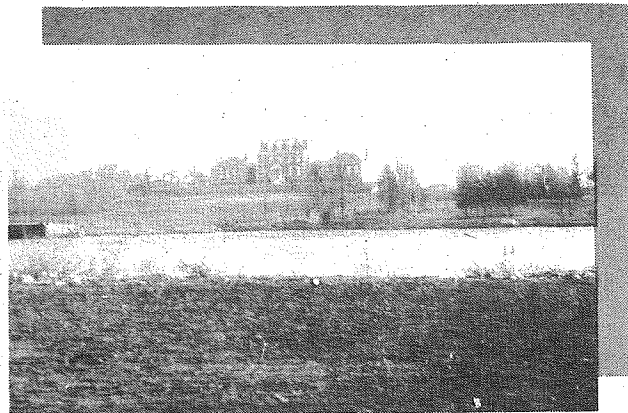
other on Court Street. Jackson's house no longer stands, but the other two buildings continue to grace a particularly lovely and historic section of Portsmouth today.) By way of recompense for his generous gift to the Society for Children, Chase asked only that a plaque to his memory be placed in the home; the Society went him one better than that, and renamed itself in his honor: the Chase Home for Children—the title it bears today. The Bailey House did not remain vacant for long.

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While Parks, Bilbruck, and Chase were establishing the Chase Home for Children, a woman of great energy and vision was at work, practicing Christian charity and inexorably developing the political and social climate that would nurture the development of a hospital for all the citizens of Portsmouth. Her name was Miss Harriet McEwen Kimball. A member of St. John's Parish, she led the formation of a "Relief Club" in 1879. With the assistance of Reverend Mr. Charles Holbrook, and, later, Reverend Mr. Henry



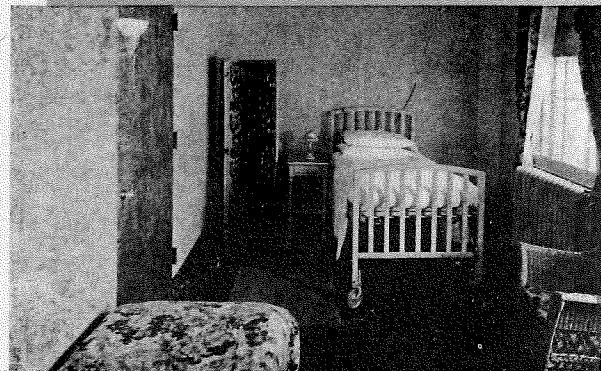
Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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Ward, Cottage Hospital

E. Hovey, Miss Kimball's Relief Club became part of the Guild of St. John's Church, and provided succor to the sick and the poor in their homes. As it happened, Reverend Hovey was a director of the Chase Home for Children (the Rector of St. John's is still always given the responsibility), and it was he who publicly announced in 1884 that the Bailey House, recently vacated by the Society for Orphans and Destitute Children, was being offered by the Society's directors to anyone who would begin to organize a hospi-



Patient Room, 1900

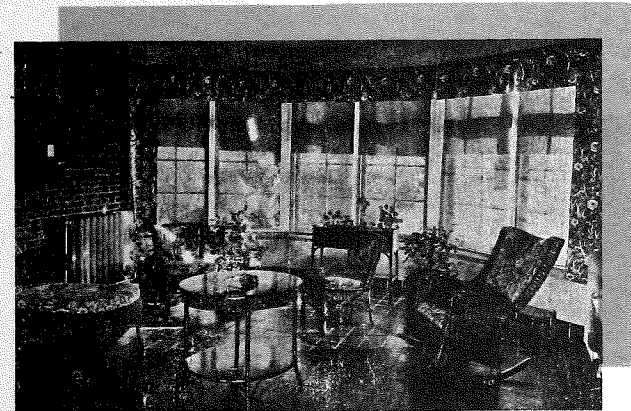
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tal. Within the same day Miss Kimball had installed a patient, and herself as a nurse! Her request for the continued use of the house as a "Cottage Hospital" was immediately granted. Miss Kimball's dream, the Cottage Hospital, was quickly chartered and a Board of Directors named. The hospital's rapid growth attested to the skill and devotion with which it was run, and to the community's need for its services.

From the minutes of the Portsmouth Medical Society, January 19th, 1886: "The follow-



The OR Staff, late 1800's

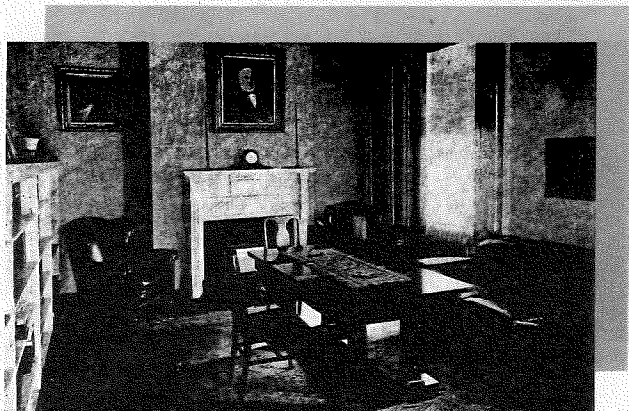


A Solarium, Cottage Hospital

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

...ologist... partial and should be thought of... the treatment you require: X-ray

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Trustees' Conference Room

ing rules concerning services at the Cottage Hospital were received from the Board of Directors and unanimously approved:

1. The Medical Staff of the Cottage Hospital shall consist of the members of the Portsmouth Medical Association appointed by the Board of Directors.
2. Each physician thus chosen shall be on duty two months. If unable to serve, he shall notify the Directors who will appoint his successor.

3. The attending physician (with the matron)

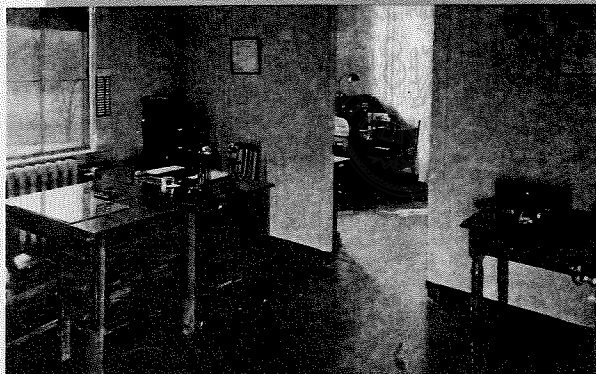
shall determine which patients shall be admitted to the Hospital, and shall direct the discharge of such patients as in his opinion should no longer remain. He shall also have a general oversight of the sanitary condition of the hospital.

4. A record shall be kept, in a book furnished for the purpose, of the diagnosis, treatment, course, and termination of each patient admitted.
5. Any physician in good standing may remain in attendance upon any case he may

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have referred hither, but shall require of the Hospital no compensation for such services.

6. No capital operation, except in cases of emergency, shall be performed without previous consultation with at least one other member of the visiting staff.
7. The Directors will in no case be responsible for any compensation to the attending physician.
8. It is not intended that patients who are able to pay for medical attendance shall



Modern Physician's Office, 1919

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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resort to the Hospital for gratuitous medical attention, and it is not expected that the physicians will give their services except to those deserving charity."

With a very short time it was obvious that the Bailey House, which had been too small for the Chase Home, was too small for the Cottage Hospital as well. From the minutes of the Portsmouth Medical Society for February 24th, 1891:

"The subject of adapting the present Almshouse for a Hospital was discussed,

and many good and sufficient reasons given why such action would be inexpedient. The chief objections were: its inaccessibility; the odium attached to the fact that it had been an Almshouse; the association of paupers; its mal-hygienic condition; and, greater than all, the fact that a suitable location for the erection of the Hospital has already been purchased."

The minutes here refer to another notable outpouring of public support, this time des-

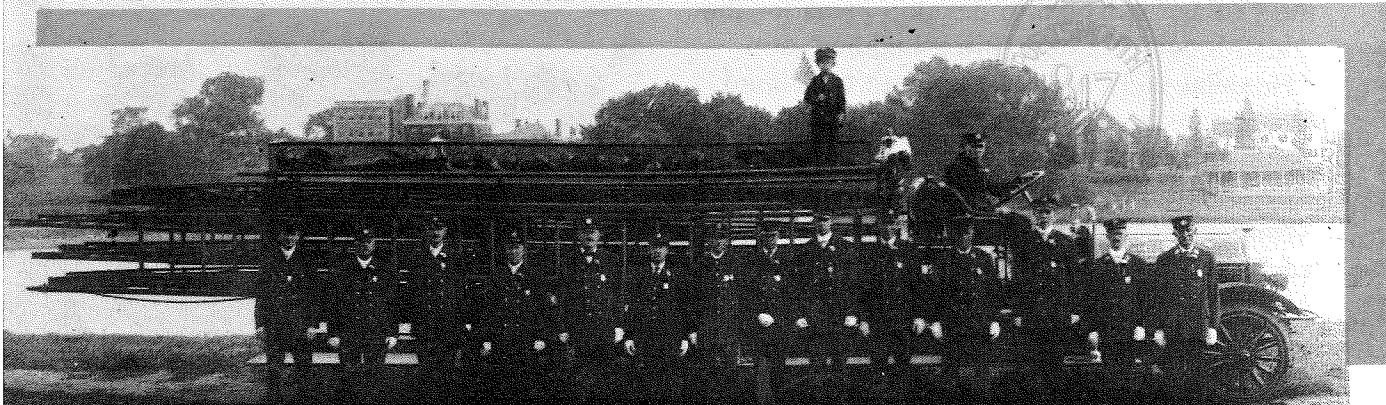
igned to bring Portsmouth Hospital to its present site.

In 1891, Frank Jones, Portsmouth's most famous 19th-century figure, capped an already generous contribution to the Cottage Hospital with a challenge gift of \$5,000 to be paid if the Hospital succeeded in raising a certain additional amount. In response, Mr. George Bilbruck (yes, the same man who gave the Bailey House to the Society for Orphans back in 1879) came through with the princely sum of \$10,000. Between them,

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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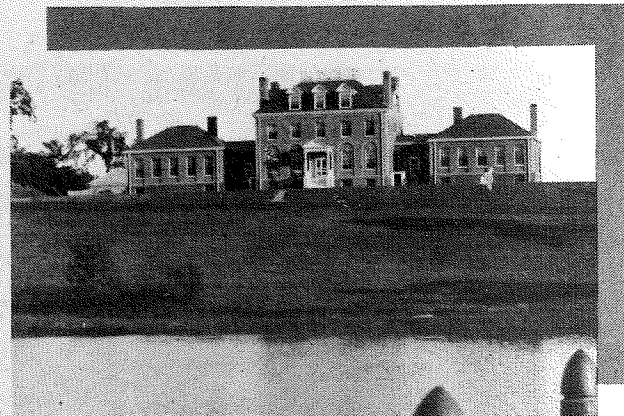
Hospital in background, East Wing Expansion (Portsmouth Fire Department in full Regalia) Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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Portsmouth Cottage Hospital, 1901, South Facade

Jones and Bilbruck enabled the Directors of the Cottage Hospital to develop plans for the construction of a new, brick building atop "Hospital Hill" across the South Mill Pond. Thanks to the two brewers, it was built: a handsome Victorian brick building, with a mansarded three-story center, gracefully and symmetrically flanked by one-story wards at each end, the front of the complex facing the Mill Pond and the rooftops of the city beyond. Construction was finished in early 1895, the New Hampshire legislature enacted



Cottage Hospital, North Facade

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

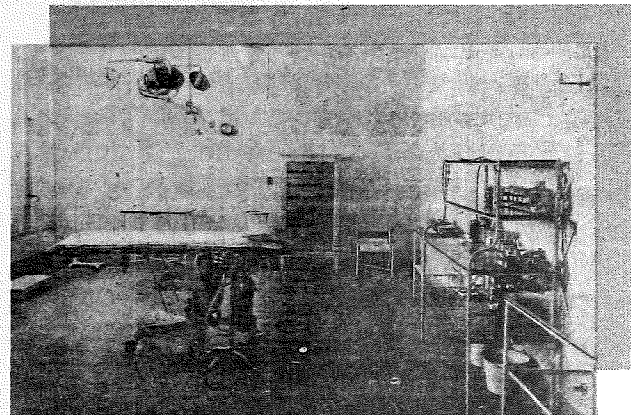
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a new charter for the Cottage Hospital on March 28, 1895, and the first patient was admitted on October 1st, 1895. The building still stands, as modified in 1920, now with three full stories throughout its length. In recent years it has again found importance in the health care of the community; although no patients are now hospitalized in the Cottage Hospital building, it houses many of the administrative and maintenance personnel of the hospital, and until recently was the home of the Portsmouth Community Health Ser-

vices, Inc. (the visiting nurses) and the Seacoast Regional Counseling Service. Stoutly built, the building will continue to be an important hospital asset.

If the 18th and 19th centuries were the era of home-centered medical care, the 20th century has surely been the age of the hospital. The use of Portsmouth Hospital has increased so dramatically that today it is difficult to conceive of the Portsmouth of 1875 or 1880, when no hospital existed at all. Since 1895, growth has been steady.



Late 1800's Operating Room

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After the expansion and renovation of the Cottage Hospital Building in 1920, a nurses' home was built in 1929. That edifice remains today as the central portion of the hospital's patient-care complex, where the main entrance is located. (That the training of nurses was an early concern of the Directors of the Cottage Hospital is borne out by the minutes of the Portsmouth Medical Society meeting of April 17th, 1891: "The proposition of Miss Woods of the Cottage Hospital, to establish a training school for nurses in connection with

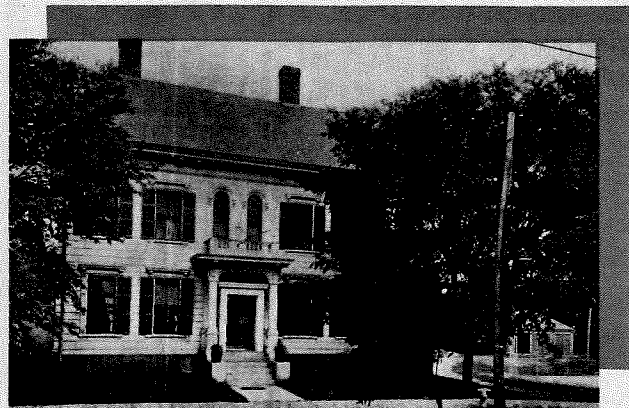


The Nurses (1920)

the Hospital was presented, discussed, and unanimously endorsed.") In 1934 construction was renewed with the erection of the Maternity Building, now known as the Seybolt Building in memory of yet another most generous benefactor, John Seybolt.

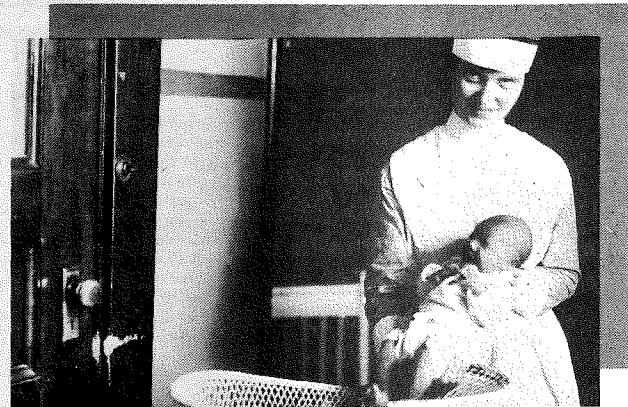
Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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First Nurses' Home

Finally, on February 16, 1964, the Main Building was dedicated, opening the modern era of Portsmouth Hospital. The Main Building's size and design have allowed the introduction of many functions, including departments of Emergency Medicine, Intensive Care, Physical Therapy, Respiratory and Pulmonary Medicine, and Mini Surgery. New equipment is added constantly, including nuclear scanning and, most recently, instant imaging using radionuclides and the Gamma Camera; state-of-the-art cardiac monitoring



The Nursery

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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techniques are in place, as well as cardiac pacemaking; and large numbers of people have been added, too. The Medical Staff has grown to well over 100 doctors and dentists, and the nursing service has increased dramatically in numbers and specialized skills.

In the last analysis, of course, a hospital is mostly people. Surely the Seacoast must be proud of its people: Mr. Parks, the mariner who wanted to protect his children; Mr. Bilbruck, who gave so much to so many; Dr. Hall Jackson; the men of the Portsmouth

Medical Society; Frank Jones; Miss Kimball; John Seybolt, and on and on. We at Portsmouth Hospital hope that the people of the Seacoast region will continue to help make the hospital exactly what you feel it should be; we hope you will work with us, tell us what you want and what you need, and volunteer to serve in the governance of the hospital. Above all, remember that Portsmouth Hospital was created by the people themselves, for themselves, to serve their needs as individuals and as a community. Only the

community benefits from Portsmouth Hospital, and no one profits from it: Portsmouth Hospital is synonymous with the region it serves and is governed by unpaid volunteers, as always.

We are still engaged in giving succor to the sick, and share the community's gratitude for the wise foresight and hard work of past generations of Seacoast citizens.

William F. Wieting, MD