The MGH had very few full-time nurses and depended heavily on students for much of its bedside and outpatient care.

CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF NURSING EDUCATION AT MASSACHUSETTES GENERAL HOSPITAL 150

"...the first requisite in sickness, a kind and skilful nurse."

— **James Jackson, MD**, and **John Collins Warren, MD**, in their 1810 circular letter to foster support for a general hospital in Boston

As the first student to enroll in and graduate from a nurse training school, Linda Richards is often called "America's first trained nurse." As superintendent of the Boston Training School for Nurses, she is credited with transforming it into one of the country's premier nurse training schools. Richards is shown here with nursing students at a Connecticut hospital.

At the start of the 19th century, few nurses worked in hospitals. Patients were often tended to by female relatives who oversaw care both out of need and as a way to pay the hospital bill. Those relatives and others who were hired to work as nurses were untrained and had to learn on the job. While some provided hands-on care, many women were cast in the role of housekeeper and were often looked down upon by the physicians, a stance that continued for decades.

Following the devastating losses of husbands, fathers and sons in the Civil War, women were compelled to find new ways to support themselves. In 1873, members of the Women's Education Association founded the Boston Training School for Nurses. The school would be based on the model established by Florence Nightingale and would be affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital.

Erected in 1883, Thayer Hall was the first permanent home for the school, hosting both residences and classrooms.

MGH patient wards, such as this one in the Bulfinch Building, started to be used for practical education for nurses-in-training at the Boston Training School for Nurses in 1873.

After a difficult first year, Linda Richards became the third superintendent of the school. Under Richards's oversight, both classroom instruction and the students' work on the wards expanded. The medical staff, originally opposed to the school, took note of these changes and began to offer the students lectures and took them along to bedside clinics. Even though they were eventually relieved of housekeeping tasks, students worked 12-hour days.

By 1896, the medical staff saw the benefit of a closer relationship with the school. Ownership was transferred to the hospital trustees and the school became the MGH Training School for Nurses.

The Men's Ward in the Bulfinch Building, circa 1930s. The MGH hired its first staff nurse in the mid-1920s, freeing up students for other duties and studies.

SETTING STANDARDS

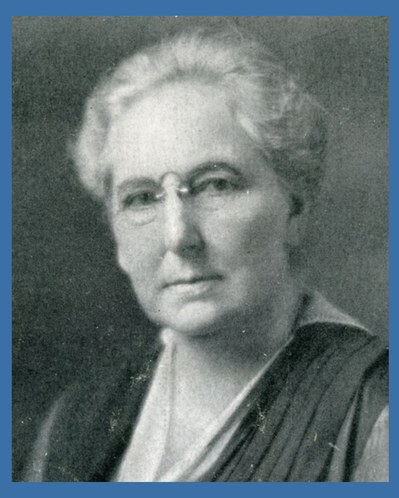
Annabella McCrae

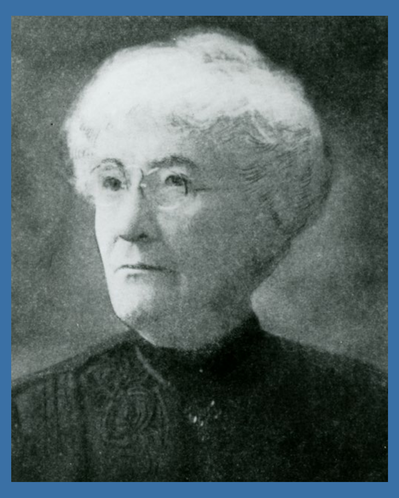
"Formidable in white starched uniform with bishop's collar, her glasses attached by a fine black cord around her neck, Annabella McCrae entered a room under full sail, the MGH cap set squarely, top and center, on her carefully confined hair…Her eyes, like the hawk's, missed nothing…
To see Miss McCrae dart across Thayer Classroom to rip apart a loosely made bed and heap scorn upon its maker was to experience one of nature's phenomena."

— **Sylvia Perkins, RN**, MGH SON 1928

At the turn of the century, medical care was advancing rapidly as the country's population and interest in medical science both grew. Courses at the MGH School of Nursing were lengthened to three years to include specialty departments, and students were trained in higher-level skills including assisting in surgery and administering ether anesthesia. Affiliations with local colleges were established to offer science courses.

Changes were also taking place in the nursing profession. Nationally, nurses began to organize to standardize the profession and improve opportunities. MGH nurses played a leading role, and along with nurses across the country, helped found the American Society of Superintendents of Nursing Schools. This institution was one of the first to establish professional nursing in America.

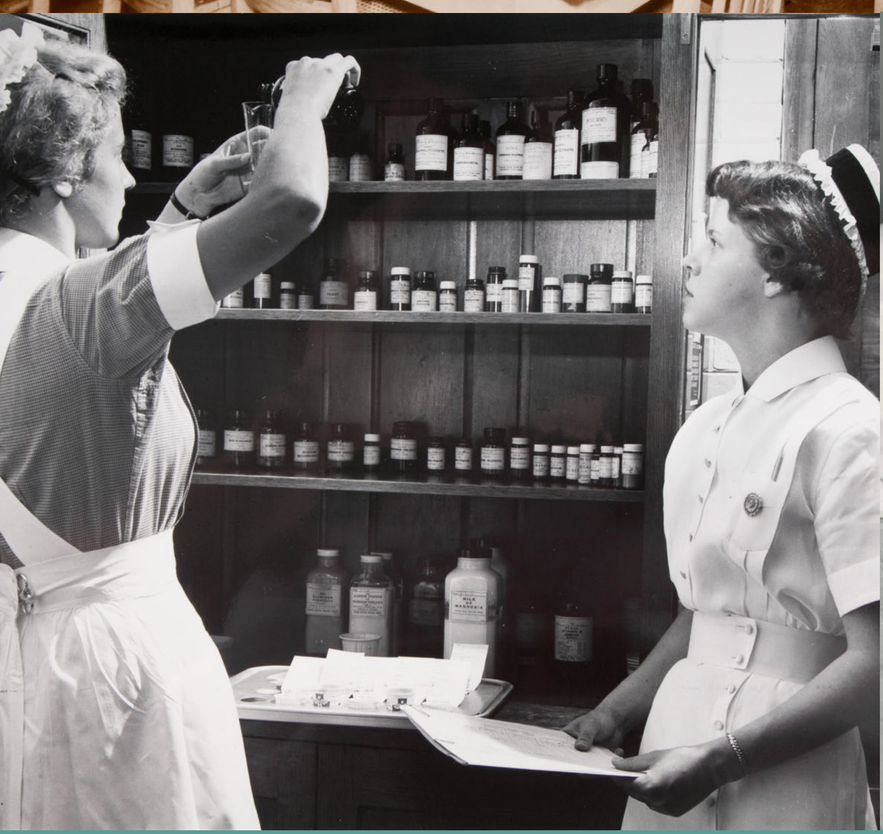




National nursing leaders and MGH graduates Sophia Palmer (left) and Mary E.P. Davis formed the MGH Nurses Alumnae Association in 1895 and were two of the founders of the American Journal of Nursing.

American Journal of Nursing

At about the same time, nursing also was being professionalized at the state level. The Massachusetts State Nurses' Association was formed to protect the status of trained nurses while the Massachusetts Board of Registration oversaw nursing licensure.



A HEAVY WORKLOAD

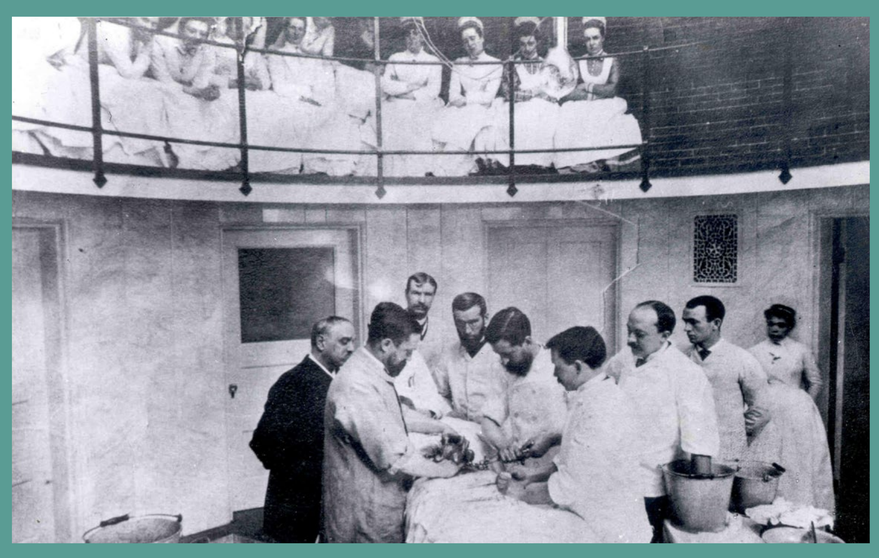
"We would get up at 5:30 in the morning. We had a half hour to prepare to get into our uniforms … Our day went from that time in the morning to 6 at night studying, with a very short period of time to eat lunch. We had no breaks. Then we went to the library where we stayed until it closed…We went back to the dormitories…and we would literally study till the book fell on our chests, and we fell asleep and [we'd] get up and do it again. We did that for nine months."

— **Nancy Smith Kowal, MSN**, MGH SON 1963

In the early 20th century, opportunities for nurses were increasing. Many of the school's graduates were working across the country in hospitals, serving in the military, and in private practice and public health. In addition to attending expanded academic classes, the school's students still made up much of the nursing staff and continued to take care of patients up to 12 hours a day.

The Mass General would not hire its first staff nurses until the mid-1920s, a move that freed up students for more instruction time. This change, as well as evolving and updated curriculum changes, would provide the foundation for the creation of an expanding and modern nursing school. In 1940, the school was renamed the Massachusetts General Hospital School of Nursing to stress academics rather than training.

By the time the School of Nursing turned 50 years old in 1923, more than 1,500 graduates had been trained. Graduates held significant positions in administration, teaching, and public health, and organized and directed diploma and college nursing programs around the country.



By the time Mass General Hospital took over administration of the school in 1896, student nurses had received training in higher-level skills including assisting in surgery and administering ether anesthesia. Here, a group of students observe an operation while a staff colleague is on hand to assist.

"Always, always more to see, more to learn and more to do … to improve both care and cure."

— **Ruth Sleeper, RN, BSN, MA**, director, MGH Nursing Service/MGH School of Nursing, 1947 to 1966

EXPANDED PRACTICE

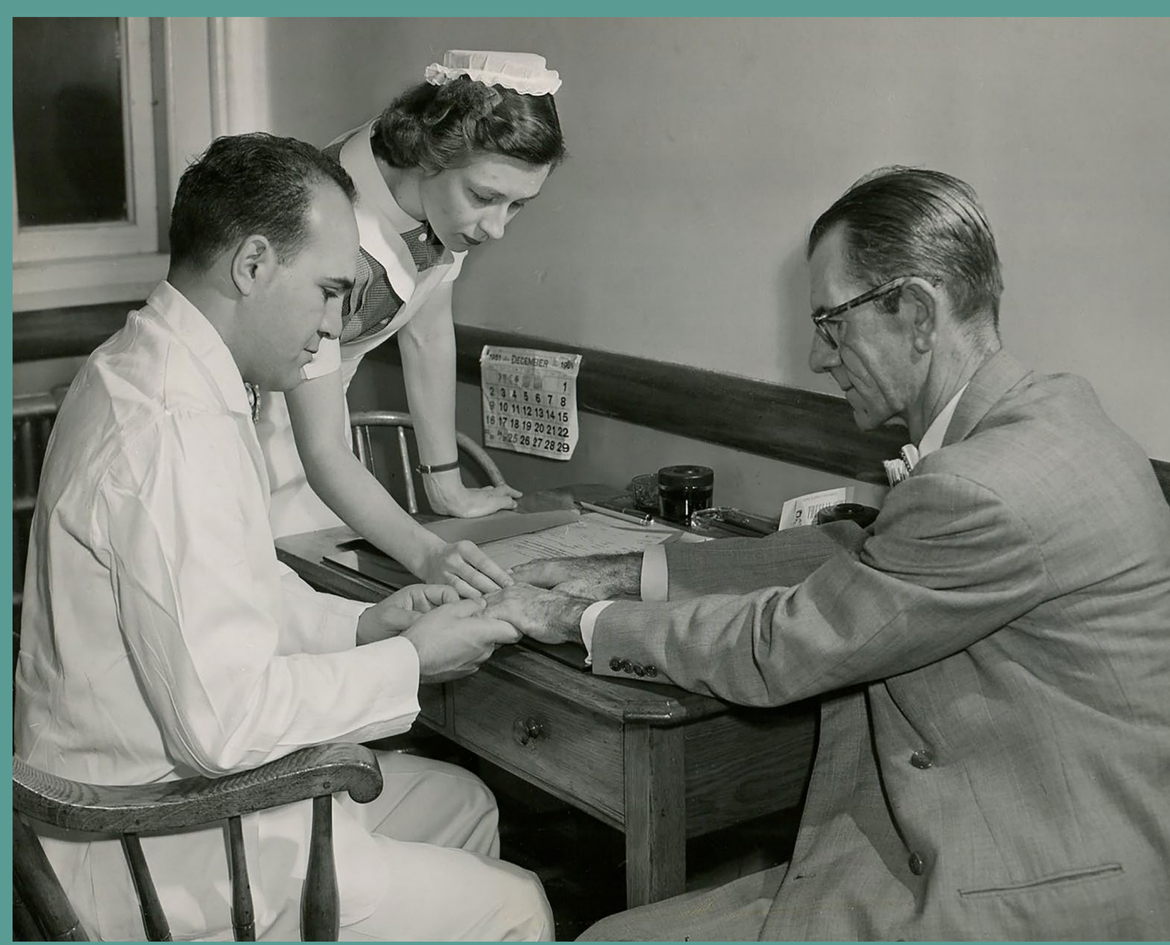
Following WWI, nursing practice expanded into trauma care, gas-inflicted injuries and the psychiatric care of "shell shocked" soldiers. MGH nurses, dozens of whom volunteered at base hospitals across France, brought back the skills they acquired to the hospital. Other events—including the flu and polio epidemics—elevated nursing hands-on expertise as more critically ill and injured patients required increasingly complex care.

Patient acuity was growing, and the need for new techniques and equipment to provide patients with the best possible care was imperative. Crises such as the 1942 Cocoanut Grove Nightclub fire and the 1955 polio epidemic resulted in developing and using new treatments for burn and respiratory patients. Intensive care units like the neonatal ICU assisted in helping premature infants thrive.

After WWII, Ruth Sleeper became director of both the school and nursing service. This period saw nursing shortages as many returning nurses went to college on the GI Bill or got married. Diploma schools continued to be the main source of hospital staffing, and the hospital determined that closing the school would severely affect patient care. The MGH School of Nursing had graduated nearly 4,000 nurses, one of the largest groups from any nursing school in the world.

Within the decade, rising patient medical acuity reflected the need for more complex care. New inpatient settings such as peri-operative and intensive care and post-hospital home care presented new challenges.

MGH outpatient care expanded, and with it, the hospital's recognition of the importance of the role of the nurse as educator and advocate for patients and their families. As the MGH School of Nursing continued to grow its curriculum, it sought and offered affiliations with colleges and universities.



With the growth of outpatient care, the role of nursing and the education of nursing students expanded into the ambulatory care practices, which evolved into the nurse practitioner role at the MGH and in its newly opened community health centers.

"The graduates and the under-graduates of [the MGH School of Nursing] have made possible the MGH as it exists today."

— **Nathaniel Faxon**, MGH general director, 1935 to 1949

THE END OF AN ERA

With the retirement of nursing school and nursing department director Ruth Sleeper, the hospital saw the opportunity to split the two divisions into separate departments. Mary MacDonald (above) became director of the department of Nursing, and Natalie Petzold was appointed head of the school.

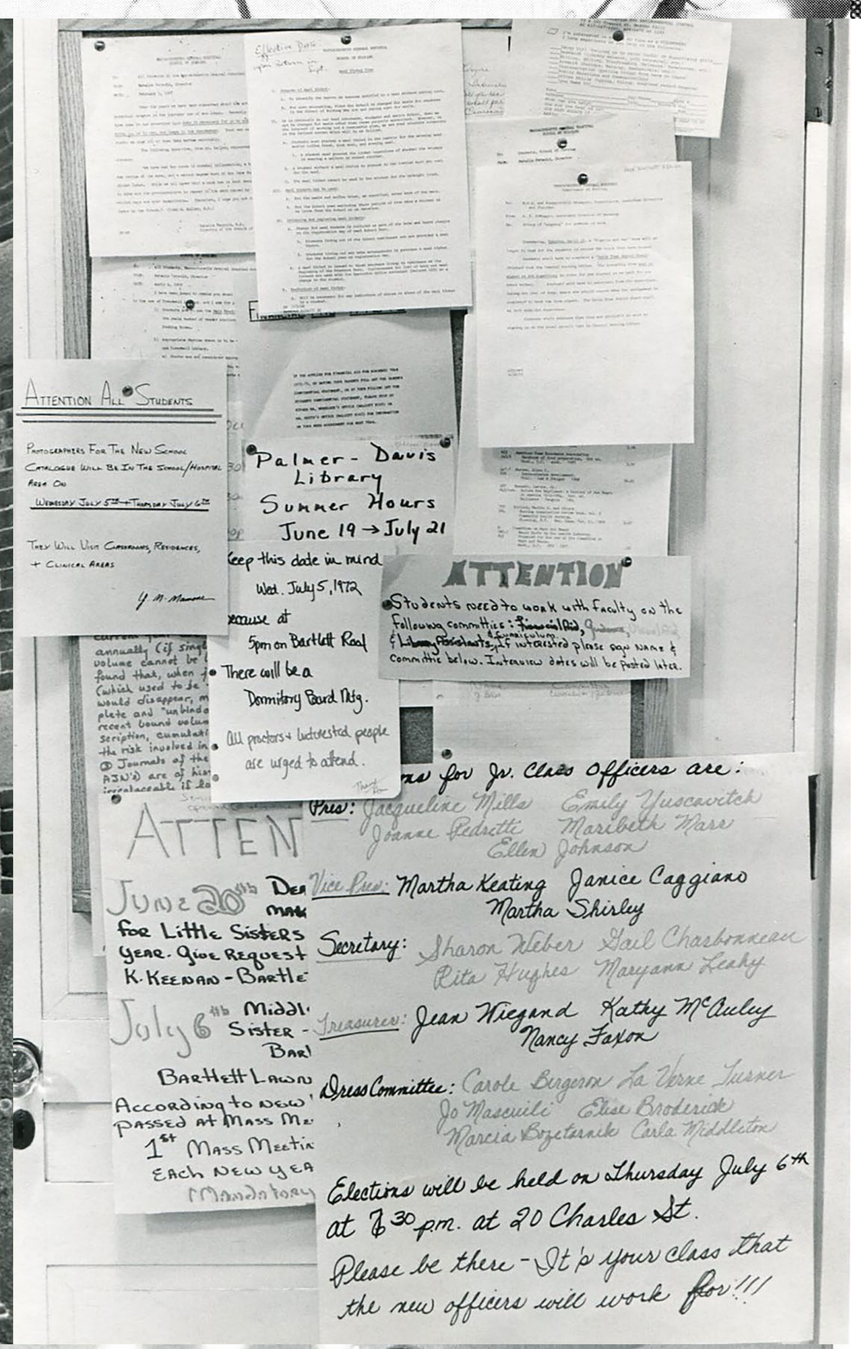
The passage of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s made health care more accessible and affordable for many. MGH expanded its ambulatory care services and created neighborhood community health centers to boost access to outpatient care. In addition, the hospital launched the first nurse practitioner programs in the state. In 1975 Massachusetts passed legislation that granted nurses with advanced education the authority to provide a variety of services, including primary, specialty and obstetrical care.

As the MGH marched toward 100 years of nursing education, the hospital launched a reorganization. With nursing director Ruth Sleeper's retirement in 1966, separate leaders were appointed for patient care and education. This division set the stage for a renewed consideration of the future of the school.

In 1923, the Rockefeller Foundation published a hallmark report on the state of nursing education in the United States. It found that while some hospital schools of nursing did well at basic nursing education, colleges and universities were better equipped to teach public health, nursing education and the care of serious illness. The report was instrumental in developing university nursing programs. In the early 1970s, the MGH's Committee on Teaching and Education recommended that the MGH School of Nursing transition from a diploma-granting institution to a degree-granting one while maintaining the current school's high standards and leadership. In 1977, MGH received degree-granting authority by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education for programs in nursing as well as other allied health specialties.

As the planning for the MGH Institute of Health Professions began, so too did the planning for the closing of the MGH School of Nursing. In 1981, the Massachusetts General Hospital School of Nursing graduated its last class, and with it, ended the longest operating diploma school in America and the last of the three original nursing schools in the United States founded on the ideals of Florence Nightingale.

Natalie Petzold teaching



"The story of the school is primarily a story of people, of values, of principles, of ideals. It is a story full of life, drama and change, of determination and perseverance, of trials, discouragement, frustration, commitment, helping, caring, of searching, exploring, learning and growth, of accomplishments of its graduates and contributions around the world. You have become a part of the fabric of the school of nursing which spans the years, transcends ephemeral differences, captures in subtle and intricate design the spirit, the uniqueness and special quality and contributions of each person and each class. A legacy was passed on to you and you will pass it on to others as you exemplify those ideals and quality for which your school has stood. Just as you take a part of the MGH School of Nursing with you, you will always be part of the MGH School of Nursing Community—whether it exists in the hearts and minds of those associated with or touched by the school."

— **Natalie Petzold**, superintendent of the MGH School of Nursing, addressing the 68 graduates of the MGH SON's last graduating class, 1981