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Pollitt, P., & Reese, C. N. (2000). St. agnes school of nursing: A legacy of hope. *ABNF Journal*, 11(1), 3-6.
Publisher version of record available at: <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/218874747?accountid=8337>

St. Agnes School of Nursing: A Legacy of Hope

Abstract: *This article traces the beginning of African Americans in the nursing profession in the state of North Carolina with particular emphasis on the origin and demise of the St. Agnes School of Nursing at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, NC.*

Key Words: *African Americans; St. Agnes School of Nursing; African Americans in Nursing; Nursing and African Americans in North Carolina*

After the completion of the Civil War, much of the south lay in ruins. The economy which was based on Confederate currency was in shambles. Reacting to Nat Turner's slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831, the North Carolina legislature made teaching enslaved people to read and write a crime punishable by fines, whipping and incarceration. Because of these atrocities, the literacy rate for African Americans was estimated at between five and ten percent. Social institutions existing prior to the war, including schools and churches were gone or changed so much that they were almost unrecognizable. War widows, orphans, disabled veterans and newly freed slaves had to reconstruct their lives under these trying circumstances.

During this period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, many northern religious and philanthropic groups aided by the Federal government began building new kinds of programs and institutions in the former confederate states. Educating newly freed African Americans was a goal shared by many of these northern reformers. The ability to read write and 'cipher' helped provide access to a variety of jobs as well as power to ensure fairness in their business and personal affairs. Colleges and graduate schools were needed to educate African American lawyers, doctors, professors, nurses, business leaders, ministers and other professionals to serve the needs in African American communities.

In 1867, white northern reformers from the Protestant Episcopal Church arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina, (NC), to open St. Augustines's, a school for African Americans.

The school was chartered in July 1867 and accepted its first students in January 1868. No tuition was charged. Board was set at \$8.00 per month. Students from the capital city of Raleigh and surrounding counties came to St. Augustine's to get an elementary and high school education. With help from public and private supporters, the school grew and expanded. In 1896, on the campus of St. Augustine's, the St. Agnes School of Nursing opened. It was the first school of nursing in the state of NC for African American students (Halliburton, 1937).

Professional nursing in NC traces its origins in the United States to the Civil War. For the first time, women on both sides of the conflict organized themselves into professional nursing corps. They learned through close observation and trial and error how the diet, cleanliness, positioning, and atmosphere in the wards influenced the outcomes of illness and injury (Donahue, 1985). Many white women learned management, public relations and administrative skills in War time hospitals. Innovations in medicine, surgery and pharmacology, in addition to the art of nursing practice were made available to the civilian population after the War. In the decades after the Civil War, general hospitals opened in great numbers across the country. Many of these hospitals also served as training schools for nurses. NC reflected these national trends. In the 1880's and 1890's hospitals, often with training schools for nurses, opened for white people in most of NC's largest towns including Raleigh, Wilmington, Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Asheville (Wyche, 1938).

Until 1896, there were no nursing schools that African American women could attend. One hospital in the state, Leonard, in Raleigh, was established in the 1880's to serve African American patients. Leonard had an affiliated medical school but no program to train nurses. There were great unmet needs for health care as well as nurses training facilities in the state. The needs were most acute for African Americans (Wyche, 1938; Thoms, 1929).

One of the white reformers who worked to fill this gap was Sara Hunter. Hunter, the wife of the principal of St.

Augustine's school in Raleigh, addressed the Women's Auxiliaries of the Protestant Episcopal Church at its national meeting in 1885. She described the curriculum at St. Augustine's and stressed the need to add a hospital and nursing school to the campus. Mr. T. L. Collins of California heard about Mrs. Hunter's appeal and donated \$600.00 in memory of his recently departed wife, Agnes Collins. Mrs. Hunter returned to Raleigh with enough money from Mr. Collins and other benefactors to begin construction of St. Agnes Hospital, which was named in memory of Mrs. Agnes Collins. The hospital opened on October 18, 1896 (Halliburton, 1937).

The building, by today's standards would not even be recognized as a hospital. There was a single cold water faucet located in the kitchen. When hot water was needed for sterilizing, cooking, and other necessities, it was heated on a wood stove. The laundry consisted of three wash tubs and a large iron kettle in the front yard. These were used for boiling clothing and linens. Obtaining ice required a four mile trip by horse and buggy to downtown Raleigh. There were no screens on the windows. Heat was supplied by burning wood. Light was obtained from oil lamps. The office was a multipurpose room which was also used as a reception room, dining room, surgeon's dressing room, and occasionally as the morgue (Glenton, 1920).

The hospital opened with great fanfare but in the first week no patients were admitted. The second week, a man with typhoid fever came for care and quickly recovered. Within six months he had been joined by 16 other inpatients, 35 dispensary (outpatients) patients, and 223 people who received medical and nursing care in their homes from St. Agnes' Hospital personnel. The first baby born at the hospital was appropriately named Agnes by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Griffin. Agnes Griffin went on to become a prominent physician practicing for decades in New York City (Glenton, 1920). From the beginning, St. Agnes had dual missions of providing hospital and outpatient care for local residents and providing nurses training for interested students. In 1897, four student nurses were taught by a faculty of eight (Table 1).

Table 1. Faculty 1899-1900

<u>Faculty</u>	<u>Subject</u>
Dr. K. Battle	Physiology
Miss Louise Burgess	Nursing Matron
Miss Mary Conway	General Nursing
Miss Nanny Delany	Cooking
Dr. C. Hayden	Physiology and Materia Medica
Dr. A. Knox	Surgical Nursing
Dr. J. McKee	Obstetric Nursing
Dr. W. Royster	Medical Nursing
Dr. R. Lewis	Ophthalmology
Dr. H. Royster	Anatomy
Dr. L. Scruggs	Lecturer

Miss Louise Burgess, the first Head Nurse, was an African American graduate of the New England Hospital for Women and Children. A report for 1898 shows the hospital had become a vital part of Raleigh's African American community. During this year alone, 60 people were treated as inpatients and 23 operations were performed. These patients

received a total of 1,670 days of care. An additional 436 people were treated through the dispensary (Halliburton, 1937).

In 1898, St. Agnes graduated its first two nurses. They were Anna Augusta Groves and Effie Wortham, both of Raleigh. Since at that time there were no registration laws for nurses in effect, they did not have the title of registered nurse. Initially, the training period was 18 months. Students entered the program as probationers. During the first six months they would clean, cook, and make beds. If their work was acceptable and they decided they wanted to pursue a career in nursing; they entered the hospital as student nurses. In this capacity, they worked alongside the matron, staff nurses and physicians on the wards, in the operating room, and on home visits. Most of their education was on the job training. Lectures and recitations were held regularly, often focusing on the diseases and conditions of the current patient population. Additionally, students studied physiology, materia medica, practical nursing, and cooking. The 1898 graduates were followed a year later by Virginia Mason, Pearl Odom, and Claudia West (Brown) (Boykin, 1966).

In 1900, a fire broke out in the hospital. All of the patients were evacuated to Taylor Hall, an auditorium on the campus of St. Augustine's. During the crisis, one patient needed emergency surgery. After the fire was smoldering under control, some of the nurses went back into the hospital to sterilize instruments in the oven of a wood stove. They found the stove had a hole in it and a fire could not be sustained. Dr. Catherine Hayden knew St. Augustine students had been erecting a new building on campus. She went to the construction site, found some usable cement and patched the hole in the stove with the cement. The nurses started a fire and the instruments were sterilized. The operation was performed in Taylor Hall and the patient recovered. The fire of 1900 and another smaller fire in 1904 highlighted the need for a safer and more modern hospital building (Halliburton, 1937).

The first of many fund raising campaigns to improve the hospital was successful. Dr. Glenton, a staff physician at St. Agnes, recalled two hospital benefactors of the time saying:

"We have never been in the hospital, none of our kin have ever been in this hospital, but women from down our way have been ailing and not able to do a days work for months and months. And they come up here to this hospital and then come back to us like their old selves; well and happy. So we are glad to give our donation".

Dr. Glenton noted one of the women gave five cents and the other six sweet potatoes as gifts to the hospital staff. They walked eight miles to present their gifts. In 1904, male students from St. Augustine industrial classes quarried rock from the school grounds and constructed a solid four story stone hospital with room for 75 beds. The new building had both electricity and running water. Local residents and supporters from other groups such as the Protestant Episcopal Church, raised fifteen thousand dollars to equip and furnish the new hospital (Glenton, 1920).

If the need for the new hospital was ever in question the admissions statistics should have spoken for themselves. The new hospital was full shortly after it opened, as seen from the statistics in Table 2.

Table 2. Admission Information for 1901, 1905, 1919

	<u>1901</u>	<u>1905</u>	<u>1919</u>
Admissions	61	137	1,110
Operations	16	53	648
Hospital Bed Days	1,319	5,251	19,213

On December 17, 1926, the hospital suffered another major fire. It began in the sterilizing room and quickly consumed the third and fourth floors. The Raleigh fire department put out the fire in time to save the first and second floors. Another fund raising campaign ensued. Supporters wanted to raise enough money to rebuild and expand the hospital and to add a sprinkler system to reduce the risk of future fires (Raleigh Times, 1926).

Probably the most unexpected donors to the rebuilding campaign were members of the Raleigh Ku Klux Klan. At the first meeting of the fund raising committee in 1922, three members of the Raleigh chapter appeared in full regalia of robes and hoods. They handed a letter and five \$100.00 bills to Reverend Milton Barker who was chairing the meeting. The letter read:

Dear Sir, Believing in the sincerity of the movement and being in sympathy with the furthering of such a worthy and beneficent cause, the Klan hereby declares it's interest in the success and future of St. Agnes Hospital for colored people and hereby makes known its desire and willingness to lend support. It gives great pleasure, therefore, at this opportunity to tender, as a visible sign, the pledge of the Raleigh Klan to this cause, written for the sum of \$100.00 dollars. And enclosed herewith are (5) \$10.00 as the first payment on this pledge with the hopes of the Klan for the great success of the campaign..." (St. Augustine Record, 1927).

The donation from the Klan was joined by donations from the Red Cross, Raleigh Kiwanis Club, and individual donations. The Raleigh Times, a daily newspaper editorialized:

"...I don't know of an institution in the South that does more for the poor. Dr. John McKee City Physician said on Saturday. The patients get good nursing and medical attention regardless of the fee. The hospital does an untold amount of good. The City could ill afford to get along without St. Agnes..." (Raleigh Times, 1926).

Of the \$43,071.72 dollars raised, \$25,371 came from African Americans and \$17,751 came from white supporters. The restoration of the hospital was soon underway and by the end of the school year it was complete.

The new building ushered in a period of achievement at St. Agnes School of Nursing. Demand for St. Agnes graduates could not be met nor could more than a fraction of applicants be accepted. By 1922, St. Agnes boasted 116 graduate nurses and an enrollment of 33 students. The length of training increased from two and a half to three years. In 1928, the school earned an 'A' rating from the NC Board of Nurse Examiners. Graduation ceremonies included demonstrations

by the graduates of skills such as bandaging and splinting. It seemed as though nothing could stand in the way of the success. However, the stock market crash of 1929 and resulting Great Depression created many financial hardships for the hospital and school of nursing (Boykin, 1966).

The stock market crash of 1929 worsened a period of economic depression, unemployment, and great financial hardship for many people in NC and across the rest of the country. Virtually all areas of the state and sectors of the economy were adversely affected. Many humanitarian organizations providing health and educational services for disadvantaged people were forced to close.

St. Agnes Hospital and School of Nursing suffered in a variety of ways. Enrollment dropped to only 17 students (St. Agnes Record, 1932). Potential nursing students delayed their educations to help on the farm or to take a 'public' job to keep family members fed and younger siblings in school. As enrollment declined, fewer dollars were available for faculty salaries. Additionally, many patients were unable to pay for their care, even at the low rate of a dollar a day for a bed in a ward and three dollars a day for a private or semi private room. In the semiprivate room the three dollars covered a room fee as well as the cost of medications and dressings. In 1930, St. Agnes provided 20,235 days of patient care at an average per diem cost of \$1.91. These figures do not include 3,158 days of residence for expectant mothers who could work in non-professional jobs at the hospital for three months in lieu of paying for labor, delivery and newborn care. Finally, as the result of job losses and lower wages among longtime individual supporters of St. Augustine and St. Agnes, donations declined further decimating the operating budget (Boykin, 1966). Conditions at St. Agnes were echoed in many small hospitals across the country. As Mary Roberts noted during the 1933 conference of the Southern Division of the American Nurses Association:

"...we have the social and economic paradox of the unemployed nurse and the unnursed patient, which is, however, no more paradoxical than the farmer with unsold wheat and the children in the city begging for bread..." (Southern Historical Collection, 1933).

The plight of St. Agnes during the years of the Great Depression was chronicled in the St. Augustine Record, a quarterly published newsletter that was sent to alumni and friends of the school. The following excerpts reflect the difficult days the school faced in the early 1930's.

"...there seems but little to write of St. Agnes Hospital since all our efforts are directed towards keeping open in order to minister to a people who have but little for food and nothing for hospitals or doctors..." (December, 1931).

"The present buildings (of St. Agnes Hospital) have room for 100 patients, for the most part charity cases. The low prices paid for cotton and tobacco have made it almost impossible for the patients to pay for hospitalizations...In spite of our poverty we have managed to keep open and no one needing care has been turned away from the door because of our lack of funds..." (December, 1932)

"...There seems little to record that is new about St. Agnes Hospital since the struggle to economize more and more in the use of supplies and to limit purchases

to the absolute necessities are the same things most institutions are doing... (October, 1933).

Despite these trying circumstances, St. Agnes Hospital and School of Nursing were continuing to provide valuable services. The *NC Health Bulletin*, the official magazine of the NC Board of Health remarked in 1933 "it may be said without fear of contradiction from any quarter that the nurse who have graduated from this hospital during the last 20 years have done as much to ameliorate the suffering among the Negro race as any other agency in the state" (*St. Agnes Record*, 1934). The article further noted the good work St. Agnes graduates were doing in public health, in teaching at other schools of nursing and in their work at the Negro Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute in Raleigh, NC.

The good works and reputation of St. Agnes resulted in sizable donations from the city of Raleigh, the Duke Endowment, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the American Church Institute for Negroes, and the Julian Rosenwald fund. These monies helped the institution to stay solvent. Hard work, dedication, philanthropic donations and prayer kept St. Agnes open during the darkest days of the depression (Ross, 1932).

Increasing prosperity brought about by the Federal Government's New Deal programs and particularly World War II reached St. Agnes Hospital and School of Nursing by the 1940's. St. Agnes participated in the Nurses Cadet Training Program during World War II. In exchange for providing an accelerated training program to meet the need for military nurses during the War, the Federal Government upgraded facilities at St. Agnes. Increasing enrollment was accompanied by higher standards for those students accepted into the school. A high school degree was mandatory prior to matriculation at St. Agnes (Boykin, 1966). By 1945, the students at St. Agnes were required to take courses in chemistry, sociology and psychology from professors at St. Augustine in addition to the standard nursing courses (*St. Agnes Record*, 1945). By 1950, the clinical experiences were expanded to better prepare students. An eight community pediatric clinical rotation based at Willard Parker Hospital in New York and a twelve week psychiatric rotation based at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Tuskegee Alabama were added. St. Agnes continuously received 'A' ratings from the NC Board of Nursing Examiners (*St. Agnes Record*, 1946).

Despite the high quality education offered at St. Agnes, a variety of factors converged around 1960 resulting in the closing of the school. These included crumbling facilities, racial integration, and the upsurge of state supported educational institutions. In 1959, a consultant was hired to study the physical plant of St. Agnes. According to articles in the local newspapers, the consultant reported "...under no conception can it be imagined that this hospital can be renovated or expanded, using the basic structure that now exists."

The notion of building a new segregated hospital was unacceptable to the majority of people in Wake County in 1960. The voters approved money to build a new hospital to replace several small and inadequate facilities. The new Wake Medical Center would serve all the citizens of Wake county.

With the closing of the hospital, St. Agnes School of Nursing lost its primary site of practice. Additionally, the school had to compete with an increasing number of less expensive state supported universities and community colleges which now had nursing programs available to African American students. In 1960, without a hospital to call its own and a decreasing student enrollment, the St. Agnes School of Nursing closed its doors forever.

At a time when public financing of health care was not common, the Protestant Episcopal Church took the lead in establishing and nurturing a multifaceted health care organization to serve the health, educational and employment needs of some of the most disadvantaged people in NC. For over 60 years, the St. Agnes Hospital and School of Nursing contributed immensely to the lives of the people of NC. Over 500 registered nurses were educated at St. Agnes and went on to share their skills, knowledge and dedication throughout the state, nation, and world. Thousands of people enjoyed healthier, longer lives because of the work of the graduates of St. Agnes.

Today, much of the history of the St. Agnes Hospital and School of Nursing has been forgotten. The shell of the hospital stands empty on the campus of St. Augustine College. Many of the graduates have either died or retired from the practice of nursing. Yet, the strength, courage and dedication of the founders, faculty, students, and supporters of St. Agnes are worth of our remembrance and gratitude.

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