



Heroes Of Healing: A Tribute To NC Nurses

By: Phoebe Pollitt

Abstract

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Heroes *of* Healing

Nursing has a long history in North Carolina, yet the stories of the women and men who care for us too often go untold. This month, we're shining a spotlight on their work — and saying thank you.

written by PHOEBE POLLITT

NURSES ARE ALL AROUND US: in hospitals, clinics, psychiatric facilities, prisons, schools, hospice centers, and people's homes. They're in executive suites, research laboratories, and the halls of government. Yet they tend to be all but invisible.

As a student at UNC-Chapel Hill in the mid-1970s, I worked in the North Carolina Room of Wilson Library. I was the "clippings girl," and my daily assignment was to read the major newspapers in the state and cut out items of interest to future scholars. Occasionally, I'd clip articles about the nursing profession. I knew I wanted to be a nurse, but the job also sparked an interest in history, and those stories began my lifelong passion for North Carolina nursing history.

The untrained nurse is as old as the human race; the educated nurse is a relatively recent phenomenon. Today's Tar Heel nurses stand on the shoulders of the pioneers who founded the profession. During the Civil War, brave women defied social norms by leaving their homes and caring for people who were not part of their families. They acted on the human impulse to care for others who were sick and injured in Confederate, Union, and wayside hospitals throughout our state. By the turn of the 20th century, nurses had created the first female professional organization in the state, the North Carolina State Nurses Association; successfully lobbied the General Assembly to pass the first Nurse Registration law in the country; and founded clinics, hospitals, and schools of nursing.

Nurses like Jane Wilkes, Mary Wyche, Lydia Holman, and Charlotte Rhone inspired the generations that followed to go beyond their normal routines to improve the health and well-being of all people.

By the time I was a student in the '70s, there was a lot of excitement about the beginnings of rural health clinics — largely staffed by nurse practitioners, a new role that was being created in schools of nursing and in the legislature. Other career paths were opening up in jails, helicopter ambulances, schools, and more. When they graduate, nurses once recited the Florence Nightingale Pledge, to “aid the physician in his work,” but today, nurse practitioners, nurse midwives, and nurse anesthetists work independently in many health care settings.

I began my own career in a crisp white uniform and starched cap, and I adapted, along with most nurses, to scrubs and lab coats. I started working in a hospital, but I soon moved into public health, school health, and my career as a nurse educator.

Before that job at Wilson Library, I had thought of nursing in terms of one nurse caring for one patient. But as I learned more about nursing as a career, stories about historically significant nurses opened my eyes to nursing in a larger context: nurses as social change agents, as builders and founders, as pioneers.

I realized, for the first time, that the nursing profession and nurses could expand beyond helping

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individuals to helping improve the well-being of communities, our state, and even our nation.

All of nursing is focused on caring for others using all that we have — heads, hands, and hearts — to make the world a better place.

NURSES ARE ALL AROUND US. THEY ATTEND OUR births and deaths, administer healing treatments when we are ill, and help us promote well-being through public health and mental health programs. Almost everyone can identify a nurse or two on his or her family tree. Nurses belong to and care for members of every racial, religious, and cultural group. For more than a century, North Carolina nurses have worked in rural and urban areas, providing care in chrome-trimmed surgical suites and tumbledown cabins, and have navigated the state’s legal, political, and economic currents to improve the health of all North Carolinians.

Learning about North Carolina nursing history expands our knowledge of the histories of women, medicine, labor, and diverse populations within our state. Movers and shakers, rule-breakers, innovators, creators, founders, rebels, politicians — all of these things are true of North Carolina nurses. While Tar Heel nurses give skilled and selfless care to patients, they have also launched health care and educational institutions, agitated for civil rights, represented their districts in the state legislature and the U.S. Congress, and led national and international organizations.

In every corner of our state, from Appalachia to the Outer Banks, nurses have made profound impacts on the lives of individuals and their communities. In war and peace, during times of illness of body, mind, or spirit, nurses are with us. Their names and stories deserve to be known; their work deserves to be honored. **Og**

The Nurse Historian

As a nurse, educator, and historian of nursing, Phoebe Pollitt has spent her career studying and celebrating the accomplishments of nurses past and present. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in nursing from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Pollitt worked as a home health nurse and as the first school nurse in Watauga County, where she focused on tobacco and teen pregnancy prevention. She went on to earn two master’s degrees and holds a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of nearly 50 articles, three books, and numerous presentations, many of which tell the stories of North Carolina’s nursing heroes. In 2019, she retired as an associate professor of nursing at Appalachian State University. She lives in Boone.



NC PIONEERS

The story of nursing in North Carolina starts with the nurses who laid the foundation for today's health care heroes.

The Mother of NC Hospitals **JANE WILKES** (1827-1913)

Jane Wilkes wasn't a nurse by formal education but, like so many women during the Civil War, she learned while treating wounded soldiers.

She volunteered at the Confederate military hospital in Charlotte. As fighting surged and the hospital filled, Wilkes and other nursing volunteers of the Ladies Hospital Association opened additional "wayside hospitals" — one inside a store, another in a storehouse. "The women bravely took up the duty that came to hand, and did everything that could be done for these poor fellows," Wilkes wrote in an article for the *Charlotte Observer* in 1896, also noting that many of the men died.

After the war, her pastor urged Wilkes and the other women of St. Peter's Episcopal Church to establish a civilian hospital with

separate wards for Black and white patients. The white community opposed an integrated facility, and so the first civilian hospital to open in North Carolina, St. Peter's Hospital, served only white patients.

Although Wilkes had owned slaves and backed the Confederacy, she never forgot her pastor's entreaty. After leading the effort to build the first hospital, she raised money from Northern Episcopal congregations for a second hospital to serve Black patients. Good Samaritan opened in 1891.

Atrium Health, the modern-day descendant of Wilkes's philanthropy, now operates 42 hospitals. Across from its Levine Cancer Institute in Charlotte stands a statue of the woman who helped make it possible. — *Elizabeth Leland*



Along Charlotte's Trail of History, a bronze statue of Jane Wilkes by sculptor Wendy Ross stands, fittingly, in a medicinal garden across from Carolinas Medical Center.

Charlotte Advocate

THEREASEA ELDER (1927-2021)

Thereasea Elder made history in 1962 as Charlotte's first African American public health nurse — then, years later, when health care began desegregating, she endured racism and harassment as one of two Black nurses sent out to care for white people in their homes.

"They put us into the KKK part of Charlotte, and it was a great challenge," Elder recalled in 2007. "I wore every stitch of my uniform to let them know I was a nurse."

One patient at a time, Elder helped break down the barriers of segregation.

Confronted once as to why she was working in a white neighborhood, she replied, "They're sick and need a nurse." Another time, when asked to take out the garbage, she tactfully said that someone else was coming to do it.

After retiring from nursing in 1989, Elder founded the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee devoted to documenting and preserving Black history. Among other accomplishments, the group successfully lobbied for a plaque to mark where the all-Black Good Samaritan Hospital once stood — now the site of Bank of America Stadium, headquarters of the Carolina Panthers football team.

Elder began her nursing career at Good Samaritan before becoming a public health nurse. When she died in January 2021, U.S. Representative Alma Adams saluted her as "a remarkable warrior, and a kind and gentle soul who was relentless in her commitment to serve our community." — *E.L.*