A Tradition of Excellence
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PICTORIAL HISTORY
of the
WATTS SCHOOL OF NURSING

Rebecca Cerese, Video Dialog Inc. | Donna Rogers, Watts School of Nursing

With a Foreword by the Watts Alumni Association
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Prologue

The essence of the Watts School of Nursing is captured in the original documentation of the times, people, and events. These writings and photographs weave a tapestry of the school’s history that has many threads, a pattern depicting visionary administrators, dedicated faculty, and extraordinary graduates.

In this book, Watts comes alive through remarkable photographs, predecessors’ words, and reflections of alumni, faculty, and students. Page by page, the reader is drawn into the rigor and excitement of the times and the traditions underlying student life. This collection honors all the individuals, both past and present, who have contributed to the rich history of the Watts School of Nursing.
When Watts School of Nursing first opened its doors to students more than a century ago, nursing education was very different than it is today. Although many changes have taken place over the years, the program continues to be rigorous and challenging, shaping and molding each student both professionally and personally. A strong emphasis on clinical practice has remained at the core of the school.

Our special time at Watts has left an enduring imprint on our hearts. Shared experiences created strong and lasting friendships. Each of us left Watts with a fierce passion for nursing that connects us to those who came before and those who follow.

The Watts School of Nursing Alumni Association is very pleased that this book portrays not only the celebrated history of the school but also the shared intimacy of our years at Watts. The creation of this book is a true gift to all Watts graduates. It makes each of us proud to be known as a Watts nurse.
Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been an exciting journey into the fascinating past of the oldest nursing program in North Carolina, the Watts School of Nursing. Along this journey, many have contributed time and energy to produce this wonderful work about one of the very best nursing programs in the United States. This book details the legacy of excellence and stories of the past and ends with a glimpse into the future. The school sincerely thanks all who have been part of this historical book.

Special thanks to Donna Rogers, faculty member, honorary Watts Alumni member, and friend, for her commitment and love to this project. Without her enduring care, fact-finding missions, and selfless giving, this book would not have been completed. To her husband Ed, who gave up many dinners and living space to house this project as it was created, thank you.

Words of thanks are not sufficient to recognize all the contributions of Betty Jean Faulkner, class of 1965, former faculty member, and catalyst behind the Watts History Project, to this book. Her endless knowledge of all things Watts and her amazing attention to detail have steered us in a steady direction. This book would not have been completed without her.

Words also cannot express our gratitude for all the work and energy given to this book by Rebecca Cerese of Video Dialog. Her youth, excitement, and ability to work with older people captured the hearts of those who worked with her on this project. To Rebecca’s family: thank you for sharing her with Watts.

Last, but not least, to our Watts Alumni, thank you for the shared stories and help in shaping the personal tone of the narrative. There are countless others, those who have passed on, those who continue to make an impact in the health care field and the world, and those we didn’t have the opportunity to speak with, whom we would like to acknowledge. The history of Watts is so full that it is impossible to mention all of these wonderful people, but we want to thank them for their part in creating what truly is the Watts legacy.
1. The Early Years, 1895–1915

1895  Watts Hospital and the Watts Hospital Training School for Nurses founded by George W. Watts
1897  Ethel Clay becomes the first Watts graduate
1903  Mary Lewis Wyche becomes superintendent of Watts Hospital, serving in that capacity until 1913
1906  Age for admission to the training school dropped from twenty-three to twenty-one
1909  Second Watts Hospital established by George W. Watts after the original hospital proves too small for the increasing patient population
1911  Wyche House, the first nurses’ residence, opens, reaffirming dedication to the training school
1914  Alumnae Association of the Watts Hospital Training School for Nurses becomes fully organized
1914  Position of hospital superintendent divided into two posts: superintendent of the hospital and superintendent of nurses; workday of student nurses changed to eight hours
in the years following the Civil War, the growing demand for brightleaf tobacco beckoned both rich and poor to the burgeoning community of Durham. This rapid growth opened many new opportunities for jobs and industry, but just as today, it also contributed to a variety of social problems. Durham’s infrastructure was unable to keep up with this substantial expansion, and poor health conditions emerged as one of the more serious concerns. Typhoid fever was so common that it was called “Durham fever,” and contagious diseases often ran unchecked. Residents of Durham who fell ill had no place to go. Local physician Dr. Albert G. Carr began advocating for a hospital but struggled to mobilize the necessary financial support from the community.

George Washington Watts arrived with his wife and daughter from Baltimore in 1878 and soon prospered as a partner in the fast-growing W. Duke Sons and Company tobacco firm. He became a leading member of the city’s business community and began to take a strong interest in the general and professional development of the young town. Mr. Watts sought a means to show his appreciation for the fellowship and kindness his family had received in their adopted city and listened with great interest when Dr. Carr spoke of the city’s increasingly urgent public health care needs. Mr. Watts’s own experience with medicine was both varied and personal. His wife, Laura Valinda Beall, had required frequent treatment at the Johns Hopkins Hospital for recurrent bouts of kidney disease. Arthur G. Watts, his younger brother, had been a physician in Baltimore, and in 1892, Mr. Watts himself had been hospitalized for a short time. Thus, he was particularly aware of the importance of having quality health care available to the citizens of Durham, especially the need for a hospital.
Through the generous gift and wisdom of George Watts, Watts Hospital and its training school for nurses were founded in 1895. Initially located on the northeast corner of Main Street and Buchanan Road, the hospital was constructed in the “cottage style.” It consisted of five separate buildings: the Administration Building, Male Pavilion, Female Pavilion, a surgical building, and a building containing the autopsy room, the mortuary, and a carriage shed. The first four of these were “connected by corridors and enclosed in winter, and the last entirely isolated on lower ground at the rear of the east pavilion.” The hospital had twenty-two beds, eighteen of which were available at no cost to indigent patients, and was reasonably equipped according to standards of the time.

A statement by Mr. Watts at the dedication of the hospital, February 3, 1895, served as inspiration for its contribution to the community: “The hospital is yours, to be used for the care and treatment of the sick and injured. No resident of Durham shall be turned from its doors because of his inability to pay.” Mr. Watts also declared at the dedication, “The training of nurses is one of the most important objectives of this institution.” And so it has remained throughout the years.

Everybody was scared of a hospital and nurses were used as a last resort. Lots of times we just preceded the undertaker; but lots of times we cheated him too.

—Lily Cowan, Class of 1898, quoted in the Durham Herald-Sun, December 7, 1941

When Watts Hospital first opened, John Sprunt Hill reported, the people of Durham “were indifferent to hospitals and ignorant of the advantages of medical care. . . . For the first ten months only 68 patients availed themselves of the services of the hospital, averaging six patients per day.”

Instead of admitting defeat in his undertaking, Mr. Watts persevered with remarkable foresight. He later stated,

But few of the smaller cities or larger towns had hospitals, and their uses were not only not known, but misapprehended by the large majority of our citizens. They were regarded as places where the sick were to die, and those in need of surgical attention to be mutilated. Time was required to correct this impression and educate the people as to the true intent and purpose of the hospital. Those in charge and our medical fraternity continued faithful in advocating the advantages to the sick of such a place. Those who had been patients were pleased and told others of their experiences. The hospital began to grow in popular favor.

The pupil nurses, as the students of the era were called, provided the mainstay of the hospital’s workforce. The considerate, skilled patient care they provided contributed greatly to the acceptance of the hospital, beginning the legacy of nursing excellence for which Watts graduates are known.

An article by Josephus Daniels that appeared in the Raleigh News and Observer on March 17, 1896, helped to educate the public and correct misconceptions about the hospital:

From the moment you enter the front door you are impressed with the sweetness and cleanliness, the laundry and kitchen being as bright and cheerful-looking as the neat reception room or the office of the doctors. The pay wards and the free wards are models of neatness and comfort. . . . One of the good agencies of the hospital is a training school for professional nurses, and there are now several young women under training and instruction and lectures are given by all the members of the Durham Academy of Medicine.
The early years, 1895–1915

The early history of the school closely paralleled the history of Watts Hospital. As the hospital became established as a place of medical care, the Watts Hospital Training School for Nurses became established as a provider of skilled nurses. The school’s beginning is described in the First Annual Report of the Trustees of Watts Hospital, depicted in these photos.
A 1941 story in the *Durham Herald-Sun* reported,

It was February, 1895 in Durham, and a man fell desperately ill. Home remedies were applied, but they did no good. Finally, at her wits end, the man’s wife suggested that he be taken to the new Watts Hospital where he could get a different kind of nursing. He refused violently, raving that he wasn’t yet ready for the undertaker, and became sicker. The woman took matters into her own hands. Bundling warm her husband, she secured a public vehicle and they jolted rapidly to the hospital, horse and wagon and pink mosquito netting, driven, frantic wife and unwilling patient. The officials received ambulance and occupants with comparative calm in view of the fact that the rambling white building . . . had been opened only early that month. There were exactly three nurses in those days: a supervisor, a matron, and one student, Miss Ethel Clay.7

Miss Florence McNulty, the hospital’s first superintendent, was one of the three nurses. Her official title at the time was matron. She was an educated and skilled nurse who was described as “wise in her management of all details of the Hospital.”

The training school began admitting students almost immediately and, under Miss McNulty’s supervision, great care was exercised in determining who would be admitted to the two-year nursing program. Those admitted were single women of high moral character between the ages of twenty-three and thirty.

Miss McNulty held her position a poor and then resigned on account of poor health. It is sad to note that she died in a short time after leaving the hospital. Misses Featherall, Betton, Betton, and Annie Pinyon served successively as superintendents from dates of May 1896 to October 1, 1903. Much credit is due each. The many capacities in which the superintendent had to serve and under less favorable conditions than exist at the present time, is worthy of note.

Ethel Clay was born on October 2, 1874, in New York City, the daughter of Henry de Boisfouillet Clay and Harriett Field Clay. After graduation from Notre Dame Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, she entered the Watts Hospital Training School for Nurses in 1895, alongside four other young women. She alone completed the work of her class to become the first Watts graduate in 1897. One of her many responsibilities as a student nurse was documented in the Watts Hospital Board of Trustees minutes from November 4, 1896: "Miss Ethel G. Clay acting Superintendent in the absence of Mrs. Featherall, Matron, made the usual quarterly report of matron."

Even after she married Greensboro insurance executive Julian Price, her interest in nursing and health issues never waned. She became a member of the founding Executive Committee of the Greensboro Red Cross and was a leader in its canteen. Between April 1917 and November 1918, the canteen provided medical attention to over 100,000 military personnel and operated a soup kitchen throughout the Spanish influenza epidemic. During this 1918 epidemic, Mrs. Price’s contributions went even further when she was appointed superintendent of Long Hospital, which opened as an emergency hospital for influenza victims and was credited with saving many lives.

As a charter member of the District Nurse and Relief Society, she also served as an advocate for proper patient care for low-income individuals suffering from tuberculosis. From this society stemmed the Greensboro Nursing Council, the Guilford County Sanitarium, and much of the city’s extensive health program. Mrs. Price died on October 26, 1943, after a long and distinguished life in the service of her community.
Three years ago I was, for a short while, a patient in a hospital, and only then did I fully learn the invaluable services of the unsung hero, the trained nurse. With her womanly gentleness, given to her by God, augmented by years of study, reflection and experience, she becomes almost a heaven-sent visitor, an angel of mercy at the bedside of the sick. She knows his needs; she realizes his condition; her hand is always ready to make him comfortable; her earnest sympathy encourages him; her firmness stimulates him, and her training enables her to faithfully carry out the physician’s instructions. More than once I have been told that her services are more valuable than physic.

— George Washington Watts, Dedication of the Watts Hospital, February 21, 1895
The life of the young women who attended the training school was both challenging and demanding. There was a strict code of conduct to be followed, as well as a rigid dress code. They were expected to be devoted to duty, thinking not of themselves, but of the well-being of others.

During the school’s formative years, the classes were very small and applicants were admitted at irregular intervals as vacancies occurred. There was no formal classroom space, and the students learned primarily through instruction given at the bedside and “hands-on” patient care. The program was largely an apprenticeship that catered to the demands of the hospital, and the help needed on the wards took precedence over other aspects of the curriculum.

Given that the students provided much of the hospital’s workforce, they received a small stipend for their services and paid no tuition. As the hospital’s First Annual Report details, their training included “instructions from text-books, and Manuals of Nursing, daily drill in the wards, operating room and other departments of the Hospital, by the Matron and Head Nurse, and lectures and demonstrations by the Medical and Surgical Staff.”

The lectures given by the physicians were usually scheduled in the evening after a long and arduous day of work.

Life was never dull for those pre-1900 graduates. In voluminously skirted blue uniforms, white kerchief and cap, the girls did regular 24-hour duty which often stretched into 24 or sometimes even 36-hour stretches . . . The schedule called for only one night nurse and the corridors between wings were long and dark. Sometimes patients became obstreperous, and a slip of a girl would find herself handling a delirious farm hand.

—Mrs. Clyde Dickson (Ella Boone Sapp, Class of 1898),
*Durham Herald-Sun*, December 7, 1941
Early on, the students routinely worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and covered all hospital shifts. This was a rigorous schedule to maintain, so whenever possible, the First Annual Report notes, they were granted "an hour of rest or exercise each day, and [were] frequently given an afternoon. While it was not always possible, they [could] usually expect part of each Sunday." The students were expected to "perform any duty assigned them by the Matron, either to act as nurses in the Hospital, or be sent to private cases among the rich or poor." Their duties included cooking, cleaning wards, and serving meals, in addition to patient care. They filled bottles in the pharmacy, rushed to emergencies on a horse-drawn ambulance, shoveled coal into the hospital’s furnace, and, in short, did virtually any task associated with the hospital.

As seniors, the students were extensively trained in ward management and supervision and often served as head nurses on the wards. Upon graduation, they were immediately able to work in any of these capacities, but most went into private duty or public health nursing.

While on duty, the students wore bulky sky-blue poplin dresses over yards of petticoats that flowed to the ankle, with leg-of-mutton sleeves, long white cuffs, and white aprons. White organdy kerchiefs pinned at the waistband served as bibs and were fastened at the neck with simple but often expensive pins. White gathered organdy caps, black hose, and high-top button shoes that assured ankles would never be seen completed their attire. Although the uniform may not have been particularly functional, it was the height of fashion in its day.
Ardent management of the school continued under Miss Mary Wyche when she came to Watts in 1903 to serve as the hospital's sixth superintendent. During her tenure at Watts Hospital, Bessie Burgess wrote, "the school's greatest strides in developing early superior educational leadership in the state were made."

Under Miss Wyche's direction, the standards for admission were raised, the length of the program was expanded to three years, more emphasis was placed on theory, and a definite schedule of lectures and floor duty was organized. These significant changes are reflected in the Annual Report of 1906.

On March 3, 1903, North Carolina had the distinct honor of becoming the first state to require registration for nurses. A Board of Examiners was also created at this time and gave its first examination on May 24, 1904. Two of the first six certificates awarded went to Watts graduates Hattie Lowry and Ida Thompson.
1913 Nursing Law—Section 6: The Clerk of the Superior Court of any county upon presentation to him of a license from the said Board of Examiners shall register the date of registration with the name and residence of the holder thereof in a book to be kept in his office for this purpose and marked "Register of Trained Nurses," and shall issue to the applicant a certificate of registration under the Superior Court of County, upon the form furnished him as hereinafter provided, for which registration he shall be paid 50 cents by the applicant.

—North Carolina Statutes, 1913

Miss Owens’s Nurse’s Certificate of Registration, Durham County

Beulah Owens, Class of 1905, photo taken in 1914
Through its merits, the original Watts Hospital grew in favor with the public. Soon, the rising patient population began to overwhelm the small hospital's capacity. Once again, Mr. Watts stepped forward and built an entirely new hospital to meet the city's health needs for years to come. Under towering oaks, he constructed a Spanish mission-style hospital with the characteristic red tile roof. As John Sprunt Hill notes, the hospital was "located outside the city limits away from the dust and noise and smoke of the city, where the air was pure and land was plentiful."

The adventure was a bold one and required a large expenditure of money, but immediately it seized the imagination of the people of Durham... and soon the whole hospital situation in Durham changed for the better and, in due season, the venture proved a remarkable success, and more and more the people in this section of North Carolina commenced to avail themselves of the splendid facilities of the new institution.

—John Sprunt Hill, “Remarks on the History of Watts Hospital”
The hospital complex consisted of the administration building, operating building, powerhouse, laundry, and one patient pavilion. A thoroughly fireproof structure, the hospital was a state-of-the-art facility filled with the finest medical equipment and outfitted with skylights in the surgery suite for additional natural light. A recent publicity pamphlet conjures an image: "The entry hall gleamed with marble floors and was paneled in magnificent oak, with twin fireplaces on opposing walls. More impressively, the new hospital provided spacious, updated accommodations for many more patients." —

The task of moving is seldom a pleasant one, but under the thrill of such prosperity and with happy anticipation of the future, the work must have been a real joy. There were thirteen patients transferred. . . . Three other patients in the old hospital this day were able to be discharged. And so, the record of the new hospital began, December 3, 1909.

—Lottie Eure, "History and Organization"

The broad sweep of lawn, the majesty of towering trees and the artistic placing of shrubbery combine to provide a restful, picturesque hospital setting.

—Durham County Hospital Corporation, A Century of Service
Within two years, the first nurses’ residence at Watts was constructed and named in Miss Wyche’s honor. The two-story structure was built on the north side of the main building and was similar in outward appearance to the general pavilion. The interior contained nineteen double rooms, six single rooms, two large reception rooms, a gymnasium, a classroom, and a locker room, as well as dining, sewing, and library facilities. Its homelike atmosphere was very different than that of the third floor of the hospital where the students had previously resided.

I congratulate those unselfish women who have given themselves to the task of nursing the sick that they have such an elegant home, such exceptional opportunities to study their profession, and such excellent chances to minister to the suffering.

After Miss Wyche’s departure, and on her recommendation, the superintendent position was divided into two positions: the superintendent of the hospital and the superintendent of nurses. Miss Vashti Bartlette became the first superintendent of nurses, and although she didn’t hold this position for long, Miss Bartlette took a bold step forward when she implemented an eight-hour workday for the student nurses. It was an unheard-of luxury that gave the students more time to study and to relax away from the hospital. This was considered a remarkable innovation, because by 1919 only two of the sixty-three nursing schools in North Carolina had adopted eight-hour workdays.

The training school is in [the] charge of Miss Bartlette, a graduate of Johns Hopkins Hospital. She possesses those qualities of culture which together with her knowledge of nursing make her an efficient superintendent.

—Bulletin of Watts Hospital, April 1915
The Bulletin of Watts Hospital in April 1915 spoke to the training school's progress, noting its "growth in strength and number each year." It proudly reported that the standard had been raised "until it was as high as any similar school in the United States." The work of the training school was described as being "most satisfactory and the most important point noted was the quality of the applicants for admission, most of whom were refined and educated ladies." The bulletin further stated that "the faculty performed efficiently their duties. The attendance of both lecturers and pupils was good. The record of examinations held during the year speaks well for the thorough study and instruction."

At this time, the faculty included the superintendent of nurses, the operating room supervisor, the hospital dietician, and staff physicians. The superintendent conducted the classes on general nursing and the operating room supervisor, dietician, and physicians conducted classes in their specific areas.
While the original idea in organizing this school was to provide nurses for the patients in the hospital, the constant purpose has been to advance the profession of nursing, that it shall be a school open to women of culture and stability who would become pupils with a view of making nursing a life work.

—Bulletin of Watts Hospital, April 1915

Baby Ruth Johnson remains in the hospital ten days, or until proper food has been selected to fit her case. After she goes home, we send a nurse to see if our directions are carried out. While the nurse is in the home she has a chance to note the surroundings. She has the best chance to instruct the mother and father on the details in hygiene. She has a chance to show the importance of proper food, properly prepared. The nurse is only practicing what she has learned in our dietetic department. By this method, we get definite results. We think this method accomplishes more than tons of pamphlets.

Student nurses tend to children on the balcony.

Student nurse in the solarium, or Father’s Waiting Room, second floor of the main building, 1914
To continue connections to their school and classmates, Watts graduates began to organize an alumnae association in 1910, with Miss Juanita Ross serving as the first president. The Alumnae Association of the Watts Hospital Training School for Nurses was incorporated in May 1917, and the Alumni Association continues to be an integral part of the school.
Footnotes

chapter 1: the early years, 1895–1915

1. Dedication Speech by Mr. George W. Watts, First Annual Report of Trustees of Watts Hospital (1895), 11.
6. First Annual Report, 47.
7. First Annual Report, 47.

chapter 2: the transition period, 1916–1949

3. Annual Report, 1922, 70.