Travel back in time with American Sentinel University to take a look at some of nursing’s most influential, barrier-breaking and unsung heroes, and learn more about the history of nursing education.
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INFLUENTIAL NURSES IN HISTORY

Nursing today is not just one profession, but a wide array of specialties linked by a common foundation in nursing education and theory. Going back to the early days of nursing, there have always been visionary leaders who saw a need and then worked to fill it, creating a professional niche for others who shared their passion. Some of these visionaries have familiar names: Clara Barton, whose work on the frontlines during the Civil War lead to her founding the American Red Cross; and Margaret Sanger, who opened the first birth control clinic in the U.S. in 1916, resulting in her arrest and the beginning of a movement that continues as Planned Parenthood today. Here are some others who are less well known.

Lillian Wald (1867-1940)

Lillian Wald was a pioneer in public health. After seeing first-hand the unsanitary conditions in Manhattan’s tenement buildings during the 1890s and the lack of medical care available to the burgeoning immigrant population, she founded a visiting nurse service in 1893 and began caring for the poor. By 1895, she had government support and financing and was able to expand services. She opened Henry Street Settlement House, a community center that provided a wealth of services to families and children, including safe playgrounds, health and hygiene education, and cultural experiences. It exists to this day.

Lillian and her staff essentially became the first public health nurses in New York City, with their focus not just on medical care but on healthful lifestyles and environments as well. In 1902, she used some of her funding to hire a public school nurse to make the rounds of neighborhood schools. This undertaking was so successful that the Board of Education began hiring school nurses. In 1912, Lillian co-founded and became the first president of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing—which is why she is credited with creating an entire nursing specialty.

Mary Breckinridge (1881-1965)

Mary Breckinridge was an early pioneer in rural healthcare. In 1925, she founded the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) to bring professional nursing services to Kentucky’s Appalachian Mountains, where residents were notoriously underserved. The FNS relied on nurse-midwives to bring general and maternal care to an area that was then so isolated that the caregivers traveled on horseback and accepted bartered goods as payment. During its first two decades of service, the area’s infant and maternal mortality rates plunged to well below the national average. The FNS staff founded the first professional association of nurse-midwives in 1929.
By the 1960s, healthcare had become so complex that the FNS expanded its focus to train and hire family nurse practitioners, allowing the organization to provide more comprehensive care to all family members. Today, Mary’s work in rural healthcare is carried on through the Mary Breckinridge Hospital, now owned by Appalachian Regional Healthcare. Rural populations still face many health disparities, but we’ve come a long way, thanks to Mary’s early efforts.

Dorothea Dix (1802-1887)

Dorothea Dix created lasting reforms in America’s mental health system. She was not formally trained as a nurse, due to the era she hailed from, yet she is considered one of the most famous nurses in history. Although she was appointed to superintendent of the Union Army nursing corps during the Civil War, her most important contributions came before that. During the 1840s, Dorothea became interested in the plight of the mentally ill, who were locked up under deplorable conditions. She read everything available about mental illness and the treatments of the day, and she conducted extensive field research, visiting jails and homes for the poor across Massachusetts, documenting everything. She then presented her research to the state legislature and asked for a state-funded mental hospital. After this initial success, she took her reform campaign to other states. As a result of Dorothea’s patient advocacy, many psychiatric hospitals were built or improved upon, and staffed with trained nurses. Dorothea was ahead of her time, a visionary who could see a mental health system of holistic care, rather than imprisonment.

Florence Wald (1917-2008)

Florence Wald is known as the mother of the modern hospice movement. As a nurse, she was troubled by the way terminally patients were treated and became interested in palliative care after hearing a lecture on the topic by a British physician. At that time, Florence was the dean of the Yale School of Nursing, and she reportedly worked to update the program to make students more aware of end-of-life issues. In 1966, Florence stepped down from her position to found the Connecticut Hospice, the first such program in America. Today, of course, hospice programs are ubiquitous, and all nurses are trained to advocate for their patients’ dignity, freedom from pain, and right to make autonomous decisions.
UNSUNG HEROES IN NURSING HISTORY

We’ve all heard the story of Florence Nightingale, the famous “Lady with the Lamp” who is revered as the founder of both modern-day nursing traditions and nursing education. Yet there are other nurses who influenced our profession greatly, either by breaking through barriers or advancing the profession in subtle ways. These are just a few of the unsung heroes in nursing history.

The volunteers

At one time, sick people were cared for at home by family members. When nursing first evolved, it was not a respectable profession and was often associated with “women of ill repute.” This didn’t change until the mid-1800s, when respected and high-profile individuals began stepping into caring roles as a community service. You may be surprised to learn that these people include:

- **Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882)**, the famous first lady, worked tirelessly as a volunteer nurse, tending to injured soldiers during the Civil War. This was very much a selfless act for a woman of her affluence and education level. She’s known not only for assisting army doctors, but for the empathy she showed through acts like hand-feeding, reading to, and writing letters for wounded soldiers.

- **Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**, the famous poet, spent three years working as a nurse during the Civil War. He was motivated to become a caregiver after his brother was wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg, providing comfort to both Union and Confederate soldiers during 600 hospital visits. An archive of his correspondence includes a letter to a friend, in which Whitman wrote, “The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles & powders are helpless to yield.”

- **Martha Jane Cannary, better known as Calamity Jane (1852-1903)**, was working as a Pony Express rider when smallpox broke out in her South Dakota town in 1878. She cared for eight of the men who fell victim to the dreaded disease; five of them survived despite the lack of medical supplies on the frontier.
The famous firsts

The nurses who broke new ground or shattered barriers have also helped to create the foundations of modern nursing practice. Here are a couple who stand out:

• **Ellen Dougherty (1844-1913)** was literally the first Registered Nurse in the world. New Zealand was the first country to legally require registration upon completion of nursing training. Ellen had trained there at Wellington Hospital from 1885 to 1887 and was registered on January 10, 1902.

• **Linda Richards (1841-1930)** was the first American to train professionally as a nurse. She started working as a nurse back when nursing education was virtually non-existent, but then enrolled as the first student in the first U.S. training program at New England Hospital for Women and Children, graduating a year later in 1873. She never lost her love of learning, later training in England under Florence Nightingale, where she learned the association between germs and infection. Back in the U.S., she helped to set up nurse training programs in several cities, becoming the superintendent of the Boston Training School for Nurses. While working at Bellevue Hospital in New York, Linda developed a system for tracking the status of each patient—an early medical record.

The pioneers

Today, it’s hard for us to imagine a time when nursing education was minimal and nursing practice didn’t include the core concepts of holistic care we take for granted today. Here are some of those who helped to develop nursing theory and make nursing a respected profession:

• **Lystra Gretter (1858-1951)** is credited from shifting the model of nursing education from an on-the-job apprenticeship to a three-year academic program. She wrote one of the earliest standardized nursing textbooks, and created the ethical oath known as the “Florence Nightingale Pledge.”

• **Virginia Avenel Henderson (1897-1996)** is known as “the first lady of nursing” and her contributions are often compared to those of Florence Nightingale for their influential effects. She is credited with rewriting and modernizing the standard nursing textbook of the era to reflect an era of antibiotics and medical advances. In a later edition, she described a patient-centric model of nursing care that helped to standardize nursing practice.

• **Lydia Hall (1906-1969)** further developed patient-centric nursing theory with her concept of “core, cure, and care.” She was a pioneer in the area of nurse autonomy and nurse-driven care, helping to shift the profession away from a task-focused model to one that emphasizes professional judgment and responsiveness to individual patient needs, in order to improve patient care.
Today, nursing is a profession that acknowledges the importance of diversity in its workforce. But it wasn’t always this way. Going back to the 1800s, pioneers in diversity struggled to break new ground and lay the foundations for our current multi-cultural labor pool.

**Mary Eliza Mahoney (1845-1926)**

Mary Eliza Mahoney was the first African-American woman to become a registered nurse in the United States. Her parents were freed slaves who moved north after the Civil War, in pursuit of better opportunities for themselves and their three children. In Boston, Mahoney attended one of the very first integrated schools in the nation, and decided as a teenager that she wanted to be a nurse. She worked at a local hospital for 15 years, as a cook, a housekeeper, and finally as an unofficial nursing assistant before she was finally admitted to a nursing school in 1878 at the age of 33. She graduated the following year and went on to prosper in a predominately white society, fighting against racial discrimination in nursing along the way.

In the early 1900s, Mahoney was troubled that the major professional nursing organization (which later became the ANA) did not welcome black members. In response, she met with other visionary black nurses who all worked together to found the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN), an organization devoted to diversity and excellence in nursing. Mahoney spoke at the organization’s first convention in 1909.

After Mahoney died in 1926, the NACGN established the Mary Mahoney award in her honor. When the NACGN finally merged with the ANA in 1951, the award continued and still exists today.

**Martha Minerva Franklin (1870-1968)**

Martha Minerva Franklin was another African-American nurse who actively campaigned for racial equality within the profession. She attended the meeting of black nurses that lead to the NACGN being formed in 1908, and became the organization’s first president. By 1920, the NACGN had 500 members. The organization’s mission statement stressed that black nurses must strive to meet the same professional requirements as all nurses, so that a racial double-standard could not be claimed to exist. By 1951 it had made so much progress in breaking down discrimination that the NACGN dissolved and its members were welcomed into the ANA. In 1976, Franklin was inducted into the ANA’s Hall of Fame.
Adah Belle Samuel Thoms (1870-1943)

Adah Belle Samuel Thoms was inducted the same year as Franklin. Thoms was the first treasurer of the NACGN and went on to become the president of the organization in 1916. During World War I, Thoms actively campaigned for the American Red Cross to admit black nurses. She also established a national job registry to help minority nurses who were seeking better employment opportunities.

Mabel Keaton Staupers (1890-1989)

Mabel Keaton Staupers was a Barbados-born nurse who emigrated to the U.S. at age 13 with her parents and attended nursing school in Washington, DC. Her exposure to segregation and the dehumanizing conditions that minorities were often subjected to led to her resolve to break down barriers. She helped to organize the first inpatient facility for black tuberculous patients in Harlem and worked tirelessly to improve overall community health.

Staupers also worked to promote the status of African-American nurses, becoming the first paid executive secretary of the NACGN in 1934, and later becoming president of the organization. During World War II, she advocated for and won the fight to allow black nurses in the Army and Navy nursing corps. She was inducted into the ANA’s Hall of Fame in 1996.

Hazel Johnson-Brown (1927-2011)

Johnson-Brown was the first African-American to be appointed as Chief of the Army Nurse Corps in the U.S. In 1979 she made military history when the Army promoted her to the position of Brigadier General. Johnson-Brown also faced discrimination early on: she was denied entrance to a Pennsylvania nursing school because she was black, but moved to New York City and enrolled in the Harlem School of Nursing.

Today, the medical profession as a whole widely recognizes that minority care providers are essential to providing quality care to a diverse population. American Sentinel University supports nursing diversity on every level, across racial and gender lines. We are an equal-opportunity educational facility, offering a variety of online nursing degrees.
A TIMELINE OF NURSING EDUCATION

The tradition of formal training for nurses is only about 150 years old. Prior to the 1870s, most people were cared for at home by family members, largely because nursing was not a respected profession. That perception began to change as more and more medical advances were made during the last part of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Here’s our timeline of the highlights in nursing education, from bedpans to the BSN and beyond.

Early to mid-1800s: Physicians begin scattered efforts to “train” low-status women to assist them with menial tasks.

1854-1856: Florence Nightingale demonstrates the value of military nurses during the Crimean War. She begins to organize her thoughts on how nurses should be trained.

1859: Florence Nightingale publishes “Notes on Nursing,” the first instruction manual of any kind for nurses.

1860: The Nightingale Training School for nurses opens in England and is quickly deemed a success. This leads to a new public image of nurses as professionals and is widely seen as the invention of modern nursing as we know it today.

1873-1889: The Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing is founded in New York City, as the first nursing school in the U.S. to be founded on the principles set forth by Florence Nightingale—it features a one-year program. Soon afterward, the New England Hospital for Women (Connecticut) and Massachusetts General Hospital (Boston) open nurse training programs.

1889-1900: By the turn of the century, there are over 400 hospital-based nursing schools in the U.S. There is no standardization: programs range from six months to two years in length and each hospital sets its own curriculum and requirements. These schools exist primarily to staff the hospitals that operate them.

1909: The University of Minnesota School for Nurses becomes the first university-based nurse training program. It awards a baccalaureate degree to students that complete a three-year program.

1923: A study known as the Goldman Report concludes that nurses should ideally be educated in a university setting, according to academic standards.

1948: The Carnegie Foundation studies nursing education and publishes the Brown Report, again recommending that nursing schools be placed in academic settings rather than hospitals. Regardless, hospital-based
diploma programs continue to be the norm, training the vast majority of American nurses and focusing on filling open nursing positions.

1952: A project at Columbia University introduces the concept of two-year, associate degree nursing programs as a research-based plan to test this new education model. The curriculum is composed of half nursing classes and half general education classes, with clinical experiences gained in the community.

1960-1975: Diploma programs decline rapidly as they are replaced by associate’s degree programs at community colleges.

1982: Even as the ADN remains the most common degree held by working RNs, the National League in Nursing (NLN) releases the first position statement to affirm the BSN is most desirable as the minimum educational level for entry-level nurses. Over the next three decades, many other organizations adopt the same position.

1990: The Department of Health and Human Services creates a commission to address the national nursing shortage. Fears of worsening shortages put a damper on efforts to require the BSN as entry to professional practice.

2003-2008: Several studies demonstrate that patient outcomes improve when a higher percentage of nurses on staff hold a BSN.

2010: The Institute of Medicine issues a landmark report called The Future of Nursing, which compiles extensive research to back its recommendations for all nurses to attain higher levels of education. It calls for 80 percent of the nursing workforce to hold a BSN degree by 2020.

2012: New York and New Jersey consider controversial legislation known colloquially as the “BSN in 10” law. It would require ADN-prepared nurses to obtain a bachelor’s degree within ten years of entering nursing practice. Again, fears of a looming nursing shortage prevent the BSN from becoming a national standard for entry level practice. By this time, however, many employers are stating a preference for BSN-holding nurses and creating incentives for nurses to go back to school.

2016: What’s YOUR career and educational path? While a nursing diploma or ADN provides the basic technical skills necessary for safe and effective patient care, a good RN to BSN program will build on those skills in a way that encourages critical thinking. A BSN program helps nurses to develop critical thinking skills and improve existing communication skills. It can open minds to new ideas and new models of care — resulting in the highest possible standard of patient care that you’re able to provide. Likewise, an MSN program can be your passport to a specialty nursing field, like case management, informatics, or infection control. These areas require strategizing, collaborative relationships, and a multi-dimensional approach to tackling a problem. Specialized knowledge forms the foundation of these nursing fields. When you acquire new knowledge, you can apply it to nursing practice in ways that enhance patient care and improve outcomes.
ABOUT AMERICAN SENTINEL UNIVERSITY

American Sentinel University delivers accredited online degree programs in nursing (BSN, MSN, and DNP) and healthcare management (MBA Healthcare, M.S. Information Systems Management, and M.S. Business Intelligence and Analytics). Its affordable, flexible bachelor’s and master’s nursing degree programs are accredited by the Commission for the Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) of One Dupont Circle, NW Suite 530, Washington, D.C., 20036. The DNP program is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) of 3343 Peachtree Road NE, Suite 850, Atlanta, Ga., 30326. The University is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, DEAC, 1101 17th Street NW, Suite 808, Washington, D.C. 20036, (202) 234-5100, www.deac.org.

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