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INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT BELLEVUE HOSPITAL

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- 1. Bellevue Hospital can trace its beginnings to a six-bed infirmary that was part of “the Publick Work House and Home of Correction of the City of New York,” an almshouse that was opened by the City of New York in 1736.¹**
- 2. The first medical officer was Dr. John Van Beuren. His salary was 100 pounds per year, out of which he was expected to supply his own medicines.²**
- 3. In 1795, the city decided that a new almshouse was needed. The money needed to build the new almshouse was raised through a lottery. With the permission of the state legislature the city aldermen issued eighteen thousand tickets at \$10 each. A “free Negro” won the high ticket, and with the city’ s share of 15 percent, the city built the new almshouse.³**
- 4. The new almshouse was a three-story structure facing Chambers Street; when completed 622 “homeless, sick and insane” were**

moved in before the next winter. Over 500 of the “inmates” were immigrants.⁴

5. After deciding that an even larger almshouse was needed, the city aldermen bought the 150-acre Kipps Bay farm for \$22,494.50, and on April 29, 1811, took possession of the fertile acres that extended from Twenty-third to Twenty-eighth Streets and from the East River to Second Avenue.⁵
6. The new almshouse was not completed for five years. The new almshouse was a complex of buildings, which included cells for the insane, forty-one rooms for paupers, and two six-room brick hospitals. The three-story blue-stone main building was 325 feet long, with wings at either end (the north wing for whites, the south wing for non-whites); it was the largest structure in the city. The entire facility was enclosed in a ten-foot stone wall for it was still a prison. The facility became known as the Bellevue Institution.⁶
7. One of the visiting surgeons at the almshouse was Dr. David Hosack, who was the family doctor of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. Dr. Hosack performed the first tying of the femoral artery in America.⁷

8. Another visiting surgeon at the almshouse was Dr. Wright Post, who made the first ligature of the subclavian artery for a brachial tumor, an operation that had never been performed in America and only once, unsuccessfully, in London.⁸

9. During the year ending September 30, 1825, when the annual cost of running the almshouse had climbed to \$81,500 – better than 10 percent of the total city budget of \$780,400 – the number of its inmates fluctuated from a high of 1,867 to a low of 1,437 (with deaths totaling 495). Ninety-five percent of the inmates were white and were more or less equally divided between men and women (with genders, like races, segregated in their own quarters).⁹

10. In 1819, the Bellevue medical staff took care of 1,815 cases of typhus. The wards were so crowded that coffins were kept stacked in the halls, and the bodies of the dead were put into them as soon as the breath had left them.¹⁰

11. In 1825, the medical staff was entirely reorganized; the office of visiting physician was abolished, and the reign of the resident physician began. The first resident physician was Dr. Isaac Wood, who served until 1833.¹¹

12. In 1826, the Bellevue Institution housed 1,366 inmates in the almshouse and 336 prisoners.¹²

13. Between June 27 and July 7, 1832, 556 cases of cholera were sent to Bellevue, and by August 8, 334 of these had died. Often forty bodies lay in the dead room at a single time. When the hospital administrator, Dr. Isaac Wood, made rounds, he was obliged to step over the dead and dying. Dr. Wood himself caught cholera, but survived.¹³

14. In 1835, the Bellevue Institution took on the function of serving as Manhattan's execution ground.¹⁴

15. From 1832 until 1847, the position of resident physician was filled by political appointees, favorites of the aldermen. This was the heyday of corruption. On First Avenue the fence was only five feet high, and over it both employees and inmates did a lively trade of almshouse property for liquor.¹⁵

16. The condition of the almshouse, penitentiary, and hospital was horrible enough in 1837 to shock the sensibilities even of the Common Council and move them to investigate it. The commission appointed had as its members Messrs. P. W. Engs, William A. Tomlinson, Z. Ring, James H. Braine, and Peter

Palmer. Their report is to be found in Document No. 32 of the “Records of the Board of Aldermen.” The commission found no system, no organization, and except in the women’s wards, filth that was almost indescribable. In the hospital there were 265 patients, over half of them “insane.” In every room, in every ward there was typhus. There were no medicines, no drugs, not even meal for poultices. At the recommendation of the commission, a former resident physician, Dr. Benjamin Ogden, and his two assistants, Drs. Abram Dubois and David L. Eigenbrodt, were asked to return, which they did, giving their services without pay.¹⁶

17. During the typhus epidemic of 1847, from sixty to eighty patients a day were trundled out to Bellevue in wagons, buggies, some in pushcarts and wheelbarrows; Bellevue alone treated 1,900 cases. At the time the resident was aided by six assistants, also appointed for one year and without pay. Typhus carried off in that year and in the succeeding summer many of the young assistants.¹⁷

18. In response to letters published in the *Evening Post* describing conditions at Bellevue, the Common Council appointed a committee of prominent medical doctors to report on the

almshouse and present a plan for its reorganization. Comprising the committee were Drs. John W. Francis, James R. Wood, Joseph M. Smith, Valentine Mott, James R. Manley, F. Campbell Stewart, Willard Parker, Stephen R. Harris, Gunning S. Bedford, and Benjamin Drake. They reported a plan that was finally adopted. A board of visiting physicians and surgeons was created and placed in authority over the resident physician. The new board met and organized on November 17, 1847. Dr. James R. Manley was chosen president, Dr. Valentine Mott, vice-president, and Dr. John T. Metcalfe, secretary. This board finally separated Bellevue from the almshouse; the death rate dropped from 20 to 9 percent.¹⁸

19. In the nineteenth century, many eminent physicians practiced at Bellevue Hospital. The most dynamic surgeon of them all was Dr. Valentine Mott (1776-1865). Dr. Mott performed many medical firsts including being the first in the history of surgery to ligate the arteria innominata two inches from the heart for aneurism of the right subclavian, 1818 (the patient lived for 28 days). Dr. Mott was also responsible for the introduction of the medical chart as a means of recording clinical information about a patient.¹⁹

20. The hospital in 1854-55 was crowded to its utmost capacity, the

number of patients treated in 1853 was 5,564, and had nearly doubled since 1847. Every nook and corner was occupied.²⁰

21. In 1855, a new wing to the hospital was built at a total cost of \$60,000; it was formally opened on April 23, 1855. The wing had four stories. A fourth story was also added to the main building and a large amphitheater was built that could accommodate 600 persons. Bellevue was then the finest hospital in the city, with an estimated capacity of 1,200 beds; the lying-in ward accommodated about 250 patients yearly.²¹

22. In 1853, the sum of \$3,000 was appropriated to replace the “noxious dead-house” with a larger and better building. The building was completed in 1857. It was a brick structure, two stories in height. The upper story was designed as a pathological museum. The museum became the Wood Pathological Museum of Bellevue Hospital, which contained rare, interesting, and unique specimens of anatomical dissections and pathological specimens.²²

23. In 1870, there were 598 births in the hospital; in 1873, 449 births.²³

24. In 1872, Miss Louisa Lee Schuyler formed the State Charities Aid

Association for improving public institutions of charity. A branch of this association was the Bellevue Hospital Visiting Committee, a group of sixty women chosen for their ability and social position. Mrs. Joseph Hobson was chairman of the subcommittee to visit the surgical wards for women. When the four members of the committee visited the wards, Mrs. Hobson was so overcome by the smells that she nearly fainted and could remember very little that she had seen. The next day Mrs. Hobson went alone, determined to control her nausea, and made a proper inspection. Mrs. Hobson's report shocked the committee, which demanded an investigation of conditions in the hospital. Their advocacy led to the founding of the School of Nursing, which opened on May 1, 1873.²⁴

25. Most of the doctors were opposed to opening a school of nursing. One distinguished surgeon said the class of patients in Bellevue was so difficult to deal with that any intelligent woman such as they hoped to train would lose heart and leave. By the time the first class was graduated in 1876, nurses were accepted as part of the institution. Miss Euphemia Van Rensselaer was the first nurse to enter an operating room. Miss Frances Root became the first forerunner of the modern social service nurse. Miss Root was convinced that the poor should have competent

nursing and knowledge of social hygiene, as well as material aid and sympathy.²⁵

26. In 1892, 16,541 patients were treated at Bellevue Hospital.²⁶
27. In 1892, 4,539 alcoholic patients, 3,347 who were men, were admitted to Bellevue Hospital; no other general hospital in the city would accept these patients.²⁷
28. In 1902, Bellevue Hospital was separated from the Department of Charities and was placed under a new board of trustees, headed by Dr. J. W. Brannan. The trustees conducted a survey of the hospital. The survey convinced the trustees that there was an urgent need for a completely new hospital. The old almshouse, which contained 718 of the 946 beds, was more than eighty-five years old and was completely inadequate for the needs of the patients and staff. Eighty to a hundred patients a day were received in one basement room; forty-three interns were crowded into sixteen rooms; the maids were housed in a dark dormitory with thirty-one beds in a space forty-five by thirty-six feet (the only place they could sit was on their beds because they had no chairs); employee turnover was from 40 to 50 percent per month. The prison wards were worst of all. In the men's ward, the only sanitary arrangement was an old, corroded iron hopper; in the

women's ward the hopper was in the pantry where the cooking utensils were kept. In response to the trustees' report, the Board of Estimate appropriated a sum for the preparation of plans and specifications for a new Bellevue to cost \$3,000,000, and gave the commission to McKim, Mead and White – Stanford White's firm, perhaps the best known architects in the country.²⁸

29. Between 1819 and 1970, Bellevue Hospital was under the control of six different governing bodies – Board of Commissioners of the Almshouse (1816-1849), Board of Governors of the Almshouse Department (1849-1860), Board of Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction (1860-1896), Department of Public Charities (1896-1902), Trustees of Bellevue and Allied Hospitals (1902-1929), and Department of Hospitals (1929-1970).²⁹

30. Bellevue Hospital was known as the “poor man's hospital.”³⁰

31. In the late nineteenth century, the drug department at Bellevue Hospital annually dispensed for use in Bellevue alone about 135,000 yards of surgical gauze, 600 pounds of lint, 3,500 pounds of absorbent cotton, 50 bales of oakum, and vast quantities of drugs, including nearly 1,000 pounds of ether. In the cellar about 75,000 bottles was washed annually.³¹

32. In 1903, Bellevue Hospital admitted 27,547 patients.³²
33. In 1904, Bellevue Hospital admitted 28,925 patients.³³
34. In 1904, almost 53 percent of the patients admitted to Bellevue Hospital were foreign born.³⁴
35. In 1904, the daily per capita cost of inpatient care at Bellevue Hospital was \$1.18 per day.³⁵
36. In 1925, the daily per capita cost of inpatient care at Bellevue Hospital was \$3.09 per day.³⁶
37. In 1925, the per capita cost of outpatient care per visit at Bellevue Hospital was ten cents per visit.³⁷
38. In 1925, there were 46,226 admissions to the medical and surgical wards and 1,826 births in Bellevue Hospital.³⁸
39. In 1925, the number of outpatient visits to Bellevue Hospital was 308,769 exclusive of new cases, which totaled 76,764.³⁹
40. In 1930, there were 58,026 admissions to Bellevue Hospital.⁴⁰
41. In 1930, 2,349 children were born in Bellevue Hospital, the Ambulance Division responded to 13,901 calls, 59,627 treatments were provided by the Physio-Therapy Division, and over 27,813

tons of coal was consumed.⁴¹

42. In 1930, 16,036 patients were admitted to the Bellevue Hospital Psychiatric Department.⁴²
43. In 1930, Bellevue Hospital admitted patients for numerous conditions including senility, pellagra, rickets, scurvy, “mental deficiency,” unknown tumors and unknown diseases.⁴³
44. In 1935, 21,056 patients were admitted to the Bellevue Hospital Psychiatric Department, and of that number 5,880, or 27.8 percent, were subsequently committed to state hospitals.⁴⁴
45. In 1935, Bellevue Hospital admitted 61,920 patients and provided 896,450 inpatients days of care.⁴⁵
46. During the Civil War, the medical staff at Bellevue Hospital volunteered their services as physicians for the Union Army. Almost the entire staff that left the hospital in April, 1861, went to the front. In March, 1862, it was recorded that Bellevue was being drained of its young men.⁴⁶
47. During World War One, a unit from Bellevue Hospital, designated as Base Hospital Unit Number 1, operated a 316-bed hospital in Vichy, France.⁴⁷

48. During World War Two, a unit from Bellevue Hospital, designated United States General Hospital Number 1, opened a nearly two-thousand bed hospital in France.⁴⁸

SOURCES

¹ Robert Carlisle, ed., *An Account of Bellevue Hospital with a Catalogue of the Medical and Surgical Staff from 1736 to 1894* (The Society of the Alumni of Bellevue Hospital, New York), 1893, pages 4-5.

² *Ibid.*, page 5.

³ Page Cooper, *The Bellevue Story* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company), 1948, page 23.

⁴ Cooper, *loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 26.

⁶ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, Oxford University Press), 1999, pages 502-503; Carlisle, *op cit.*, page 22-23; Cooper, *op. cit.*, pages 26-27.

⁷ Cooper, *op. cit.*, pages 27-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 29.

⁹ **Burrows and Wallace, op cit., page 503.**

¹⁰ **Cooper, op. cit., pages 29-30.**

¹¹ **Carlisle, op. cit., page 33; Cooper, op. cit., page 36.**

¹² **Burrows and Wallace, op. cit., pages 502-503; Carlisle, op. cit., page 34.**

¹³ **Cooper, op. cit., page 34.**

¹⁴ **Burrows and Wallace, op. cit., page 506.**

¹⁵ **Cooper, op. cit., page 36.**

¹⁶ **Carlisle, op. cit., pages 37-39; Cooper, op. cit., pages 37-38.**

¹⁷ **Between 1825 and 1884, at least 27 medical staff died in the line of duty at Bellevue. Most of them died from typhus. Each death was tragic. In one incident that occurred in January 1864, two interns, one 23 years old, the other 24, died from typhus while one was nursing the other. Another doctor, Dr. Belden, died from typhus in 1825. Dr. Belden's full name is unknown. Carlisle, op. cit., pages 32, 42-43, 63, 132, 344; Cooper, op. cit., pages 38-39.**

¹⁸ **Carlisle, op. cit., page 45; Cooper, op. cit., page 39.**

¹⁹ **In addition, Dr. Mott was the author of numerous books and papers, including "Mott's Velpeau," 4 vols., 820 pages, and "Removal of Thyroid**

Body weighing Four Pounds, with Entire Success.” Dr. Mott was the father of Dr. Alexander Brown Mott, who was Professor of Surgery and Anatomy, Bellevue Hospital Medical College, 1861-1872. Carlisle, op. cit., pages 110-111; Cooper, op. cit., page 45.

Two other notable physicians who served at Bellevue Hospital were Dr. Charles Stuart Tripler (1806-1866) and Dr. William C. Gorgas (1854-1920). Dr. Tripler was Assistant Resident Physician in 1826 and later served as a medical officer in the United States Army. In 1846, Dr. Tripler was made medical director of a regular troop division in Mexico during the Mexican War; in 1860, at the beginning of the Civil War, he became the first Medical director of the Army of the Potomac. Dr. Tripler was the author of “Manual of the Medical Officer of the Army of the United States.” In 1920, the Department Hospital, Territory of Hawaii, was redesignated Tripler Army Hospital in honor of Dr. Tripler. Carlisle, op. cit., page 147; “Tripler Army Medical Center,”

<http://www.tamc.amedd.army.mil/information/gentrip.htm>.

Dr. Gorgas served in the 2nd Surgical Division in 1880. Later, as a member of the Panama Canal Commission, Dr. Gorgas freed the Canal Zone from yellow fever, making possible the construction of the Panama Canal. In 1914, Dr. Gorgas was appointed Surgeon General of the United States Army. Carlisle, op. cit., page 207; “William Crawford Gorgas, Major General, United States Army,” <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.com/wcgorgas.htm>

²⁰ Carlisle, op. cit., pages 55-56.

²¹ Ibid., page 56.

²² Ibid., pages 56-57.

²³ Ibid., page 75.

²⁴ Cooper, op. cit., pages 85-90.

²⁵ Ibid., pages 88, 95-96.

²⁶ Carlisle, op. cit., page 101.

²⁷ Ibid., page 94.

²⁸ Cooper, op. cit., pages 158-161.

²⁹ Harry F. Dowling, *City Hospitals – The Undercare of the Underprivileged* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.), 1982, page 37.

³⁰ Helen Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington & Company), 1892, page 281.

³¹ Ibid., pages 292-293.

³² Bellevue Hospital, “General Statistics – Nativities of the Patients Admitted, 1904.”

³³ Bellevue Hospital, loc. cit.

³⁴ **Bellevue Hospital, “General Statistics – Nativities of Patients Admitted, 1904.”**

³⁵ **Bellevue Hospital, “General Statistics – Consolidated Statement of Distribution of Expenses for 1904.”**

³⁶ **City of New York, Board of Trustees – Bellevue and Allied Hospitals, “Summary of Statistics and Operating Expenses for the General Administration of the Hospitals, the Out-Patient Departments and the Day Camps for Tuberculosis Patients for the Year 1925.”**

³⁷ **City of New York, Board of Trustees – Bellevue and Allied Hospitals, loc. cit.**

³⁸ **City of New York, Board of Trustees – Bellevue and Allied Hospitals, loc. cit.**

³⁹ **City of New York, Board of Trustees – Bellevue and Allied Hospitals, loc. cit.**

⁴⁰ **Department of Hospitals of the City of New York, *Second Annual Report 1930* (Herald-Nathan Press, New York), pages 29-32.**

⁴¹ **Department of Hospitals of the City of New York, loc. cit.**

⁴² **Ibid., page 213.**

⁴³ **Ibid., pages 277-357.**

⁴⁴ **The United Hospital Fund, Report of the Hospital Survey for New York
Vol. II (The United Hospital Fund, New York), 1937, page 968.**

⁴⁵ **American & Canadian Hospitals (Physicians' Record Company, Chicago,
Illinois), 1937, page 847.**

⁴⁶ **Carlisle, op. cit., pages 60-62.**

⁴⁷ **Cooper, op. cit., pages 201-206.**

⁴⁸ **Ibid., pages 247-248.**