

# Preserving History

Historical hospital memorabilia remind us how far we've come

By Shelley Flannery

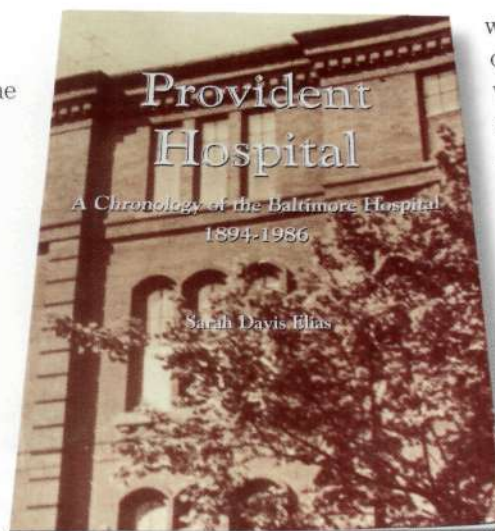
“Things just aren't the way they used to be.” It's a phrase often muttered

by parents and grandparents—even great-grandparents—usually while shaking their heads in disappointment. But the same phrase can be applied when thinking about positive changes as well. Every once in a while items cross our paths and we think, “Look how far we've come!”

That's exactly how someone might describe the feeling of examining the historical items that Bon Secours Baltimore Health System recently donated to three local institutions' archives. The relics remind us not only how far the medical and healthcare professions have come in just a hundred years, but also how far African Americans' position in those professions has come.

## Hospital Background

To understand the importance of the archived material, it's important to recognize the hospital's past. Bon Secours has a long history, including acquiring Liberty Health System, which brought with it the history of Provident Hospital and Free Dispensary. Opened in 1894



with just 10 beds, Provident was one of only five hospitals in the nation with the sole purpose of caring for and offering medical education to African Americans.

“It was a fulfillment of a dream back then to have a place to train black doctors and nurses,” says Sister Mary Shimo, archivist, Sisters of Bon Secours, USA.

And for that very reason, “Provident Hospital was one of the most important healthcare institutions of its time,” says Edward C. Papenfuse, Ph.D., state archivist and commissioner of land patents. “It became a distinguished institution during segregation.” Its history depicts the struggle African Americans endured to receive education in healthcare-related careers when they were not permitted to attend other schools.

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## For the Record

The historical materials Bon Secours acquired in the purchase of Liberty Health System are invaluable. And because of their significance, the hospital wished to gift them to institutions that could preserve them properly and make them available to researchers as well as the public.

In early 2009, the health system donated several items to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African



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*History changing hands*

American History and Culture, including photographs, donor/contributor plaques, medical instruments, a panel listing of doctors' names and phone numbers, hospital pamphlets and original paintings that once adorned the hospital's walls.

Later that year, Bon Secours granted permission to the Provident-Helene Nursing Alumni Association to preserve pieces of Baltimore nursing history, including a 1917 commencement program, a 1929 School of Nursing brochure, photographs and yearbooks.

This year, the health system donated the remaining materials—portraits, stained-glass windows, displays and 66 boxes of manuscripts—to the Maryland State Archives. Some notable items included annual reports from Provident Hospital from 1949 to 1958, a document signed by Dr. John Miller that transitioned Provident Hospital to Liberty Hospital, and an operating room logbook from West Baltimore General Hospital from 1925.

### **A Community Effort**

All in all, the materials measured an impressive 162 linear feet. And yet, the records are still incomplete.

"There are gaps in the chronology," Shimo says. "We believe people still have historical items at home in their

attics that they might not even know about. We would be most grateful if the community would help complete the files. We would welcome any items they'd like to donate."

Donated items will be conserved, preserved and restored. Then they will be shared with the community both online and in person.

Information is also being sought. "We'd love it if people could help us identify individuals in photos and assign dates to items," Papenfuse says. "This was an extremely important establishment in Baltimore. We shouldn't forget the contributions people made." •

## **DO YOU HAVE HOSPITAL HISTORY YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE?**

Look in those old boxes in the attic and garage. If you have any historical documents, photographs or other memorabilia from Provident, Liberty or Lutheran hospitals, please contact the Maryland State Archives at [archives@mdsa.net](mailto:archives@mdsa.net).

