



Claremont Sanitarium

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Claremont Sanitarium (1897–1905)

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Claremont Sanitarium was a medical institution operated by a South African branch of the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association of the Seventh-day Adventist Church between 1897 and 1905.

Developments That Led to the Establishment of the Claremont Sanitarium

The beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa goes back to the 1870s when a Seventh-day Adventists American mineral prospector, William Hunt, reached South Africa.¹ Hunt shared his faith with some South Africans, among whom was J. H. C. Wilson, a former Wesleyan Methodist Church local preacher in the Kimberly mining town. Wilson's letter to the Seventh-day Adventist Church official paper, the *Review and Herald*, appeared in the June 6, 1878, edition, informing the church of some believers who had accepted the Adventist faith through the study of the literature Hunt had shared with them.² No record of any reply to Wilson's letter is known to exist.

Later, in 1885, Pieter J. D. Wessels and George J. van Druten, both of whom were also residents of Kimberly and had begun observing the Seventh-day Sabbath independently, met Hunt. Both had formerly belonged to the Boshof congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church. After learning that there was a denomination in America with 30,000 members who also observed the seventh-day Sabbath, Wessels and Van Druten wrote a letter to the General Conference in Battle Creek, Michigan, requesting that a Dutch speaking minister to go to South Africa to teach them more about the Adventist faith. With the letter, they enclosed £50 to help pay the travel expenses for the requested minister.³

The General Conference received the letter in November of 1886, and although there were no trained Dutch ministers at the time, the church recommended J. F. Stureman to accompany a group of ministers to South Africa. Stureman was intended to work as a canvasser among the Dutch-speaking people,⁴ but for whatever reasons, he did not go. Among the ministers who were sent were D. A. Robinson and C. L. Boyd and their wives; two colporteurs, G. Burleigh and R. S. Anthony; and a Bible worker, Carrie Mace.⁵

Upon their arrival in South Africa, the group led out in a vigorous soul-winning program that led to baptisms and the establishment of the Beaconsfield congregation, the first Adventist Church in Africa, situated in the Kimberly district of the Cape Colony. More churches were opened in Cape Town, and with the arrival of A. T. Robinson in 1892, the South Africa Conference was organized in December 1892.

In 1891, diamonds had been discovered on the Benauwdheidsfontein farm belonging to Johannes Jacobus Wessels Sr. With the sale of this farm to the De Beers Consolidated Mines, the Wessels family became wealthy overnight. Pieter J.D. Wessels and other members of the Wessels family visited the Adventist church's headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, while attending the 1893 Annual General Conference Session. One of the impressive institutions they visited there was the Battle Creek Sanitarium.⁶ They desired that a similar institution should be established in South Africa.

Founding of the Claremont Sanitarium

As early as 1890, an article written by Phillip W. B. Wessels, and published in the *Review and Herald*, hailed the Cape Peninsula as having a favorable climate ideal for the recovery of invalids.⁷ About the same time, Ellen White counseled that sanitariums should be established in every country of the world. By October 23, 1893, during the second session of the South African Conference attended by the General Conference president, O. A. Olsen, and in response to the recommendation of the General Conference for the establishment of local sanitariums in different countries of the world, several resolutions were voted leading to the establishment of a sanitarium in South Africa.⁸ One of these resolutions involved the appointment of a board of trustees to hold property in line with the laws of the country, comprising A. T. Robinson, Peter J. D. Wessels, Philip W. B. Wessels, Henry Wessels, J. M. Freeman, J. H. Edmed, E. B. Miller, O. A. Olsen, and John Harvey Kellogg.⁹ A branch of the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association was also formed in South Africa.

The South African Conference committee appointed another special committee to search for a location at which to establish the sanitarium. The members of the location committee were: Philip Wessels, Mrs. N. H. Druillard, Mrs. J. J. Wessels and E. A. Ingle.¹⁰ A tract of land consisting of 123 acres was secured at a cost of £3,000 on Belvedere Road in the Claremont Valley below magnificent Table Mountain, somewhere between Claremont and Newlands suburbs on the outskirts of Cape Town.¹¹ The sanitarium building plans were drawn in Cape Town by C. W. Sisley, a visiting American architect, who worked under the direction of John Harvey Kellogg.¹² The total cost of the sanitarium building was £50,000, of which £30,000 came from the Wessels family, making them the major shareholder.¹³

Since the sanitarium was intended to be one of the finest buildings south of the Equator, no effort was spared in its construction. It was a four-story building consisting of 51 rooms, a modern x-ray machine, a steam laundry, a gymnasium, a bakery, with all rooms lighted by electricity, and its hydraulic lift made the movement of patients to the upper floors convenient. The building materials cost between £7,000 to £10,000.¹⁴ Expensive furniture was carefully selected and imported from Europe and America. After the establishment of this costly facility, the surrounding real estate appreciated in value.¹⁵ This became evident when a part of the land was sold for £7,000 to purchase the Carnavon House on Roeland Street in Cape Town for opening a branch facility of the sanitarium.¹⁶

History of the Claremont Sanitarium

In March 1896, the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association appointed Richard Selden Anthony the first physician sent to serve the Claremont Sanitarium. He later became the institution's medical superintendent. Anthony had come to South Africa ten years earlier as a colporteur, but later returned to America to study medicine after marrying one of the Wessels family daughters.¹⁷ On November 1, 1896, a training school for nurses was opened, with rules, regulations, and course of study similar to those of the Battle Creek Sanitarium Training School. Five nurses who had just graduated from Battle Creek Sanitarium arrived in Cape Town as personnel for the Claremont Sanitarium on December 26, 1896. These were O. D. Dilley, Sophia Leach, Lizzie

Sargent, Emma Campbell, and Idda Royer.¹⁸

After two years of construction work, the sanitarium was officially opened on January 12, 1897, by T. E. Fuller, a member of parliament.¹⁹ Other guests present at the occasion were Justice Buchanan, Rev. Adrian Hofmeyer, and Dr. Andrew Murray.²⁰ Although the institution opened with a debt not exceeding £4,000, it was hoped that within a short time the debt would be cancelled by the generosity of the friends of the sanitarium. John J. Wessels was appointed business manager and treasurer, A. Druillard was appointed steward, and his wife, M. H. Druillard, was appointed the first matron.²¹ Within a week of opening, every room in the "San" (as it became known) was filled, necessitating the renting of adjacent buildings belonging to Gert Scholtz to accommodate institution workers who had been occupying some of the hospital rooms. By March 1897, the number of employees reached thirty-four as the sanitarium operated at full capacity.²² I. J. Hankins describes the immediate impact the sanitarium made in Cape Town:

The Claremont Sanitarium is having a good patronage; in fact, the building and the facilities are inadequate to meet present demands. Plans have been laid for additional buildings, which will be erected as soon as practicable. Ministers of different denominations, judges, lawyers, physicians, and others in the higher circles of society, have been among the patients, and have returned to their work with improved health, and with a good report of the sanitarium. A patient said to me the other day that he had never before met a people whose religion was so practical. Some are already inquiring about the doctrines which make us so peculiar, and are investigating the truth with interest. Several attend the Sabbath services at the Claremont church, as well as the Sabbath school held in the sanitarium. We have a reason for gratitude to God for the prosperity that has attended this branch of work.²³

Eight months after the opening of the sanitarium, Anthony had made 1,798 professional visits in the city. In 1898, Kate Lindsay, a physician from Battle Creek, was called to assist Anthony. The institution now had two physicians, twelve nurses, most of whom had graduated from Battle Creek, and fifteen other employees. In addition to the public lectures given on the first Monday of each month, the sanitarium medical staff began publishing the *South African Journal of Health* on July 15, 1898, edited by Anthony, to widely convey the hospital's teaching on the art of healthful living.²⁴

The institution focused on restoring the natural function of the human body by correcting the faulty processes until the normal health of the body was achieved. Thus, treatment included hydrotherapy, diet, exercise, rest, massages, and a positive mental outlook based on faith in God.²⁵ This method of treatment, developed in America by Seventh-day Adventist physicians, was called rational medicine. There is no record of remarkable cures, as this method of treatment required time and patience.²⁶ Most of the health foods available at the sanitarium were imported from Battle Creek or from the sanitarium in England. Attempts at manufacturing health foods locally did not yield the desired results.²⁷

Extensive additions, including an eighty bed-wing, a new gymnasium, a dining room seating 150 people, and equipment for manufacturing health foods, in total costing £20,000, were made to the sanitarium. The new wing was officially opened on February 22, 1899, to the disappointment of Ellen White who lamented over the investing of means in one place, repeating the error that was made in Battle Creek.²⁸ Colonel Stowe, United States of America Consul-General, one of the speakers at the opening ceremony, affirmed the Claremont Sanitarium as a “true reflection of the original model” (the Battle Creek Sanitarium).²⁹ The sanitarium’s American connection was depicted by the names given to roads such as Cleveland, Roosevelt, Washington, and so on, in the Claremont area. The roads that surrounded the Claremont Sanitarium were the Cleveland, Belvedere, Laurier, and Sanitarium Roads.³⁰ The fame of the institution spread as far as Natal and Bulawayo in Rhodesia. By 1900, the Claremont Sanitarium was listed as one of twenty-seven such institutions established by the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association throughout the world. Thirty-one treatment (bath) rooms were established in various cities of the country. While these treatment rooms were operated by the church, or by church members, they strictly adhered to the denominational medical principles. The treatment rooms that existed and operated in Kimberly, Cape Town, Durban, Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth, East London, and Bellaire (Maritzburg) became instrumental in the spread of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.³¹

The Challenges and Demise of the Claremont Sanitarium

The euphoria generated by the success of the sanitarium did not last long. The expansive development accomplished within a short time became its consequent weakness. Stevenson observes that “inexperience combined with the zealous desire to advance the work of God in South Africa concealed the pitfall which would eventually spell ruin for this first sanitarium.”³² The management and degree of control by the Wessels family caused friction in the institution.³³

With J. J. Wessels serving as the business manager for the sanitarium, Anthony, who was the medical superintendent, expressed concerns in his letter of May 23, 1899 saying,

I have been strongly opposed to this family affair ever since I have connected with this work in South Africa. It is for this reason that I have felt that I was out of this place, my wife also being a Wessels...Dr. Davies and his wife are coming here. They are both physicians. His wife and my wife are sisters; so you see the combine[sic] is not broken yet...³⁴

Likewise, when J. J. Wessels left for Australia, his brother P. J. D. Wessels replaced him as business manager. Thus, on September 21, 1899, Anthony elaborated further in another letter saying, “There is a general feeling among the brethren in Africa that the Wessels family are simply schemers, and only wish to make money, even from their investment in the cause.”³⁵ In the same letter, he also mentioned that the institution did not have working capital and that it was in debt.

To make matters worse, near the end of 1899 the South African War (Second Boer War) broke out. Early the following year, the British imperial government requisitioned the new wing of the sanitarium building for the treatment of its wounded soldiers. Military officers ate their meals in the general dining room, mixing freely with patients and hospital workers. In their part of the sanitarium, the army officers set up a bar at which liquor was sold. Ellen White observed in general, through her letter to W. S. Hyatt, who had replaced A. T. Robinson as president of the South Africa Conference on May 15, 1898,³⁶ how the war situation would have been different had the work in Africa been carried forward as it should have.³⁷ While the war raged on, Anthony left South Africa aboard a military ship. Although the military moved out of the Sanitarium in 1901, the medical work never recovered its former prosperity as patronage drastically diminished due to the prevailing economic depression. The Wessels family, which had invested large sums of money in the institution, demanded complete control of the sanitarium in order to increase its profits. The conference committee tried to maintain its control of the institution but found it difficult, since both the Church and the South African branch of the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association did not have legal property-holding rights.³⁸ The issue under consideration here was the question of the ownership of the sanitarium.³⁹ Unfortunately, by 1900, the £30,000 donated to the Church by the Wessels family for the establishment of the sanitarium was then being regarded as a debt owed to the family.⁴⁰ The sanitarium facility had been enlarged and more workers had been employed which the sanitarium could not sustain on its payroll.

In 1900, Arthur G. Daniells, on his way from Australia to America via Europe and South Africa, refused to endorse the Wessels family's ownership of the institution.⁴¹ When the Wessels brothers threatened a lawsuit to obtain title to the property, the ninth session of the South African Conference, which met in March 1900, appointed a committee to take charge of the affairs of the sanitarium. This committee later, in 1901, voted to hand over the sanitarium to a syndicate formed by the Wessels family. A report was given to the General Conference executive committee meeting of April 29, 1901, which recommended that the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association board make a settlement with the Wessels family so that the Church may retain the sanitarium.⁴² Ellen White warned John Harvey Kellogg, the director of the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association to "keep out of the jam. It will come [she said], and somebody will be hurt."⁴³ Nevertheless, she considered it "folly for them to attempt to manage a sanitarium, for they cannot do."⁴⁴

Following the handover of the sanitarium, the Wessels syndicate repudiated the principles upon which the institution was founded as they tried to run the institution like a first-class hotel. On the other hand, as late as July 21, 1901, some of the Wessels family members, such as Dr. Henry Wessels, still held a view that if a certain amount of money was paid to the Wessels family, the Church could receive the sanitarium back, as he believed it was better for the Church to run it.⁴⁵ However, the situation worsened as the economic depression that followed the South African War brought severe damage to the operations of the sanitarium. In April 1902, the Wessels syndicate sold the sanitarium to a hotelier, George da Costa Ricci.⁴⁶ But as no one could afford hotel life

during the depression, the hotel became bankrupt. Finally, on July 19, 1905, after standing empty for almost three years, a mysterious fire burnt the entire building to the ground.⁴⁷ Arson was suspected. Since there was no properly registered insurance policy, nothing was recovered from the loss.⁴⁸

The Legacy of the Claremont Sanitarium

Swanepoel indicates that “[a]lthough the church lost control over the Claremont Sanitarium in 1901, its medical and health work had made a fairly wide impact by that time.”⁴⁹ He also points out, “By establishing a Sanitarium and Orphanage the church demonstrated in a tangible way its strong philanthropic bent. It considered the concern which Christ had demonstrated for the physical welfare of human beings as a definite pointer for the Christian church to engage in similar activities.”⁵⁰ Although the sanitarium’s early stage of dynamic growth was short lived, it generated remarkable optimism and enthusiasm in the work of the Church.⁵¹ Listed as one of the twenty seven institutions established by the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association around the world, the loss of the Claremont Sanitarium could not be allowed to dent the future of the church permanently. As such it was immediately replaced, though to a lesser degree, by the establishment of the Cape Sanitarium in 1904.⁵²

Official Names: Claremont Medical and Surgical Sanitarium (1897-1901); Claremont Sanitarium & Hotel (1901-1902); Ricci’s Hotel (1902); Vacant building (1902-1905).

Administrators: Richard S. Anthony (1897-1900); John J. Wessels (1901-1902); George da Costa Ricci (1902).

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