



Battle Creek Sanitarium, Fieldstone Building, c. 1900s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

## Battle Creek Sanitarium (1866–1942)

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The Battle Creek Sanitarium was a world-renowned Adventist health resort in Battle Creek, Michigan, United States.

## Western Health Reform Institute (1866-1876)

Though the Civil War had officially ended by 1866, its devastating aftermath was just beginning. The war's desolation was visible in all quarters, from politics to religion. The founders of the newly created Seventh-day Adventist Church were struggling to keep the scattered bands of believers together, and they were disappointed to see petty results from the effort of their labors. Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*, wrote that "instead of an increase of laborers, many of the more efficient ones then in the field, have been either entirely prostrated, or afflicted in some way calculated to dishearten or cripple them."<sup>4</sup>

Many well-known ministers and leaders, including James White, John Andrews, Joseph Bates, John Byington, John Loughborough, and Daniel Bourdeau, were afflicted by one malady or another.<sup>2</sup> Smith wrote that "as in times of prosperity it is proper to enumerate our blessings, so now in this time of adversity and humiliation let us enumerate our calamities." After listing the calamities, a season of prayer was appointed, from May 9 to 12, 1866, to "be set apart as special days of humiliation, fasting and prayer on the part of the church." Smith hoped that the special days would see God "revive his cause, remove his rebuke from off his people, restore his servants, and lead on the message to its destined victory." The upcoming session of the General Conference only served to add urgency to Smith's prayer request.<sup>3</sup>

On May 19, Ellen White addressed the General Conference delegates gathered in a 50-foot tent erected on the location where the Dime Tabernacle would later stand.<sup>4</sup> For the first time, she read the contents of the vision she had seen on Christmas Day, 1865, regarding health reform. In the opening lines she rebuked the audience, stating that "our Sabbath keeping people have been negligent in acting upon the light which God has given in regard to the health reform."<sup>5</sup> But there was still hope. God desired that the Adventists "should provide a home for the afflicted and those who wish to learn how to take care of their bodies that they may prevent sickness." White urged that Adventists "should have an institution of their own, under their own control, for the benefit of the diseased and suffering." If rightly conducted, the institution would "be the means of bringing our [Adventism's] views before many whom it would be impossible for us to reach by the common course of advocating the truth." Even though White acknowledged that many in the Church needed treatment in such an institution, she argued that the main purpose of a health center was to convert patients to the Church.<sup>6</sup>

The testimony finished, the people in the tent began asking themselves how a small Church could put such mammoth plans in motion. Since James White was ill, the responsibility for creating a health institution fell on John Loughborough, president of the Michigan Conference. After praying for a time, Loughborough and his committee said, "we will pledge to the enterprise, venturing out on what is said in the testimony, though it looks to us like a heavy load for us to hold up."<sup>7</sup> Drawing up a subscription paper, Loughborough went to John P. Kellogg, one of the wealthier Adventists in Battle Creek, Michigan. "Brother Kellogg," he began, "you heard the testimony that Sister White read to us in the tent. A few of us have decided to make an investment for the purpose presented to us in that testimony, 'sink or swim.' We thought we would like to have your name at the

head of the list, as you have more money than any of us.”<sup>8</sup> According to Loughborough’s chronicle, Kellogg promptly took the paper and signed, “J. P. Kellogg, \$500,” before adding, “There it is, ‘sink or swim.’”<sup>9</sup>

Loughborough succeeded in raising \$11,000 in all. In a few days he and other leaders purchased a farm in Battle Creek pertaining to Judge Graves for \$6,000, and on this site was developed the Western Health Reform Institute. On September 5, 1866, the institute was formally opened, with “two doctors, two bath attendants, one nurse (untrained), three or four helpers,” and “one patient.”<sup>10</sup> There was room available for 12 patients, and before the month ended all rooms were occupied and the staff had to scramble to provide more rooms and assistants. The *Review and Herald* reported that “all felt that the institution was and would be a complete success. The prospect for patients is all that could be asked. The greatest fear that the managers now have, is, that they will not be able to accommodate all who may wish to come.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite such a good start, the institution went through many financial difficulties in its attempt to expand. More patients meant more medical professionals were needed. In a letter to George Ide Butler, president of the General Conference, James White urged him to “hustle young men off to some doctor mill, and get ready. Our institute buildings are already larger than our doctors.”<sup>12</sup> James and Ellen White decided to send four promising young men to take a course at Dr. Trall’s famous Hygic-Therapeutic College in New Jersey. After attending the college for a time, one of the lads, John Harvey Kellogg, got into a spat with Trall and left New Jersey to enroll at the Medical College of the University of Michigan, but left a year later for the Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York City, where he received his M.D. in 1875.<sup>13</sup>

## Battle Creek Sanitarium (1876-1902)

The recently graduated John Harvey Kellogg was offered the position of superintendent of the institution, but he declined. Such honor did not belong on the shoulders of a 24-year-old doctor.<sup>14</sup> However, he did accept the position of editor of the *Health Reformer*.<sup>15</sup> In July 1876 the board again offered Kellogg the position of physician-in-chief. To help in his decision, the chairman of the board informed the young doctor that they had decided to close the institution unless he would accept the position—and so he did.<sup>16</sup>

When young John Kellogg took over management of the Western Health Reform Institute, it was in a sad condition. Few of the patients paid their bills, many took baths in dirty water, and meals were awful. Kellogg and his team immediately began working to turn the situation around. The old methods of “water-cure” were replaced by “rational hydrotherapy,” new procedures were adopted, and updated equipment was installed.<sup>17</sup> Kellogg also attempted to provide a scientific rationale for the natural curative methods that were out of vogue among the medical educated elite. To accomplish this, Kellogg went as far as changing the name of the institution to the *Medical and Surgical Sanitarium*. He hoped the new name would become tantamount to “a place where people learn to stay well.”<sup>18</sup>

Kellogg did not see himself as a mere doctor—his role also included that of an educator. He decided to establish a hygienic school where young people could learn how to care for the sick. “The physician-in-chief is a thorough scholar,” declared Stephen Haskell, “a Christian gentleman, and he has a corps of efficient helpers. Hence the best instruction may be expected.”<sup>19</sup> The School of Hygiene was opened on January 14, 1878, with 75 students.<sup>20</sup>

Coinciding with the opening of the school was the construction of a new building for the sanitarium. “We are ready to build,” wrote James White. “The time has come to bring up this branch of our work equal to others, so that all our institutions here shall be number one.”<sup>21</sup> Kellogg was proud to open the new building by 1878. It was a 130-foot-long “mammoth building designed expressly for the purpose of a hygienic hospital, or a home for the invalid... Altogether, this institution is the one par excellence of its kind in America... with all the facilities that science and long experience can devise—with a wide and enviable reputation, and an ever-increasing patronage—the Medical and Surgical Sanitarium of Battle Creek, Michigan, is destined to wield a mighty influence in the world,” predicted former patient V. C. Smith.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the new building reflected the sanitarium’s growing success, church leaders soon found to their dismay that the doctor had an insatiable appetite for expansion and innovation—and that this was just the beginning. As the 1870s gave way to the 1880s, Kellogg’s spats with Adventist leaders grew more frequent and more intense. In Kellogg’s opinion, these were men who were supposed to be preaching Bible truth—not giving unsolicited opinions on how a medical institution should be run. Even so, Kellogg persuaded church leaders to oppose any separation of the sanitarium’s assets when its charter expired in April 1897. With the holdings intact, he was able to purchase the sanitarium’s physical structure back at an auction upon the expiration of the charter.<sup>23</sup>

Kellogg took painstaking efforts to write the new charter in a way that would reflect his views on the institution’s status. In the new *Declaration of Principles* for the sanitarium, Kellogg eliminated the requisite that “shareholders” be members of the Adventist Church. When the *Declaration* was first read publicly in a meeting in March 1899, many members asked Kellogg the meaning of *undenominational* and *unsectarian*. “It means simply that it is to be conducted as a medical institution,” explained the doctor. And as such, “it must be carried on as an undenominational institution. It cannot give benefits to a certain class, but must be for the benefit of any who are sick.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of the new *Declaration of Principles*, the members unanimously consented to his new nomenclature. However, he was able to mask his real intentions. In 1905 he admitted to a close friend that he had been expecting to leave the Church for more than a decade, which is why he insisted that the sanitarium be run as a separate corporation.<sup>25</sup>

Another source of conflict with church leaders was, in Kellogg’s opinion, their lack of adherence to healthful living practices. Kellogg was also on the lookout for ways to improve the food menu for his patients, which led to the development of foods such as corn flakes, meat substitutes, nut butters, and other eatables that became international best-sellers. Although the cereal-making process was invented by John Harvey and Will K. Kellogg,

it was the latter who made the Kellogg name synonymous with corn flakes.<sup>26</sup>

As the twentieth century dawned, Kellogg was proud of the sanitarium's standing. He had taken it from near failure and transformed the institution into an internationally renowned medical establishment that even beckoned to the rich and famous throughout the years. Kellogg had begun laying the groundwork for his view of an *undenominational* medical institution early on. The only thing now in his way of achieving his ultimate goal was the Church. To outsiders, he would state the sanitarium's standing in brash terms.

"The Sanitarium of which I have charge has no more connection with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, as such, than you have," Kellogg told one inquirer.

"Who, then, is it that owns it, or runs it, or holds it in charge?" asked the puzzled man.

"A private association," Kellogg said.

"And it has no connection with the Church? Then, I even might be a member of the Sanitarium Association?" questioned the man.

"Certainly." But then Kellogg raised his hand. "No, you couldn't either, for I detect the odor of tobacco about you. No person who smokes can be a member of the association. I myself drew up the institution's articles of association. I saw to it that it should be absolutely uncertain [unsectarian]. Membership in the association governing it, is as open to a Catholic as to a Seventh-day Adventist."<sup>27</sup>

Ever since becoming physician-in-chief, Kellogg had gradually been adding on to the sanitarium's structure, standing, and success—until tragedy struck.

## Fire, Fortune, and Failure (1902-1954)

The sanitarium was hushed on the night of February 18, 1902; everyone was asleep. But at 3:48 a.m. Joseph Keim and his wife were awakened by a weird thumping coming from somewhere. Opening the door, they noticed black smoke drifting down the corridor. The Keims immediately threw overcoats over their pajamas and bolted down the hallway, beating on doors as they went.<sup>28</sup> By then, teams of nurses, doctors, and attendants were running to and fro to rescue all 407 people from the burning sanitarium. It was not long before the fire spread to all stories, and even across the street, razing a house to the ground. By daybreak, the magnitude of the destruction was evident: the fire had burned down Dr. Kellogg's entire, magnificent "San."<sup>29</sup>

Over in Chicago's Central Station, a train made a stop at around midnight. A man dressed in white was met by a reporter who asked,

"Dr. Kellogg, are you going to rebuild?"

"Rebuild what?" he asked.

“Don’t you know that the Sanitarium burned down last night?”

“No, this is the first that I have heard about it. Of course, we are going to rebuild.”<sup>30</sup>

Then and there Kellogg began idealizing plans for a greater and grander sanitarium. Arriving in Battle Creek, he worked hard with his brother Will to raise the money for the new building—which ended up costing more than \$1 million (around \$30 million in 2020). Funds included the brothers’ various enterprises, book royalties, and generous donations.<sup>31</sup> When the grand reopening ceremony was set for May 31, 1903, travelers began streaming into Battle Creek for the occasion. No time was wasted, and Kellogg had the sanitarium up and running the next day.<sup>32</sup>

By 1906 Kellogg succeeded in his plan to extricate the sanitarium entirely from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In his view, the denomination did not “own the property, and never [could] own it, for it belong[ed] to the public.”<sup>33</sup>

Like his brother Will (founder of Kellogg’s Cornflakes), John Harvey did a remarkable job at promoting his “university of health.” As the twentieth century progressed, the doctor would send numerous handwritten letters to celebrities, politicians, and famous authors, asking them how their health fared, and inviting them to stay at the sanitarium free of charge. His plan worked, and many notables began streaming into “the San,” including the Rockefellers, Fords, Harvey Firestone, Thomas Edison, William Howard Taft, William Jennings Bryan, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, the Roosevelts, and others.<sup>34</sup>

During the winter of 1918-1919, Kellogg came down with a severe bout of pneumonia and tuberculosis. This forced him to take a prolonged vacation in Florida and to begin relinquishing control of his beloved medical empire. As the new decade advanced, the new physician-in-chief, Dr. Charles Stewart, embarked on the erection of a luxurious tower that stood unchallenged as the tallest building from Chicago to Detroit. Ironically, Kellogg grew angry at the board’s decision to expand (which resulted in the incurrence of more debt), even though he had made many such moves throughout his career.<sup>35</sup>

By the time the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression hit, the sanitarium was in no condition to endure the strain, and it systematically crumbled. By 1938 it was headed toward bankruptcy, even though Kellogg had tried to avail himself of every conceivable option to save the institution. Debts were only settled after August 1942, when the United States government purchased the main buildings of the sanitarium. During World War II, wounded soldiers were treated in what became known as the Percy Jones Hospital until its conversion into a federal office building in 1954.<sup>36</sup>

## The Enduring Signature

Dr. Charles Mayo once told a patient, “I see that Dr. Kellogg has operated on you.”

The patient confirmed the identity of the surgeon before incredulously asking, “how could you have known who had done the operation?”

“That’s easy,” replied the doctor. “The scar is small and neat, just like a signature.”<sup>57</sup>

Dr. Kellogg had been steadily developing his signature ever since he had taken over the administration of the institute in the 1870s. Even though the sanitarium no longer exists, his signature survives in the history of Seventh-day Adventism as well as the history of medicine. Posthumously, one of his colleagues complained that the sanitarium did not endure because Kellogg insisted on “doing it all himself.”<sup>58</sup> This effectively made the Sanitarium’s history one with John Harvey Kellogg’s.

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