

# Riverside Hospital (1927–1983)

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Devannah Blackwood was a student at Oakwood University when she wrote this article.

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Riverside Hospital was an innovative medical institution in Nashville, Tennessee, dedicated to providing Adventist health care to the African American community.

## Origins

The origins of Riverside Hospital can be traced to 1901 when the Nashville Colored Sanitarium was opened in an effort by the newly-organized Southern Union Conference to extend Adventist medical missionary work to African Americans in its territory.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Lottie C. Isbell, newly graduated from American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek, took charge of the small sanitarium, with its treatment rooms on North Cherry Street, in 1902. The treatments she offered included alternatives to conventional medicine, such as hydrotherapy. However, this non-traditional approach proved controversial in Nashville, home to several Black institutions of higher learning, including the prestigious Meharry Medical College. The sanitarium relocated to the Hillcrest area on White's Creek Pike, but this endeavor, too, was short-lived, failing to attract sufficient clientele.<sup>2</sup>

After marrying Pastor David E. Blake in 1907, Dr. Isbell-Blake returned to Nashville for another medical missionary initiative under the auspices of the Southern Union Conference. She and her husband, who also became a physician, opened Rock City Sanitarium in February 1909, utilizing equipment from the earlier treatment rooms, including bath fixtures, electric light cabinet, and needle sprays.<sup>3</sup> Once again, though, the response was insufficient and the sanitarium closed after the doctors Blake moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

Aspirations for a strong Adventist health care institution for African Americans in the South did not die but remained dormant for 15 years until given new life by educator and philanthropist Nellie H. Druillard (1844-1937). She had become affluent through mining and real estate investments in South Africa, where she had served as a missionary for a number of years. After her return to the United States, Druillard worked with educational reformers Edward A. Sutherland (her nephew) and Percy T. Magan in founding Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs, Michigan, in 1901.<sup>5</sup> Continuing her collaboration with Sutherland and Magan, Druillard helped fund the founding of Madison College and related self-supporting institutions near Nashville in 1904, and managed the institution's finances for its first ten years.<sup>6</sup>

## Nellie H. Druillard and Riverside Sanitarium (1927–1936)

In response to an appeal from Ellen White during these busy years, Druillard had also promised to establish a sanitarium in Nashville to serve African Americans. While recuperating from painful injuries caused by an automobile accident in 1922, Druillard, by then 78 years old, recalled her unfulfilled promise. In prayer she promised God that she would follow through on it if He would help her heal.

After she recovered sufficiently, Druillard began building the sanitarium on property facing Trinity Lane north of Nashville, but when her intentions became known, racist opposition compelled her to begin again on property located about a mile to the east on a plateau overlooking a bend in the Cumberland River.<sup>7</sup> Here, Riverside Sanitarium opened in 1927 and with it a nurses' training program.

Like its short-lived predecessors, Riverside Sanitarium featured "rest, hydrotherapy, [and] proper diet" and utilized modern medicine with the goal of "assisting nature in recovery from sickness and disease."<sup>8</sup> Unlike its predecessors, it had a solid financial foundation provided by Nellie H. Druillard enabling it to withstand short-term financial shortfalls.

However, the strain of running the sanitarium and training the students became too much for Druillard as she entered her 90s. In 1935, she learned that the General Conference was seeking to develop a full-fledged medical facility for African Americans.<sup>9</sup> Thus, she handed ownership of the Riverside Sanitarium and School of Nursing over to the denomination. Two years after this, in 1937, Nellie "Mother D" Druillard passed away.<sup>10</sup>

## Riverside Sanitarium and Hospital (1936–1983)

Harry E. Ford, renowned for building up the laboratory and X-ray department at Hinsdale Sanitarium near Chicago, became business manager at Riverside in 1936, marking the transition to an all-Black medical staff and administration. Dr. T. R. M. Howard, a graduate of the College of Medical Evangelists at Loma Linda who had just completed a residency at Provident Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, became medical director, succeeded by Dr. Carl A. Dent, another Loma Linda graduate, in 1939.<sup>11</sup>

Riverside Hospital became an institution accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals and expanded to a four-story 85-bed facility in 1948.<sup>12</sup> An adjoining school for practical nursing was also started in 1952. This school was the only one in mid-Tennessee which accepted African American students. The first class of five women graduated in 1953, starting Riverside's contribution of licensed African American nurses to the nationwide healthcare workforce.<sup>13</sup>

In 1972, a new \$3 million building was built for the hospital, with modern systems for examination and communication and a 150-bed capacity. This, and the addition of more professional buildings for physician's offices, allowed Riverside to begin offering 24-hour emergency service on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1977.<sup>14</sup>

Riverside Hospital became a nationwide hub for African American professionals to perfect their craft, with specialties including internal medicine, surgery, radiology, and more. It also provided consultancies from

professionals based in the local Meharry and Vanderbilt medical centers. Riverside also prided itself with its state-of-the-art clinical, X-ray, and radioisotope laboratories.<sup>15</sup> The Riverside operating room was also modern, with the newest equipment of the time.<sup>16</sup>

While becoming a fully-modernized hospital, Riverside also continued to offer and make advances in the alternative treatments of the Seventh-day Adventist health message. For example, two physiotherapists, a field with few practitioners, came to serve at Riverside in the early 1950s. They provided services such as whirlpool baths, Russian baths, electrotherapy, and salt rubs.<sup>17</sup> The hospital also emphasized the importance of a healthy diet and built a tennis, shuffleboard, and volleyball court to encourage exercise.<sup>18</sup>

Among the many notable medical professionals who served at Riverside Hospital, one example was Dr. Dorothy Lavinia Brown. By 1954, she was the first female African American surgeon in the South. In 1957, she joined Riverside's staff and became chief of surgery. Brown stayed with Riverside for 24 years, while also serving as a clinical professor at Meharry Medical College and as an educational director for the Riverside-Meharry Clinical Rotation Program.<sup>19</sup>

Another was Dr. Carl A. Dent, Riverside's longest-serving medical director. He was the first African American intern at Los Angeles County General Hospital in California. After completing his medical training, he served as medical director at Riverside from 1939-1945, and again from 1950-1965 (officially, president of the medical staff for the years 1955-1965).<sup>20</sup>

## Closure and Legacy

In 1977, financial losses incurred by Riverside prompted the General Conference to contract with Adventist Health System/Sunbelt Health Care Corporation in Orlando, Florida, to manage the hospital. The health system's efforts failed to turn Riverside into a financial success.<sup>21</sup> The hospital closed its doors in 1983, and was sold to First Hospital in 1988, serving as a behavioral health facility.<sup>22</sup>

Riverside Sanitarium was the first Black Seventh-day Adventist medical institution. Eventually developed into Riverside Hospital, it was a long-standing pillar in African American healthcare and the Nashville community. It also brought one-of-a-kind healing to the community through the Seventh-day Adventist Church's unique health message and alternative treatments.

## Leaders

Business Managers: H. E. Ford, 1936—1938; Louis Ford, 1938—1944; H. D. Dobbins, 1944—1947; Adel Warren, 1947—1952; L. S. Follette, 1952—1955.

Administrators: L. S. Follette, 1955—1959; N. G. Simons, 1959—1972; J. P. Winston, 1973—1977; J. E. Merideth, 1977—1981; W. M. Rucker, Jr., 1981—1983.

Directors of Nurses: Geraldine Oldham, 1939; Ruth Frazier Stafford, 1939—1949; Mary Carter, 1950—1954; Alpheus Pruitt, 1954—1955; Myrtle Fryer, 1956; Alpheus Lightford, 1956—1959; Lavetta Dent, 1959—1960; Naomi Dennison, 1961—1962; Grace McLeod, 1962—1963; Anna Belle Simons, 1964; Emma Chafin, 1965—1972; Ernese Slusher (acting), 1972—1973; Lavetta Dent, 1973—1974; Harriet Dinsmore, 1974—1976; K. Gibbs, 1978—1979; A. Hanna, 1979—1980; N. J. DeAllen, 1980—1983.

Medical Directors: T.R.M. Howard, 1937—1938; C. A. Dent, 1939—1945; J. M. Cox, 1945—1950; C. A. Dent, 1950—1955.

Presidents, Medical Staff: C. A. Dent, 1955—1965; G. N. Benson, 1966—1967; C. A. Dent, 1968; A. P. Johnson, 1969—1983.

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