



Devon Family History Society
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DEVON RECORD OFFICE

DEVON & EXETER HOSPITAL - REGISTER OF NURSES

1881-1902

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Until the 20th century, hospitals were charity foundations for the sick poor; rich people could afford to be nursed at home. There was no formal training for nurses, and nursing was seen as an occupation for working class women until the 19th century, when the work of Florence Nightingale highlighted the need for educated, trained, nurses. On her return from the Crimea in 1856, Florence Nightingale raised £59,000 to improve the quality of nursing and this fund enabled the Nightingale Training School, at St Thomas' Hospital in London, to be set up in 1860. The School ran a one year training scheme for nurses. Probationers were trained free of charge, but lady-pupils paid for their training; they were the nurses who usually went on to become matrons. By the end of the 19th century, most large hospitals had their own training schools for nurses, but workhouse infirmaries continued to use female pauper inmates to nurse in the wards unpaid.

The state registration of doctors began in 1858, but there was no parallel system to register nurses. In the 1880s, the Hospitals Association, founded in 1884, made a commitment to set up a register of nurses. The Matrons Committee disagreed on the length of the training required, advocating three years while the Hospitals Association said that one year was sufficient. Finally, in 1887, the Hospitals Association established a non-statutory voluntary register for nurses. Many of the matrons, (the lady-pupils), opposed this and joined together, in 1888, to form The British Nurses Association. This obtained a royal charter in 1891 to become The Royal British Nurses Association. The matrons wanted nursing to be recognised as a profession on a par with doctors and so the BNA set up its own registration system. Nurses who qualified for registration had undertaken a three year training, were of good character, and had three years experience of nursing. This meant that there were now two different voluntary registers of nurses, run by two different organisations.

In 1902, the Midwives Registration Act set up the state registration of midwives, but there was still nothing similar for nurses. A House of Commons Select Committee, established in 1904, made out the case for registration, but again, nothing was done. After the First World War, in 1916, The College of Nursing was founded as a professional association for nurses, and one of its aims was to establish a register of nurses. At last, in 1919, a private member's bill was brought in Parliament, leading to the passing of the Nurses' Registration Act in that same year. This established the General Nursing Council which was made responsible for maintaining a register of nurses and approving the training schools.

The Devon and Exeter Hospital in Southernhay, Exeter, had its own training school for nurses. Two registers of nurses are indexed in these books. The earliest register contains the names of the charge nurses who worked in the hospital in the 1890s, but the main section of this register, and all of the later register, is concerned with assistant nurses and probationers, beginning in the late 1880s at the time when nurses were struggling for recognition as professionals. The registers give the names of nurses, their starting and leaving dates and details of their training and career. The charge nurses had often trained outside Devon and came to Exeter for a few years before moving on to another hospital elsewhere, or to private nursing. Some of the assistant nurses and probationers were local to Devon, but many of them came to Exeter to continue their training. Some of the women left very quickly, either because they did not like the work or because they were thought not suitable for nursing. The register records their names and addresses, their religion, their training and their employment in the hospital.

The fact that there was no state registration of nurses at this time and that nurses moved from one hospital to another to further their career, means that it can be difficult to track down an ancestor who was involved in nursing. This index will make it much easier to find a family member who nursed in Devon and to discover more about them. Not all the information in the registers has been extracted for this index and we recommend that the original registers are consulted once it is known that the name of a specific nurse is included in them.