The history of Boston Children’s Hospital

This self-guided tour highlights people, places and artifacts that have played important roles in the history of Boston Children’s Hospital. The photographs, facts and stories in this guide are drawn from our Archive Program’s extensive collection. Learn more by visiting the historical markers and displays located at each stop on the tour.

Boston Children’s Hospital was founded by four physicians in 1869. Dr. Francis Henry Brown, a Harvard Medical School graduate and Civil War surgeon, organized a small group of his fellow graduates, along with several prominent civic leaders in Boston, to begin one of the nation’s earliest children’s hospitals. At this time, the majority of patients were children of poor Irish immigrants. Many had traumatic injuries or infectious diseases, especially tuberculosis. Philanthropy completely supported the new institution. The Ladies’ Aid Association provided essential supplies, including food, clothing, sheets, towels, books and toys. The success of the institution, with its careful combination of care and knowledge, soon led to the establishment of additional outpatient facilities and a convalescent home for the care of children outside of Boston.

Adeline Blanchard Tyler, an Episcopalian deaconess, was recruited to oversee daily operations. When illness prevented her from continuing, she was succeeded by Sister Theresa and the Anglican Order of the Sisters of Saint Margaret, who managed nursing care until 1917. They founded the School of Nursing at Children’s to ensure a steady supply of pediatric nurses in the Boston area and beyond.

The original Boston Children’s building was a five-story brick townhouse on Washington and Rutland streets in the South End of Boston. The little hospital’s impact on Boston’s families was almost immediate, and within a year, the managers of the hospital found it necessary to relocate to a larger building. In 1882, Boston Children’s moved to a new 60-bed hospital on Huntington Avenue specifically designed for the care of children. In 1890 an additional wing was added, allowing for 36 more beds.

The hospital began a program of practical education for medical students, many of whom were from Harvard Medical School. House officers were first appointed as “internes” and “externes.” They assisted the medical and surgical staff in a variety of activities.

Around this time, milk from tuberculosis-infected cows was recognized as a common source of disease among poor children. Dr. Thomas Morgan Rotch established the nation’s first milk laboratory at Boston Children’s where milk was studied for clinical purposes. Within 30 years after the move to Huntington Avenue, it became clear that a larger, updated facility was required to meet patients’ needs. In addition, hospital leadership understood that a closer association with Harvard Medical School would foster major scientific advances.

In 1914, soon after Harvard Medical School had moved to its present site on Longwood Avenue, Boston Children’s relocated next door. The new three-acre site on the former Ebenezer Francis farm was purchased for $120,000 and the hospital’s leadership reported, “the air was purer and the noise and jar less.” The relationship with Harvard and the opening of a new nursing school helped Boston Children’s move to the forefront of pediatric discovery, patient treatment and medical education. Outstanding medical research, clinical advances and exemplary teaching were integrated with the best possible environment for care.

Cows bred to provide tuberculosis-free milk for patients graze in front of the Hunnewell Building in 1919.
Boston Children's Hospital History Trail

Since its founding in 1869, Boston Children's Hospital has been at the leading edge of patient care, medical research and teaching. Follow the Boston Children’s History Trail to learn more about the people, places and achievements of the past — and how they inspire us to do great things today.

1. Time Capsule
The Time Capsule contains memorabilia pertaining to our history. It will be opened in 2069 to celebrate the hospital’s 200th birthday.

2. Operating Room/ Farley Building
When Boston Children’s moved to Longwood Avenue in 1914, the hospital constructed a series of small buildings behind the Hunnewell Building. The Operating Room Building, usually known simply as “Surgical” or “The OR,” was one of these buildings.

3. Fegan Building
The Fegan Building was built in 1967 for outpatient visits. More spacious waiting rooms and play areas replaced the crowded wooden benches that served as waiting areas in the old facilities.

4. Laboratory Study Building
A small laboratory building was constructed in 1921 behind the Hunnewell Building, and was expanded in 1926 when a second story was added. James Lawder Gamble, MD, whose pioneering investigations developed the scientific basis for whose pioneering investigations added to our understanding of infectious diseases.

5. Cottage Wards
Several wards were constructed in the area behind the Hunnewell Building to house medical and surgical patients. These “cottage wards” — sometimes called “chicken coops” — were designed to maximize air and light and to minimize the spread of infectious diseases.

6. Wolbach Building
Built in 1914 as a hospital for infants and purchased in 1923 by the Harvard School of Public Health, the Wolbach Building later became a part of Boston Children’s and housed administrative offices. Some of its original architectural details remain.

7. Prouty Garden
The Prouty Memorial Garden and Terrace was donated to Boston Children’s in 1954 by Olive Prouty as a memorial to her two deceased children. The garden was honored with a gold medal by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in 1960.

8. Bader Building
The six-story Bader Building opened in 1930 on the corner of what is today Blackfan and Shattuck Streets. Named in honor of Mr. and Mrs. L. F. S. Bader, who contributed the majority of the construction funds, this building was one of the most modern hospital facilities of its time in the United States.

9. Exhibit Case
The hospital’s Archives Program was established in 1993 to acquire, preserve and make available the historical records that document the ongoing history of the hospital, its staff, volunteers, patients and families. Interpretive exhibits featuring items from our collection are displayed here.

10. Carnegie Building
The Carnegie Building, built in 1907, housed medical and surgical research laboratories and was where John Enders, Frederick Robbins and Thomas Weller did work on polio and other infectious diseases for which they were awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1954.

11. Ambulances
Boston Children’s has always had a need to transport patients to and from the main hospital. The first ambulance used for this purpose was a horse-drawn 'targa.'

12. Enders Building
The John F. Enders Pediatric Research Laboratories opened in 1970 and was named for John Enders, PHD, in recognition of his pioneering work in the study of viruses, including polio, mumps and measles.

13. Longwood Row Housing
In the early years after the hospital relocated from Huntington Avenue, a series of row houses were built on both sides of Longwood Avenue that served as housing for many medical residents, nurses and staff members.

14. Outpatient Visits
In 1938, the Outpatient Department was composed of 25 clinics and handled more than 68,000 visits a year. Eighty-five doctors took turns supervising the clinics, which were available to all patients, regardless of their family’s ability to pay. The average cost to the hospital for each visit was $1.50 and the average payment made was 65¢.

15. Hunnewell Building
Built in 1914, Hunnewell was the first building on Boston Children’s new Longwood campus and has been in continuous operation for over 100 years. It was named after Francis Welles Hunnewell, a 19th-century developer of real estate in the Allston-Brighton neighborhood.

16. Gardner House
Gardner House opened in 1930 and was home to the School of Nursing through 1978. Nursing students often gathered in its elegant living room for high tea. Later, in the 1980s, families of patients stayed in the Gardner House’s family hostel.

Silver from the School of Nursing on display

© Boston Children’s Hospital, 2017

Marker Locations

Boston Children’s Hospital

Until every child is well.