

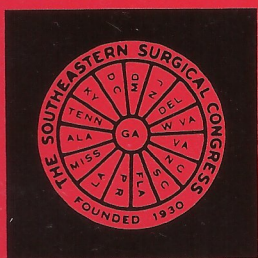
---

# THE AMERICAN SURGEON™

---

*Official Publication of the*

- *Southeastern Surgical Congress*
- *Midwest Surgical Association*
- *Southern California Chapter of the American College of Surgeons*



*December 1995*

*Volume 61*

*Number 12*

*AMSUAW*

*ISSN 0003-1348*

*Published monthly by the Southeastern Surgical Congress • Atlanta*

# Vignettes in Medical History

## *Charity Hospital: An Annotated Account of the First One Hundred Years*

K.L. CHAUVIN, J.P. O'LEARY

*From the Department of Surgery, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana*

THE HISTORY OF CHARITY HOSPITAL in New Orleans is a microcosm of medicine as it developed in America.

In the early 1700s, living conditions in Louisiana, particularly in New Orleans, were terrible. "Malignant" fevers and venereal diseases were rampant. Food was scarce. Health among the inhabitants was poor and the death rate was high. Better health management was needed. The French established several small military hospitals. One such hospital, the Royal Hospital in New Orleans, was completed in 1722. It consisted of "a wood frame building, fifty by twenty feet, raised slightly off the ground and located facing the river at the corner of the now present Ursuline Street."<sup>1</sup>

In 1725, Father Nicholas Ignatius de Beaubois, Superior of the Jesuit Mission of Illinois, arrived in New Orleans. He had convinced the Ursuline Nuns in France to assume charge of the Royal Hospital. In 1727, a small number of nuns sailed for New Orleans but ended up in Belize. Five months later they arrived at the mouth of the Mississippi River, where they were bombarded with patients who were casualties of the Indian War. It was not until 1721 that the nuns actually reached the Royal Hospital. Unfortunately, the hospital was destroyed by a hurricane 1 year later.

A new military hospital was built in 1734, along with a nearby convent for the nuns. Only military personnel and individuals employed in the King's service were admitted as patients to the new Royal Hospital. This lack of care for the indigent inspired Jean Louis, a French merchant marine and entrepreneur, to bequeath his entire estate for the establishment of a hospital devoted to the care of the poor. This desperately needed facility was originally named the Hospital of St. John, but within months became known as Charity Hospital. The first building, located at the corner of Chartres and Bienville Streets, was an old dormitory that had housed a religious order of nuns. It was a two story structure with a garret and had no glass in the windows. Curtains were hung to keep out

mosquitos. Charity's only source of funding was the original bequeath and whatever could be collected from special collections at the cathedral. No governmental support was present. Ultimately, several wealthy families competed for control of Charity, using their contributions as leverage in the squabble.

By 1743, the increasing number of indigent patients necessitated a larger Charity Hospital. The second hospital was built on a French government land grant near the ship-turn of Bayou St. John. At that time, the major shipping access to the city came from Lake Pontchartrain and not from the treacherous Mississippi River.

Over the next two decades, the first signs of administrative organization appeared. A 10-member board consisting of clergymen, government officials, and a physician from the Royal Hospital was formed to ensure that the indigent ill received at least rudimentary care. Quackery, "the empirical use of drugs, herbal medicine, and basic forms of surgery... unproven by scientific standards" were the preferred methods of treatment.<sup>1</sup>

Gifts and gambling were the only sources of revenue. Despite Governor Jean Jacques D'Abbadie's concern about finances to support Charity, it was ultimately the staff who allowed the hospital to survive by donating money in addition to working without pay. Overcrowding continued to be a major problem.

Due to the French and Spanish War, the French government confiscated nearly three quarters of the land originally dedicated to Charity to build ditches and fortifications. With peace in 1763, the Spanish became the reluctant occupiers of New Orleans. They made few changes that would upset the French populace, who were already angered by their abandonment by the French government. The Cabildo (the appointed town council), although a small governing minority, became the dominate political group. With the arrival of Governor Alexander O'Reilly in 1769, Charity was placed under the control of the Catholic church and the Spanish governor. Funding for Charity was obtained from taxes on taverns, bars, fines, boarding houses, and the funding of some taxes in kind by food supply houses.

The practice of medicine continued to be dominated

Address correspondence and reprint requests to J. Patrick O'Leary, M.D., Chairman, Department of Surgery, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, 1542 Tulane Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70112.

by French physicians and changed little from that practiced before the Spanish occupation. Purging, vomiting, blood letting, sweating, and blistering were common techniques. Surgery consisted mainly of amputation and lancing of boils. Moreover, during both the French and Spanish occupation, surgeons were almost always barbers without the scholarly training of physicians. They were granted the right to practice only on a temporary basis and were required to produce a certificate of study, take an examination given by the King's physician, and be a member in good standing of the Catholic Church. Subsequently, they were forced to serve a 6-month internship at either the Royal Hospital or Charity, after which they would be reexamined. Once practicing, they were required to donate a percentage of their services to Charity. Surgeons of this era were required to consult physicians on cases of serious illness. If a patient died after 3 days of illness without a consultation, the surgeon was held to blame and fined "forty livres," which was placed in the coffers of the house of Charity. No such restrictions were placed on the medical physicians. Except for these restrictions placed on the surgeons, staff at Charity was mostly untrained and unlicensed. "So little confidence was had in them that they appeared to have been consulted as a last resort, the neighbors being first called in to examine and diagnose without cost."<sup>1</sup>

In 1779, the second Charity was destroyed by a hurricane. Space was leased from a boarding house, and indigent sick were housed here while funding was sought to build a new hospital. Despite the Cabildo's resolution to rebuild Charity, no new building was forthcoming. Six years later, in 1785, Don Andre's Almonaster y Roxas, a former war clerk, civil notary, nobleman, and close friend of Acting Governor Esteban Miro, offered 114,000 pesos fuertes to rebuild Charity. He requested that the facility be named the San Carlos Hospital (Hospital of St. Charles) in honor of the king, although it retained the name of Charity. It consisted of "twenty-four beds in four wards named after Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, an apothecary shop, a large chapel, a large room for hospital attendants, and a garden in the rear."<sup>1</sup> When Governor Miro departed for Spain in 1791, Almonaster was left unprotected. The newly appointed governor, Baron de Carondelet, deprived him of all control over the hospital which he had singlehandedly resurrected and endowed. In 1794, Almonaster was reinstated to this position as hospital patron. Almonaster died in 1798.

When Louisiana became part of the United States in 1803, William Claiborne commissioned a permanent health committee. The committee monitored sanitary conditions at Charity. Despite these efforts, Charity

continued to suffer in all respects. In 1808, Charity's problems were brought to the legislature by the then New Orleans mayor, James Mather, who pleaded "look at the Charity Hospital. . .examine the state of abandonment and deprivation to which this institution is reduced: the poor man preyed upon by maladies, seeks an asylum and finds only a grave."<sup>1</sup>

On September 23, 1809, Charity was again destroyed by fire. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish closed the Royal Hospital, leaving the responsibility for all health care to Charity. This included not only the indigent, but also the military and civilians of the city. In 1811, the City Council approved the construction of a new Charity and created a nine member Board of Directors. Six members were appointed by the governor and three were chosen by the Council. In 1813, the State of Louisiana assumed full responsibility for operating Charity. One year later, the site known as State House Square bounded by Canal, Common, Philippa, and Baronne Streets was donated by the City for a new hospital. Finally, in 1815, the fourth Charity Hospital was built. It consisted of "two large buildings containing one surgical hall, two large "fever" wards, a dysentery ward, a ward for chronic cases, a ward for females, a ward for convalescents, one bathing room, one apothecary store, and a number of other apartments for family residents."<sup>1</sup> Funding was obtained from taxes imposed upon concerts, balls, theatres, and gambling halls.

Despite the new building, Charity's unfavorable reputation continued to thrive. In 1820, the editor of the *Gazette de la Louisiane* denounced Charity's dreadful conditions, stating that there were 105 patients "with but one physician and three nurses to attend on all that number."<sup>1</sup> The sick were allowed to "perish in their filth."<sup>1</sup> At that time, less than two per cent of Charity's patients were Louisianians. The majority were transients passing through the city on their way to America or from "upriver" and in the city transporting goods. Many immigrants, orphans, convalescents, indigent widows, and "walking well" were among Charity's patients.

Throughout the 1820s, new buildings were erected at the site of Charity, and the quality and number of staff and hospital services increased.

In 1831, construction of the fifth Charity began to accommodate the increase in patients created by the city's rapid growth. The new Charity was completed in 1833 at a cost of \$149,570.83. It was 290 feet long and three stories high. It consisted of "a core of lodges that opened into a spacious hall intersected at right angles by another hall running the length of the building on to which the wards opened."<sup>1</sup> The lower story contained a library, physicians' room, surgeons' room,

and the Medical College of Louisiana (now Tulane University Medical School) and its lecture rooms. The second and third stories contained patient wards. This new building marked a milestone in Charity's history in terms of its size, physical structure, and bed capacity.

Despite good medical care, death rates continued to increase. In 1833, hospital management was placed entirely in the hands of the Daughters of Charity. The Medical College of Louisiana opened in 1834. A sec-

ond medical school, the New Orleans School of Medicine, also using Charity as its teaching hospital, was founded some years later.

#### REFERENCES

1. John Salvaggio. *New Orleans' Charity Hospital: A Story of Physicians, Politics and Poverty*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.
2. Unknown, "Develop Your Future at Charity Hospital of Louisiana at New Orleans". (Pamphlet, Unknown).