New Jersey’s First Catholic Hospitals

By Fernanda Perrone

Not everyone may be aware that the oldest continuing general hospital in New Jersey, Hoboken University Medical Center, was founded as the state’s first Catholic hospital. St. Mary Hospital (known until 1959 as St. Mary’s) was established in 1863 at the height of the Civil War by the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, a women’s religious community from Aachen, Germany.

Originally known as the Sisters of St. Francis of the Poor, the community was founded in 1845 by Frances Schervier, a wealthy young woman who devoted her life to caring for the sick poor. The sisters led austere lives, supported themselves by begging, and treated the poor free of charge. Five years after their 1858 arrival in Cincinnati, the sisters were persuaded by local philanthropists and clergy to come to Hudson County, where mass immigration and industrialization, combined with the privations of wartime, had created a crisis situation. In Hoboken, the sisters set up a small hospital on Meadow (later Park) Street in a converted private home. The following year, 1864, the sisters established another small hospital, St. Francis, in neighboring Jersey City. In 1867, Bishop of New Jersey James Roosevelt Bayley persuaded them to found yet another hospital, St. Michael’s in Newark.

From humble beginnings, these three institutions all became important Catholic hospitals. At the same time, the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor continued to found hospitals in New York, the Midwest, and elsewhere.

St. Mary Hospital in Hoboken expanded rapidly during the late nineteenth century. In 1866, the hospital moved to a larger building at its current site on Fourth and Willow Streets. The hospital continued adding buildings until in 1904 it ranked as the largest hospital in New Jersey. In 1916, the facility was completely replaced by a new purpose-built hospital complex. During this period, the hospital was associated with several important events. In 1886, Father Augustus Tolton, the first recognized black priest in the United States, celebrated his first United States Mass at the chapel at St. Mary Hospital. In 1910, while waiting to board an ocean liner on the Hoboken piers, New York mayor William Gaynor was shot by a disgruntled former city employee. He was rushed to St. Mary Hospital where he spent 19 days. During World War I, because of its strategic location, St. Mary was taken over by the U.S. government and became the point of embarkation for almost two million doughboys headed for Europe. The school of nursing, founded in 1918, was reorganized after the war as a two-year program. In 1926, one of the first tuberculosis clinics in the state was founded at St. Mary.

St. Francis Hospital in Jersey City underwent similar rapid expansion. In 1869, the hospital was able to move to a new building due to the generosity of several donors. In 1889–1890, yet another facility was erected, which by 1895 covered the entire block bordered by Erie and Ninth Streets, Pavonia Avenue, and Hamilton Square in Jersey City. With 250 beds, two operating rooms, and a ground floor chapel, St. Francis exceeded in size all the other hospitals in Jersey City combined. In the late nineteenth century, St. Francis acted as a de facto public municipal hospital for Jersey City, treating patients of all races and religions without charge. It also became celebrated for medical innovation: Dr. Theodore R. Varick, surgeon-in-charge at St. Francis, published groundbreaking work on the use of hot water in surgery in 1886. Both St. Francis and St. Mary hospitals, surrounded by factories and railroads, became known for treating victims of industrial accidents. In 1922, St. Francis also opened a school of nursing, which
became a state-accredited three-year program in 1929. Mayor Frank Hague was a supporter of the hospital, where he had the chapel renovated as a memorial for his parents in 1927.

The Franciscan Sisters of the Poor’s third New Jersey hospital, St. Michael’s, also flourished during the nineteenth century. In 1869, the hospital moved from its first home on Bleecker Street to the current site on Central Avenue. Saint Michael’s became known as a maternity hospital, and a nursing school was founded in 1928. In the twentieth century, St. Michael’s continued to thrive, becoming the first medical institution in New Jersey to perform open-heart surgery, and the first to develop a cardiac catheterization program.

By the late 1960s, although their three New Jersey hospitals were outwardly successful, the Franciscan Sisters were experiencing a marked decline in vocations and in numbers of professed sisters. Younger sisters often preferred social work to nursing or hospital administration. In 1973, the sisters announced their intention to withdraw from Saint Michael’s Medical Center. They continued to operate their Hudson County hospitals; in fact, both institutions completely replaced their antiquated buildings with modern medical complexes in the 1970s. Rising costs and increasing numbers of charity patients, however, put pressure on both hospitals. In 1985, they merged to form Franciscan Health System of New Jersey. By 2000, however, the Franciscan Sisters transferred the ownership of both hospitals to the Sisters of Bon Secours. Faced with continued declining revenues, the Sisters of Bon Secours closed St. Francis Hospital between 2003 and 2005 and transferred medical services to St. Mary Hospital. In 2005, the hospital buildings were sold to Exeter properties, partially demolished, and converted into condominiums. The original plan was to close St. Mary Hospital as well, but after a successful campaign by local residents, the hospital was taken over by the City of Hoboken. In 2011, however, the hospital was again sold, to the for-profit group CarePoint Health, which continues to operate it. The fate of Saint Michael’s Medical Center remains uncertain.

Selected Sources:
Thomas J. McLoughlin, *The History of St. Francis Hospital* (Jersey City, NJ: St. Francis Hospital, 1914).
*Sisters of the Poor of St. Francis Centenary Souvenir, 1845–1945*. Copy at the Seton Hall University Archives.

More information about this early healthcare ministry can be found in the author’s forthcoming chapter: “‘To Care for the Sick and Poor so Numerous There’: The Franciscan Sisters of the Poor in Hudson County During the Civil War Era.” *New Jersey Catholic History Reader* (South Orange, NJ: New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission, 2016).
St. Francis Hospital, 1907. Image courtesy of Jersey City Free Public Library.

St. Mary Hospital Hoboken, NJ community, 1912. From the collection of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor Congregational Archives.
St. Mary Hospital, Hoboken, ca. 1920. Image courtesy of New Jersey Medical History Postcard Collection, Special Collections, George F. Smith Library, Rutgers University Libraries.

St. Michael’s Hospital, undated, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.