

From the Desk of the Historian

What a Difference – Because of These Nursing Heroes!



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As you read this month's issue, this columnist's December 2024 hiatus is over and once again, my thoughts turn to the significance of Black History Month (just ending) and the start of Women's History Month in relation to heroes of nursing. There are so many nurses to choose from and if all were highlighted, this column would become a volume. So, the list had to be limited to these 6 nurses: Jessie Sleet Scales, Lavinia Lloyd Dock, Mabel Keaton Staupers, Catherine Alicia Georges, Goldie D. Brangman, and Lillian Wald. For many, these nurses' names may be familiar; to others, here's your opportunity to meet them.

Jessie Sleet Scales (1865-1956)

A Canadian by birth, in her late 20s, Ms. Scales traveled south to Chicago, IL to attend and graduate from the Provident Hospital School of Nursing. Recognizing her need for further education, she attended a six-month course at the Freedman's Hospital in our nation's capital. Following two years of work at a Lakewood, NJ health resort, she gravitated to public health nursing. At that time, it was called District Nursing. Although she applied to work as a nurse at St. Phoebe's Mission (Brooklyn, NY), she was not granted employment – despite the fact that the leadership of the mission used Ms. Scales' knowledge and skills informally to care for their patients. But when it came to formalizing that relationship, the answer was no.



Undeterred, she ultimately gained employment as a nurse in the Charity Organization Society (CSO) through the advocacy of its general secretary, Edward Thomas Devine. Although some of the CSO's governing members did not agree with his choice of Ms. Scales, Dr. Devine was very aware of the vast number of New York City's African American population suffering from TB. He was also astutely aware that having a nurse coming to their homes to care for them that looked like them would enhance collaboration and positive health outcomes. Hence, Ms. Scales became the first Public Health Nurse of color in New York City. She went on to write about her case studies, "A Successful Experiment" which the American Journal of Nursing published 1901.



Catherine Alicia Georges (1944-)

Dr. Catherine Alicia Georges, Professor Emerita, Lehman College, understood from the very beginning of her nursing journey that education was important in everyone's life. She earned her BS in Nursing from Seton Hall University, then her MA in Community Health Nursing from New York University (NYU), and her EdD in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Vermont.

Dr. Georges has always been a dynamic leader and champion for those individuals and populations that are marginalized, disadvantaged and under-represented here in America and around the world. She used her gifts and abilities to lead the National Black Nurses Association (NBNA) as the Association's fifth president. As a nurse educator, Dr. Georges influenced generations of pre- and post- licensure nurses to be the best nurses they can be and more importantly, the best individuals. In recognition of her life-long efforts, she has received many honors which include (to name just a few): honor society memberships in SIGMA Theta Tau (SIGMA) and Golden Key; sorority memberships in Alpha Kappa Alpha and Chi Eta Phi Nursing (honorary); Mabel Staupers Award, Women in Public Service, Mary Mahoney Award (ANA), NYS Legislative Nurse of Distinction, King Chavez Parks Visiting Scholar (SON, U Michigan), and the Jane Delano Distinguished Service Awards.



Lillian D. Wald (1867-1940)

Lillian D. Wald used her nursing expertise and passion for the health and welfare of immigrant families living in the tenements on Henry Street to establish a public health presence in that community. She lived in the Henry Street community. She established networks between the politicians and philanthropists of the day to bring the plight of poor health, overcrowding, and poor sanitation to their attention. Wald approached philanthropist Jacob Schiff to purchase a house on Henry Street for the purpose of housing the visiting public health nurses who worked to provide home health care (see Figure 1). This Henry Street public health "experiment" grew and grew to establish itself and live on as the Visiting Nurse Association.



Visiting Nurse providing care



Goldie D. Brangman (1917-2020)

Goldie D. Brangman, a 1943 graduate of Harlem Hospital, spent her entire nursing career enhancing the knowledge of nurses and improving patient outcomes. She was an innovator who mentored other nurses to learn about the importance of anesthesia and the greater importance of nurse anesthetists. During WWII, many hospitals experienced a shortage of anesthesiologists who were drafted into combat hospitals to care for military personnel undergoing surgery in the field. Brangman was among many nurses educated into the role of nurse anesthetists. Six years after graduating from Harlem Hospital SON, she established the Harlem Hospital Nurse Anesthesia Program and held the position of Program Director for the next 36 years until her retirement. Her most notable patient at Harlem Hospital was the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who survived a 1958 assassination attempt through the care he received from Goldie Brangman and other nurses at the hospital.



Lavinia Lloyd Dock (1858-1956)

Lavinia Lloyd Dock graduated from Bellevue Training School for Nurses in 1886. In writing her autobiography, she minimized her role as a nurse. She did not think she was a great nurse, however history refutes that. Although diminutive in stature, she made a lasting impact on the nursing profession as an Assistant Superintendent at Johns Hopkins Hospital, the secretary of the International Council of Nurses, and co-authoring 3 volumes of the History of Nursing with M. Adelaide Nutting. Her biggest contribution to our profession had to do with women's suffrage. Dock proffered that until women had the vote that nursing could not be a profession and wrote about this in one of the 1907 issues of the AJN. She protested and marched from New York City to Washington, DC and as a member of the Women's Party was arrested three times for her pro-suffrage activities. Dock took great pride in both of these achievements: authoring and arrests for advocacy.



Mabel Keaton Staupers (1890-1989)

Mabel Keaton Staupers, a Bajan by birth, immigrated to the United States with her mother and later followed by her father. She attended Freedman's Hospital SON in our nation's capital and while working there, she served as a public health nurse to patients living with tuberculosis.

She moved to Harlem, NY where she and two other colleagues opened the Booker T. Washington Sanatorium to care for African American Harlemites. Within those walls, patients received care from nurses and doctors who looked like them and understood the difficulties of living in a society where de facto Jim Crow sentiments were ever present. Mrs. Staupers understood the importance of community and she found a professional community as a member of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) as a nursing student in 1916 – just eight years after its founding. She remained a member and until 1951 when, under her presidential leadership and thanks to the commitment for integration of Mary Elizabeth Carnegie (another NY and VA nurse), NACGN merged into the American Nurses Association. Because of Mrs. Staupers' leadership, she received many awards, among which was the Mary McLeod Bethune Award.

Thanks for joining me again this month as we all celebrate women of renown, nurses who embodied courage, professionalism, leadership, advocacy, and education. May we continue to learn from their legacies. ■

*Until next time,
Trudy*