

Craig Colony Training School for Nurses

Craig Colony School of Nursing was organized in 1897, one year after Craig Colony for Epileptics opened for patients. The first class graduated in 1899 and consisted of four males and seven females. The school operated until 1977 and boasted a total of approximately 750 graduates. Upon successful completion of their courses, many of the nurses joined the large staff of Craig Colony and cared for upwards of 2,000 patients annually. The nurses' clinical experience included chronic nervous disorders, and medical, surgical, orthopedic, pediatric and rehabilitative nursing.

The New York State institution for epileptics was established in 1894 in the hamlet of Sonyea, in the town of Groveland, on the former Shaker lands. The first patients were admitted in 1896. The locating of Craig Colony in Livingston County was due to William Pryor Letchworth, who received international recognition for his work in social reform. The colony was constructed on over 1,900 acres using the cottage plan - a cluster of small buildings rather than one large structure.

Craig Colony for Epileptics, named in honor of Dr. Oscar Craig of Rochester, was the second institution specifically for epileptics in the United States. Craig had a working farm, craft shops, a school, churches, and a hospital. The nursing service administered to the hospital patients and also to those residing in the colony's 37 buildings.

In 1912, the Craig Colony School of Nursing was re-organized and in 1913 became Craig Colony Training School for Nurses, accredited by the New York State Education Department. This change elevated the status of the school and was the beginning of affiliations with major hospitals in New York City and across the state.

America's entry into World War I in 1917, and the Spanish Influenza pandemic in 1918, led to a severe shortage of nurses nationwide that extended into the early 1920s. During that time period only a handful of students graduated from the school, yet the program managed to survive.

Changes occurred in the 1920s as the two-year course expanded to three years, pupils were required to take an entrance exam, and nursing schools across the state were required to include nutrition and cooking instruction. In the 1930s, maximum work hours were established with an eight-hour-per-day shift for nurses and four-hour shift for students, in addition to their classes.

WWII ushered in another era of change and challenges for the Craig Colony Training School as many nurses (and other hospital staff) enlisted in military service. In addition, an application was made to the U. S. Public Health Service for approval of the School of Nursing participation in the U. S. Cadet Nurse Corps. According to the organization's website, this was the nation's first integrated uniformed U.S. service corps. While nurses fulfilled an urgent need in the military

during the war years, enlistments led to a lack of students entering the Craig Colony Training School.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, enrollments increased and class sizes grew to the largest since the training school's inception. The curriculum expanded as students began to take college courses at SUNY Geneseo in addition to affiliating with major hospitals and taking nursing classes at Craig Colony. The curriculum also included a four-week block at the New York State Tuberculosis Hospital at Mt. Morris before that hospital closed in 1971.

The 1970s witnessed the era of de-institutionalization, and together with state budget cuts, this led to the demise of the Craig Colony Training School for Nurses. In 1972, the nursing program was reduced from three to two years. The school merged with Alfred State College to offer an associate's degree in nursing. Then, in 1976, Craig was one of a dozen state nurses' schools to come under the axe, despite the continuing need for professional nurses locally and across the state.

Craig Colony Training School for Nurses weathered many storms, including two world wars, an influenza pandemic, and the Great Depression before the school was forced to close. The last class graduated May 28, 1977, after a successful run of 80 years.

By Amie Alden, Livingston County Historian, May 2020