

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part __)

The Founding of Mount Sinai Hospital

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654 – 1860**, by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945, pages 155 – 160.

Introduction

The Jews of New York City were rather late in establishing Jewish institutions such as a poorhouse, a home for orphans and the aged, and a hospital. Several attempts were made in the years prior to 1850, but they failed due to the small size of the New York City Jewish community which in 1836 numbered only about 2000 and increased to about 7000 in 1840. Sick Jews were sent to non-Jewish hospitals, because there was no other alternative.

By 1850 there were about 16,000 Jews residing in New York, and “the need for a Jewish hospital became increasing clear. Fear was often entertained by the patient as well as by the Jewish community at large that the Christian authorities might convert the Jew on his deathbed and bury him as a Christian. The records speak of a young man by the name of Kahn, a stranger in the city, who fell sick and was taken to Bellevue Hospital. Before he died, he ‘expressed a wish to be buried among Yehudim.’

“Other problems arose which were based upon real situations. During treatment or convalescence, a patient was forced to eat non-kosher food. Often his fellow - patients laughed at his religious rites, at his tefillin and his Tzitzis.”

In 1850 the Hebrew Benevolent Society became interested in founding a Jewish hospital and, under the leadership of Manuel Mordecai Noah, organized a meeting of the major Jewish organizations then existing. This led to the formation of a committee and much serious discussion about the project within the Jewish community. However, there was little agreement as to what should be done, and when Noah died on May 22, 1851, “the project made no further headway.”

Sampson Simson¹ Takes Charge

“It was then that the man of many plans, the eccentric Sampson Simson [who at this time was 72 years-old], came forward and with one bold stroke cut through all the difficulties. In 1852, ignoring all of the societies, he gathered around him people from Shearith Israel

and Shaarey Tefilah, the native and the English Jews², and founded the *Jews' Hospital in the City of New York*, known since 1866 as Mount Sinai Hospital. Simson's plan was to enroll members at five dollars a year; these members were to elect trustees to administer the hospital. A ball was run by a group of young people and netted over \$1,000.

“The original Noah committee and the German Hebrew Benevolent Society stood aghast and bewildered; they called for an explanation, but the new group ignored them. Simson, who, despite his eccentricities, was a very practical man, not purely an idealist, gave the new organization two lots on 28th Street; thus the institution was launched. By Thanksgiving Day, 1853, the cornerstone of the first Jewish institution in New York City was laid. Two lots adjoining those given by Simson were purchased.”

“On May 17, 1855, the new building on Twenty-eighth Street, now completed [at a cost of \$30,000], was dedicated and [on June 5th] its doors opened to the public, four stories high with one large ward and several small ones on each of the floors. Each ward contained a number of bedsteads near which stood an arm-chair, all scrupulously clean and white. The recently completed Croton system supplied water; gas lighting was also introduced.”³

“Judah Touro of New Orleans had left the hospital \$20,000; its continued existence was, moreover, assured by a long list of both Jewish and Christian contributors.”

The Hospital's Early History⁴

Dr. Valentine Mott (August 20, 1785 - April 26, 1865), a pioneer in vascular surgery, was one of the first physicians to be associated with the new institution. “The first four consulting physicians included some of the most eminent names in the community. Chandler R. Gilman, Professor of Obstetrics at the College of Physicians and Surgeons was one of the first of the contemporary physicians to maintain that criminal insanity existed and called for special treatment. William Detmold, a German, introduced orthopedic surgery in New York. One of the two attending surgeons who carried the brunt of the work was Israel Moses, the first physician of Jewish faith and origin to be named to the staff.”

One hundred and ten patients were admitted to the hospital during its first year of operation, and all 45 beds were utilized. Most of these patients were unable to cover the costs of their treatment and were therefore treated without charge. However, those who could pay at least part of their medical costs were required to contribute what they could. The total expenses of the hospital during its first year were \$5,493.

“During the early years of its existence the Hospital was purely a sectarian institution. Persons other than those of Jewish faith were not accepted unless in case of accident. Presumably the dietary laws were observed.”

The outbreak of the Civil War changed the nature of the hospital. A ward was established to treat wounded soldiers regardless of their religious affiliation, and additional beds and staff were added. As many as 117 wounded soldiers were cared for by the hospital during the first six months of 1862.

From July 13 to July 16, 1863 New York City experienced what came to be known as the Draft Riots that resulted from discontent when several new laws were passed by Congress to draft men to fight in the ongoing Civil War. President Lincoln sent several regiments of militia and volunteer troops to control the city. The result was that hundreds of civilians and soldiers were injured. Many of these came to Jews' Hospital for medical care.

“Due mainly to the influx of wounded and ill during the War the purely sectarian character of the institution as well as its name was considered an anachronism, particularly in the eyes of city authorities who were reluctant to extend aid to a sectarian organization. In 1866, by an act of the Legislature the designation of the hospital was changed to Mount Sinai.

“In 1867 twelve lots running between Sixty-sixth and Sixty-seventh Streets east of Lexington Avenue were leased from the city for 99 years for a nominal sum of one dollar a year. Three years later Mayor Oakley Hall laid the cornerstone of the new building, with the participation of the President of the Hospital, Benjamin Nathan, and its Vice President Emanuel B. Hart in the exercises.” This new facility contained 120 beds.

“With the move to Lexington Avenue, patient care grew to encompass outpatient services as well as specialty wards for pediatrics, eye and ear, neurology, genitourinary, and dermatology. A tiny lab, large enough for only two people, was set up in a coat closet, and lab work took on increased importance.

“As advances in research, diagnosis, and patient care occurred, and more people sought treatment at hospitals in general, Mount Sinai administrators realized it was time once again to move and expand.

“In 1904, the new 456-bed, 10-pavilion Mount Sinai Hospital was dedicated on Fifth Avenue at 100th Street. Numerous specialties arose, among them otology — the treatment of ear diseases — physical therapy, and neurosurgery. The Hospital opened clinics on diabetes, children's health, and mental health, among others.”⁵

For further information about the hospital's history during the twentieth century to the present day, see <http://www.mountsinaihospital.org/about-us/history>.

¹ For a sketch of Sampson Simson's life see last month's **Glimpses Into American Jewish History** column, **The Jewish Press** _____ 2011, pages ____

² The nucleus of the group that worked with Simson consisted of the Reverend Samuel M. Isaacs, John I. Hart, Benjamin Nathan, John M. Davies, Henry Hendricks, Theodore J. Seixas, Isaac Phillips and John D. Phillips.

³ **The Centennial Anniversary of the Mount Sinai Hospital (1852-1952)** by Burrill B. Crohn *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; Sep 1952-Jun 1953; 42, 1-4; AJHS Journal. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>

⁴ All quotes below are from **The Centennial Anniversary of the Mount Sinai Hospital (1852-1952)** unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ <http://www.mountsinaihospital.org/about-us/history>