

Doylestown Hospital marks 90th year

By Edward Levenson Correspondent | Posted: Monday, October 7, 2013 10:00 am

On the afternoon of Tuesday, Oct. 9, 1923, a crowd gathered at East Oakland Avenue and Pine Street for the dedication of the Doylestown Emergency Hospital.

"This hospital belongs to Doylestown. It is a community affair," said keynote speaker Dr. Frank B. Swartzlander, a Doylestown physician who was instrumental in the creation of the hospital. "It is a wonderful thing for Doylestown and the doctors. It should be a stimulus for the physicians and the community."

The opening of the eight-bed hospital was a triumph for the Village Improvement Association, a Doylestown women's civic group that first saw the need for a hospital in 1906 and spent years planning and raising money for one. Their goal was to provide maternity care, emergency aid for people with minor injuries and initial treatment for seriously injured patients before they could be transferred to another hospital.

Doylestown Emergency Hospital was the predecessor of today's Doylestown Hospital, which marks its 90th anniversary this month as the nation's only community hospital owned and operated by a women's club. The 238-bed hospital, which annually spends about \$232 million and admits nearly 12,000 patients, dwarfs the original institution, which spent approximately \$8,600 a year and treated about 235 inpatients annually in the mid-1920s.

"I don't think the founding mothers had any idea what they set in motion, and how important to the community the hospital was going to be. They never really thought of themselves as more than an emergency hospital," said Carolyn Della-Rodolfa, chairwoman of the hospital board, as well as the VIA's vice president of health services and a past president of the organization.

Members of the VIA, founded in 1895 "to promote the health and beauty of the town," met with a group of physicians and clergymen in the courthouse in February 1907 to discuss the possibility of starting a hospital in Doylestown. Swartzlander remarked, "All the doctors in town have been handicapped by not having some such place as a hospital," the Doylestown Daily Intelligencer reported.

Swartzlander, William R. Mercer (a sculptor and brother of Henry C. Mercer) and Isabella Watson, president of the VIA; were named trustees of a hospital fund, which slowly began raising money.

Over the next decade, the VIA took steps to improve health care in Doylestown short of a full-fledged hospital. In 1916, the first visiting nurse was hired for \$75 month to visit the sick in homes and schools, making referrals to physicians when necessary.

With the assistance of the Doylestown branch of the American Red Cross, the VIA in 1919 rented two rooms for emergency treatment in a house on Broad Street across from the courthouse.

By 1922, the hospital fund had grown large enough that the trustees were able to buy the three-story stone-and-frame house of John B. Livezey, at East Oakland Avenue and Pine Street, for \$6,000.

Conversion of the house into a hospital was completed in February 1923, "and with the exception of the absence of an elevator, the building is very suitable for hospital work," the Intelligencer reported. In the months before the dedication, the visiting nurse and the Red Cross moved their offices into the hospital, and an addition was built for the John S. Fretz Memorial Operating Room.

"The new hospital building is finished in white inside. There is a cozy reception room in the front of the building. A circular hall leads to the office and memorial operating room that is located on the east side of the hospital building on the first floor," the newspaper said.

"On the second floor of the building in the front room, will be found a ward, fully equipped with two beds and a crib. The middle room on the second floor is fully equipped. Later, the middle room upstairs will be used as a ward," the article stated. The staff consisted of two nurses and a live-in female caretaker.

At the dedication, William R. Mercer, on behalf of the fund trustees, presented the building to the VIA, which had incorporated in order to own and operate a hospital.

Six months later, the Intelligencer reported: "So great has been the demand for its services that the hospital has been running at full capacity, and this morning a rush order was given for two more beds which will be crowded in to meet the demand for them."

The demand kept growing as Doylestown and the surrounding area grew. A new 21-bed hospital, costing a then-substantial \$80,000, opened in 1939 at Belmont Avenue and Spruce Street. After expanding to 54 beds in 1951, the institution dropped "Emergency" from its name in 1957 and was called simply Doylestown Hospital.

Even that eventually was not big enough, and Doylestown Hospital relocated in 1975 to a \$12.6 million, 165-bed building on West State Street in Doylestown Township. The campus has expanded substantially since then as the hospital has moved into new fields, such as cancer care and open-heart surgery.

Despite the tremendous changes over the past 90 years, the hospital's fundamental mission has remained unchanged, according to James Brexler, president and chief executive officer.

"At its core, this organization is meeting the needs of the community as it relates to health care," he said. Besides the hospital, the VIA also owns the Pine Run retirement community and Lakeview assisted living center in Doylestown Township, and the Health and Wellness Center in Warrington.

As Doylestown Hospital looks toward its 100th anniversary in 2023, Brexler expects even more health services will be delivered outside the traditional hospital setting. "We're evolving into a network of care in the community," he said.

Board chair Della-Rodolfa, who lives in Doylestown Township, said she is reminded of the hospital's humble roots every time she drives by the original building, now private apartments..

"I wonder what those ladies would think if they were here now," she said.