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The Clarke Maternity Hospital

The Crane Homestead, pictured here in the 1890s, was converted into the Clarke Maternity hospital in 1918.



Other than the odd bed, hacksaws, scalpels, pliers and needles located in many doctor's surgeries in 19th century Willimantic, the city has been home to several major hospitals. The most recent and well known is the Windham Memorial Hospital that opened in 1933. From 1910 until 1930, Dr. Louis Mason operated a private hospital in the grand old house which once stood on Fairview Avenue in the Oaks. Dr. Thomas Morton Hills' private hospital stood on North Street. It was built in 1889 and operated until

1909. St. Joseph's hospital on Jackson Street operated from 1907 until 1933. The Sisters of Charity staffed it. Their popular 40-bed hospital was not large enough for the growing city of Willimantic, and evolving medical treatment, which demanded more periods of hospitalization. In April 1933, the 75-bed Windham Community Memorial Hospital opened its doors to the public, thanks to a vigorous community movement.

The growth of any city can be measured in its recorded birth and deaths. In 1908, the newly opened St. Josephs hospital supervised 23 births. In 1952 the Sisters of Mercy's doctors and nurses at St Josephs brought 611 children into the world. By 1917, it was obvious to two local nurses, the Misses Leone and Leola Clarke that the area was crying out for a new maternity facility. Leone Clarke was born June 1, 1878 at Presque Isle, Maine, one of the six daughter of Charles and Cynthia Clarke. Leone graduated in 1904 from the State Normal School in Willimantic. She decided to change her career from teaching to nursing, and subsequently trained as a nurse at the Backus Hospital in Norwich. Her younger sister Leola was also born at Presque Island, in 1880. She trained as a nurse at the House of Mercy Hospital Training School in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, graduating in 1907.

The sisters first appear in the Willimantic City directory of 1913, living together at 232 Lewiston Avenue. The nurses were "well known" in the area at this time, so its quite possible that they had worked at Dr. Mason's or St Joseph's hospital. In 1914, Leone and Leola moved to the Crane homestead on upper Jackson Street. Eleazer Crane, a local dairy farmer, built the fine Victorian house (pictured) in the 1890s, located at 484 Jackson Street. The Potter Funeral Home was built adjacent to the house in the early 1950s. The Crane homestead was demolished in the early 1970s to provide more parking space at the Funeral Home.

The Clarke Maternity Hospital opened in the old Crane homestead on October 13, 1918. It was always "occupied to capacity." Willimantic was in the middle of the traumatic worldwide influenza epidemic. An emergency hospital had opened in the armory. A call was sent out for extra nurses. The city's undertakers could hardly cope with all the tragic deaths. The most well known victim was the 54 year-old pastor of St Josephs, Father Timothy Bannon. All the city's schools and "moving picture theaters" were closed until the epidemic subsided. On a brighter note, in their first three weeks of operation the Clarke sisters oversaw the births of three babies -- a daughter to Mrs. Beebe of Bridgeport, a son to Mr. and Mrs. S. P. Brown of Mansfield and a son to Mr. and Mrs. R. I. Longley of Storrs.

The Clarke sisters saw to all of the maternity needs of their private patients. But they were also adept in removing tonsils, or carrying out any "minor operations to their female patients." It was strictly a women's hospital -- no male patients were treated. The sisters continued together until 1931, when Leone retired. She died, aged 65, in Columbia, Connecticut on July 5, 1943, aged 65. Leola closed the hospital in 1933. She moved to Hartford, but lived in retirement with her sister, Clair Robinson, in Columbia. Leola died on December 23, 1973, aged 93. Many local residents were born in the Clarke Hospital between 1918 and 1933. Were You?