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# Nova Scotia had largest hospital in North America from 1716-58

Established at Louisbourg by the French

By DR. ALLAN E. MARBLE  
The Medical History Society of Nova Scotia

It's somewhat surprising that from 1716-1758 the largest hospital in North America was located in Nova Scotia or, more correctly, the territory presently called Nova Scotia. One would have thought that Boston, New York, or Philadelphia would have had a hospital much larger than any such structure in Nova Scotia. But the English, unlike the French, didn't consider it necessary to establish hospitals in its colonies.

The French established the 104-bed King's Hospital at Louisbourg in 1716 by inviting the Hospitalier Brothers of St. John of God to construct and administer it in almost the very centre of the town. A 1731 sketch by Etienne Verrier, the chief engineer in charge of the fortress construction, depicts the hospital as the second largest building in the town. A 1734 circa plan of the Town of Louisbourg shows the hospital building – 265 feet long and 88 feet wide – occupied a complete town block. It was complete with an apothecary shop, chapel, kitchen, bakery, brewhouse, laundry, morgue, two wards, and a number of private rooms.

The Brothers of the Order of St. John of God were the surgeons in the hospital and the Sisters of the Order of Notre Dame carried out the nursing function. Records in the Paris Archives indicate the members of these

two orders were very strict as to who they would admit into the hospital. For instance, the French military wasn't allowed to bring any sick or wounded prisoners to the hospital and no person considered to be a lunatic or known to have venereal disease would be admitted. Local surgeons in the Town of Louisbourg or in the surrounding area could send patients to the hospital but thereafter couldn't visit or treat them. Once admitted to the hospital, a person was a patient of the Brothers of the Hospitalier Order.

On June 8, 1758, during the last siege of Louisbourg, a cannon ball fell on the hospital causing considerable destruction to the building and killing the chief surgeon. After 1760, stone from the building is said to have been transported to Halifax for the construction of public buildings in that new town.

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## The Medical History Society of Nova Scotia

The Medical History Society of Nova Scotia is keeping the rich medical history of the province alive. To help shine light on that history, *doctorsNS* is introducing a series of vignettes to tell the medical story of Nova Scotia.

The society began as the official Archives Committee of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia, which is now Doctors Nova Scotia. It was incorporated on March 27, 1992 and, at the time, called The Medical History Museum of Nova Scotia.

The society's founders included Drs. E. Carl Abbott, Ian Cameron, Joan M. Crosby, Marie Elwood, Sandra Haycock, Michael R. MacDonald, Allan J. MacLeod, Allan E. Marble, William F. Mason, Duncan K. Murray, Eugene Nurse, Edward F. Ross, Bernard J. Steele, and curator Owen McInerney.

Beth MacPherson joined the board as administrator in 2000, implementing the strategic report and its recommendations produced by Dr. Andrew Nurse. The society's name was changed in 2004 to The Medical History Society of Nova Scotia, and its bylaws were revised and augmented by the creation of a logo by the late Dr. Marie Elwood. The society's mandate has always been "to preserve

the medical heritage of Nova Scotia." To fulfill this, the society has moved into producing customized geographical displays profiling physicians throughout Nova Scotia.

A permanent display at the Yarmouth County Museum includes biographies and original artifacts from the Webster family of physicians whose connection to the province dates back to the 1700s. A display at the Colchester Historical Society in Truro featured the Colchester County physicians of the 1800s and early 1900s. Another in Sherbrooke Village profiled Dr. Stella Messenger-Pearson, a female general practitioner who practiced there in 1919. The Life of John Stewart, Disciple of Lord Lister, the physician who promoted antiseptic use in surgery to Nova Scotia, is now on display at the Beaton Institute in Cape Breton. Through Doctors Nova Scotia, the society also rotates displays on the history of medicine in Nova Scotia based upon Dr. Marble's latest research. Seven displays were provided in May of 2013 to the Medical Hall of Fame induction ceremony in Halifax.

To learn more about the medical history of Nova Scotia, or contribute to the work of the society, visit [www.medicalhistoryns.com](http://www.medicalhistoryns.com)