

A Short History of Watts Hospital...

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George Washington Watts was born in 1851 to Gerard Watts, a wealthy entrepreneur from Hagerstown, Maryland. Watts attended public school and later the University of Virginia and received a major in civil engineering. After finishing college, he worked as a traveling salesman in his father's business, G.S. Watts and Company, a tobacco wholesale firm.

Watts came to live in Durham after his father struck up a deal with the Duke family and purchased a share in their tobacco business for his son at a cost of \$14,000. Watts brought with him his wife, Laura Valinda Beall, and their daughter.

Before long, Watts became a big influence in city government and was on the head of many town committees. Watts was always very sensitive to health care. His younger brother

was a physician and his wife suffered from a recurring kidney disease that forced her to travel to Johns Hopkins Medical Center frequently for treatment. Yet, Watts made his resolve to build a hospital in Durham in 1892 when he was hospitalized in Baltimore. He found the staff to be wonderful and wanted to make the same quality care he had received available to the citizens of Durham.

So, along with the help of town physician and personal friend, Dr. Albert G. Carr, Watts found a suitable location for the hospital on the corner of Buchanan Road and Main Street. Using the money he made from the tobacco business, he hired Rand and Taylor architectural firm out of Boston to draw up the plans. On February 21, 1895, Watts Hospital opened its door and became the first clinical medical teaching hospital in North Carolina.

The original Watts Hos-

pital consisted of 22 rooms, 18 of which were "free" rooms, or rooms for patients who could not afford hospital fees. Watts contributed \$50,000 to the hospital to help it run and make sure affordable healthcare was provided.

Between 1906 and 1908, the demand for a larger hospital was very great. Watts wanted to expand Watts Hospital; however, the architects he hired encouraged him to build a new hospital instead that was away from the center of the city. On December 2, 1909, the new and larger Watts Hospital was dedicated. It was settled on sixty acres of land outside the city limits and cost Watts \$217,000 to construct.

Yet, while the hospital was being built, Watts's health was declining steadily. He was diagnosed with stomach cancer and he died on March 7, 1921. In his will, he left the hospital his 9,000 shares in the British

American Tobacco Company and \$200,000 to build a wing on the hospital to honor his wife, Valinda Beall.

After his death, the board of trustees and John Sprunt Hill, Watts's son-in-law, took over the administration of Watts Hospital and strove to operate it in a manner which would have pleased the founder. They maintained the high standards of medical care that Watts had implemented and worked to bring new technology and ideas to the hospital as well.

Competition arose when Duke University's teaching hospital was built in 1930. Although many staff members were anxious about having a new hospital in town, it actually was very beneficial to Watts Hospital. Doctors and medical students from Duke Hospital often worked at Watts Hospital and brought in new skills.

Over the years, the hospital expanded constantly.

The hospital received grants from the government and individual donors, such as the Hill family who donated \$20,000 to help build Hill House. As the demand for medical care increased, so did the government funding to provide medical equipment. By the 1960s, Watts Hospital was thriving.

On October 3, 1976, the construction of the seven story, \$20 million Durham County General Hospital was completed. The local hospitals had already met and decided that this hospital should take over in Durham. The merging of Watts Hospital and Durham County General Hospital was never brought up in the meeting. So, on October 10, 1976, the Army Medical Corps came from Fort Bragg to help move patients to the new hospital and Watts Hospital closed its doors after 81 years of service to the

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Watts Hospital, 1921



Room on Second Beall

Photo credit: Watts Hospital

Photo credit: Watts Hospital



Watts Hospital at the turn of the century

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