

This Week in Eden History

April 24 | Evangelical Deaconess Society



*The first deaconesses:
Sister Superior Katherine Haack
(sitting) with Sister Lydia Daries
(right) and probationers Sophie
Brunner (left) and Charlotte
Wellpot, 1890 | Eden Seminary Archives*

St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the U.S. in 1889, rich with many important businesses and cultural institutions but—as with other many fast-growing cities during this period—burdened with poor sanitation, inadequate social services, and blighted housing. Medical care was primitive, even for those who could afford to pay. Most people attended to sick family members at home. The quality of care at City Hospital (founded 1846) was poor, and non-English speaking patients often felt unwelcome.

The members of the St. Louis Evangelical Pastor's Association recognized the need for better medical care. Although Good Samaritan Hospital had been established in 1857 as a private venture by Pastor Louis Nollau to address this need, more effort was necessary. The pastors looked to the example of the Deaconess Home and Hospital in Kaiserswerth, Germany for a possible solution. Here, single women dedicated their lives to providing health care to the

needy people while living in a supportive religious community.

The decision was made to organize the Evangelical Deaconess Society of St. Louis at a public meeting on March 18, 1889, and articles of association accepted, and a board of directors

elected on April 24. The composition of the board was to include at least four women, which was unusual for a time. The purpose of the Society was 1) to nurse the sick and exercise care for the poor and aged by deaconesses, and 2) to found and support a home where deaconesses would be educated and trained.

An eleven-room house at 2119 Eugenia was secured to serve as a home and hospital for deaconess work. Mrs. Katherine Haack, a widow and her daughter, Lydia Daries, were consecrated as the first deaconess sisters. Prominent physicians Drs. Henry Summa, A. F. Bock, Arthur E. Ewing, and John Green, Sr. offered their services to treat patients in the new Evangelical Deaconess Home. Improved facilities were built at 4117 West Belle Place in 1893 and subsequently replaced by a new hospital at 6150 Oakland Ave. in 1930.

The number of St. Louis deaconess sisters peaked in 1937 at 144. Although the number of women entering the sisterhood declined rapidly after that, enrollment in the nursing school grew rapidly after its founding in 1942. Despite an intensive effort, deaconess recruitment ended in the mid-1950s when it was determined that young women desired nursing as a career but no longer wanted to live in deaconess communities. The last deaconess was consecrated in 1949. Deaconess sisters continued to teach in the nursing school and work in the hospital until their retirement.

The changing landscape of healthcare and healthcare funding led to a decision to sell the hospital to Tenant Corp. in 1997. Funds from the sale continue to support the Deaconess Foundation's mission to strive for the wellbeing of children in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The Deaconess School of Nursing was sold to Chamberlain University in 2005.

Like many other Evangelical Synod institutions, Eden seminary maintained a close relationship with Deaconess Hospital. Eden graduates served as hospital directors and chaplains, the hospital provided practical educational opportunities for Eden students, and the seminary provided classes in religion and theology for Deaconess School of Nursing students.

Eden Theological Seminary Archives
475 E. Lockwood Ave.
St. Louis, Missouri 63119
(314) 252.3141

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