

A History of Heritage

SSM St. Joseph Health Center

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As St. Charles celebrates the 200th anniversary of its 1809 incorporation as a village with 200 events in 200 days, Streetscape wanted to honor one of its longest standing landmarks—SSM St. Joseph Health Center.

The Sisters of St. Mary migrated to St. Louis during the smallpox epidemic of 1872, immediately going out to nurse the sick in their homes. At the time, St. Charles was a thriving center of industry and about 6,000 people. There were 18 dry goods stores, 10 grocery stores, four cigar stores, three tin stores, three gunsmiths, two harness makers, five wagon makers, seven blacksmiths, five flour mills, three billiard saloons, a stone jail and 10 churches.

By 1875, the epidemic had subsided and the “Smallpox Sisters”, as they were called, returned to their convent on Third and Gratiot Streets in St. Louis. But by 1884, due to the lack of clear cut health measures, sanitation and methods of immunization, scarlet fever and diphtheria were taking their toll on the lives of Missourians and St. Charles was no exception.

City officials requested Reverend Francis X. Wilmes, pastor of St. Peter Church, to seek once more the aid of the Sisters of St. Mary. Although the sisters were nursing at Quarantine Hospital in St. Louis and were unable to come to St. Charles at the time, they did care for nine people suffering from smallpox who needed immediate attention. It was at this time that the Wabash railroad bridge in St. Charles collapsed, killing four men and injuring many more. It was the sisters who nursed the accident victims.

By this time, the citizens of St. Charles had realized their need for a hospital of their own. Franz Schulte—whose own infant son had been nursed through diphtheria by the Sisters of St. Mary—offered his house at 305 Chauncy Street to be used for such a purpose. Father Wilmes made one stipulation—that the Sisters of St. Mary be in charge of the endeavor.

Mother Mary Seraphia accepted the offer and Sister Mary Elizabeth Backer and two companions returned to open a hospital in the Schulte home on November 4, 1885. The one-and-one-half story brick house contained a wine cellar, two rooms on the first floor and three rooms on the second floor. Later two more rooms were annexed to the first floor, raising the bed capacity to a total of eight patients. Because of confined quarters, only female patients were accepted.

Hospitalization was a new concept to St. Charlesans of the 19th century and as a result the hospital very often only housed two or three patients.

By 1890, the house on Chauncy was sold and the hospital purchased a new site with an adjoining lot donated by Dr. Benjamin Geret. The land had an interesting history, having been the burial ground of the victims of the cholera epidemic of 1833.

While cholera was taking lives of people the world over, St. Charles was not spared. It is estimated that one out of every ten people in the town died of cholera during 1833. The First Presbyterian Church on Third and Madison Streets purchased lot number 88 as a burial ground for its parishioners. Over 100 inhabitants of St. Charles were buried in High Hill Cemetery in 1833.

In the Fall of 1890, excavation on the new hospital across the street from St. Peter Church was begun. Human bones were unearthed from the property and properly interred elsewhere. The hospital was dedicated by Reverend Henry Muchlsiepen in August, 1891. This 28-bed, red brick structure was financed partly through the sale of the old hospital and partly through loans and donations from St. Peter Church and other benefactors. Dr. Kurt Stumberg became the first chief of staff and Geret, one of the staff physicians, taught Sister Mary Elizabeth Becker to mix and compound drugs.

The hospital admitted 121 patients that first year and 281 the following year, remarkable for a time when primitive fears of hospitals still prevailed. On the expense ledger for that year was the notation: “five leeches \$2.50”.

The first baby was born in the hospital around this time, and the first surgery performed—a cholecystectomy by Geret. The first floor waiting room was made into a makeshift operating room complete with a kitchen table padded with blankets and covered with a sheet. Surgical instruments were boiled on the gas burner and surgical drapes were rolled into small bundles and sterilized in the kitchen oven. By 1903, an operating room table had been donated.

In the early 20th century, the price of a double room at the hospital was roughly \$1 a day. In spite of the low rates, one-third of the patients were carried on the book as charity patients or “ODLs” (Our Dear Lord’s). Because of lack of an elevator, patients had to be carried to the second floor. The sisters worked tirelessly to exterminate the bedbugs, cockroaches and body lice that made their way into the hospital. Floors and bedside stands were scrubbed with creosol solution and bedsprings were immersed in scalding



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formaldehyde baths. Although operating in a manner far below accepted standards of today, the hospital was within the framework of the average hospital of that day.

The year 1935 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the hospital and the formation of the Ladies Auxiliary. Farmers still donated lard, vegetables and fruit and the sisters spent many days picking apples, pears and peaches and preparing them for winter use.

During World War II, volunteers turned out en masse to help operate the hospital, as doctors were drafted, nurses volunteered and personnel decreased. St. Peter High School girls were given demonstrations in bed-making and simple nursing procedures.

By 1956, 200 lay persons were employed in the now much larger St. Joseph's Hospital. The payroll was \$412,000 and there were 21 Sisters whose services were contributed. During that year, the Ford Foundation made a \$200 million grant to the nations 3,500 voluntary, nonprofit hospitals to improve and extend their services. St. Joseph's received \$62,600 which helped to pay for a six-story, air conditioned, east wing in 1959. The wing was dedicated on February 15 of that year. Among the guests at the celebration dinner that evening were the 12 grandchildren of the late Franz Schulte, who in 1885 donated the original hospital on Third and Chauncy Streets.

The decades that followed saw continued growth at St. Joseph's, and it continues today. SSM St. Joseph Health Center and St. Joseph Health Center-Wentzville's combined 2008 operating budget was just over \$202 million. St. Joseph Hospital West's was \$103 million. Some 40,796 individuals visited the emergency room and 15,521 people were admitted to St. Joseph Health Center and St. Joseph Health Center-Wentzville. St. Joseph West saw 8,419 admissions and 33,176 emergency department visits.

Nearly 1,500 people work at St. Joseph Health Center and Health Center-Wentzville, along with 659 physicians. Nearly 800 are employed at St. Joseph Hospital West. Services now include: behavioral health, a sleep disorders center, senior services, a heart institute, a neurosciences institute, and a vascular institute. According to a New England Journal of Medicine survey, St. Joseph is one of just 1.5 percent of United States hospitals with a comprehensive electronic health records system.

Note: Much of the information for this story was taken from the book "Sisters of Saint Mary and Their Healing Mission" which was written in 1979 by Sister Mary Gabriel Henninger. Streetscape and specifically this reporter thank the staff of SSM St. Joseph Health Center for sharing their rich history with us and the community for over 125 years. ■