

Dalhousie Nursing Alumni- Generations of Excellence Celebrating our Past and Investing in our Future



History of the School of Nursing, Dalhousie University 1949-1985

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Like most Canadian university schools of nursing, Dalhousie's nursing school traces its roots to post graduate diplomas for hospital trained, practising nurses in public health, nursing administration and education. These pre-dated the formation of the school in 1949 (they were offered for a period during the period between WWI and WWII) and so the School's initial offerings were one year post graduate diplomas and not a baccalaureate degree in nursing as had been hoped.

The Registered Nurses Association of Nova Scotia was the driving force for the establishment of a program at the university – as a source of better education for registered nurses and a means of developing the required knowledge and skills of hospital trained nurses for positions in clinical leadership and education. They had support from the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University, Dr. H.C Grant. The university Senate endorsed the plan in principle in 1946 and Dr. Grant led the effort to secure a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation or the Red Cross but the demobilization of soldiers following WWII, who had first opportunity to pursue university education (and many of whom were medical doctors), postponed the plans. This occurred despite the almost desperate need for better qualified nurses to assume roles in hospitals and public health departments across the country and the limited capacity of university schools to prepare them. Lack of money was the overriding challenge.

During the spring of 1948, the Red Cross approved a grant of \$9000 per annum for three years and this provided half of the much needed financial support to establish the School. However, strident lobbying of the federal government was eventually successful in obtaining the entire amount required and the Red Cross was released from its commitment. University president A.E. Kerr announced that the school would provide courses leading to a bachelor of science in nursing degree in partnership with the hospital sector that would provide the “practical training”.

A second goal was to provide post graduate diploma training in public health or nursing education. Both goals were described as “modest endeavours” but a step forward for nursing in Atlantic Canada. The first director secured to lead the School was A.E. Electa MacLennan, a native of Nova Scotia and a graduate of Dalhousie (B.A., 1929), who studied nursing at the Royal Victoria School of Nursing in Montreal and obtained a Master’s Degree from Columbia University in New York. She and the Assistant Director, Marion Pennington (a WWII veteran and public health nurse who worked post war with the UN commission on refugees) were the only two faculty members – they drew from other faculties and the health community to provide the course instruction.

From its inception, the Dalhousie School of Nursing was a regional resource for nursing education in Atlantic Canada. There was significant interest in the post graduate public health course and most of the 15 students admitted in 1949-50 had bursary support from their provincial governments. Interest in the supervision and education stream, however, was initially largely absent. It was not until the 3rd year of the program that 5 students were enrolled in the teaching diploma program. By 1952, there were 47 graduates, over half of whom were working in provincial public health department. Only five were employed in schools of nursing.

Active community outreach was undertaken in the form of the creation of “Institutes” and short courses for graduate’s nurses in administration, clinical teaching, and maternity care. These courses were also offered in various locations around the province. From these humble beginnings, the school grew steadily - if not quickly. While there was high demand for the post graduate diploma courses, there were struggles with the baccalaureate degree program. The initial mode for the degree program included periods of clinical practice at the Victoria General Hospital and so it took 5 calendar years to achieve all of the academic and clinical requirements for the degree. Although there were several registrants, none completed the program in the early 1950s. Other university nursing programs had similar challenges and significant changes were made in the mid -1950s by eliminating the summer clinical practica.

The class of 1959 included its first male graduate, Harry Spindler. The first Nova Scotian of African descent to graduate from the School was Elnora Jackson of Bridgewater, NS who obtained her post basic public health diploma in 1959. She was also the first black Nova Scotian to graduate from the Children’s Hospital in Halifax. The Dalhousie Nursing Society (now the Dalhousie Undergraduate Nursing Society or DUNS) was an early development and by the mid-1950s, the Society was actively involved in broader campus activities. In 1956, the School emerged as an independent body within the university when the Committee on Administration was disbanded and they took control of their own governance. It was the success of the post graduate diploma courses that enabled the School to continue to the 1960s.

The introduction of a national plan for hospital insurance created renewed demand for nursing management expertise and, in 1960, the university Senate approved a one year post graduate diploma course in nursing service administration. Thelma Potter was the first addition to the nursing faculty engaged to teach in this program. In addition to her basic nursing education and military service record, she held a BScN from McGill University and was supported by Dalhousie University to obtain a MSc from Boston University. Jean Church, the Assistant Director who

replaced Marion Pennington (who was recruited to the World Health Organization), was supported to complete a Master's degree at Teachers College, Columbia.

By the end of the 1950s, enrolment had reached 70 students but the School still had no dedicated space on campus and continued to be housed at the Department of Public Health Clinic space. The provincial Minister of Health urged the university to find the School a permanent home. A series of temporary accommodations were made and the School's address changed with these moves. By the end of the 1960s, enrolment exceeded 140 students and the baccalaureate degree program came into its own.

Reorganized in 1957, the new nursing program consisted of 3 years of university study followed by 30 months of clinical study and practice that required almost 6 years of study in total. The credential was a Bachelor of Nursing. Despite student complaints that it was too long, enrolment grew to 53 students in 1964-5.

In 1955-6, further curriculum review was undertaken so that students could complete degree requirements in four years. This included the creation of a nursing "skills lab". As early as 1967, the School began to discuss the need for a graduate program (first established in Canada at the University of Western Ontario in 1957 and McGill University in 1961) but this did not receive serious discussion until the end of the decade.

The Faculty of Health Professions (FHP) was established in 1961, and embraced the School of Nursing. Dr. Robert MacDonald, first Dean of the Faculty of Health Professions, was co-founder of one of the most interesting post graduate diploma programs offered by the School during the period of plurality in nursing education - the Outpost Nursing Program. Discussions began in 1964 with the federal Department of Health and Welfare and, in 1966, funding for the program from the federal Medical Services Branch (MSB) was obtained. Ruth May, a graduate of Wellesley College and the Massachusetts General Hospital, as well as midwifery education from Kentucky and outpost experience, was recruited to lead the two year post graduate program. One year of academic study was followed by one year of paid, supervised practice in Newfoundland and Labrador under the Grenfell Association. On graduation, students received both a diploma in public health and one in outpost nursing. While other programs attracted students from the Atlantic Region of Canada, the Outpost Nursing Program attracted students from across Canada and it flourished. It remained a sole source of education for nurses working in remote areas of the country until the 1980s when other universities began to offer programming. Health Canada ceased its funding support to Dalhousie for the Outpost Nursing Program in 1997. In recognition of her achievements and contributions, Ruth May was awarded a Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) from Dalhousie University in 1999. Eventually the outpost content was integrated with the primary care nurse practitioner program in 2000.

The 1960s were a period of expansion and establishment as a centre of university nursing education. In 1966, the four year integrated Bachelor of Nursing degree program was offered entirely within the university. This marked an end to the sharp division between theory (university) and practice (hospital) in nursing education but not an end to the perception within the profession that university graduates were less ready for clinical practice.

A relationship between Mount St. Vincent (MSV) (the first independent women's' college established in the British Empire in 1925) and Dalhousie University saw students from "the Mount" and "Dal" attend nursing classes at each campus. MSV students did their clinical experience at the Halifax Infirmary. Collaboration was inspired by a general reduction in applicants to nursing programs during the 1960s in Nova Scotia. In 1971, the university nursing programs of both universities were combined at Dalhousie University, which had the benefit of a Medical School.

During the 1970s, Electa MacLennan retired and the Masters in Nursing program was established. Other programs were phased out as degree nursing education gained stature and importance in Atlantic Canada. As a result, enrolments significantly increased and there was renewed pressure for a permanent home for the School. The diploma programs were gradually phased out starting in 1974. In addition to the student Nursing Society, a greater effort was made to establish a nursing alumni association. Since many of the diploma graduates already had close allegiances with their hospital Schools of Nursing (which had competing and vibrant alumni associations), this was not an easy task. By 1973, however, there were sufficient degree graduates to make this more feasible and a formal Dalhousie Nursing Alumni Association structure was organized with Karen Mann as first President.

Dr. (honoris causa) MacLennan's retirement in 1972 coincided with a decade of more changes for the School. Succeeded by Dr. Floris E. King (U of Toronto and U of North Carolina) who continued the focus on public health nursing, the focus on nursing research and graduate education was strengthened. Dr. King was a strong advocate for research and had utilized her first national health grant to sponsor a national conference on nursing research in 1968 while still at the University of British Columbia.

Serious discussions about a Dalhousie graduate program in nursing for Atlantic Canada began in 1969 with the support of FHP Dean MacDonald but it was not until 1975 that the Master's program admitted its first students. A chief barrier to implementation was securing qualified faculty. By 1973, the School had 24 full time faculty members but of these, only one held doctoral credentials and seven held Master's degrees. The rest of the faculty were prepared at the undergraduate level.

There was also the problem of physical space to accommodate graduate students. Despite significant building on the university campus during the 1960s, the School of Nursing still had no formal home. In 1973, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Dr. C.B. Stewart, championed the cause and Dr. Floris King "pleaded for adequate accommodation" (Twohig, p. 101). Still it was not until 1977, that the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission approved funds to support renovations in the Forrest Building and not until fall, 1985 that this became a reality, ending 34 years of "temporary" accommodation for the School of Nursing.

During the 1980s, despite some lack of stability in Directors, the faculty grew in numbers and in academic strength. More faculty members held upper graduate degrees (4) and more held tenured, associate professor rank (10). A key achievement in 1980 was the establishment of a Nursing Research Fund through an aggressive campaign to nurses, the provincial government, businesses and other benefactors. Spearheaded by Dr. Margaret Scott Wright (Director) and

Dr. Ruth MacKay, the Fund was launched in April of that year and continues to provide small research grants to Nova Scotia nurses today.

In 1985, following a major curriculum review, the undergraduate credential became a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) reflecting the greater scientific base of knowledge. Nursing education at Dalhousie University faced the end of the century with optimism and a sense of accomplishment, as a full member of the academic community.