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Julia Johns and the Alexandria Infirmary

BY JENNIFER LANE

On March 1, 1873, 151 years ago this month, the Alexandria Infirmary opened its doors. A group of women headed by Julia Johns established the Infirmary, now known as Inova Alexandria Hospital.

Within three months of their first meeting, they had secured a location – a converted house at the southwest corner of Duke and Fairfax Streets – and hired a staff of three consulting physicians, a matron, a nurse and a cook. The Infirmary's opening inaugurated a significant improvement in health care for Alexandrians, who previously had to travel to Washington, D.C. or Richmond to receive hospital care.

The creation of the Alexandria Infirmary by Johns and the women who formed the founding Board of Lady Managers was part of a 19th-century sisterhood of labor, activism and advocacy by individual women and of the organizations they organized, led and supported to improve their communities and nation.

The Second Great Awakening, a Protestant religious revival movement which began at the turn of the 19th century, brought more public engagement through faith. The growth of women's participation and leadership in religious



Julia Johns.

PHOTO/BOARD OF LADY MANAGERS

circles allowed women to move into other social movements and further their leadership and management skills independent of male-led groups.

The outbreak of the Civil War also expanded women's leadership opportunities, as they took on labor and financial responsibilities for men who had left for war. White women in northern and southern areas of the country established soldiers aid societies to supply armies with food, clothing and medicine.

Julia Johns, the daughter of Virginia Episcopal Bishop John Johns, had lifelong experience with her father's administrative responsibilities and pastoral duties. Julia Johns sometimes accompanied her father as he visited congregations, met with clergy, administered sacraments and, later, ministered to wounded soldiers in Richmond's hospitals.

During the Civil War,

Bishop Johns' family relocated to the Richmond area with Alexandria friends. Julia Johns and her friend, Mrs. McGuire, volunteered as nurses in Confederate hospitals there.

After returning home to Alexandria, Julia Johns combined her knowledge of hospital care and administration to create and sustain a successful women-run hospital. Johns and the white Protestant middle-class women who formed the Infirmary's administrative board shared beliefs in Christian charitable activism and were prominent members of Alexandria's faith communities.

They used their connections to financially sustain the Infirmary in its early years. Church collection proceeds and donations of goods from individuals and businesses supported regular operations. Special fundraising efforts across church commu-

nities supported the purchase of new buildings. Substantial community fundraising from Black and white church congregations financed construction of Alexandria Hospital's first purpose-built facility, which opened in 1917.

The Board of Lady Managers had the dual role of administering healthcare and marshaling financial support. They retained director positions on the hospital's board after it merged with Inova Health Systems in 1997. Today, women-led organizations including the Lady Managers and the Twig, the Junior Auxiliary of Inova Alexandria Hospital, continue supporting the hospital's work in our community.

"Alexandria Hospital: Women Mobilize the Community," an exhibition on view at the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, marks the 150th anniversary of the Alexandria Infirmary. Visit the museum and learn more about the vital roles that women have played in sustaining the hospital.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout the month of March. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.