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Martha G. Ripley

PIONEER DOCTOR *and* SOCIAL REFORMER

WINTON U. SOLBERG

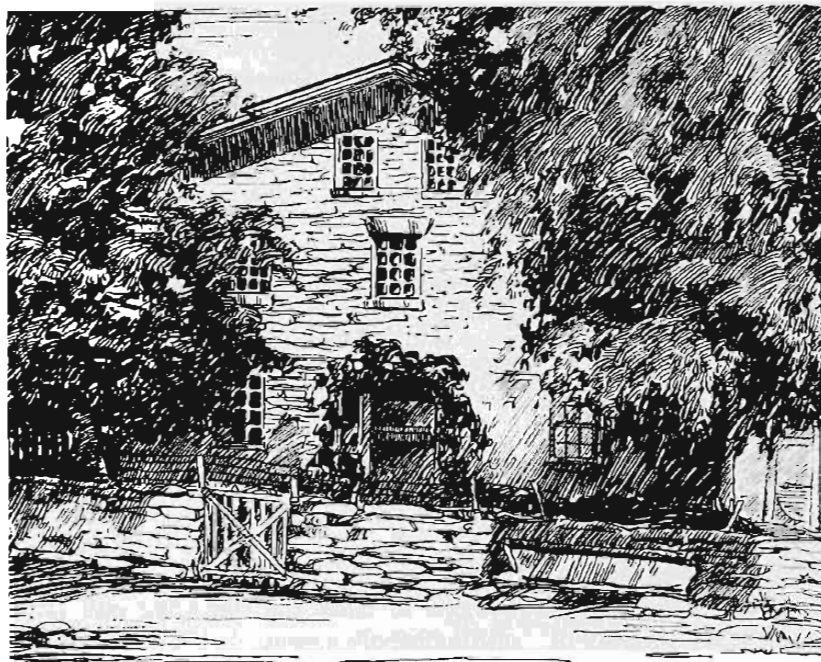
IN THE ROTUNDA of the Minnesota Capitol is a plaque dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martha G. Ripley, "Pioneer Woman Physician" and "Founder of Maternity Hospital." Beneath the determined visage frozen in bronze, a conventional list of superlatives proclaims her to have been "fearless," "courageous," a "champion of righteousness," a "noble influence," and "an enduring inspiration." Like most such eulogies, however, the terms fail to capture the dauntless spirit and the burning dedication to justice which made this woman's name a household word (and often a far from popular one) among an earlier generation of Minnesotans. They contain no suggestion of her thirty-year

struggle to make the sprawling mill town of Minneapolis a more civilized community, nor do they echo the impassioned speeches, stormy legislative hearings, and stinging letters to newspapers which marked that effort. Her identification as the founder of Maternity Hospital conveys little impression of the stern compassion with which she insisted—against an overwhelming weight of public opinion—that unwed mothers were deserving of medical care.

Martha George Rogers was born of English and Scotch-Irish descent in Lowell, Vermont, on November 30, 1843. Little is known of her paternal ancestors beyond the fact that they were good Calvinists who arrived from northern Ireland early in the eighteenth century and settled in New Hampshire. Her father, Francis Rogers, was born there in 1803 and subsequently moved to Vermont, where he became a stock farmer. Left with two daughters upon the death of his first wife, he married Esther Ann George, who also came from Scottish stock.¹

About the time that Martha, the first of five children, was born, conditions in northern Vermont left much to be desired, and many New Englanders were seeking cheap and fertile lands in the Middle West. Following this trend, the Rogers family moved

¹ Data on Martha Ripley's family has been supplied by Mrs. Leroy A. Page (Edna May Ripley), the doctor's youngest and last surviving daughter, now residing in Santa Barbara, California. In letters and in several interviews during 1961 and 1962 Mrs. Page furnished information bearing on the life of her mother without which the present article would not have been possible. She also made available to the author family correspondence, newspaper clippings, hospital reports, and miscellaneous memorabilia in her possession. This essay expands the author's brief article in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, a forthcoming publication of Harvard University Press. In an earlier version the present work benefited from reading and comment by Mr. James and by Barbara Miller Solomon, Director, The Women's Archives, Radcliffe College.



THE Rogers home
near Fort
Atkinson, Iowa

to northeastern Iowa in June, 1847, and became part of the earliest white settlement on what was then Indian land in present Winneshiek County, about fifty miles west of the Mississippi River.²

Francis Rogers located his family on the Little Turkey River about three miles southeast of Fort Atkinson, one of the seats of authority planted by the United States Army on the northwestern frontier. Besides promising him a market for his produce, the fort offered security and—until civilization advanced to the prairie—a point of contact with the larger world. A year after the Rogers' arrival, the army abandoned Fort Atkinson, and in 1851 the county of Winneshiek was organized. Francis Rogers was elected county supervisor.³

For the next decade the twin influences of a New England family circle and a stern frontier discipline continued to shape Martha. Francis and Esther Rogers had good minds, and both were independent spirits who possessed conviction and courage. In Francis these attributes—and his New England origins—are evident in his many litigations with neighbors. Fragmentary evidence suggests that Martha was closer to

her mother. The wellspring of Esther Rogers' character was undoubtedly religious faith. She was a Freewill Baptist who read through the Bible once a year and joined a resolute concern for practical justice with deep spirituality.⁴

Both parents eagerly supported reforms and followed the leading issues of the age. Before they left Vermont, Puritanism had ripened into evangelical Protestantism, one aspect of which was a zeal for improvement often bordering on a quest for the millennium. Acquaintance with sodden Winnebago Indians and soldiers only intensified the enmity to liquor which they brought from Vermont. They also enlisted in the abolition cause, which was becoming the leading reform of the age, and maintained an underground railroad station in a

²W. E. Alexander, *History of Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties Iowa*, 182 (Sioux City, 1882).

³Alexander, *Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties*, 170, 191, 317.

⁴Alexander, *Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties*, 192; Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., *A Woman of the Century: Biographical Sketches . . . of Leading American Women*, 610 (Buffalo, Chicago, New York, 1893); Mrs. Page to the author, April 6, May 13, 1961; interview with Mrs. Page, July 21, 1962.

cave in the bluff behind their dwelling. Their daughter early took her place in the struggle for equal rights by carrying food to fugitive slaves.⁵

Formal schooling was not to be had in Martha's early years, but she received rudimentary instruction from her parents. Later she attended high school, although she did not graduate. This meager intellectual fare was supplemented by the fact that the Rogers' home was known for generous hospitality to friend and stranger alike. In 1859 Francis Rogers, now a substantial farmer, erected a commodious stone house, the first of its kind in the settlement, and the dwelling then became even more familiar as an overnight stopping place for travelers.⁶

AT THE END of the fateful month in which Abraham Lincoln was elected president, Martha Rogers turned seventeen. With her long black hair, finely modeled face, sparkling gray eyes, and vivacious personality, she was the "belle of the Little Turkey River." Although she must have had ample opportunity for immediate marriage, she chose instead to teach—practically the only career open to women on the frontier. Despite her limited academic preparation, Winneshiek County awarded her a first-

class teacher's certificate, and she spent a total of seven terms in the schoolroom.⁷

At about this time diphtheria epidemics visited the community, and the young teacher was pressed into service attending the sick. There has been some conjecture that the seeds of her future medical career were planted then, but the available evidence indicates only that she successfully cared for diphtheria victims and gained some experience in practical home nursing.⁸ Medicine was at that time a rare and exotic occupation for women, and had the idea beckoned to her, she would no doubt have dismissed it.

The outbreak of the Civil War changed this situation to some extent, bringing unprecedented opportunities to American women. In June, 1861, Dorothea L. Dix became superintendent of United States Army nurses, and everywhere women volunteered for nursing duty or organized to send supplies to soldiers. Martha Rogers volunteered, but Miss Dix wanted plain women over thirty, not pretty teen-agers. Thus Martha had to content herself with recruiting others who were eligible and with seeking money and gifts for the United States Sanitary Commission. The story is told of how, early in the war, a farmer rejected her appeal on behalf of the commission with a reluctant offer to donate all the potatoes she could dig in a day. The next morning she dug from earliest dawn until shortly before noon. Then, spurning the cash settlement he angrily tendered her, she dug until sundown for the Union cause.⁹

The close of the war brought many young men west. Among them was William Warren Ripley, who took up ranching in the neighborhood of Fort Atkinson and soon began to pay court to Martha Rogers. Tall and nearing thirty, he had attended school at Groton, Massachusetts, and came from a family of comfortable means. His uncle owned a paper mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and by the time young Ripley married Martha in June, 1867, he had

⁵ Isaac Atwater, ed., *History of the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 260 (New York, 1893).

⁶ Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 260; Mary Dillon Foster, *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women*, 269 (n.p., 1924); clipping from an unidentified Decorah, Iowa, newspaper of 1960, in the possession of Mrs. Page; Mrs. Page to the author, May 9, 1961; interview, July 31, 1961.

⁷ Mrs. Page to the author, October 3, 1961.

⁸ The assertion is made in *Maternity Hospital, 1887-1937*, 4 (Minneapolis, 1937). This booklet, issued in commemoration of the hospital's fiftieth anniversary, contains a biographical sketch of Dr. Ripley written by Mrs. George A. Kingsley. It is inaccurate in many respects but includes several anecdotes which were probably acquired at first hand. The potato story related below is included there and in other biographical accounts.

⁹ Helen E. Marshall, *Dorothea Dix, Forgotten Samaritan*, 203-206 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1937); Willard and Livermore, eds., *A Woman of the Century*, 610.



MARTHA G. Ripley, about 1868

already agreed to return to New England as manager of this enterprise.¹⁰

His bride accompanied him, and the youthful chapter in her life came to a close. In turning her back on the Middle Border she left a land that often developed in its daughters a great capacity for independence — which in the end it refused to grant. As one author has recently noted: "The wilderness may have been the frontier for American men . . . but the city was the frontier for American women."¹¹

THE TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD Mrs. Ripley arrived in Massachusetts as the nation was beginning to shed its rural and agricultural past for an urban and industrial future. Lawrence, then the sixth largest city in the state, was a young and raw mill town rapidly growing into a worsted woolen center. Sixty per cent of the ten thousand operatives in its textile and other mills were women. Here on the Merrimac one

could observe in microcosm the process that was to transform the entire country.¹²

Beyond Lawrence was the intellectual ferment of Boston, where some of the best minds in New England — and the nation — were seeking ways to redirect the forces of reform, which for years had focused almost exclusively upon emancipation. With this goal achieved, reformers found it necessary to adjust their sights to new targets — the industrial and urban evils facing them in the postwar decades. One obvious link with the prewar equal rights crusade was the feminist movement and its offshoot, the struggle for woman suffrage. It was also a rallying point around which the ragged and bewildered reform army could temporarily unite. Yet in the woman's rights movement itself there was dissension. Personality conflicts and rival strategies had led by 1870 to the formation of two separate groups.

In Boston the American Woman Suffrage Association, an outgrowth of the New England Woman Suffrage Association over which Julia Ward Howe had presided, pursued a moderate course which stressed a male-supported campaign that gave priority to winning the ballot in the separate states. Its guiding spirit was Lucy Stone, and its local affiliate, the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association, was led for many years by James Freeman Clarke, a renowned Unitarian clergyman. The rival National Woman Suffrage Association, directed from New York City by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, had a comparatively radical program and an aloofness to male participation. It favored an aggressive campaign to secure a federal amendment granting women the vote.¹³

¹⁰ Interviews with Mrs. Page, July 31, August 5, 1962.

¹¹ David M. Potter, *American Women and the American Character*, 6 (Stetson University, *Bulletins* No. 62 — DeLand, Florida, 1962).

¹² H. A. Wadsworth, *History of Lawrence, Massachusetts*, 8, 9, 88, 163 (Lawrence, 1880).

¹³ For a history of the woman suffrage organizations, see Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959).

At the time the Ripleys arrived in Massachusetts, Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry B. Blackwell, were making the commonwealth their laboratory for political action on behalf of woman suffrage. Convinced that reform must come at the state level first, they aimed at an amendment to the state constitution and sought to promote organization at the local level as a means of bringing pressure on the legislature.¹⁴

Not for some years, however, did Martha Ripley emerge as an active suffragist. The early part of her residence in Massachusetts was spent close to Lawrence and represented a unique interlude of leisure in her life. The first of three daughters born to the Ripleys—Abigail, Clara, and Edna May—did not arrive until five years after their marriage. At about this time the family moved from Lawrence to Middleton, where William Ripley bought a mill of his own and engaged in the production of writing paper. The change may well have been prompted by disagreements with Ripley's uncle and employer, Jerome A. Bacon, whom family tradition portrays as a tyrant. Contact with Bacon may also have conditioned Martha's feelings toward several issues of the day, for the millowner believed that none of his hundred and more operatives worked either hard or long enough for the low wages he grudgingly paid them. A part of Martha's free time in Lawrence had been devoted to nursing among the families of the less fortunate workers, and her hu-



WILLIAM W. Ripley, 1868

manitarian sympathies would almost inevitably have reacted against Bacon's attitudes. He was also involved through marriage with the feminist movement, which he treated much as he did the laboring class, seeking in a famous lawsuit to break the will through which his mother-in-law had left a large bequest to advance the cause of woman suffrage.¹⁵

THE YEAR 1875 found Mrs. Ripley ready to take her place in the ranks of reform. Middleton did not at that time have an active suffrage group, and in order to create one she embarked upon a campaign of education. In the course of this she sought to bring such prominent Bay State women as Mary F. Eastman, a noted speaker, and Mary A. Livermore, long president of the state temperance union and editor of *Woman's Journal*, to lecture in the area, and she herself, gifted with a strong, clear speaking voice, took the platform.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Lois Bannister Merk, "Massachusetts and the Woman-Suffrage Movement," an unpublished doctoral dissertation in the possession of Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁵ Interview with Mrs. Page, August 5, 1962; Wadsworth, *History of Lawrence*, 153; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3:310-315 (Rochester, New York, 1886). The Ripleys had moved back to Lawrence by 1880.

¹⁶ Mary F. Eastman to Martha Ripley, February 11, 1876; Mary A. Livermore to Martha Ripley, September 12 [1876?]; poster announcing a suffrage rally, October 28 [1876?]. These items and all of Mrs. Ripley's correspondence cited below are in the possession of Mrs. Page.

The success of her efforts can be traced in the pages of the *Woman's Journal*, which shows Middleton developing into a stronghold of the movement.

Education proceeded in both directions, however. In the course of organizational work at the grass roots level, Mrs. Ripley observed that the abstract right called suffrage meant far less to ordinary members of her sex than did a specific reality, such as a vote on temperance or a voice in school elections.¹⁷ The lesson was not lost upon her, and she became a permanent convert to the moderate approach advocated by Lucy Stone. This placed her in the mainstream of the trend which stressed woman suffrage not only for its own sake, but as the means of achieving other reforms.

Success at the local level won Martha Ripley a place in the inner councils of the state and regional associations. "We hope," wrote Henry Blackwell in the spring of 1876, "you will make it a point to speak . . . in regard to the work to be done & the way to do it. We need new voices & new workers & you can aid much by telling your own experiences."¹⁸

In her debut at the annual convention of the New England Woman Suffrage Association, she took issue with a statement that women could not convert members of their sex as well as men could, and citing her Middleton labors, she pointed the moral: keep the woman's rights movement practical. At the same meeting she was given a place on the executive committee of the organization, and a few months later Lucy Stone informed her of her election to the state central committee of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association. She was re-elected annually to both posts until her departure for Minnesota in 1883.¹⁹

She must have been a spirited figure at suffrage gatherings. At the January meeting of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Convention in 1881 she criticized a speaker who blamed women for men's shortcomings, and declared that such meetings spent too much time discussing questions already

settled. She noted the rapid changes occurring in the condition of women. They could now enter any profession and succeed if they had the ability, she said. If Harvard would not accept women, they could acquire the necessary knowledge in "other places of learning." After this—perhaps as a result of it—Lucy Stone invited her to address the spring meeting of the New England association, telling her: "Say your own genuine say."²⁰

Entrance into the circle of suffrage leaders was a vital step in Martha Ripley's education, for she formed lifelong friendships with members of the immediate group and with other prominent reformers as well. She became a favorite and frequent visitor in the Dorchester home of the Blackwells, and her committee associates also included professional women such as Mercy B. Jackson and Marie E. Zakrzewska, who were both doctors. These relationships gave her a fresh perspective on woman's role in American society and helped prepare the ground for her own entrance into a career.²¹

THE FIRST STEP in this direction was taken in October, 1880, when she enrolled in the Boston University School of Medicine. Her immediate reason for seeking medical training was to care more competently for her own family and for the families of the mill hands who still called upon her for help in times of sickness and distress. She had en-

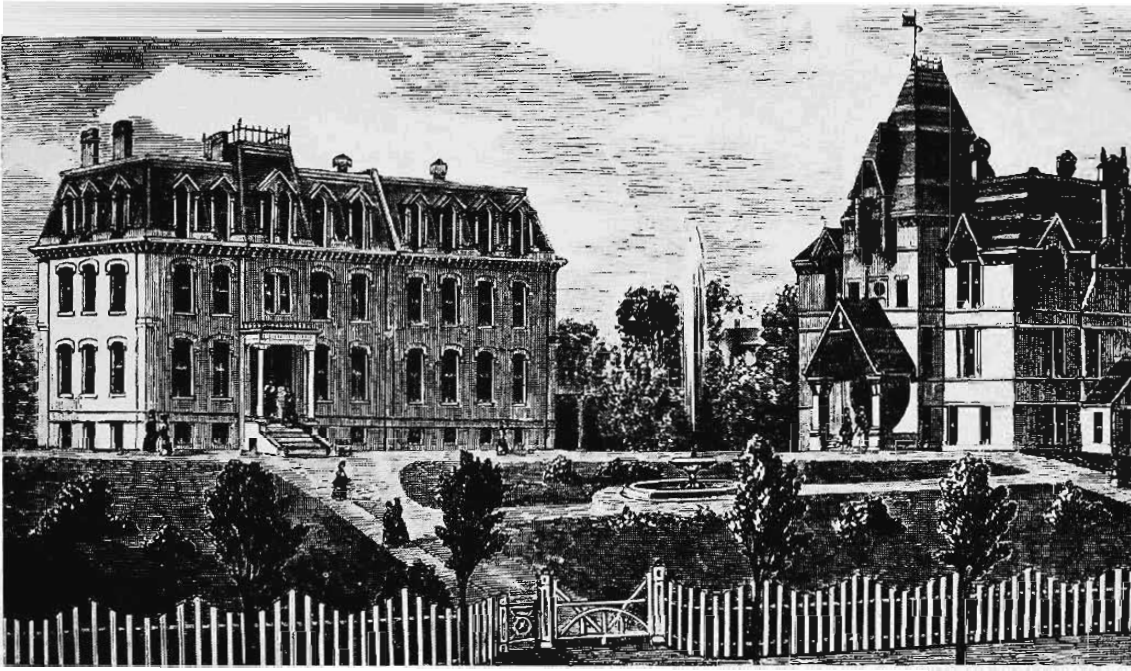
¹⁷ *Woman's Journal*, June 3, 1876, p. 181.

¹⁸ Blackwell to Mrs. Ripley, May 25, 1876.

¹⁹ *Woman's Journal*, June 3, 1876, p. 181; September 16, 1876, p. 301, 304; October 13, 1876, p. 325; January 26, 1878, p. 32, 184; February 8, 1879, p. 48, 183; May 29, 1880, p. 173; June 5, 1880, p. 179; May 28, 1881, p. 172, 173; January 21, 1882, p. 18; June 3, 1882, p. 176; January 27, 1883, p. 31; June 9, 1883, p. 183; Lucy Stone to Mrs. Ripley, May 8, 1877.

²⁰ *Woman's Journal*, February 5, 1881, p. 51; Lucy Stone to Mrs. Ripley, May 4, 1881.

²¹ Her intimacy with the Stone-Blackwell family is evident in her continued correspondence with them. Writing to Mrs. Ripley on the occasion of Henry Blackwell's eightieth birthday, his daughter Alice Stone Blackwell commented: "You are one of the people he is fondest of." (Letter dated April 27, 1905.)



THE Boston University School of Medicine (left) and the Massachusetts Homeopathic Hospital as they appeared in the 1880s

gaged willingly in this charitable work until a baby she was caring for choked to death with membranous croup. Shocked, she then insisted that she would either have to study medicine or abandon nursing. The broader humanitarian implications of the healing profession also undoubtedly attracted her as they did her prominent classmate, Anna H. Shaw, who, seeing "the splendid work women could do as physicians," gave up the ministry for a long and distinguished career in medicine and social reform. Another influencing factor may have been Mrs. Ripley's sister Clara, who was already a practicing doctor in Lawrence.²²

Her entrance application gives a revealing glimpse of both the matron and the medical education of the day. She lacked a high school diploma, but she was not deficient in preparation by contemporary standards. Her experience undoubtedly counted, as did her "eager desire for knowledge" and her "habit of trying to learn something

everyday and from every person." Perhaps the little Latin she acknowledged was boned up for the occasion. Even so, the essay she wrote would probably by itself have won her admission.²³

An original composition on "The Women of 1880," it opens a window on her essential interests and reveals the aspirations of women reformers. "Could the people who inhabited this city even a hundred years ago be permitted to look in upon us today, what astonishment would be theirs!" she wrote. "And how many questions would have to be asked and answered before they could be made to comprehend that women have at last begun to find out why God created them with brains equal in capacity to those of their brothers." Imagine their feelings when told that the "great and honored offices" of doctor, lawyer, and minister are often filled—and well filled—by women. She granted that these were exceptional women, just as really great men were exceptional men. "But with the restricted educational and political liberty women of the present enjoy, save in a few noble instances like Boston University 'The First Medical College for woman'; our advantages have been few for a higher education." However, she saw a brighter vista

²² Alice Stone Blackwell, "The Lesson of a Life," in *Woman's Journal*, June 22, 1912, p. 196; interviews with Mrs. Page, July 31, August 5, 1962; Anna Howard Shaw, *The Story of a Pioneer*, 141 (New York, 1915).

²³ Her application, including a completed questionnaire and her essay, dated October 6, 1880, is in the archives of Boston University.

ahead, concluding with the assertion that "what we have been able to get, has been a blessing to the world, to our homes, and to each individual. Let 'Excelsior' be our mottoe."

HER ENROLLMENT in the Boston University School of Medicine launched Mrs. Ripley on a current formed by the confluence of three streams: medical education for women, homeopathy, and professional training in a university. The first of these is closely related to the history of midwifery, a field which men entered only in the late 1700s when improved medical education afforded them instruction in obstetrics. In the following century, however, romantic sensitivities and heightened female modesty made male midwives an embarrassment; thus when the tide of equal rights started rising, women found this door to the medical profession standing ajar.

Among the reformers agitating for female medical education in the first half of the century, the most prominent was Samuel Gregory. He was the author of many polemical pamphlets in which he defended women's sensibilities against male doctors and attacked the evils of a profession which he saw as attracting prurient men because of the liberties presumably afforded. Yet despite his vivid imagination, Gregory's concern for medical education was eminently practical and led in 1848 to the opening of the Boston Female Medical College.²⁴

The institution initially thrived, disseminating among women valuable medical knowledge and teaching measures for promoting health at a time when sickly females abounded. Its patrons included Boston's ranking literary and reform lights. But despite its success and the opening of similar schools in New York and Philadelphia, the future of women in medicine was still by no means assured.²⁵

By the time the pioneering Gregory died in 1872, the New England school was faltering and in need of outside help. This was forthcoming from Boston University,

which had opened in 1869 under Methodist sponsorship and affirmed from the outset its full faith in equal rights by admitting women to all its departments. Of these, the medical school alone was laggard in taking shape. The trustees of the university were therefore receptive to opportunity: their commitment to education for women enabled them to assimilate Gregory's moribund school, and their sympathy for another beleaguered minority as well as the assurance of professional aid from that quarter led them to open the medical school in 1873 as a homeopathic institution.²⁶

Homeopathy, a system of medicine based on the theories of the German physician Samuel C. F. Hahnemann, had never become influential in Europe. In the United States, however, where its teachings were introduced in 1825, homeopathy found a more favorable environment. The climate of reform, as well as certain medical trends after the 1840s, favored its growth. Although allopathic (or regular) medicine retained its pre-eminence, homeopathy for a time became the country's second leading school of medical thought. The American Institute of Homeopathy, formed in 1844, antedated the American Medical Association by three years.²⁷

Subsequently, however, the development of American medicine along empirical lines undermined the speculative and theoretical foundations of homeopathy. Although

²⁴ William Frederick Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States Before the Civil War*, 407-409 (Philadelphia, 1944); Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States*, 2:340-362 (New York, 1929); Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3:299.

²⁵ William Harvey King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy and Its Institutions in America*, 3:159-165 (New York, 1905); Norwood, *Medical Education*, 409, 412, 414, 415.

²⁶ King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:165, 181.

²⁷ Henry E. Sigerist, *American Medicine*, 195 (New York, 1934); Henry Burnell Shafer, *The American Medical Profession, 1783 to 1850*, 243 (New York, 1936); Richard Harrison Shryock, *Medicine and Society in America, 1660-1860*, 144 (New York, 1960).

it continued for years to remain both a popular and effective form of medicine, numbering many successful physicians in its ranks, it was eventually reduced from a respectable system to the status of a heretical cult.

Perhaps because of their own minority standing, homeopaths seem to have more quickly recognized the right of women to practice medicine than did other professional healers. In New England during the 1870s women were admitted to homeopathic organizations but excluded by the regular medical societies.²⁸ The homeopathic tradition was also well adapted to affiliation with a university where professional training in an atmosphere of advanced knowledge was at this time beginning to replace the old apprenticeship method in medicine and law.

At Boston University an academically distinguished faculty of some thirty members included Dr. Conrad Wesselhoeft, once president of the American Institute of Homeopathy. Wesselhoeft had translated Hahnemann's works into English and sought in his own prolific writings to formulate the principles of homeopathy in the light of modern science.²⁹ He made a deep impression upon Mrs. Ripley, as did Dr. Mary J. Safford, one of the five female members of the faculty, "a mite of a woman with an indomitable soul," who was famed for her philanthropic work in the Boston slums.³⁰

When Mrs. Ripley entered Boston University, laboratory instruction was replacing lectures and the twenty-four-month curriculum, which was spread over a three-

²⁸ King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:169-173; *Woman's Journal*, January 7, 1882, p. 3.

²⁹ King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:183; *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20:4 (New York, 1936).

³⁰ Shaw, *Story of a Pioneer*, 142.

³¹ King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:183-189, 193-211; Blackwell, in *Woman's Journal*, June 22, 1912, p. 196; letter from Alice Stone Blackwell in the *Boston Transcript*, May 11, 1931.

³² King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:191.

³³ Interview with Mrs. Page, July 31, 1962.

year period, meant that she received three times as much formal instruction as had Elizabeth Blackwell, the country's first woman to earn a medical degree. One third of Mrs. Ripley's class consisted of women, and they often dominated the student prize competitions. Nevertheless, equal rights suffered when the faculty allowed men students to monopolize the best appointments. As her friends told the story (probably with embellishment), Mrs. Ripley faced the challenge by brandishing a backbone she was dissecting, and asserting that this was what the faculty needed. The situation was soon corrected.³¹

As her training advanced, her increased medical responsibilities in Boston widened Mrs. Ripley's education as an urban reformer. Seniors did the maternity work of the homeopathic hospitals and visited homes on sick call.³² Here among paupers and slums, life reached out and provided a crucible for testing the theories held in polite reform circles.

THE GENTLE picture of a well-to-do-matron giving medical care to her own family and to others upon a voluntary basis was dissipated when William Ripley was injured in a mill accident and was forced to retire from business. This threw upon his wife the responsibility for earning income.³³

She graduated with honors in the spring of 1883, and late that August departed alone on a scouting trip to Minneapolis. Her husband had relatives there, and no doubt Minnesota's burgeoning industrial city promised more opportunity than the settled communities of New England. Perhaps also she was drawn by a desire to try out her new role on the home ground of her native Middle West.

Reaching Minneapolis, she called first upon Dr. Adele S. Hutchison, an earlier graduate of the Boston University medical school, who was practicing in the city. Probably not overjoyed at the prospect of a competitor, Dr. Hutchison gave her a cool reception and discouraging reports. Never-

theless, Dr. Ripley visited the new homeopathic hospital on Ninth Street and began to look for housing and office space.³⁴

The search was disappointing. Most of what she saw was either "small and cheap" or too remote, and despite the building boom, houses were taken "about as soon as the cellar is dry." Land was fabulously expensive, with lots reputedly doubling in price in a few weeks. "'Margins and corner lots' is about all you hear of," she wrote in perplexity, wishing that Mr. Ripley were there to make the decision. Such vexations reminded her that the trip was in earnest, and "not like a visit."

It was a lonely and difficult period, and her spirit faltered briefly before the new responsibilities she faced. Her letters to her family reveal the high price paid to be a "woman of 1880."

"I *am very tired* anxious etc." she wrote in one, going on to say that she was exhausted "mentally and physically" and believed that she had been for years and had just discovered it. She was without ambition, hated to speak to anyone or walk even a block, and felt like drifting. Beset with cares, she imagined that she "should like to live at the papermill all my life," although even that "might be full large for me." This delayed reaction was the protest of strength pushed to its outer limits.

Minneapolis gradually exerted a tonic effect, however. "The place grows upon one," she admitted, cautiously adding that she hardly thought she should ever be as enthusiastic about it as were her husband's relatives with whom she was staying. Instead, she shared the opinion of one who liked it very much "but will not say that she likes it better than Boston." Shortly thereafter Dr. Ripley and her family moved to Minneapolis.³⁵

EVEN before she arrived permanently the cause of women reached out to claim her. In October, 1883, she was elected president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, a position she held for several

years.³⁶ This choice of a person then absent and unknown to the local women is accounted for by the fact that the Minnesota organization that year shifted its allegiance from the Stanton-Anthony faction, with which it had previously been affiliated, to the American Woman Suffrage Association. Not only did the women vote for the more moderate strategy of the Stone-Blackwell group, but they went one step further and accepted (perhaps in the absence of other local leadership) a new president "who comes to us highly recommended by H. B. Blackwell and Lucy Stone."³⁷

Minnesota was not Massachusetts, however, and during her tenure Dr. Ripley scored only limited gains. One of these was effecting an alliance between woman suffrage and temperance forces in the state. She also succeeded — probably through her Boston connections — in bringing the seventeenth annual convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association to Minneapolis in 1885.³⁸ Not long afterward she gave up the presidency of the Minnesota suffrage organization, but only to intensify her assault on other fronts of the woman's rights struggle.

The ballot was to her but one aspect of the larger quest for equality and was above all else an avenue toward correcting the discriminatory laws and social attitudes which facilitated the exploitation of women by men. Medical practice brought to her attention daily the helplessness of women

³⁴ This and the material in the following four paragraphs is from three letters written by Dr. Ripley to her family. The first was from Chicago, dated August 29, 1883, and the other two from Minneapolis, August 30-31 and September 2.

³⁵ *Woman's Journal*, November 24, 1883, p. 368.

³⁶ Sources differ as to exactly how long she held the office. Most of her biographers say six years, although her last term apparently ended in 1888, which would make five years, and as early as 1887 communications in the *Woman's Journal* are signed by Ella M. S. Marble as president.

³⁷ *Woman's Journal*, November 24, 1883, p. 369.

³⁸ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3:659; 4:411-417 (Rochester, New York, 1902).

to protect their homes, their children, and themselves in a society which accorded them an inferior position.

Brushing aside the conventional cowardice which forbade the discussion of "delicate" subjects, Dr. Ripley flailed the lax public attitude which indulged the double standard. Excoriating male seducers who insisted upon the chastity of their own brides, she demanded equal personal purity of men. As a physician she announced her dissent from the views of those doctors who insisted that men needed sexual intercourse for health. She also asserted that the underlying cause of much female ill health and mortality would be found by study of the life and habits of women's fathers.³⁹

When a young Minneapolis woman shot the man who ruined her under the promise of marriage, Dr. Ripley exclaimed that no poor working girl should be obliged to do for herself what the law should do for her. Existing statutory punishments for crimes against women she declared a disgrace, noting that in Minnesota the persons of girls were not as well protected as their property.⁴⁰

There was much truth in the statement,

³⁹ Letter from Dr. Ripley to the *Minneapolis Times*, an undated clipping in the possession of Mrs. Page; Martha G. Ripley, "Practical Midwifery," in *Medical Century*, 8:289 (October 1, 1900).

⁴⁰ Letter from Dr. Ripley to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, an undated clipping in the possession of Mrs. Page.

⁴¹ Letter from Dr. Ripley to the *Minneapolis Times*, an undated clipping in the possession of Mrs. Page; letter from Dr. Ripley to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 24, 1891; *Minnesota, General Laws*, 1889, p. 120; *Statutes at Large*, 1878, p. 621.

⁴² *Minnesota, House Journal*, 1891, p. 213, 262, 274, 289, 366, 373, 427, 441, 492, 547, 548, 566, 567, 579, 615, 675, 691, 709; *General Laws*, 1891, p. 161, 162; *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 27, 31, 1895. There was some ambiguity in the 1891 laws, and opponents of change argued that because graduated penalties were provided for carnal knowledge of children up to age sixteen, this was in fact the age of consent.

⁴³ *Minnesota, Senate Journal*, 1895, p. 124, 499, 765, 785; *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 31, 1895; *Minneapolis Journal*, April 11, 1895.

since the age of consent under the 1858 constitution was but ten years. An example of the resulting injustice was a case in which a women's organization learned with dismay that the existing law prevented it from adequately prosecuting a man for violating his eleven-year-old stepdaughter. Nevertheless in 1889 the legislature not only rebuffed an attempt to raise the age of consent but passed a law empowering fathers to will away their unborn children. This, Dr. Ripley declared publicly, was "worthy of the Dark Ages." She also pointed out that existing statutes allowed Minnesota fathers to bind out children without the mother's consent.⁴¹

In 1891 the legislature was deluged with petitions to raise the age of consent to eighteen years; the lawmakers placed it at fourteen. Four years later another vigorous campaign was launched to secure an adequate law. A meeting in the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis on January 30, 1895, endorsed a bill which raised the age to eighteen. Dr. Ripley served on a general committee to "carry on the work and to appoint press and finance committees." Working with her was Professor Maria Sanford of the University of Minnesota, and among the religious leaders who supported the effort was Archbishop John Ireland.⁴²

The fight was carried into the judiciary committee of the state senate. In earlier deliberations within the circle of crusaders, Dr. Ripley had differed with those who feared that boys or innocent men might be made liable to blackmail or jail at the instance of designing servant girls. At the Capitol, however, she insisted on distinguishing between types of offenders and stressed the need to incarcerate older, more wicked culprits for over a year—and not merely in a county jail. Despite all efforts, the measure failed to pass. Then, calling attention to the injustice done women, Dr. Ripley personally petitioned the senate for the right to vote—a gesture which the lawmakers met with laughter and ridicule.⁴³



DR. Martha G. Ripley, about 1900

There were numerous other facets of the equal rights struggle upon which she voiced her opinion or took vigorous action. Among them were the need for matrons on the Minneapolis police force, the right of female domestics to organize a union, and the right of women to seats on the board of education. Many statements before the Minneapolis school board and letters on the editorial pages of the city's newspapers reflected her sustained interest in the public schools—both as a mother and as a defender of the largely female teaching staff. Her concern also extended to the other end of the social spectrum, where women were even more open to exploitation. As a member of the Women's Rescue League she participated actively in efforts to reform and rehabilitate the city's prostitutes.⁴⁴

She remained faithful to the cause of woman's rights until the end of her life. By virtue of her age and long residence she became a link of continuity after the turn of the century between the pioneers in the movement and their successors at a time of internal strain resulting from shift-

ing bases of support and a change-over in leadership. In her hospitable Minneapolis home she entertained former associates and met younger women, among them Carrie Chapman Catt, a gifted leader whose star in the woman suffrage movement was then rising.⁴⁵ This was the generation destined to carry suffrage through to success in the nineteenth amendment—a victory which Martha Ripley did not live to see.

MEDICINE was, however, Dr. Ripley's reason for settling in Minneapolis, and it monopolized her time and energy. She became a highly successful obstetrician and won a place of distinction in the medical history of the city. Licensed on the last day of 1883, she was preceded by at least seven women doctors in Minneapolis and a total of twenty in the state. The prominence which accompanied her suffrage activities brought patients in its wake, and the city's large immigrant population included many women who, perhaps recalling old-country customs, took kindly to lady doctors. Contemporary sources agree that her practice was extensive and lucrative. It included at least one male allopath, and devoted patients seem to have overlooked her homeopathic connection, although she actively maintained it in writing, lecturing, and teaching.⁴⁶

As a professional woman the former Iowa beauty wore her skirts well above the ground as a sanitary measure, and probably

⁴⁴ All of these activities are reflected by undated clippings in the possession of Mrs. Page. See also, *Woman's Journal*, October 8, 1892, p. 326; October 15, 1892, p. 332; Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 261; *Minneapolis Journal*, August 8, 1904; *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 25, 1904; *Minneapolis Times*, October 28, 1907.

⁴⁵ Dr. Ripley to her family, June 10, 1901.

⁴⁶ Nellie N. Barsness, "Highlights in Careers of Women Physicians in Pioneer Minnesota," in *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*, 13:19 (January, 1958); Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3:976; Shryock, *Medicine in America*, 147; Blackwell, in *Woman's Journal*, June 22, 1912, p. 196; *Maternity Hospital*, 5; Horace B. Hudson, ed., *A Half Century of Minneapolis*, 206 (Minneapolis, 1908); Ripley, in *Medical Century*, 8:289-292.

for a similar reason she cut her dark but graying hair unfashionably short. With her firm profile, her height (five feet six inches, well above average for her generation), and her air of quick determination, she must have been a commanding figure.⁴⁷

Despite her many professional and community responsibilities she was, her daughter recalls, a good wife and mother—one who could be counted on when the family needed her. In her moments of relaxation she enjoyed both cooking and poetry; she was a member of the Plymouth Congregational Church, which the family usually attended together. William Ripley was a partner who greatly aided her. Not only was he sympathetic to her professional and reforming careers, but he also assumed much family responsibility. Never returning to active business, he was able to spend considerable time with the children, and a daughter remembers that he often drove the doctor on her night calls in a buggy heated with warmed soapstones.

Society in the narrow sense of the term did not attract the Ripleys, and their household always remained modest. It was nevertheless a center of generous hospitality. In addition to suffrage and reform leaders, there were other frequent guests; on occasion weddings were hastily arranged in the parlor; and one girl was informally adopted into the family circle. Altogether their domestic life suggests warmth and unity. It was, one suspects, a refuge and source of strength rather than a drain upon the doctor's energies.

Characteristically, she approached her community responsibility as a medical practitioner with deep earnestness. As Minne-

⁴⁷ The information in this and the paragraphs immediately following is from various interviews with Mrs. Page, especially that of July 8, 1961.

⁴⁸ Letter from Dr. Ripley to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, undated clipping in the possession of Mrs. Page.

⁴⁹ Unidentified newspaper clipping, in the possession of Mrs. Page.

⁵⁰ *Minneapolis Times*, April 7, 1904; *Minneapolis Daily News*, July 1, 1908; William W. Folwell to Dr. Ripley, August 9, 1890.

apolis had reason to know, her conscience imposed "the duty of not keeping silent when . . . wrong exists."⁴⁸ In addition, therefore, to her lifelong crusade for woman's rights, she campaigned for a wide variety of reforms related to public health, although her idealism and social viewpoint at times evoked strong opposition and even ridicule. Newspaper reporters frequently teased the well-known public figure, but on occasion they could be her champions as well. "Hurray for Martha," chortled one, when she emerged victorious from a dispute with a dogmatic and unpopular city health officer.⁴⁹

As an individual and also as chairman of the fourth ward committee of the Minneapolis Improvement League, she conducted a war on filth and a battle for pure water. In letters to the newspapers she also condemned food adulteration and added her voice to that of the *Minneapolis Tribune* against crowding patients with different contagious diseases into one small, unventilated room in the city hospital. A letter published in 1890, outlining the inadequacies of the city's sanitation system, drew from William W. Folwell, former president of the University of Minnesota, an answer complimenting her on "so much good sense" in such small space.⁵⁰

As a corollary to her crusade for public health, she became an enthusiastic advocate of cremation. Sanitary means of earth burial had not yet been devised, and as urbanization advanced, it became impossible to remove crowded graveyards outside the limits of cities. This not only endangered public health, but imposed an economic hardship on the landless urban masses for whom the costs of traditional interment became increasingly prohibitive. The modern cremation movement with its emphasis on sanitation was, therefore, one aspect of the rise of the city.

It was also a part of the late nineteenth-century reform syndrome. In Europe it was associated with liberalism, socialism, and free thought, while in the United States it

first gained support in radical reform circles, such as the Bostonians with whom Martha Ripley had become associated in the 1870s. Her friends Mary Safford and Anna Shaw both favored it, and in 1893 Lucy Stone was the first person to be cremated in New England.⁵¹

On one occasion Dr. Ripley read a paper about cremation before the Minneapolis Homeopathic Institute. Concerned with its social and humanitarian rather than its religious aspects, she defended it on sanitary and economic grounds. She urged that the city assume responsibility for building a crematory on correct scientific principles, and she described the process of incineration, drawing upon her own observation of the reduction of two friends to ashes. In closing she suggested three advantages of the custom: cremation meant safety to the living, was less costly than earth burial, and, she added, with grim but certainly unconscious humor, it “allays all fear of being buried alive.”⁵²

Her commitment to the cause was total, for she asked that her family return her body to Boston if she died before she could be incinerated in Minneapolis. This, however, proved unnecessary, as the city’s first crematory went into use in 1909, three years before her death.⁵³

THE UNIQUE achievement which set Martha Ripley apart from a host of other dedicated reformers in her generation was the establishment of Maternity Hospital. Long a Minneapolis landmark, the institution reflected the two dominant themes in its founder’s life: concern for the welfare of women, and the physician’s responsibility to give medical care wherever it was needed. It reflected also a compassion which reached out to touch young lives on an intensely personal level, regardless of social disapproval or financial sacrifice.

In nineteenth-century Minneapolis — as elsewhere at the time — unwed mothers approached childbirth with immense physical and psychological hazards. Hospital ma-

ternity facilities were limited, since most babies were still delivered at home, and no city hospital admitted an unmarried woman for confinement. Such persons were, in the view of the day, deserving of punishment, not help. Since family homes were also frequently closed to erring daughters, the alternatives were few and grim.

The only Minneapolis institution open to such cases was Bethany Home for the Friendless, established in 1875 by a society for reforming women. The city gave it financial support and sent charity cases there. Young “innocents” were thrown with hardened older women, and punishment rather than redemption was the keynote.⁵⁴

Although she did not condone immorality, Dr. Ripley was keenly aware of the injustice inherent in the situation. Possibly, too, experience in medical practice had given her a social view of behavior which made her less certain than many others of her day as to just how guilt should be apportioned in a complex society. The rapidly urbanizing community of Minneapolis was both complex and fluid in 1886 — a fact reflected in the diversity of the first three patients taken under the doctor’s wing. One was a teacher, another the daughter of a clergyman, and the third a very young Scandinavian girl, homeless, friendless, and destitute.⁵⁵

Whatever the circumstances of their pregnancies, they needed care, and Dr. Ripley met the situation by renting a small house on Fifteenth Street and hiring a nurse. The first three patients were quickly joined by others, and within a month it became evident that the building was too small. Friends of the doctor and others who

⁵¹ Alice Stone Blackwell, *Lucy Stone: Pioneer of Woman’s Rights*, 285 (Boston, 1930); John Storer Cobb, *A Quarter-Century of Cremation in North America*, 1, 12, 23 (Boston, 1901).

⁵² Unidentified newspaper clipping, in the possession of Mrs. Page.

⁵³ Interview with Mrs. Page, July 8, 1961.

⁵⁴ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4:780; Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 249.

⁵⁵ *Maternity Hospital*, 8.

sympathized with the project rallied to her aid, and one of them provided temporary rent-free quarters in an eighteen-room house on the north side of town. The admission of nineteen patients during the next four months clearly demonstrated the need for a permanent hospital.⁵⁶

Dr. Ripley organized her forces, and in July, 1887, a corporation was formed to "provide a lying-in hospital for the confinement of married women who are without mean or suitable abode and care at the time of child-birth," and which might "admit girls who have previously borne a good character, but who, under promise of marriage, have been led astray." It was also to "care for destitute children born in this institution." The only nonamendable article of incorporation specified that the medical department was to be "under the care and control of homeopathic woman physicians," although any doctor of good standing could treat patients there.⁵⁷ On the board of directors were prominent women Dr. Ripley had met through her various activities, including homeopaths suffragists, school board candidates, and a lawyer. The name chosen was simply "Maternity Hospital," and this it remained, although there was an early suggestion that it be changed to "Frances Willard Hospital" — perhaps with the thought of disguising its true purpose.⁵⁸

A permanent location was urgently needed, and the corporation quickly purchased for \$8,500 "a new brick-veneered building, containing twenty large, sunny and home-like rooms," at 2529 Fourth Avenue South. Since only a few hundred dollars were available for a down payment, the property was subject to liens and mortgages, and for a few years the financial

stress was keen. "We have been warmed and fed from day to day," wrote the secretary in her report for 1888, and the long list of contributions makes this abundantly clear. Nothing was refused — from five hundred pounds of flour donated by Charles A. Pillsbury to the "grapes and 1 goose" given by one Anna Reynolds.⁵⁹

The hospital's most substantial benefactor was Levi M. Stewart, a bachelor lawyer who habitually parried appeals with a request for time to discuss the matter with "Mrs. Stewart." These conferences resulted in many contributions, including an emergency loan which saved the building at a time when payments could not be met.⁶⁰

Some irritations inevitably arose as Dr. Ripley strove energetically to conquer the many financial and ideological obstacles in the path of Maternity Hospital. Briskly efficient, impatient of red tape, and pressed by other duties, she was capable of disconcerting some allies. A skilled beggar, she reserved certain prospective donors for herself and did not relish interference such as that of one meddlesome associate who rushed beyond her depth and permanently rebuffed a wealthy giver. When he refused her request, the irate supplicant had taunted the man, whose habits she knew too well, by declaring that he above all others should support a maternity hospital!⁶¹

Setbacks such as this could be countered by unceasing labor. More difficult to overcome was the substantial body of public

THE house at Western and Penn Avenue North, occupied from 1896 until 1916



⁵⁶ *Maternity Hospital*, 8; *Maternity Hospital, Annual Report*, 1887, p. 2.

⁵⁷ "Articles of Incorporation of the Maternity Hospital," in *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 22.

⁵⁸ *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 2, 6.

⁵⁹ *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 8, 19, 21.

⁶⁰ *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 8; 1912-13, p. 16.

⁶¹ Interview with Mrs. Page, August 22, 1961.

opinion which resisted the hospital's humanitarian work because of a conviction that it encouraged vice and illegitimacy. This attitude led at least one prominent Minneapolis woman to try dissuading a friend from membership on the board of directors, and in later years the hospital's association with unwed mothers prevented many "respectable" women from taking advantage as paying patients of its truly outstanding medical facilities.

As guiding spirit and attending physician, Dr. Ripley established an enviable record by insisting upon aseptic practices, by excluding contagious diseases, and by establishing the cottage system when the hospital moved in 1896 to its final location on a five-acre tract at the corner of Western and Penn Avenue North. Not one child was lost during actual birth in the eleven years to 1899, and the standards set by Dr. Ripley were maintained throughout the life of the hospital. For the decade ending in 1937 the maternal death rate there was 1.35 per thousand as compared to a state-wide average of 4.5.⁶²

Dr. Ripley not only led the institution to distinction in the field of hospital and medical care but also in recognizing the close relationship between social service and medical treatment. Maternity was the first Minneapolis hospital to establish a separate social service department. Following the threefold purpose set forth in its articles of

incorporation, it developed over the years three distinct divisions, each operating independently but in close co-operation. One was the hospital proper, serving both private and welfare patients. A residence for unmarried mothers and an infants' home were eventually housed in separate buildings and were operated under the social service department, which also supervised the admission of welfare patients.⁶³

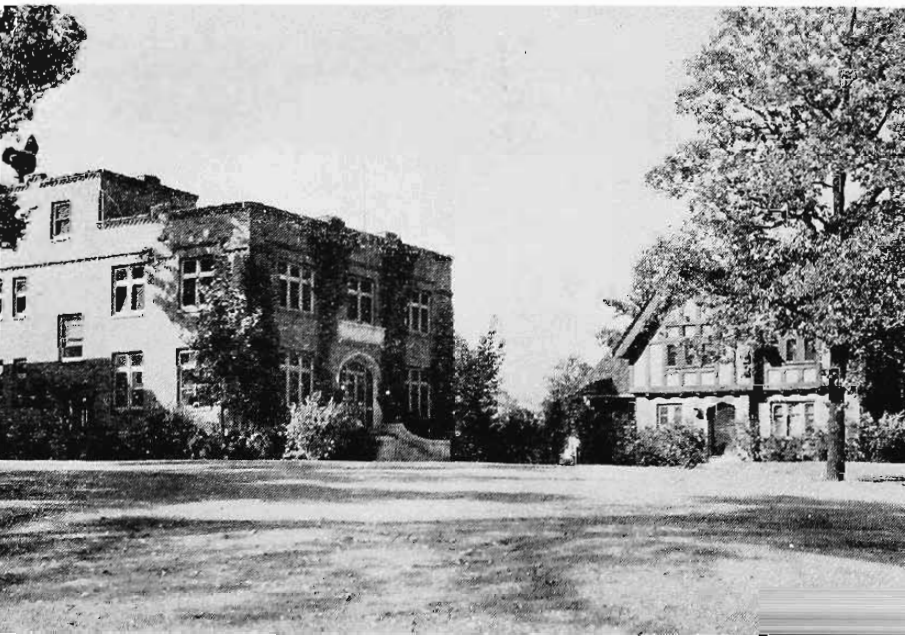
For many infants, deserted wives, and wronged girls this shelter was the only home they had known. Dr. Ripley's experience convinced her that young unmarried mothers needed rehabilitation. She once noted in a medical report that a death attributed by the attending physician to heart failure was in fact "from a sense of shame and disgrace" which so preyed upon the patient's mind that "life became a burden too heavy for endurance."⁶⁴

During their stay in the hospital youthful transgressors were surrounded with wholesome influences and asked to attend a religious service on Sunday and often on Thursday also. For those who kept their babies, training was offered in the care of infants, and an effort was made to find employment for the ones who faced the need to support themselves after leaving. As the

⁶² *Maternity Hospital*, 10, 21; *Annual Report*, 1899, p. 8.

⁶³ *Maternity Hospital*, 12, 15.

⁶⁴ *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 10.



THE Ripley
Memorial Hospital
and the nursery
cottage

years passed, Maternity Hospital remained in the vanguard of the national trend toward more extensive and sophisticated social work. By the mid-1920s guidance and counseling services were offered, as well as opportunities for vocational training, and each case was followed up for a number of months by a trained field worker.⁶⁵

Joining the infants born in the hospital were foundlings often left there and babies properly admitted for medical attention. The institution operated as an informal adoption agency long before an 1893 law permitted it to consent to adoption of abandoned or destitute children. The committee in charge sought "good Christian temperance" homes and appears to have placed as many as half the babies that came under its care. Early procedures were disarmingly simple. At the turn of the century a man obtained a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired boy along with the assurance that he could exchange him for a dark-eyed girl when the supply permitted.⁶⁶ Commenting on the progress in later life of these adopted children, Dr. Ripley observed that "environment is the greater factor in peoples' lives than heredity."⁶⁷

AT THE CLOSE of 1911, twenty-five years after its founding, Maternity Hospital had

⁶⁵ *Annual Report*, 1888, p. 5; 1899, p. 9; 1907, p. 5; Maternity Hospital, *Bulletin*, 1926, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Annual Report*, 1899, p. 11; 1910-11, p. 9-12; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1893, p. 113-116.

⁶⁷ *Annual Report*, 1910-11, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *Annual Report*, 1910-11, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Interviews with Mrs. Page, July 8, August 5, 1961. Maternity Hospital continued in operation until March 1, 1956, when, beset with financial difficulties, it was closed and the property sold to the Children's Hospital of Minneapolis. The buildings were later remodeled and are now in use as a nursing home for elderly people.

⁷⁰ A commemorative booklet, published at the time the memorial plaque was unveiled, and entitled *Martha G. Ripley, M.D.* (n.p., n.d.) contains the addresses delivered at the dedication service.

THE DRAWING on page 2 is from the pamphlet on *Maternity Hospital*, cited elsewhere, and the etching on page 7 is from King, ed., *History of Homoeopathy*, 3:161. The pictures of the Ripleys and Maternity Hospital were loaned by Mrs. Page.

cared for a total of 5,200 patients. During that period Dr. Ripley was the heart and soul of the enterprise. In an anniversary address in November, 1911, she reviewed its history and opened a drive to raise fifty thousand dollars for a new hospital building.⁶⁸ But her time was running out.

Shortly after Christmas she ignored her own advanced years and tired body to brave inclement weather and support some humanitarian measure at the Capitol in St. Paul. The resulting respiratory infection brought on an illness which proved fatal. "Is everything all right at the hospital?" were her last words before she died on April 18, 1912. Two days later she was cremated, and when in late 1915 the cornerstone was laid for the new Martha G. Ripley Memorial Building of Maternity Hospital, her ashes were placed within it.⁶⁹

Dr. Ripley's contribution to the development of Minnesota reached beyond Maternity Hospital, however, and it was therefore fitting that a memorial plaque in the Capitol should permanently honor her. A surviving daughter and many devoted friends — by then scattered throughout the nation — secured approval to dedicate this on June 29, 1939.⁷⁰

In its inscription, as in the minds of her contemporaries, the emphasis is on Maternity Hospital. That achievement, a practical fruit of a well-spent life, was constantly her preoccupation after 1887. It should not deprive her, however, of the additional significance which contemporaries could perhaps see less clearly than the eyes of posterity.

Born in the same decade that the humanitarian reform and woman's rights movements first gathered momentum, she lived with those symbols of the quickening human spirit through the difficult transition from a rural to an urban and industrial order. In assuming active and continued responsibility for improving the condition of women and helping her fellow man to adjust to a new age, she committed herself to extending the area of human freedom and equal rights for all.



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