

Michigan's First 'University Hospital'

The Pavilion Hospital arose from the stormy medical history of its era and outlived the expectation that it would soon be deliberately burned to the ground. BY JAMES TOBIN

IN MID-1800s AMERICA, ASPIRING physicians took training by one of two treacherous paths. One was apprenticeship to a practicing doctor, who might or might not entrust the student with much hands-on work. The other led through one of the motley string of American medical schools. Some were professional and scientific, Michigan's among them. Others were for-profit and fly-by-night. Both types relied almost wholly on the lecture method.

In a big city, a medical school could at least send students on "a hasty walk through the wards of a hospital," as one critic put it. But in a town like Ann Arbor, with no hospital and a population of only a few thousand, even that was impractical.

This was the *casus belli* behind the first big battle in the Medical School's history — the push by several professors in the late 1850s to move the enterprise to Detroit. Their campaign faded when the high cost became obvious and the Regents approved an optional summer course in clinical medicine in Detroit. But the need for broader clinical education remained.

Then came the medical catastrophe of the Civil War, which saw far more soldiers killed by disease than by shot and shell. Afterward, progressive

physicians, including several at the U-M, raised increasingly urgent calls for better clinical training.

So in 1869, the Regents agreed that one of the four "professor's houses" on the Diag — built when the campus was founded in the early 1840s — could be converted to hospital space. The house closest to the Medical Building (which was on East University where the Randall Laboratory now stands) was chosen, though it served as little more than a holding area for patients to be demonstrated before the students in the Medical Building. With space for 20 beds, the little hostel limped along with skimpy funding. Everyone recognized the need for something bigger.

But the issue hung fire while the medics debated their second great challenge — whether to bend to

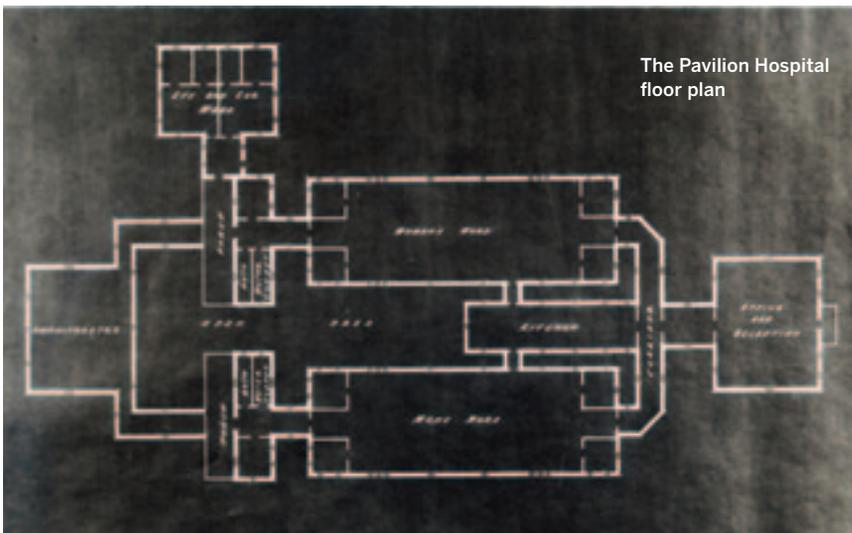
the state legislature's insistence that homeopathic medicine be taught in Ann Arbor. State funding for the whole university hung in the balance, and six years passed before an uneasy compromise was struck. The state would help pay for a separate Homeopathic Medical College and for a shared teaching hospital. Lansing would put in \$8,000 if Ann Arbor pledged \$4,000, a condition the citizens approved by a 422-4 landslide.

So, in 1875, U-M's first real hospital arose on North University opposite the future site of the Michigan League. Its official name was the "University Hospital," but it was commonly known as the "Pavilion Hospital." It was modeled on military hospitals — one story and built of wood, so that in case of contagion, the

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Men gather on the lawn behind the Pavilion Hospital, circa 1877



The Pavilion Hospital floor plan

building and its germs could be put to the torch without a crippling cost.

As an architectural term, “pavilion” refers to a wing extending from a central structure — in this case, the two identical wings that reached southward from the converted professor’s house. But “pavilion” also denotes a large tent or tent-like structure, and this better denotes the hospital’s distinctive look. From a distance it resembled a pair of long, white circus tents with cupolas and spires like the minarets of a castle. The roof line zigged and zagged in occasional peaks, with Victorian trim here and there below the eaves. On a campus composed chiefly of stolid brick blocks, it drew the eye. It wasn’t lovely, precisely, but it was certainly interesting to look at — a “real ornament,” said the student-run *Chronicle*.

Construction proceeded over several years in a southward crawl toward the center of the Diag. In the first phase, the “professor’s house” was remodeled into an office and reception area. Then, straight behind the house, a long kitchen was built. To right and left, corridors led to two rectangular wards — the 115-foot-long pavilions — one for men, one for women, with open-air porches at the ends and a courtyard between. Soon the edifice was extended further by the additions of an operating amphitheater and a ward for eye and ear patients.

Despite allopathic grumbling, one of every five beds was reserved for homeopathic patients. Then the homeopaths got their own pavilion hospital, much like the first, where the Natural Science Building stands now.

If the Pavilion Hospital’s exterior design was “tasteful,” as President James Angell allowed, the same could not be said of the interior, at least after a couple years of hard service. According to Reuben Peterson, a U-M obstetrician who wrote an early history of the hospital, health inspectors were reported to be “deeply impressed by the insufficiency of the ventilation system the moment they entered the main wards. Indeed, it was such as to remind one very forcibly of the condition of the military hospitals in the early years of the late war.”

Their recommendation for better ventilation was ignored, but sanitary practices were sound enough that there was never a need for the cleansing conflagration anticipated by the designers.

Before too long, President Angell and others were saying it was neither healthy nor convenient to have a hospital in the middle of the campus. So, once again, city and state put up funds for a new hospital — \$50,000 from Lansing, \$25,000 from Ann Arbor — and in 1891, a new University Hospital opened its doors on Catherine Street, the first incarnation of today’s medical campus. The Pavilion Hospital was cleaned up and had a second career as the College of Dental Surgery. In 1909 it was torn down — not burned — to make way for the Chemistry Building that still stands today. [M]

Sources include Richard M. Doolen, “The Founding of the University of Michigan Hospital: An Innovation in Medical Education,” *Journal of Medical Education*, January 1964; Reuben Peterson, unpublished history of University Hospital, Bentley Historical Library; and The University of Michigan: An Encyclopedic Survey.