Martha Ripley: Pioneer in medicine and social justice

One of the first female doctors in the United States, Dr. Martha Ripley helped to transform both the field of obstetrics and the role of women in early Minnesota.

Ripley, born in 1843, decided to study medicine when, as a volunteer nurse, an infant in her care died of the croup. She obtained her degree in Massachusetts and then moved with her husband and three daughters to Minnesota, where she established the Maternity Hospital.

The hospital opened in 1886 in a small house in Minneapolis with only three patients.

From the beginning, the hospital doors were open to everyone, regardless of financial means, marital status, age, or ethnicity. Unwed women, who in the 1880s were seen as undeserving of medical care, found compassionate care at Ripley’s hospital.

Ripley’s zeal was directed toward reducing the deaths of both women and infants in childbirth. The practices she employed to that end often caused a stir. Hospital deliveries themselves were a rarity in the United States until the 1910s. Ripley also caused a scandal by hemming her skirts above the floor for better sanitation.

In other “firsts,” the hospital was the first to allow mothers and infants to room together and among the first to offer natural childbirth options.

Maternity Hospital’s statistics were enviable, with the maternal death rate a quarter of the average. As her reputation grew, Ripley was called on to lecture in obstetrics and pediatrics in medical colleges in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa.

With a steadily increasing demand for its services, the hospital repeatedly moved to larger locations. In 1896, the hospital was moved for the fourth time, relocating to the corner of Glenwood and Penn avenues.

Dr. Martha Ripley was one of the United States’ first female doctors and a vocal voice for social reform in early Minnesota.
Over the following two decades, three more buildings were added—a temporary home for infants, a cottage for nursing staff, and a bungalow for infants requiring special care.

In addition to her pioneering medical work, Ripley was a vocal social reformer. She served as President of the Minnesota State Suffrage Association and petitioned the state legislature on the right to vote for women, as well as raising the age of consent from 10 to 16. Ripley also fought for the inclusion of matrons on the Minneapolis police force and women on the Board of Education.

But her primary focus remained the hospital. In 1911, at its 25th anniversary celebration, Ripley made a plea for $50,000 to erect a new hospital building, citing the hospital’s longstanding mission to serving all in need and its essential role in the community.

The funding was raised, but Ripley would not live to see the new building completed. She died in 1912 of a respiratory infection. Her last words were, “Is everything alright at the hospital?”

The building was completed in 1915 and named the Martha G. Ripley Memorial Building in her honor. Ripley’s ashes were laid in the cornerstone.

The Maternity Hospital closed in 1956 due to lack of funding and became the Queen Care Nursing Home. The nursing home closed in 2000.

Today, three of the original buildings remain on the site: Ripley Memorial Hospital, Emily Paddock Cottage, and the Babies’ Bungalow. The site honors Ripley’s lifelong commitment to social justice. Ripley Gardens builds on Aeon’s award-winning work preserving historic places and helping them meet today’s needs.

Aeon is a nonprofit developer, owner and manager of high-quality affordable homes in the Minneapolis St. Paul area. Established in 1986, the award-winning nonprofit has built or renovated more than 2,000 apartments and townhomes, which provide stability to more than 3,500 people each year—including individuals and families with low to moderate incomes and formerly homeless individuals. The organization’s inspiration to create community assets that last for generations is illustrated in its name “Aeon,” which means “forever.” Its vision is that every person has a home and is interconnected within community.