

# The Mercies Surprise Baltimore

*Community Benefit,  
Not Profit, Was the Motive  
behind the Preservation  
in 1887 of the City's  
Downtown Hospital*

**BY JOHN J. FIALKA**

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*John J. Fialka's book, Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America, recounts the contributions made by women religious in America from the 1800s to the present day. The stories illustrate what Fialka describes as "the spiritual wealth these women invested in America." This "spiritual wealth" serves as the foundation for community benefit programs today. Below is an excerpt from Fialka's Chapter 12.*

**T**HE BLEAKEST MOMENT in the history of the hospital that has served downtown Baltimore for almost 150 years came on the frosty evening of November 1, 1887. A group of doctors who used the hospital to perform surgery and to teach medicine came to the conclusion that it was doomed.

On the west side of the city the University of Maryland was developing a hospital with a medical school. On the east side, a medical colossus bankrolled by a local merchant, Johns Hopkins, was beginning to rise. Parts of the center of the city, which included the waterfront, were becoming seedy slums populated by wharf rats and bums.

While the inner city had its romantic places, the doctors' diagnosis was that few people were interested in keeping their hospital going. The one exception was this strange order of Catholic nuns, the Sisters of Mercy. For some reason they had agreed to take over nursing chores at the hospital.

To the modern mind, City Hospital, as it was called then, was hardly a hospital at all. It was more like a charnel house or a kind of medical warehouse reserved for very sick people. It featured stark contrasts between life and death. Some students observed autopsies. Others could watch delicate surgery. And sometimes they could switch back and forth because the procedures were performed in the same room, often at the same time.

City Hospital was poorly heated, poorly lit, chronically short of potable water. Its patients,



often street people, enjoyed what they might have considered luxury accommodations: dingy twelve-by-fifteen-foot boxes.

"Disorder in the highest degree and uncleanness of the most repulsive type made the City Hospital a place to be avoided by respectable visitors," says one early account of its status. What mystified the doctors that night was that the nuns had come in at all. Since then they had cleaned it up and now they were pledging to help the doctors buy adjacent land owned by the city. They proposed to build a new hospital there.

These doctors were hard businessmen. Some were fine surgeons when they weren't drinking. It had seemed like good business to bring in the nuns. Since the Civil War the Mercies' nursing skills had become legendary. Plus, they worked for almost nothing.

But now they were offering to buy what amounted to equity in the place! It was bad enough that the nuns' interest in the land had provoked the city's Protestant ministers to gather two thousand signatures on a petition to get the mayor to queer the deal. But now the doctors had to grapple with the frankness of the priest who had recommended the Mercies in the first place, Rev. William E. Star. A gentle soul who was chaplain at the state penitentiary, he had just let them in on a little secret: To back up their dreams, the nuns had no money, not a dime, zippo.

That night the doctors had a very noisy meet-

ing, but Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, one of the elders among them, enjoyed a moment of quiet satisfaction. After all, it was he who had warned them that they should have never gotten into business dealings with the nuns in the first place. They had no contracts, nothing to assure that the sisters would do anything at all as part of the bargain. Now the doctors appeared stuck. "I am sick of the whole affair," he confided in his diary.

Dr. A. B. Arnold, the dreamer of the group, presented this prognosis: The nuns wouldn't be involved with City Hospital if it didn't pay them. Sisters of Mercy, he reasoned, were no different from the doctors. They both had faith in the almighty five-dollar bill. There had to be money someplace, he concluded.

But there wasn't. The priest, a respected man in Baltimore, had said as much. Some of the doctors were religious, some—like many of Baltimore's city fathers—put what little faith they had in the goals of the old Confederacy, and some were outright atheists.

What galled them all was that they had believed the leader of the Mercies, Mother Mary Benedicta, when she blithely told them if they committed to get the land, she would build the hospital and make it "one of the finest in the Union." By the end of the evening they resigned themselves to the fact that they had all invested in a dubious under-

### Mercy Today: Commitment and Caring

Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore, provides health care for persons of every creed, color, and economic and social condition. Since its founding, Mercy continues to develop programs that fulfill critical elements of its mission and follow the tradition established by the first Sisters of Mercy of caring for the most vulnerable in their community.

In fiscal 2004, Mercy Medical Center and Stella Maris (Mercy's continuum of care service) provided more than \$28 million in uncompensated care. In addition, Mercy Medical Center—often in partnership with community organizations—offered a number of programs to meet the needs of the poor and underserved in the Baltimore community including:

- A charity pharmacy program that helps patients cover the costs of prescription drugs.
- Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (SAFE) helps sexual assault victims through the aftermath of the crime and facilitates prosecution of attackers. SAFE collaborates

with TurnAround, Inc., a not-for-profit organization for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, and the Baltimore City Police Department's Sex Offense Unit.

- The Family Violence Response Program (which also partners with TurnAround) provides direct crisis intervention, danger assessment, safety planning, and resource linkage to victims of family violence. The program, which has helped more than 900 victims since March 2000, collaborates with 11 homeless service providers, the Charles Crane Family Foundation, and the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention.
- The Mercy Supportive Housing Program, in partnership with the city's Homeless Service Unit, assists in the overall well-being of Mercy's neighbors and provides housing placement and case management to more than 100 homeless families annually.

—Aimee DeVoll

“There was no facet of Mercy Hospital that Sister Carmelita Hartman didn’t see through to the end.”

taking that would probably take them all down.

Within a month, Mother Benedicta turned this completely around. She convinced the city council to issue a long-term lease for the vacant lot near the hospital for a thousand dollars. As for the petition from the Protestant ministers, it never made it to the mayor.

One account of the Mercies’ explains this. The petition “fell into the hands” of Mr. John M. Travelers, a city council clerk, “and he being a gentleman of the highest integrity, and of uncommonly good sense, quietly dropped all the papers filled with signatures into his very capacious desk, turned the key and left them to mature.”

After that, Mother Benedicta ventured off to New York and Philadelphia to inspect models for her hospital. She commissioned three architects to flesh out what her vision should look like. In short, the new hospital was happening. The following September, at the laying of the cornerstone, the political muscle that she used quietly to make it happen came on public display.

There was Baltimore’s cardinal, James Gibbons, resplendent in white silk vestments. The new hospital, he told the crowd, would rival Johns Hopkins. Marching in solemn procession before him came the Knights of St. Vincent, Knights of St. Ignatius, Knights of St. Patrick, Knights of Holy Cross, Knights of St. Augustine and all of the other fraternal orders that bound together in a

common cause the Irish, German, Polish and Bohemian Catholic parishes of Baltimore. . . .

The confusion over who really ran City Hospital was ended in 1909. Under the leadership of a formidable new administrator, Sister M. Carmelita Hartman, its name was changed to Mercy Hospital. She forged an even stronger alliance with the business community, and in 1911 her hospital sprouted a new wing. . . .

At Mercy Hospital, she transformed the business side, reinforcing the financial footings of the hospital and using part of the income to broaden its medical research and enlarge its medical team. She set about applying the Mercy formula with a vengeance: The poor came first, but the hospital had to generate money to care for them. . . .

There was no facet of Mercy Hospital that Sister Carmelita Hartman didn’t see through to the end. Under her hand “Mercy,” as the locals call it, became a fixture of downtown Baltimore. Police and fire units made Mercy’s emergency room their hospital of choice. After Sister Carmelita left in 1917, to become the treasurer and later mother superior of the Baltimore Mercies, Mercy became the hospital-for-all-seasons for downtown Baltimore.

Contrary to the doubting doctors . . . it was . . . the force of the prayers, the sacrifices, the determination and the skill of these women in drawing help from the community that kept the whole enterprise going. ■

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