

## **Transcript for The Story of Whittaker Memorial Hospital | Newport News, VA**

- At the turn of the 20th century, America was trying to reestablish a very unequal racialized system. This Freedoms First Generation, who were born right after the Civil War, that generation became a very prosperous, powerful generation of people, in some cases well educated, but for many whites, it seemed as if black people and black men in particular were out of order.

- Discrimination, segregation, exclusion was the rule of the day, African-Americans were not allowed in white hospitals. And in the city of Newport News, it was so dire.

- That anyone in our inner-city community were treated in the jails.

- You also had horrific experimentation, five white physicians on African-Americans some of the early practices of how to do a caesarian. was the result of experimentation on African-American women. So blacks generally were very wary of white medical schools and of white hospitals because they knew this would happen.

- So home remedies establishing preventive health care was very important. When you had a hospital like Whittaker started of course it was a glory hallelujah moment, because it was started by black physicians for the black community. So there was a trust element.

- Nobody wants to go to the hospital, but if they had to go to the hospital, they knew they had a hospital to go to.

- They could have health care with dignity.

- All of this area we know as Hampton Roads, Virginia was thriving because we had a lot of activity here. This whole region was, both in terms of the military, and in terms of private industry, a big shipping and ship building naval area, but it also attracted many African-Americans. You had people pouring in from the Carolinas, from Pennsylvania, from other States, get jobs here.

- And with that became the need for health care.

- In reaction to the American Medical Association, black physicians created their own National Medical Association in 1895. This very important period in the early history of Whittaker Memorial Hospital, it was part of a trend. What many historians call black hospital movement, A small group of black physicians would gather together to pool their resources, to form a hospital. These hospitals, not only emerged, but thrived. We would see the same thing in Newport News, led by Dr. Whittaker, W.T. Jones, William Dickerson, and Foreman.

- I think they felt that it was no longer necessary for us to be treated in a jail infirmary. They saw the need. They had no assistance. It was them and the community, we had to provide for ourselves.

- They wanted to be the best and give the best care that they could.

- They invested their personal resources in helping to create a hospital. That first started off like many hospitals as a clinic.

- The physical facility was actually in the home of another historical figure in Newport News by the name of the Attorney Fields. They used his home as the first physical facility. And then over time, they got additional doctors involved and they expanded their location.

- [Dr. Alexander] And eventually that little clinic became a hospital.

- During the establishment Dr. Whittaker died and Dr. Foreman thought that it would be an honor to name the hospital after him, and thus the name Whittaker hospital.

- An important component of the support of the hospital was the black press, the Norfolk Journal and Guide. When they launched the hospital, they had someone covering that opening. They had someone covering every single campaign. They would also talk about who was a patient in the hospital, teachers, business leaders, and so forth. They would actually make sure that that information, they went to the hospital, they're recovering at home, the hospital or the physician saved their life, because American society was very busy demonizing anything and everything that was associated with African-Americans, even black professionals were seen as inferior compared to white professionals. And so the only place where you would learn about what was really happening in the black community, and you will learn about the professionals was in the black press.

- PR was very important because of course being a black professional, there were a lot of social activities. It established a middle-class within the community where a lot of the events were being held as fundraisers.

- [Dr. Ashby] My mother was an active member of the Women's Auxiliary, and they'd raised money to buy equipment and things that the hospital might not have enough money to do. They'd find a way to get it done.

- [Shelton] Whittaker was a new breed of hospital and it was a source of pride. And as a result, it became a training ground.

- [Dr. Alexander] There were no white hospitals that allowed blacks to come and be interns or residents.

- It had a nursing program. And of course it was a place where black physicians could train.

- When I started there, there were mentors, Jean Diggs, Ida Strickland, you learnt different things. You learned how to carry yourself, how to be more professional. You learned the different policies when you were in nursing school, but you learned the true nature of nursing. They always encouraged you. And everybody was just full of love. I would give them the shirt off my back or anything they needed. If I had it, it was theirs. Even today, I do that.

- During the Second World War Franklin Roosevelt, who was president at the time, used federal funds to expand black hospitals and to bring up the standards so that they moved from being wooden buildings to brick buildings so that they could continue to provide healthcare to the black community, but also to the servicemen. And so you saw the construction of new hospitals for Norfolk Community Hospital, for Richmond Community Hospital. And for Whittaker Memorial Hospital.

- [Shelton] Whittaker Hospital was designed by black architects from Hampton University. That was a big deal. So the design of the building was unique in that it wasn't red brick. It was a sandstone. It was very iconic to this day. When you drive past it, it seems to stand out like a monument.

- It was an icon in the community. I mean, it was right down on 28th street. You couldn't miss it.

- [Gail] It was like a beacon in our community.

- [Dr. Ashby] I remember going up the many steps. I thought that was like going up to a palace.

- [Shelton] I remember it being green on the interior.

- The air conditioning wasn't what it is now. The windows would be open and be a nice breeze there. The nurses were all nice, all dressed in their crisp white uniforms with their white hats and their very white shoes. Because Ms Sales, who was the chief nurse, ran a stern ship, they were all very proud of who they were and what they did.

- We would see the shift in the 1940s in the management of these hospitals. And so they started to bring in professionals who were already trained in hospital management. And so the hospital prospered and grew, and while there were still hiccups along the way, it became an important institution. They expanded the number of beds and they were also bringing in radiologists, x-ray experts, people who were dealing with different forms of cancers.

- [Woman] There was pediatrics for children. There was surgical wing. We had an emergency room.

- [Man] Several general surgeons. The most memorable was Dr. Scott and Dr. Lee.

- And so we would see the continuation of that progress through the 1960s. The sixties was an interesting decade because while you had the Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, you had resistance. The efforts of Civil Rights activists was not necessarily for integration. It was about equality, equal funding, equal access. While the effort was to eliminate these laws and practices that obstructed blacks from going anywhere, living anywhere. There were also efforts at the state and federal level to defund the black institutions with the argument. If blacks could go anywhere, then there's no need for this institution. But the problem was you still had marginalization of black patients, sometimes segregating them without them knowing it.

- Certain floors had been set aside for black patients, certain wings had been set aside. So it was still segregation. It's just that you were in the same building.

- You're not going to be able in a very short period of time to erase a hundred plus years of intentional marginalization. And that's why they began to financially struggle once again.

- A lot of the black population decided to go with the white hospitals, which had more advanced equipment. And also the doctors that were on board at Whittaker's, a lot of them started referring their patients to these white hospitals, because they felt that Whittaker was outdated.

- We could not afford the equipment to do CAT scans and some of the modern technology. So we had to send patients out to have them done.

- Whittaker hung in there for a very long time, but they ended up with a huge debt on their books.

- In addition to that, the corporate health care industry complex was emerging at that time. We would see these corporate insurance company entities becoming these medical complexes, and they would eventually gain control of billions of dollars. And so this resulted in most of the black-owned hospitals closing their doors. That's really the story of Whittaker, but that's also the story of America.

- You know, Whittaker closed in '85 and they moved to Newport News General. I think part of it was they wanted to create a new image, but different. It wasn't in the community and it wasn't a prominent icon like Whittaker had been.

- [Shelton] Although they're currently not in operation as a hospital, their legacy is still being felt by the programs and the professionals that they provided the community.

- I was born in Whittaker Hospital. My wife was born in Whittaker Hospital. And so many other people. I had never thought the day would come when Whittaker would not be existing, but at least the building is still there.

- [Shelton] They did leave a legacy in this end of town.

- It will always go down in history as the first African American hospital for the inner city neighborhood of East End.

- And the name is still there. And the young people in our community can learn from that.

- Symbolism is important to a community. It's a sense of pride. It's a sense of what was, and the people who work there because they did a marvelous job in saving the community. They were a very important integral part of not only the black community, but the whole of Hampton Roads. So Whittaker is a reminder of the excellence that the black community developed during a very trying time in history, and so it deserves to remain.