

# LINDA RICHARDS "A BORN NURSE"



Portrait of Linda Richards before leaving for England, 1877.

Linda Richards was born on a farm near the Racquette River in West Potsdam on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1841 and grew up in rural Vermont. Nine years after her father died of tuberculosis, Linda's mother was diagnosed with the infection as well. While Linda made it her duty to take care of her ill mother she became acquainted with the county physician, Dr. Currier, who allowed Linda to accompany him on house calls.

By the time Linda turned 13 she had received enough informal training to splint, clean wounds, and apply bandages. At 16 Linda became a school teacher near her home in Vermont but she found this work to be dissatisfying. During this time, Linda became engaged to George Poole who joined the Green Mountain Boys to fight in the U.S. Civil War. George returned severely wounded and Linda had another patient to nurse until his death in 1869.



Picture of a portrait of Linda Richards showcased at Canton Potsdam Hospital.

By the time her fiancé died, Linda decided a career as a caretaker would suit her best. She was hired as a ward maid, responsible for cleaning, feeding and watching patients residing in Boston City Hospital. During this time she encountered resistance to becoming a trained nurse and struggled to find a nursing program. Finally, Linda found training at the New England Hospital for Women and Children and was the first trained nurse graduating in 1873. At this point in American history, females did not have an established role in the medical workforce; many male physicians believed that women did not belong in hospitals. These perceptions and lack of nursing education programs in America created nurses that did not understand the science or the art of nursing. Little did Linda know that she would change these conditions throughout her career.

Linda was hired by Bellevue Hospital Training School in New York City where she helped the board members understand the value of sanitation and developed a system for keeping written patient records which is still used today. Linda left Bellevue Hospital to fight new battles at Massachusetts General Hospital. Appointed as the nursing program superintendent there, she proved that trained nurses are an important part of medical teams.



Photo of Linda Richards and her Japanese rickshaw driver.



Portrait of Linda Richards, 1900.

Within a month of her return Linda became the head of the Philadelphia Visiting Nurses Society. She believed in home health care for the ill residing in large cities. Her last endeavor was establishing the practice for specially trained nurses in mental institutions. After her retirement in 1911 Linda kept reading articles on nursing even though she was unable to participate in active nursing. Linda died in April of 1930, leaving behind a legacy in the art of nursing and a workforce of nurses who were accepted and respected in the medical community.

With the creation of more nursing programs in America, Linda was in great demand. However, she wanted more training and went to the Nightingale School at St. Thomas Hospital in England in 1877. Here, Linda studied the English technique of nursing and learned that germs caused diseases. In 1885 she was summoned by the America Board of Missions to travel to Japan and establish the country's first nurse training program. Linda accepted this opportunity, opened the Doshita Hospital in Kyoto, and oversaw the program until 1891.



Portrait of Linda Richards later in life.

Potsdam and St. Lawrence County have taken great pride in claiming Linda Richards as their own. She has served as an inspiration to many local nurses. In 1941, nurse educators of St. Lawrence, Lewis and Jefferson Counties formed a local branch of the National and New York State Leagues of Nursing education and named it The Linda Richards League for Nursing. The Canton-Potsdam Hospital contains a portrait of Linda and established the Linda Richards Society which recognizes those who help others through contributions to the hospital.

Photographs from Linda Richards' autobiography, *Reminiscences of America's First Trained Nurse* and *History of the Massachusetts General Hospital Training School for Nurses*. Sources included "Linda Richards, Nursing's Forgotten Lady" and "America's First Trained Nurse" published in the St. Lawrence County Historical Association *Quarterly* magazine. Text panel was created by Falisha Gilman, Clarkson University, Spring 2010.