

ROCK HILL PRIVATE HOSPITAL

By Paul Gettys

This article describes the development of Rock Hill's first hospital. Little has been published about this pioneering effort. It is mentioned in *The Roddey Family* by Louise Pettus (1998), but extensive research in newspapers and other sources has been required to develop the story. The hospital was located on what is now Charlotte Avenue, and in today's terms would have been across the street from the Salvation Army near the Southern Railroad. It was called the Rock Hill Private Hospital, the Rock Hill City Hospital and the Rock Hill Public Hospital in various sources.

As Rock Hill developed as a small village in the 1850s, it began to attract doctors to serve the population. Two of the earliest physicians were Dr. Robert H. Hope and Dr. William Barron Fewell. Most doctors had offices in their homes. These offices were often called "hospitals," but had none of the characteristics we would today recognize as a hospital. Those who were seriously ill or required specialized treatment would be transported to a larger city. Dr. Thomas A. Crawford, who came to Rock Hill to practice in 1878, partnered with Dr. William Francis Strait in an office in a small house on Elm Street. Dr. Strait was known to have performed surgeries on the kitchen table. Dr. W. W. Fennell came to Rock Hill in 1897 and used his first home on Elm Street as a "hospital." The pattern continued well into the twentieth century, with Dr. David Lyle working from his home on Hampton Street and Dr. Robert E. Sumner from his home on Marion Street, each of which was known locally as a hospital.

The first true hospital in Rock Hill was the brainchild not of a physician but of local businessman Capt. William Lyle Roddey. He was a major investor in the city's manufacturing, textile, and banking businesses and was also interested in the welfare of the community. Concerned that there was no real hospital in the growing city and that medical care was often not available to people of lesser means, Roddey proposed the development of a city hospital in 1901. The *Rock Hill Journal* of June 1, 1901 reported on Roddey's plan. It stated that Roddey "conceived the idea of establishing a hospital for the better curing of the sick and afflicted among the poor and has generously given \$3,000 to be put into the buildings." The donation of this amount in 1901 would be equivalent to over \$80,000 in today's money. The King's Daughters, a civic organization of ladies in the community, gave \$800 to help furnish the building. An organization was formed, named the Medical Society of Rock Hill, to raise \$1,500 to purchase a lot for the facility. The proposed name was the Rock Hill Public Hospital. This was quite an ambitious undertaking for a period when there was no local, state, or federal funding for public health.

Within a few weeks of the announcement of the hospital plan, a site became available. The estate of Capt. A. E. Hutchison, recently deceased, held an auction of his properties. These included a number of lots on Main Street, rural properties, and the land around the Hutchison home on Clay Street (today's Charlotte Avenue). The *Rock Hill Journal* reported on August 21, 1901 that the building site for the Rock Hill City Hospital had been selected "in front of the residence of Capt. A. E. Hutchison." The cost was \$587, and securing the electrical and water service to the site would bring the overall cost to an estimated \$800. This was well under budget, and the article contained a list of citizens who had already pledged about \$330 to the Medical Society of Rock Hill for the land purchase. The lot was purchased on an installment

plan, with a series of payments due. Construction began in August or September of 1901. The architect for the building was H. E. White of Rock Hill, who designed many local buildings (*Rock Hill Herald*, June 11, 1902), and his fee for designing the building was \$25.00 (*Rock Hill Herald*, June 28, 1902).

The hospital was referred to variously as the Rock Hill Private Hospital or the City Hospital. It seems at some point that the City Council was requested to support the operation of the institution once completed. Because City Council minutes are unavailable for this period, it is difficult to determine if the Council ever agreed to provide public funds according to the original plan. As far as can be determined, there was no support for the institution from public funds, and it operated privately.

By late October, the roof was on and the building was taking shape, according to the *Rock Hill Journal* of October 26, 1901. In November, a reminder was placed in the *Rock Hill Herald* that funds were still needed for the land purchase, the total pledged to date being \$437.25. The *Journal* reported on November 13 that work on the building was going well and it was expected to be completed by January 1. The Rock Hill Medical Society met and elected officers, including Dr. J. E. Massey, Sr. as President, Dr. T. A. Crawford as Vice President, and Dr. J. E. Massey, Jr. as Secretary/Treasurer (*Rock Hill Herald*, December 1, 1901). The Medical Society in late March planned a banquet to be held within two weeks to mark the opening of the hospital (*Rock Hill Herald*, March 26, 1902). Although construction was complete, the funds to pay for the property had still not been received.

There was evidently some opposition within the community, or at least suspicion that the hospital was a scheme to enrich the doctors. The funds for the property purchase were very slow in accruing. Capt. Roddey evidently felt a degree of frustration. On May 3, 1902, he placed a long letter in the *Rock Hill Herald*:

“The City Hospital

The agreement under which the proposed city hospital was to be organized provides for the purchase of the lot by the citizens, the furnishing of the building by the King’s Daughters, and its erection by Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Roddey. The building has been completed and the King’s Daughters have shown their generous appreciation of the necessity and advantage of having a creditable hospital by arranging to handsomely furnish it. The hospital is now ready to be turned over to the city as soon as the citizens, under the terms of the agreement, shall subscribe and pay in, the amount necessary to secure the lot. This has not been done up to this time, and it is to be hoped there would be a prompt and generous contribution from the community at large thus enabling those in charge to present the hospital to the city at an early date.

Very respectfully,
W. L. Roddey”

By June, the funds had still not been received. Roddey, in another letter to the newspaper, sounded a stronger note. “The delay in raising the money to pay for the lot is such as to leave the inference that the good people of Rock Hill do not believe that the time has arrived when the city needs a hospital. It becomes necessary for me to state that if the purchase money for the lot is

not raised on or before the 4th of July next, in accordance with the original proposition, I will withdraw my offer to give the building to the city.” (*Rock Hill Herald*, June 11, 1902). The editor in the same edition stated that the building has been completed, “being a substantial structure after the latest design for the purpose for which it was intended.” The fund for the lot purchase had reached \$471.25 in pledges, of which only \$190.25 had been paid. The King’s Daughters had already paid for furniture for the operating rooms, beds, tables, bath tubs, and bath fixtures, and the items were in storage.

On June 21, a letter appeared in the newspaper from “A Subscriber” questioning the hospital project. The writer questioned how the building was to be maintained, and requested an itemized statement of the proposed cost for operation and where the funds will come from (*Rock Hill Herald*, June 21, 1902). This writer was evidently reflecting some public distrust of the whole process. A long letter to the *Herald* from several physicians followed on June 28. It was signed by physicians J. E. Massey, T. A. Crawford, J. R. Miller, A. S. Lynn, T. L. Cornwell, J. H. Massey, W. G. Stevens, J. M. Hunter, and W. W. Fennell, all members of the Rock Hill Medical Society. It stated that the hospital building was completed and furnished. Instead of being a profit-making business for the physicians, “The object of the proposed Rock Hill City Hospital is beyond all else – charity.” It was anticipated that there would be an annual appropriation from the City Council to help in operations. The physicians would donate their time for treatment of those occupying free or endowed rooms, while a few rooms were reserved for paying patients. The letter included a full budget for the erection of the hospital, showing a need for \$561.06 in additional funds to pay for the lot, architectural fees, and connection to the water supply.

The hospital finally opened and provided service for the citizens of Rock Hill for about seven years. The Rock Hill City Directory of 1908 gives the street address for the “Rock Hill City Hospital” as 117 Clay Street (Charlotte Avenue).

The hospital was a great step forward in the provision of medical service for the citizens of Rock Hill. The building included eight wards, an operating room, an x-ray room, a nursery, a dining hall, and charity wards for 16 patients (both whites and African Americans were to be served). Spaces were reserved for those who could pay, but the primary focus was for charity patients. Dr. J. Roddey Miller was chosen to be President of the hospital. Dr. Miller was born between Ebenezer and Tirzah and received degrees from Erskine College and the Medical University of South Carolina in 1891 as first honor graduate. He was Capt. Roddey’s nephew. In later years, he served as City Medical Officer and Chairman of the Board of Health. Other physicians known to serve patients in the hospital included Dr. W. W. Fennell, Dr. Arthur Lynn, Dr. J. E. Massey, Dr. J. A. Bigger, and Dr. T. R. Carothers.

The Rock Hill Private Hospital operated for about eight years. The local newspapers during the period carried a number of short articles describing surgeries and treatments undertaken in the facility, for both Rock Hill residents and patients seeking treatment from smaller nearby towns. However, there was evidently continuing financial difficulty. In February 1908, the ownership of the hospital passed to a new board of directors, organized as the Rock Hill Hospital Association. The *Rock Hill Record* reported on February 20, 1908 that the new board had the following composition: Frank C. Whitner, President, J. G. Anderson, J. R. Barron, Sidney Friedheim, T. L. Johnston, W. W. Boyce, James F. Reid, Mrs. W. B. Wilson, Mrs. W. J. Roddey, Mrs. R. T. Fewell, Mrs. A. C. Izard, Mrs. W. L. Roddey, Mrs. J. B. Heath, Mrs. J. B. Johnson,

Mrs. J. C. Cork, Mrs. F. H. Barber, Mrs. J. J. Waters, Mrs. Paul Workman, Miss Marguerite Anderson, and Miss Sallie Gibson. This board was unusual for the fact that it contained so many women, that it contained no physicians, and that it represented the elite of the Rock Hill business community. On February 27, the *Record* reported that the new board had adopted a constitution and by-laws, accepted formal ownership of the hospital property, and elected permanent officers. The board was hoping to expand the facility and scope of hospital services.

The *Rock Hill Record* reported on March 8, 1909 that there would be an auction sale of the Rock Hill Private Hospital in front of the National Union Bank on March 25th. The property was purchased by Dr. W. W. Fennell. Later that year, Dr. Fennell purchased a large lot on Academy Street (now North Confederate Avenue) and erected a modern and fully-equipped hospital known as the Fennell Infirmary. Dr. Fennell and his partners would become known regionally as outstanding surgeons, and the Fennell Infirmary gained a wide reputation.

The ownership of the Rock Hill Private Hospital building passed to three physicians, Dr. J. E. Massey, Dr. I. A. Bigger, and Dr. T. R. Carothers, and they converted it into a rental residential property. The *Rock Hill Herald* reported on February 27, 1914, "Fire last night completely destroyed the main building of the old hospital at 112 Clay Street and damaged the west wing. The building was occupied by Mrs. J. E. Hinkle. . .It was erected as a hospital, with the intention of turning it over to the city. A private hospital was conducted but failed about five years ago, when control was secured by the present owners, since which time it has been used as a dwelling." Unfortunately, no photograph of the building has been found.

Although the Rock Hill Private Hospital operated for only a few years, it was an important step forward in the provision of medical services for the community, and represented an enlightened attempt to extend medical care to all citizens, regardless of ability to pay. Rock Hill would not have a publicly funded hospital until the creation of the York General Hospital in the Ebenezer community in 1940.

Any additional information on the hospital, especially photographs, would be greatly appreciated.