The Boston Training School for Nurses, attached to the Massachusetts General Hospital, was organized November 1, 1873, the third training school to be established in the United States in connection with a general hospital. The suggestion for the establishment of a Nursing School came from the Industrial Committee of the Woman's Education Association, as part of their search for occupations for self-supporting women… A member of the committee, Mrs. Parkman had traveled to England where she met Florence Nightingale and learned about her system of training nurses. In April, 1873 the Industrial Committee met and suggested that the Women’s Educational Association establish a Nurse Training School. Massachusetts General – was developed to offer and educational and career opportunity for women. Of note, one of the reasons Florence Nightingale formed the nursing school at St. Thomas was due to her desire to increase the ‘range of opportunities’ open to ladies through education in the profession of nursing.

The Trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital were asked if a school might be established in connection with that institution. After a conference between committees representing the Hospital and the Training School, the Trustees proposed putting into the hands of the prospective School two wards in "The Brick," as it was then called. Miss Cabot, Mrs. Parkman, Mr. Brimmer, Mr. James Codman, and Dr. Ellis formed the Committee representing the future managers of the School.

In committing the charge of nursing the patients in the Massachusetts General Hospital to the Training School for Nurses, the Trustees of the Hospital proposed the following conditions:

1. This relation between the Hospital and the Training School shall continue during the pleasure of the trustees.
2. Such of the nurses now employed by the Hospital as the trustees wish to retain shall be adopted by the Training School.
3. Nurses and pupils of the Training School shall not attend the patients of the Hospital without previous training in moving and caring for persons in bed. Their training within the walls of the Hospital shall include such instructions in cooking and in the making of poultices and other appliances for the sick as are essential to good nursing.

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1 The major reference for this article came from: Parsons, Sara. 1923. History of the Massachusetts General Hospital Training School for Nurses., WHITCOMB & BARROWS, Boston,
4. Nurses appointed by the Training School to serve in the wards of the Hospital shall agree to continue in service at least two years but the trustees retain the right to discharge them from service in the wards for sufficient cause.
5. Superintendent, nurses, pupils, and all persons employed by the Training School at the Hospital shall be subject to such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the trustees. They shall be under the exclusive medical jurisdiction of the physicians and surgeons of the Hospital, and no instruction of or interference with said persons within the Hospital shall be permitted without consent of said physicians and surgeons.
6. The number of nurses and pupils boarded, lodged, and paid at the expense of the Hospital shall be fixed by the trustees.
7. Wages shall be paid directly by the Hospital, and not through the Training School.
8. The duties of the Superintendent of the Training School shall not conflict with those of the Matron of the Hospital, assigned to her by the trustees.

In response the following letter was sent:

"Eliot, Esq., Chairman, etc. "MY DEAR SIR: I am instructed to say, on behalf of the directors of the Training-School, that the conditions under which the trustees propose that the school shall continue its connection with the hospital seem to them satisfactory- with the following limitations and explanations, which they propose to the trustees: "As to condition No. 1, that the connection of the school with the hospital may be dissolved at the desire of either the trustees or the directors upon reason- able notice-say not less than two months; as to No. 3, that it is understood that facilities for instruction in cooking shall be given within the hospital; No. 4, that the director of the school also retain the right to discharge any or pupil; as to No. 5, that the word 'interference' shall not be held to apply the rules and discipline which (subject to the regulations of the hospital) directors may judge necessary for the good government of the school, nor to visits of the directors made to inform themselves of the condition of the school. As the wages of each pupil have to be fixed in the original agreement with her, we propose that the present rate (ten dollars a month for the first year and six-teen dollars a month for the second year) be accepted by the trustees for existing agreements, and that any change in the rate in future agreements be made by the consent of the trustees and the directors. The directors have voted to agree to the conditions if it shall seem proper to the trustees to consider the above explanations to be a part of them. "I am, etc., "M. BRIMMER."

The medical staff were reluctant to accept the idea of a nursing school. The Women's Educational Union fought their objections and the hospital school was finally opened with six students. One difference between the Mass General program and the programs at Bellevue and the New Haven, Connecticut was Mass General’s program removed housekeeping chores from the student nurses' responsibilities. These menial tasks were delegated to attendants. iv

As there were no trained nurses from whom to choose a superintendent, a Mrs. Billings, who had done hospital nursing during the war and was highly recommended, was chosen to take charge of
the new School. Arrangements were made for her to have a three months' course with Sister Helen, the English superintendent of the Bellevue Training School, New York, who "reluctantly" consented to take Mrs. Billings for such a short period, stipulating that there should be no responsibility for her work afterwards.

The decision was made to graft the school’s system onto the current hospital system believing that it would be difficult to demonstrate a new system. Funding for the school depended upon voluntary contributions. The hospitals goal was to prepare nurses who should be satisfactory in the homes of their contributors later on.

Due to weak leadership during the first year, the program floundered and for a time it was considered doubtful whether the Trustees of the Hospital would consent to the continuation of the experiment, but the Directors of the School did not lose faith in their project and earnestly sought an experienced superintendent.

They found that leadership in Linda Richards, who had graduated from the New England Hospital for Women and Children in 1872, and had been employed at Bellevue Hospital, under Sister Helen, during 1873. Miss Richards was hired as director in 1874. She put the program on a firm base with regular lectures and nursing practice. Under her leadership the school and students were gradually accepted by the hospital. Linda Richards commented that. “There was the strangest division of labor [for the hospital’s nurses]…” she later notes. “…The doctors complained that nobody knew anything, and surely it was no wonder.” Richards set about to organize nurses’ work and training, and was credited with the school’s rise to the top of its field and making it a model for others - since that time the school has have maintained high standards and traditions.

Early uniforms - Probationer; Student and Graduate
When the school started, the students were permitted to work in limited areas only. By the time Richards left in 1877, she was in charge of all nursing and the students were providing care in most wards.

Bedside instruction was first mentioned in 1876 when Dr. C. Porter agreed to take sixteen or seventeen pupils on his rounds. Dr. Henry Bigelow was already taking pupils to the operating room for clinical instruction. During this year the proposition was first made that the pupils should have cooking lessons by a paid instructor.

In June, 1876, the School was moved from McLean Street into "The Brick," which was no longer used for patients and had been renovated and made over into a comfortable home for the nurses.

In November of 1875 the school was incorporated and the first graduates, three in number, received their diplomas. One remained in the hospital as head nurse of a ward, one went to the New Haven Hospital, and the third to private nursing. Those who remember these first graduates spoke very highly of them.

The first form of diploma read as follows:

This certifies that __________________________ has completed the term of two years at the Boston Training School for Nurses connected with the Massachusetts General Hospital; that she is a person of good character, and has a knowledge and ability requisite for a competent nurse, and that she has passed with credit the required examinations.

The building of the "Thayer," giving a dwelling to the nurses connected with the hospital and yet entirely apart, with every arrangement for rest and comfort, was of incalculable benefit. Year by year added improvements to the instruction in their profession. When in 1895 it was decided that the Training-School should pass entirely into the hands of the hospital authorities and the
Board of Directors therefore ceased to exist, the half dozen of nurses who were sufficient for the experimental beginning had increased to seventy-two, with superintendent and assistant superintendent.⁷

It wasn’t until Sara Parsons, RN, became Superintendent of the School in 1910 that the first full-time nurse instructors were hired.

The MGH School of Nursing graduated its last class in 1981. Its alumni remain active through the MGH Nurses' Alumni Association.

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¹ Parsons, Sara E, 1923, . History of the Massachusetts General Hospital Training School for Nurses.,WHITCOMB & BARROWS, Boston, p 35
² Ibid
³ Ibid