REMEMBERING MRS. CHASE

Before there were Smart Hospitals® and Sim-Men®, there was "Mrs. Chase."

Photo: The Hamilton Archives at Hartford Hospital

Instructor Eva A. Crowdis, RN, teaching Hartford Hospital Training School for Nurses student nurses using the Chase doll, 1921.

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By Eleanor Krohn Herrmann

What's in a Name?

Photo: The Hamilton Archives at Hartford Hospital

The Chase doll in "retirement" at Hartford Hospital, 1976.

She was conceived in Connecticut, delivered in Rhode Island, was the progenitrix of present-day descendants, and now rests silently in Hartford. Who was she? No idea? Here is another clue: She was well known to students enrolled in schools of nursing between the early 1900s and the 1970s. Some called her Josephine, others called her Arabella, but to most she was known by the more formal name, "Mrs. Chase." Although unheralded in the nursing literature, she is usually vividly remembered by the nurses of the era, for she was the mannequin—the proxy patient—on which beginning students learned and practiced their basic nursing skills. The following chronology records her life history.

1851

The real Mrs. Chase (nee Martha Jenks Wheaton) was born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island to Dr. and Mrs. James Wheaton.

1874

Martha married Julian A. Chase, MD of Pawtucket. They begot seven children.

1889

Mrs. Chase began making cloth dolls for her children and neighborhood friends. Unlike the then popular fashionably-dressed fragile porcelain dolls from Europe, her creations were soft, lightweight, flexible and durable, and unlike the one-of-a kind flat-faced rag dolls of folk tradition, her dolls achieved realism through the use of raised facial features that were skillfully hand-painted.

1891

What began as a domestic craft developed into a business after a buyer at the Jordan Marsh department store commissioned a number of the play dolls to be sold through its retail outlet in Boston. The Chase factory, actually a small building in the family's backyard and known as "The Dolls' House," was staffed by local women.

1900

Chase's play dolls were advertised nationally and were sold at such department stores as Macy's, F.A.O. Schwarz and Wanamakers. (They currently are valuable collector items.)

1905

Mrs. Chase developed a group of character dolls among which was "Mrs. Sairey Gamp," the infamous nurse from Dickens' Martin Chuzzelwit. The Chase Company slogans were: "The Maintenance of Prestige" and "If Stradivarius made dolls, he would make the Chase Stockinet." (Stockinet was a stretchy, soft, knitted material used in fabricating the dolls.)

1910

Miss A. Lauder Sutherland, an 1891 graduate of Toronto General Hospital who was then the superintendent of nurses and the principal of the Hartford (CT) Hospital Training School for Nurses (1905-1918), asked Mrs. Chase to make an adult-sized mannequin incorporating the same characteristics of realism and durability as the play dolls. Sutherland was dissatisfied with the quality of the straw-filled dummies then available and wanted a realistic mannequin that could be used for demonstration purposes and on which student nurses could practice basic nursing skills. With the assistance of her physician husband, Mrs. Chase made a pattern for the doll that incorporated stitched jointed hips, knees, elbows and shoulders. The prototype mannequin was then tested at Pawtucket's Memorial Hospital where advice about possible modifications was sought from the staff. Allegedly the finished 5'4" mannequin was based on Mrs. Chase's personal body height and proportions. At a tea party for her friends, Mrs. Chase playfully introduced the mannequin to her guests as "Miss Demon Strator."

1911

The first production mannequin, referred to as the "Chase Hospital Doll," was sent to the Hartford Hospital Training School for Nurses. The Hartford students nicknamed her "Josephine." Chase mannequins were never patented, although they were always marked with a trademark label on the left upper arm. The labels, however, are usually no longer visible, having been bathed into obscurity.

1913

Baby dolls, sometimes called "Sanitary Dolls," were made by the Chase Company in infant and children sizes, ranging from newborns to four-year olds, based on standard measurements set by the American Medical Association. Those dolls were used in public demonstrations to teach mothers the essentials of child care, and were also used in schools of nursing for teaching and practice of pediatric clinical skills. The dolls were weighted to simulate actual body mass and had nasal and aural openings which made them distinct from toy dolls. Such a doll was most commonly called "Baby Chase."

1914

A new improved adult-size Chase mannequin was exhibited at St. Louis nurses' convention. It was the first model to have an arm injection site and an internal reservoir that permitted urethral, vaginal and rectal treatments. The popularity of the doll was great and ultimately it was widely adopted, both nationally and internationally, by the nursing profession. One of the new models was sent as a gift to Hartford Hospital in appreciation for the original idea. The students named the second mannequin "Arabella." Subsequent mannequins became known to nurses and other health professionals as "Mrs. Chase," though few knew why.

1920s

Aged mannequins were refurbished by the Chase Company by replacing limbs, repainting, or recovering worn or damaged areas. By the1940s, the company only repaired mannequins 10 or less years old.

1925

The real Mrs. Chase died; age 74. The Chase family continued the business, but the production of play dolls was curtailed as the demands for the hospital mannequins escalated.

Photo: The Hamilton Archives at Hartford Hospital

Instructor Julie Guay Lukas, BS, RN, teaching student nurses at the Hartford Hospital School of Nursing using the Chase doll, 1956.

1939

The mannequins were redesigned by Mrs. Chase's older son, giving them more attractive faces, joints rebuilt with metal hinges, streamlined body shapes, remodeled reservoirs, and updated hair styles.

1940s

Male mannequins, larger than the original hospital mannequins, were made at the request of the U.S. Army to help train medical corpsmen in hospital techniques.

1942

The Chase Company, which had once been requested to refurbish the original Chase demonstration mannequin, suggested that it be put in a "museum retired from active service," adding that "it has a bigger value as an antique than it has as a practice manikin." It is now in The Hamilton Archives at Hartford Hospital. (In 1985, an early Chase hospital mannequin, dressed in a period gown, was advertised as a "cloth and oil painted folk art doll of the 1890s" by a Pennsylvania antiques dealer. He sold the mannequin for $2,000.00 Caveat emptor!)

1950s

Chase mannequins continued to be modified as new construction materials came into existence, and as nursing procedures became more varied and intricate.

1960s-70s

Chase mannequins entered the research arena when they were used by corporations to study the prevention and effects of accidents.

1981

The M.J. Chase Company— so named for Martha Jenks Chase, the founder—was sold. For close to a century, Chase dolls and mannequins had a quiet but significant impact on the lives of both the general citizenry and health care professionals. The original play dolls fostered a loving, nurturing quality in young children while the Sanitary Dolls served as a vehicle for teaching proper infant care and child rearing. The entrepreneurship of Martha Chase provided a unique example of talent and contributions in an era when women were generally relegated solely to homemaking activities. The adult-size mannequin contributed to research and military efforts, and to the education of thousands of nurses. The following poem, written in 1948 by Marguerite L. Manfreda, Hartford Hospital Training School graduate, Class of 1933, and a former resident of Wallingford, CT, reflects the fond, enduring and significant feelings of nurses toward "Mrs. Chase."

My dear Mrs. Chase of the Cameo face
My dear Mrs. Chase you deserve this grace.

In the classroom you've been our faithful guide
So your fame in nursing will ever abide.
Your history is one we can no longer hide
For we're designed to spread it far and wide.
Though we've bathed and pummeled you
with treatments galore
And turned you until you must have been sore,
You never once spoke or an angry look wore
As we practiced the nursing you made us adore.

You've been touched and observed to teach detection
Of the signs and symptoms of mankind's infections
You've had purposeful ails and many injections
That we gave to you with heart torn affection.

You are dearly loved by all those in white
And students speak of you day and night
As they tell the Chase stories with girlish delight
You're a dear who will reach historical height.

My dear Mrs. Chase of the Cameo face
My dear Mrs. Chase you deserve this grace.

The nursing profession owes a debt of gratitude
to Martha Jenks Chase and to "Mrs. Chase." ◎

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