
THE “BLACK ANGELS”

“These were nurses who came from all over. The South, North, everywhere. They came to work at Sea View Hospital because... there was a dire shortage of nurses. [They] were recruited from as far away as the Caribbean and the Philippines. The majority of the nurses were Black...they couldn’t get jobs in other areas, even though they were very well trained with degrees. White nurses did not apply for these jobs because of the danger of catching tuberculosis. It was a very high-risk job.”

VIRGINIA ALLEN

NURSE AT SEA VIEW HOSPITAL, 1947–1957

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Black women comprised the majority of the nursing staff at Sea View Hospital. In 1930, in response to a staff shortage and financial concerns, hospital administrators began recruiting Black nurses to work under “a white supervisory force.” This hierarchy revealed a racist assumption that Black nurses could not lead. The Black nurses who served at Sea View disproved this notion, toppling barriers to advancement and ushering in a new era of treatment for TB.

At first, Black nurses, including Stiversa Bethel and Salaria Kea O’Reilly, were recruited locally through affiliations with Lincoln and Harlem Nursing Schools in New York City. Then, Sea View advertised in the Black press and with nursing schools throughout the South. Nurses answered the call and joined the Great Migration – the movement of an estimated six million Black Southerners to Northern and Western states in pursuit of economic opportunity and an escape from racial violence.

Some candidates arrived at Sea View having already graduated nursing school. One such nurse was Phyllis Hall Lambert, who graduated from Florida’s Brewster Hospital School of Nursing in 1934 before coming to New York. Others, such as Virginia Allen, joined the staff as nurses’ aides and pursued a degree in nursing while they were on the job. All of the “Black Angels” took on great risks, saved lives, and made history.