

Historical Profiles of Mayo

First Mayo Clinic Building

With the downtown campus of modern-day Mayo Medical Center extending over 18 city blocks in Rochester, Minnesota, visitors and patients occasionally wonder where the first Mayo Clinic building stood amid today's maze of buildings and parking ramps, some of which tower 20 stories high. Fortunately, a collection of architectural artifacts from the early building can be seen in the subway corridor of the Siebens Medical Education Building, which now occupies the site of the pioneer structure. Incorporated into its subway walls are a usable drinking fountain, a staircase balustrade, and some decorative elements from the facade of the old building. Nearby, the wrought iron railing from the original exterior balcony forms the base of a long display case that highlights, through photographs and artifacts, other details of the first Mayo Clinic building and the importance of its design.

The construction of the first Mayo Clinic building between 1912 and 1914 marked the inauguration of Dr. Henry S. Plummer's plan to coordinate and integrate Mayo activities into a unique type of private group practice of medicine. Dr. William J. Mayo, the elder Mayo brother, had frequently said that patients were not like a wagon that could be taken apart and repaired in pieces; they were to be examined and treated as a whole person. Supporting Dr. Will's conviction and giving form to the concept was the first Mayo building committee led by Dr. Plummer. The committee also included Dr. Louis B. Wilson and Mr. Harry J. Harwick.

Since joining Mayo in 1901, Dr. Plummer had been an exponent of improved operational methods. When the increasing numbers of patients taxed the Mayos' rented offices downtown, he finally secured the brothers' approval for the construction of a specially designed building on the site of their father's first home in Rochester. His building committee colleagues soon discovered his dedication and clear understanding of the challenge facing them, and thus he became the dominant figure in the planning of the building.

After enlisting Ellerbe and Rounds, a St. Paul architectural firm, Dr. Plummer insisted that a study of the needs of the medical practice be completed before any drawings were prepared. He undertook the study himself and prepared an outline of the organizational components of the new building. Because no precedent existed for such a structure, the undertaking relied heavily on Dr. Plummer's perceptive insights and attention to detail.

The building cornerstone of white Carthage marble from Missouri was laid on Oct. 9, 1912. Dr. Charles H. Mayo handled the trowel, and his brother Dr. Will made the dedicatory remarks. In part, he said: "Within its walls all classes of people, the poor as well as the rich, without regard to color or creed, shall be cared for without discrimination." The ceremony was attended by Mayo staff members and visiting physicians from Alaska (then a US territory), South America, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and various parts of the United States.

The building opened 2 years later on Mar. 6, 1914. It contained special features that Dr. Plummer had incorporated for comfort and efficiency. Warm-colored Rookwood architectural tile from Cincinnati, Ohio, decorated the main floor, walls, and stairs. Special communication devices designed or modified by Dr. Plummer were installed to enhance staff interaction. A centralized file of medical records was available for easy access. The design of the building also helped to organize the diagnostic, surgical, and research endeavors of the clinic into divisions and sections for the first time. Throughout the ensuing years, the philosophy developed for the design of the first Mayo Clinic building has continued to influence Mayo construction.

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