

Knocking on Main Street's Virtual Doors



ILLUSTRATION: Dr. Peter Pineo's property on Main Street, Hyannis

As you approach the counter, the bookstore clerk asks, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

The answer is complicated: "No, I didn't, because I wasn't looking for *something*. I was looking at *everything*, waiting to be inspired."

If you're fascinated by history, you may start out looking for something – say, the evolution of Hyannis and its captains houses over the centuries – but find yourself happily sidetracked to learn more about a Civil War veteran who opened a marine hospital on the east side of Lewis Bay in the 19th century.

January's Hyannis Historical Society newsletter, created by board member John Richmond and accessible at hyannishistoricalsociety.org (just click on "News"), included more of his virtual walking tour of the East End of Main Street, including the substantial property of Dr. Peter Pineo. A fascinating illustration of the complex of buildings, including a fanciful tower, demanded further investigation.

Born in Nova Scotia in 1825, Dr. Pineo was fated to be a witness to history. As a medical student, he saw Dr. John Warren of Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital perform the first major operation on a patient anesthetized with ether. In 1861, he went to war as surgeon of the Ninth Massachusetts Regiment and was quickly appointed to the staffs of several generals in the field before becoming medical inspector of the Army. In that role, he inspected Fortress Monroe in Virginia, where he also oversaw the care of the captured president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis.

After the war, Dr. Pineo settled in Hyannis and established a surgical practice. He advocated for the creation of a marine hospital for the Barnstable district, and in 1871 *The Barnstable Patriot* shared good news:

"The Secretary of the Treasury has authorized the Collector of Customs to contract with Dr. Pineo of Hyannis, to undertake the care of Marine Hospital patients in this District. Dr. Pineo has purchased an estate near Hyannis harbor, which he has conveniently and comfortably furnished for this purpose, and is ready to receive patients who are entitled to marine hospital relief."

The *Patriot* and its competitor in Yarmouth, *The Register*, agreed on very little, but this was an exception:

"We believe with the *Register* that the selection of a physician for this service is a most fortunate one. Dr. Pineo is well known for both his humane and gentlemanly character as well as for his high professional attainments. As a Regimental and Brigade Surgeon, and as a Division Medical Inspector during

the late rebellion, he won rapid promotion simply by his professional merits, with the warm approbation of Gen. Mead and his associates. In selecting him for this service a meritorious and patriotic gentleman has been appointed, and a thoroughly competent and obliging officer has been assigned to this important position.”

Just a year later, the *Provincetown Advocate* was celebrating Dr. Pineo’s organizational as well as surgical skills: “A case in point is that of Mr. Orris Crowell, of West Yarmouth, whose eye Dr. Pineo recently removed to save him from total blindness, and who now wears an artificial eye as perfect in appearance as a natural one. This is only one case, but it shows the advantages our seamen enjoy, who, instead of being obliged to pay the large prices of city surgeons, by application to the surgeon of the Marine Hospital at Hyannis, receive the best of professional skill, which compensates for the heavy hospital tax paid by the sailors.”

By 1876, Dr. Pineo was campaigning for a larger facility. A Boston paper noted that the Superintendent of the United States Marine Hospital Service on Cape Cod “is urging the passage of an appropriation for the erection of a Pavilion Hospital at Hyannis. Now many sick and disabled seamen of vessels belonging to or touching at the nine ports of the two hundred miles of the sea coast of Cape Cod have to be provided with relief in private houses, or transported by rail to Boston.” Eventually, an \$18,000 appropriation was approved for the building on Lewis Bay.

The hospital was not without its critics. In 1876, the *Register* reported a “communication... reflecting seriously on the condition and management of this hospital” in the *Boston Herald*. Noting that “It has been our duty to inspect this hospital for several years past,” the Yarmouth paper avowed that “the building is a comfortable one, that the rooms for patients are fitted with the best of iron bedsteads, husk or ‘excelsior’ under-beds, hair mattresses, neat sheets and blankets; the rooms are well warmed; the attention good; and no one who knows Dr. Pineo will be likely to charge him with want of kindness and sympathy... in his treatment of patients.”

In the 1880s, Dr. Pineo retired from active practice and relocated to the Boston area, where he died in West Somerville in 1891. The marine hospital on Lewis Bay was eventually replaced by a boat yard, but the area remained fertile for the growth of medical services as evidenced in the nearby towers of Cape Cod Hospital. As for the doctor’s residence on Main Street, the

Parkway Professional Plaza building was built on the site at 51 Main Street in 1976.

Knock on any of the virtual doors of the homes on the society's historical tour and you'll likely find stories like this one. You won't know what you're looking for, but you'll be glad you found it!



PHOTO: Dr. Peter Pineo in a photograph taken by the famed Matthew Brady studio.

CLARIFICATION: Documents recently found in the Hyannis Public Library's collection offer a clearer view of whether Dr. Pineo operated an official Marine Hospital in Hyannis, or provided medical services to seamen through his own practice. It's clear that the doctor spent years advocating for a marine hospital to be opened in the village, and even that an appropriation for same was proposed, but it appears the final step was never taken.

In February 1937, Acting U.S. Surgeon General W. E. Draper replied to a request from Hyannis Public Library Librarian Ora Hinckley. *"Dr. Pineo settled in Hyannis during the year 1866," Draper wrote, at which time he entered into a contract with the Marine Hospital Service... for the care of sick and disabled seamen, performing these duties until the year 1880 when he retired. Dr. Pineo worked on a contract basis only and at no time was he a regularly appointed officer of this Service. There is no record of a Federal owned hospital ever having been established in Hyannis and it is assumed that the hospital to which Mrs. Hinckley refers was one privately owned or rented and operated by Dr. Pineo in which beneficiaries of the Marine Hospital Service were hospitalized... These hospitals, however, were not U.S. marine hospitals."*