

# Provider of Last Resort

## The Story of the Closure of the Philadelphia General Hospital

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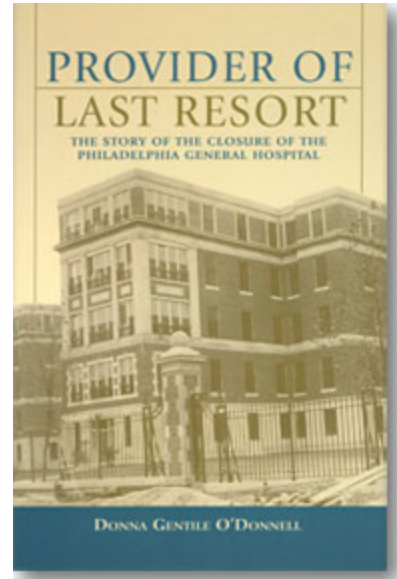
### From the Introduction

In 1977, when the last patient from Philadelphia General Hospital (PGH) was transferred out through the wrought-iron gates, the end of an era was signaled.

Preceding the closure, many forces, large and small, contributed ultimately to the fate of PGH--among them, a political roller-coaster ride that spanned decades; an epic public relations battle; and a major realignment of federal funding streams, which had unintended public policy consequences.

The research for this book made it clear that no one worldview would emerge from the long shadow that Philadelphia General Hospital cast over the life of the city. To some, it was the best hospital in the world. To others, it was the worst. To some, PGH was a remarkable institution that fell on hard times. To others, it was the only place black Philadelphians felt comfortable going to because of its early nondiscrimination policy, which preceded the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. To some, Frank Rizzo was the racist mayor who closed the only hospital that black folks had. To others, Frank Rizzo was the mayor who had the courage to close the worst hospital in the city and force the other hospitals to open their doors wider toward equal treatment.

The institutional and political battles that ensued over the last two decades of Philadelphia General Hospital's existence set the stage for its undoing. What is clear is that PGH did much to shape the development of health care delivery in many important ways, namely, through the synergy between clinical research and the practice of medicine under William Osler; the



development of organized nursing in acute care under Alice Fisher; and its embedded notions of social obligation to care for the sick, the needy, and the poor, which found expression in care delivered for those who sought the refuge PGH offered.

In the early 1700s, before the America we know came to be, notions of the "worthy poor" and European-rooted traditions of benevolence served as the underpinnings of pre-American society. It was in this pre-nation state context that the earliest incarnation of the Philadelphia General Hospital, as an almshouse, emerged. Over the centuries that followed, until its closing in 1977, PGH, in all its iterations, stood for "care and cure." But by the time PGH closed, even its strongest supporters and stalwart believers faced insurmountable odds against the survival of this once-noble institution. At the zenith of its institutional life, with 4,000 beds and its own fire department, PGH was a small city unto itself. Resting on 87 acres, PGH became a center of international excellence in science, research, and patient care.

Over time, the health care delivery system expanded and matured, and Philadelphia General Hospital began to lose its luster as a leading-edge entity. Fiscal pressures, bureaucratic complexity, and political expediency; the rearrangement of funding streams and institutional relationships; the forward march of science and research in a changing marketplace; the reorientation of social and institutional structures, including desegregation, the rise of the nonprofit hospital sector, and the creation of the Philadelphia Hospitals Authority, which made tax-exempt financing available for the first time to Philadelphia nonprofit hospitals—all of these phenomena played against the backdrop of this faltering public hospital, which loomed large in the public consciousness as its failing became a highly public matter, the subject of multiple tabloid exposés. Within the context of these failures, and on the pages of the Philadelphia newspapers, a public debate raged over the life, circumstances, and (ultimate) fate of PGH.

What remains today of the Philadelphia General Hospital physical plant is one small building used as an outpatient mental health facility and a brick and wrought-iron fence that serves as an entrance point to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), and the research complex of CHOP and the University of Pennsylvania (PENN). What remains of the spirit of PGH is a noble tradition and aspiration, neither fully realized, nor fully extinguished.