

# The Life of Henry Foster, M.D.— An Overview

*Written in part by Arch Merrill on the occasion of the Sanitarium's 100th Anniversary.*

**B**EFORE THE white man came, the Senecas discovered in the northern periphery of their lovely Finger Lakes land there were mineral springs and a racing sulphur brook whose pungent waters had strange powers to heal the sick and refresh the weary of the tribe.

Early in the 19th Century the first white pioneers came and soon there arose around the sulphur springs on the New York State frontier a tiny settlement, with an inn, a smithy and a half dozen houses straggling along a rutty road.

From the Indians the settlers learned of the curative properties of the sulphur waters and about 1825 a shed-like bath house with a trough in it was erected near the main spring. People came in carriages and on horseback from the larger nearby communities of Geneva and Canandaigua to fill their jugs with the mineral water.

Destiny came to the little Ontario County settlement known only as the sulphur springs and soon to be renamed Clifton Springs, in the fall of 1849 in the person of a tall young Vermont-born physician. His name was Henry Foster and he was a far-sighted and an enterprising man, as well as an intensely idealistic one.

He was the founder of one of America's best known health centers, the Clifton Springs Sanitarium and Clinic.

It began life in 1850 in the budding era of the water cure and the mineral baths in America. It has survived nearly every other American spa—because it was not content merely to remain a spa. Today, Clifton Springs Hospital and Clinic serves the people of the area as the referral center of the Finger Lakes in an ultra-modern facility which was opened in 1972.

**C**LIFTON SPRINGS HOSPITAL AND CLINIC is a living monument to its founder. Twenty years before he died, Doctor Foster in a remarkable Deed of Trust in which he literally gave away the enterprise to which he had devoted his adult life, charted irrevocably the course it was to follow for all time. Founded in a spirit of unselfish service, today it is a non-profit, eleemosynary institution, supported by no public funds. All profits go back into the operation of the institution or aiding those who need financial assistance.



DR. HENRY FOSTER IN THE EARLY SIXTIES

The story of the Clifton Springs Sanitarium and Clinic, particularly the record of its first half century, is essentially the story of Henry Foster, able administrator, idealistic Christian and above all, a sound and progressive physician, often years ahead of his time.

His early years were years of struggle. His father, a linseed oil manufacturer, of pioneer New England Methodist stock, lost his business and young Foster had not only to shift for himself but also to help his parents as well. He was 27 years old when he was graduated from the Cleveland (Ohio) Medical College with his hard-won degree of doctor of medicine.

## He Worked Long Hours

**B**EFORE ENTERING college, Henry Foster had served in a water cure at Lowell, Massachusetts. His first position after graduation was as head of the medical department of the New Graefenburg Water Cure near Utica, N.Y. He worked long hours, studied the water cure therapy, edited a water cure journal and saved his money. In a little over a year he had a nest egg of \$1,000.

At that time, when water cures were springing up all over the country, medicine was in a primitive state. Surgery was crude. Anesthetics were just beginning to be used. Bacteriology was unknown. Nursing was in its infancy. The inadequacy of medical practice drove the young doctor to seek something to supplement it. His experience in water cures had convinced him that there was much to be gained from hygienic living.

So he determined to establish a water cure of his own, one to be operated on Christian principles and not for gain alone. To the young physician it was a call to service, not just a business venture.

The doctor had looked at several sites before he came to the sulphur springs in Ontario County in the Fall of 1849. He was attracted by the abundant fresh water supply in addition to the profuse mineral waters in the marshy glade. He had found the site for his water cure and he would look no more.

## He Had Only \$1,000

**B**UT HE had only his \$1,000 savings. He needed and found outside capital. A joint stock company was formed with 20 shares at \$500 a share. Doctor Foster had two shares. There were nine other stockholders. The chosen site, the wild sulphur brook and ten acres of land, was acquired from the heirs of Phelps and Gorham, the pioneer owners of all Western New York. Doctor Foster was appointed medical director at \$900 a year. Another stockholder became business manager and treasurer.

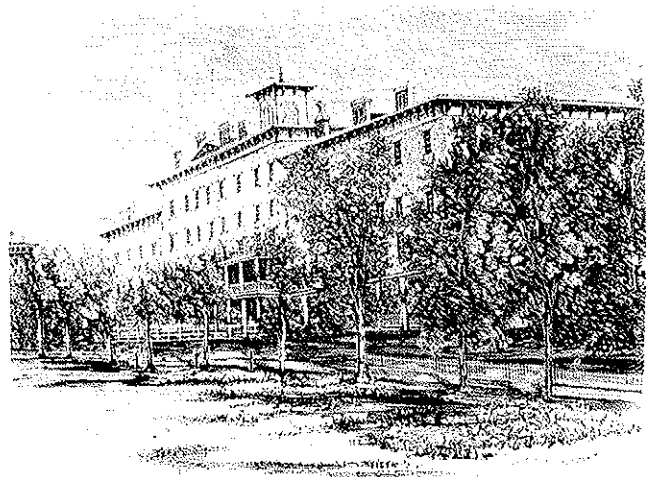
Immediate plans were made for a building and that first water cure, a small, frame structure, was opened at Clifton Springs on September 13, 1850. There was a sizeable waiting list, including many former Foster patients at New Graefenburg. Conditions were primitive. Wood was the only fuel and



FRONT VIEW OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING

candles provided the only lighting. The staff was small. In fact, Doctor Foster was its only physician for the first 18 months. Still the new water cure prospered under the founder's driving energy and despite the interference of other stockholders. Doctor Foster then and there vowed that one day he would be sole owner.

The original building had to be remodeled and added to a dozen times. Grounds were laid out, with ponds, brooks, flower beds and rustic bridges. In 1854 the capitalization of the enterprise was doubled and the Clifton Springs Water Cure Company was organized.



FRONT AND WEST VIEW OF THE SANITARIUM IN 1880

## His Brother Joins Him

**I**N 1854, also, the large, white, seven-gabled residence was built near the sulphur brook. There Doctor Foster and his wife lived and died and it is still known as the Foster Cottage. Until recently it was the residence of every superintendent of the Sanitarium.

That same year of 1854 Henry Foster's brother, William, joined him at Clifton Springs. It was he who built the four-story Foster Building, once called the Annex, across the street from the main building. It originally was designed as a hotel and for a time housed the Sanitarium hospital on its upper floors. It is now the village's leading commercial block.

The water cure was growing so fast that by the mid 1850s new buildings were imperative. In 1856 a new east wing of brick, four stories high, was opened. In 1864 a west wing of the same size was added and in 1865 a central five-story structure was completed, replacing the original frame water cure.

## He Becomes Sole Owner

**H**E HAD been gradually buying up the shares of the other stockholders and in 1867 he became sole owner of the enterprise. Another cherished dream had become true.

In 1871 Doctor Foster married Miss Mary Edwards, like himself of old New England stock. She had come to Clifton Springs with her father, an invalid. She shared her husband's religious convictions and was a true helpmate. She carried on the management of the Sanitarium after her husband's death.

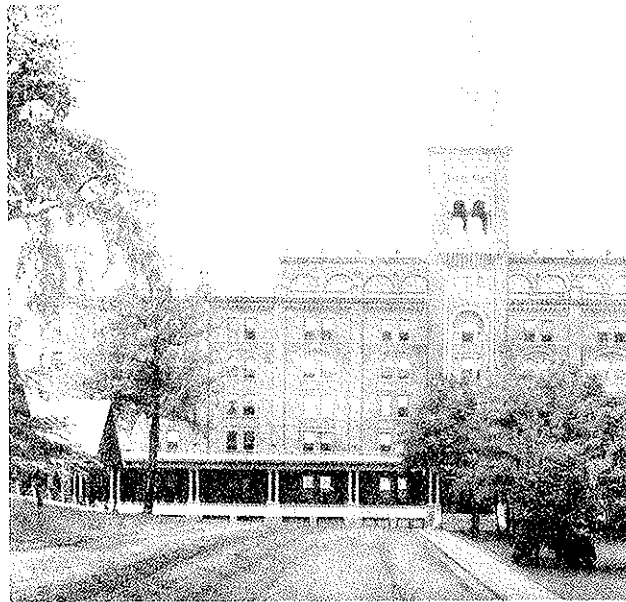
That year of the Fosters' marriage saw the name of the Clifton Springs Water Cure changed to the Clifton Springs Sanitarium.

The backwoods settlement that the doctor had found when he first came to the sulphur springs in 1849 had by then grown into a prosperous village, thanks to the Sanitarium. Doctor Foster always evinced the deepest interest in the welfare of the community. He led in all civic endeavors and gave liberally to all religious denominations.

After some of his employes in 1877 had formed a YMCA group in the Sanitarium gymnasium, he built and donated the two-story brick structure adjoining the Foster Building that houses the village "Y" today. Clifton Springs is the smallest community anywhere with a YMCA having a full-time paid director.



MARY EDWARDS FOSTER



MAIN BUILDING COMPLETED 1896

## A Fireproof Building

**F**OR YEARS Doctor Foster was constantly haunted by fear of a fire in his Sanitarium. Many a night he prowled the buildings on the lookout for the enemy. He resolved to build a Sanitarium that would be fireproof. With him a resolve meant action.

It was a herculean undertaking and into it went about all the cash the Fosters had. In September of 1892 razing of the west wing began. By the following June that section of the new plant was complete at a cost of more than \$143,000. Of that sum the Fosters put in \$60,000.

To help defray construction costs the Board adopted a plan of endowing a few rooms in perpetuity. The donor of \$15,000 was assured for all time room, board, and medical care for himself or such other person he should designate. The plan extended to the donor's heirs and assigns.

Funds for the eastern section, which was completed in June, 1896, at a cost of \$123,000, were raised by issuing bonds secured by a mortgage on the property. These bonds were placed mostly in the hands of friends of the institution.

On July 10, 1896, the imposing new plant was dedicated. It represented another of Doctor Foster's cherished ambitions—a Sanitarium that would be fireproof.

The bearded benign founder was the center of the semi-centennial ceremonies on September 13, 1900, just fifty years after he as a young doctor had first opened his water cure in the sulphur glade.

## Things Begin to Happen

**T**HE YEAR of 1881 was an epochal one in the annals of Clifton Springs. On Nov. 1 of that year, 31 years after the founding of his little water cure, Doctor Foster and his wife executed a Deed of Trust, which conveyed to the Clifton Springs Sanitarium the plant with all its equipment, to be held in trust for certain purposes forever and under certain conditions. It was a selfless document, assuring only that the Fosters exercise supervision over the institution during their life-times.

The Deed decreed that all profits must go back into the plant. Control is vested in a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees. Some members are chosen by the board and others hold their trusteeships ex officio, by virtue of their offices in certain religious organizations. Several denominations are represented on the Board.

The document also decreed that the institution maintain a chapel and employ a full-time chaplain as long as it exists.

The following paragraph in the Deed of Trust gave irrevocable perpetuity to Henry Foster's life work and aims:

"If it shall happen that the Sanitarium in its management shall be diverted from the spirit and the letter of this instrument or shall be prostituted to private or selfish interests, it shall be the duty of the Trustees to close the institution, sell the property—and divide the amount—together with the endowment funds of the institution equally among the several missionary societies represented in the Board of Trustees, to be used by the said societies respectively for foreign missions."

A remarkable man was Henry Foster. He made sure that the institution he founded and guided should always follow his policies.

He was a sound physician who kept abreast of all medical developments. He was no faddist nor was he a slave to any one school of thought. He was a true eclectic who borrowed whatever he thought was good from every source. He was never content to drift or to stand still.

He was constantly enlarging his equipment and installing new methods. He early introduced hand massage and electrochemical, electrothermal, Turkish and salt baths. He established a gymnasium with a competent instructor in the infancy of physical culture. He recognized the importance of mental therapy before most medical men of his time. He pioneered in opening a laboratory for the study and diagnosis of disease. He introduced a surgical department and an eye, ear, nose and throat division at an early date.

Doctor Foster had a suspension apparatus installed for the correction of spinal deformities when ortho-

pedic science was virtually unknown. He started a nurses' training school in 1892. As early as 1897 he began use of the revolutionary X-Ray. His apparatus, one of the first used in this country, came from Germany.

## A Strong Policy

**M**ANY YEARS ago he introduced the policy, now so strongly established at Clifton Springs, of maintaining close relations between the patient and the home physician by means of complete reports of findings to guide subsequent care.

Physical exercise, rest, peace of mind, the baths, along with up to date medical and surgical treatment were the principles of the Foster health-building creed. The Clifton Springs Hospital and Clinic has never deviated from those fundamentals while keeping, as Doctor Foster did, well in the van of the march of science.

A crowning achievement of the 1890's was the erection of the present imposing five-story main building whose baronial red tower may be seen for miles around. Once it was surmounted by a lofty spire. This building is now known as the Spa Apartments, a Senior Citizens' complex, which is home to over 160 residents.

All of the Sanitarium buildings have been approximately on the same site, the first water cure, from 1850 to 1865; then the brick building, erected in stages from 1856 to 1865, which lasted for three decades.

In that span of years, many changes had come to America. Electric lighting had taken the place of candles, kerosene and gas. Wood stoves had given way to coal furnaces and central heating. Fireproof brick and steel construction had supplanted frame and brick.

## Doctor Foster Sleeps

**O**N JANUARY 13, 1901, Henry Foster died in the white cottage. Two days later, on his 80th birthday, simple morning services were held in the Foster Cottage with only the family and intimate friends present. Then the casket was borne to the Chapel of the Sanitarium, there to lie in state until the public service in the afternoon, in which some of the nation's leading churchmen took part and which almost everyone in Clifton Springs attended.

Doctor Foster sleeps in the village cemetery. There is a suitable monument at his grave. But all about are living monuments, the health center which he founded and the village that grew up around it.