The Intersection of Social Justice with the History of Nursing

This book collection focuses on the history of nursing and the social conditions that have influenced the actions of nurses and nursing. It also reflects how nursing in turn has influenced and improved the social conditions, and hence the health, of society.
The Inseparability of Social Justice and Nursing

When I undertake an endeavor, I also seek to understand the greater picture. How we arrive at where we are is vital to where we are going, whatever our field. When I enrolled as a nursing student at Yavapai College in 2009, I quickly realized that it was necessary to learn about and honor the contributions of the nurses who led the way and created this great profession. This is especially true given the exceptionally rigorous path of study and clinical commitments a nursing program requires. It is too easy to focus only on the clinical or medical knowledge, and forget to look around and appreciate what the founding nurses, and current nurse leaders, went through to create our profession and improve the lives of all people. Taking into account the stringent social mores and laws of the times, and understanding the racial and gender limits, it is remarkable what Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole, Clara Barton, and Susie King Taylor accomplished. The contributions to overall public health by Dorothea Dix, Lilian Wald, and Dr. Mary Walker helped us arrive at a healthy 21st century. Their opinions and viewpoints about existing social ills and concerns were ignored and ridiculed because they were women. So they framed these issues in terms of improving overall health and thus changed our society for the better. Dress reform, temperance, suffrage, reproductive rights, child work laws, care for indigent women and men, prisoners, the poor, and the mentally insane were all improved because these nurses and this vanguard rebel doctors saw that by addressing the existing social policies that led to damaged health we could achieve a greater good for society.

The nursing profession began with Florence Nightingale during the 1850’s and the Crimean War. In a time when (white) women had very few rights, and generally were under the control of a male relative (father, husband) Florence addressed the abysmal rate of death in
military hospitals and, flouting all social constraints for women, traveled to the Turkish Scutari Hospital, where she insisted that women be allowed to nurse the wounded men. This had never been allowed before, due to the 'delicate sensibilities of women', and the general, overwhelming belief that nurses "were generally those who were too old, too weak, too drunken, too dirty, too stolid, or too bad to do anything else" (as quoted by Florence Nightingale of the prevailing attitudes). Single-handedly Nightingale began the science, art, and profession of nursing. The death rate of these wounded soldiers dropped dramatically. Mary Seacole also tended to the men laying on the Crimean battlefields (the Jamaican Clara Barton) while overcoming racial as well as gender restrictions (slavery was outlawed in British holdings in 1833, but racial restrictions and indignities continued). Clara Barton also fought gender limitations when she insisted on traveling to the battlefields to helping injured Civil War soldiers. Suzie King Taylor, a slave freed during the Civil War, is generally regarded as the first African-American nurse, who overcame all the indignities and limitations of being a slave and still insisted on tending to black men on the field of battle. Freed slaves may have fought for the Union, but it was the rare white man who would tend to an injured black soldier.

Dorothea Dix, Lilian Wald, and other nurses of the early 1900's transformed the profession of nursing as well as society at a time when women did not have the legal right to vote, be educated, be entitled to their own wages, and were required to have a male escort at all times or be viewed as a 'woman of ill repute'. Yet these women fought and struggled and suffered ridicule and worse, in order to improve the health of all people. Their struggles and successes and contribution to nursing as well as the advancement of society are truly remarkable.

As I immersed myself in my nursing schooling, I sought out books by and about early nurses and nursing. At first I checked them out of the library. Then I wanted to own them as I
envisioned future PhD studies and an ongoing love of this subject. I love ‘meeting’ these women. As I traveled to sights of nursing (Philadelphia General Hospital, Clara Barton National Historical Site, American Red Cross National Headquarters, Arlington National Cemetery, Women’s Rights National Historical Site, Chimborazo Civil War Hospital Site, Shiloh National Battlefield), I was ‘introduced’ to other notable nurses of the past, and found more obscure books, especially many first person accounts of women and nursing during the Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. Visits to universities such as Johns Hopkins School of Nursing led me to nursing texts written by Isabel Robb Hampton, an early nurse educator and administrator (3rd edition, subsequently donated to Yavapai College Verde Campus Nursing History Display that I created). The development of the Red Cross, Red Cross Nursing, and the Army Nurse Corps are tightly interwoven. Just as the need for manpower led to the inclusion, then integration, of black men into the military, and as they struggled for the permanent rights they had gained temporarily during wartime when they returned, so too did women in the military. Prior to World War II, ‘Rosie the Riveter’ was prevented from doing a ‘man’s’ job, and women’s struggles after the war to maintain their newly found social and economic opportunities led to the advancement of the roles and rights of women in our society. Economic and legal advancement contribute to an improved women’s health, and the overall health of our society. Nurses gained leadership experience and sought to secure and professionalize the field of nursing, and to stop being hand-maidens to (male) doctors.

Women of color face even more setbacks and limitations. First-hand stories by these women educate all of us as to the greater struggles they had to overcome and succeed, and all the more great is the success as they faced more adversity than a white woman in the times. Slavery, forced removal and migration, Jim Crow, lynching, and oppression in general affect society’s
health. Black nurses' stories, Native women's stories and histories give us first-hand accounts of how white society has impacted the long-term health of these people. These insights give us the ability to have compassion and understanding in a society that generally looks to villainize these populations. Our understanding of these issues may help us to make improvements in the health of these populations. The elimination of health disparities (a disproportionate burden of disease borne by poor and minority people) is the top goal of Healthy People 2020, the United States' health blueprint. My collection is severely lacking in Hispanic stories. While I have read magazine articles of Hispanic nurses' contributions to nursing, I have yet to find and obtain any histories written by or about Hispanic nurses' contributions to American nursing.

The profession of nursing has always been an intersection of social context, activism, and caring. The early and prescient understanding that health issues can be solved by addressing social conditions guides us today just as it did Florence Nightingale and Dorothea Dix. Most of these women in this book collection can be described as nurse (a few as doctor), feminist, social activist, and pioneer. The books in this collection inspire me, teach me, and guide me as I become a nurse leader achieving better health for the U.S. There are still many social conditions that must be addressed that prevent ALL of us of achieving life, liberty, and health.