

## Records of the Board of Trustees of Shirras Dispensary, 1851–1956

*The Charleston Archive, Special Collections Department  
Compiled by Nicholas M. Butler, Ph.D., Manager, 2005*

Collation: 2.25 linear feet

Description: This collection includes administrative records (1868–1915), financial records (1851–1915), insurance policies (1872–1915), a letterpress copybook (1896–1906), published rules and regulations (1896), physicians' reports (1869–1882), and 20th century copies of the will of Alexander Shirras (1810).

The administrative records of the dispensary's Board of Trustees consist of some correspondence (concerning applications, resignations, recommendations, and general business requests), receipts and bills for medicinal supplies and construction materials, and legal documents such as bonds, property leases and mortgages. The minutes of the dispensary's board of trustees appear to have been lost, although some rough minutes the board's meetings in 1888 are filed among these administrative records. Of particular interest among these materials is the file for 1885, which contains materials concerning litigation between Dr. Walter Peyre Porcher and the dispensary's board of trustees, et al. This matter concerns Dr. Porcher's alleged neglect in the death of Ben Reed, a nine-year-old African-American boy.

The financial records include bank deposit books (1886–1913), check stub booklets (1886–1915), a ledger book (1851–1914), and a receipt book (1866–1880).

Two types of physicians' reports are included in this collection. Annual reports of the number and types of cases treated by the dispensary's physicians are present for the years 1888, 1891, and 1894. Quarterly reports, spanning the years 1869–1882, also provide statistics on the number of cases and variety of diseases found among the dispensary's patients. These reports represent the city's Eastern and Western divisions (1869–1871), Health District No. 2 (1872–1873), and Health District No. 3 (1874–1882). The statistics for whites and non-whites are separated in these reports, sometimes on a single sheet and sometimes in a separate document.

Also included in this collection are several keys to the Shirras Dispensary, which are identified as having been in the possession of Dr. Edward Parker in 1914.

Historical Note: The Shirras Dispensary, a municipal free clinic and pharmacy, was created by Charleston City Council on 30 November 1813. The impetus for this act came from the will of Alexander Shirras (died 1811), a native of Old Deer, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, who spent the last thirty years of his life as a successful merchant in Charleston. In his 1810 will, Shirras left his residence and funds for the establishment of a clinic to treat the poor of the city who could not pay for medical treatment or prescriptions. Located at the northwest corner of Meeting and Federal (now Society) Streets, next to Westminster Presbyterian Church (now Trinity Methodist Church), the Shirras residence was a large brick single house with a smaller building in the rear.

The main house was rented by the city's Health Department, and the dispensary was located in the smaller outbuilding.

For several years after its creation in 1813, the Medical Society of South Carolina lobbied to have the organizational structure of the Shirras Dispensary amended to have one salaried physician rather than rotating voluntary physicians.<sup>1</sup> The extant minutes of the Medical Society, now at the Waring Historical Library, contain many references to the activities at the dispensary.

Under the conditions of Alexander Shirras' will, the Shirras Dispensary was run by a board of trustees consisting of the mayor of Charleston, the president of the Medical Society of South Carolina, and the president of St. Andrew's Society. One person occupied the post of Secretary and Treasurer. The board of trustees elected physicians to serve the dispensary. The Shirras fund initially paid the salary of a single physician, but in 1832 the growing need led the board to elect a second physician. After 1865 the board noted the increased demand on the dispensary's services due to the growing number of freed slaves in Charleston, and the number of physicians swelled to four.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this era, the physician's salaries, medical supplies, property repairs, and other expenses were paid from funds resulting from several sources: the rental of the Shirras residence and also tenements on Champney's Alley, interest from investments, and an annual appropriation from the city council. Generally, physicians at the Dispensary would give patients a voucher for medicine to be redeemed at a pharmacy.

In 1887, a group of physicians from the Charleston Polyclinic, a private organization, volunteered to work with the Dispensary's patients "without fee or reward."<sup>3</sup> These physicians were motivated by the desire to focus their attention on the specialty diseases that they might not have had a chance to study in detail.<sup>4</sup> While the Shirras Dispensary was open Monday through Saturday, the visiting Polyclinic physicians appointed certain hours each week to treat specific medical problems. Their specializations reflected the departments of their private organization: general surgery, diseases of women and children, diseases genito-urinary and rectum, dermatology, diseases of the eye and ear, and diseases of the nose and mouth.

The Board of Trustees occasionally took issue with their physicians, as in the case of Dr. Walter P. Porcher, who was accused of neglect in the death of Ben Reed in 1885. Reed died of lockjaw because the medicine prescribed was supposedly not covered by the dispensary. Reed's mother was unable to obtain the medication, and Dr. Porcher refused to visit the patient again until the medicine had been obtained. Unfortunately, the boy died before any further treatment took place.

The Shirras residence had become a financial drain before 1885, when the Board decided to re-erect the building because the repairs were too extensive. Before the work commenced, however, a cyclone hit Charleston in August 1885 and further damaged the building. The new estimate for restoration ran from \$1,300 to \$1,400. By ordinance, the city council temporarily took control of some of the Dispensary's patients. Before restoration was complete, a major earthquake hit the city on 31 August 1886.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis P. Jervy and W. Curtis Worthington Jr, *The Medical Society of South Carolina: The First Two Hundred Years* (Charleston: Medical University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 12–14.

<sup>2</sup> *Charleston Year Book, 1887*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Shirras' Dispensary: Society and Meeting Sts., Charleston, S.C., Founded A.D. 1813* (Charleston, S.C.: The Dispensary, 1896), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Charleston Year Book, 1887*, 94.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of dispensary patients and the amount of available funds began to diminish. Board members began covering expenses out of their own pocket; bills for construction materials, labor, and gas piled up.

During 1921–22, the Shirras Dispensary began to work closely with Roper Hospital, and even referred patients to that larger, more modern facility. Finally, on 13 January 1923, the board of trustees announced that the offices of the Shirras Dispensary would be closing and all medical activities would be transferred to Roper Hospital.<sup>5</sup> In 1935 the dispensary section of Roper Hospital was renamed the Shirras dispensary.<sup>6</sup>

Almost immediately after the initial move to Roper Hospital, the dispensary's board of trustees wanted to sell the Shirras property. At one point a pair of prospective tenants wanted to use it as a boarding house, and in 1954 Trinity Methodist Church was interested in buying the residence as well. In 1921, however, the city council had filed suit against the board of trustees because the conditions of Alexander Shirras' will did not grant the board the authority to dispose of the property. Although the board did eventually receive permission to sell the property in 1921, a sale did not immediately take place. The property was finally sold in the spring of 1956, when Trinity Methodist paid \$25,000 for the property. The proceeds from this sale went to medical treatment and prescriptions for the poor at Roper Hospital. By July 1956 the church was poised to raze the house to make way for their new Sunday school.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Charleston Year Book*, 1922, 605.

<sup>6</sup> *Charleston Year Book*, 1936, 150.

<sup>7</sup> *Charleston News and Courier*, 16 July 1956.

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## Collection Outline

- I. Administrative Materials, 1868–1915 BOX 1–2
  - a. Correspondence
  - b. Legal Documents
  - c. Minutes
  - d. Receipts & Bills
  
- II. Financial Records, 1851–1915 BOX 3
  - a. Bank Deposit Books
  - b. Check Stub Booklets
  - c. Ledger
  - d. Receipt Book
  
- III. Insurance & Fire Policies, 1872–1915 BOX 4
  
- IV. Shirras' Keys, ca. 1914
  
- V. Letterpress Copybook of the Secretary-Treasurer  
of the Board of Trustees, 1896–1905
  
- VI. Publications: Rules & Regulations 1896
  
- VII. Reports BOX 5
  - a. Annual Report Folder 1888, 1891, 1894
  - b. Quarterly Reports 1869–1871
  - c. Quarterly Reports, 1872–1882
  
- VIII. Will of Alexander Shirras, 1810 (1914 copy)