The community of Hospital Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis originated July 2, 1844 at Telgte, Westphalia, Germany, with the express purpose of taking care of the sick poor in their homes in rural areas.

In 1875, the Sisters welcomed an invitation from Bishop Baltes in Alton, Illinois to come to America. Twenty Sisters, volunteered for the mission and boarded the ship Maas for the three-week journey to New York. On November 3, 1875 they arrived in Alton to be missioned to different areas.

Father Weis, Pastor of St. Anthony’s Parish, had invited the Sisters to come to Effingham. Three of the Sisters arrived on November 15, 1875. These first Sisters were Sister Euphemia Gartner, Superior; Sister Francis Dreisvogt; and Sister Fortunata Honkamp. They were greeted by the pastor and people of St. Anthony’s Parish church. Soon they were going about the area serving the poor and the sick, without thought of any return. All were welcomed, regardless of religion. Doctors soon recognized that their care was truly professional, as well as generous and concerned.

They had not been here long when people began asking them to build a hospital. Michael Moenning donated several lots for the building and support quickly followed. The cornerstone was laid and the hospital dedicated on August 27, 1876.

Barely a year later, on September 15, 1877, St. Anthony Hospital was opened. The two-story hospital was 46 by 47 feet and provided for 18 patients. It was built at a cost of $9,000.

As the city of Effingham grew and the number of patients expanded, additions to the hospital were built throughout the years, eventually expanding the hospital to 35 rooms.
Crowded quarters in the hospital would not permit the kind of care St. Anthony’s was committed to give. In 1945, a temporary home for the Sisters was erected, and the Sisters moved from the third floor of the hospital, providing space to increase patient capacity to 110. The second part of the plan provided for building a new hospital in 1951 or 1952...so they thought.

The fire claimed 77 victims from everywhere – patients, newborn children, nurses, Sisters, a Priest, and employees. One nurse, Fern Riley, stayed with the newborns so they would not be alone.

Help came from everywhere. Doctors rushed to the scene, police arrived with needed blood plasma, staff came from area hospitals and the Sisters’ hospitals in Springfield and Decatur.

Early in the morning of April 5, after the fire, ten town citizens met to determine how they could best serve their stricken community. These men – all prominent city leaders – conferred and planned their course of action. That group became the Finance Committee, and the drive began. Help of every possible kind came forth. From every state in the union and from several foreign countries, the daily contributions poured in.
Within a few days after the fire, the Sisters created an emergency hospital from their existing convent. The structure was such that not too much remodeling was required. On June 22, 1949, St. Anthony’s Emergency Hospital was opened for medical emergencies, surgery and accident cases. It consisted of 16 patient beds, a pharmacy, laboratory, a portable x-ray machine and two operating rooms. Medical cases were cared for in their homes, and doctors often delivered babies in their offices or homes.

This facility served the community for over three years, while preparations were made to build a new hospital.

On August 15, 1951, ground was broken for the new hospital. On September 15, 1952, the cornerstone was laid. The cornerstone contained a statue of the Sacred Heart, a statue of the Blessed Lady, a statue of St. Anthony, a crucifix, homemade Rosaries of the Sisters’ beads, a Sacred Heart Badge, and Medals of St. Anthony, St. Christopher, Miraculous Medal, Infant of Prague, St. Benedict, Our Lady of Telgte, Holy Ghost, Our Lady of Consolation, St. Francis, St. Peter, Little Flower and Medallion of the reigning Holy Father, Pope Pius XII.

Steadily over the next three years, the new hospital rose up to a total of six floors and two floors of equipment penthouse. Construction was completed, and the hospital was ready for occupancy on February 2, 1954.
May 16, 1954 marked the dedication of St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital, honoring those who died in the fire five years earlier.

The Effingham fire sparked a nationwide hospital inspection for fire hazards. A National Hospital Survey investigated every hospital of 50 or more beds in all 48 states. The survey indicated that more than 90 percent of the country’s 4,500 general hospitals were unsafe from fire. Since that time, major improvements have been made in laws and statutes to ensure that a fire of this magnitude does not occur again. In 1955, the hospital received approval by the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Hospitals, the highest type of approval that a hospital could attain.

Heritage Hallway

You can tour the entire collection of historic pictures by visiting our Heritage Hallway. Start in the hallway adjacent to the Healing Garden and continue around the corners to your right towards the Center for Advanced Imaging and to your left towards Prairie Heart Institute at St. Anthony’s.

Healing Garden Hallway
(East Side)
Motherhouse in Muenster, Germany
A stained glass replica of Bishop Baltes asking 3 Sisters to go to Effingham
St. Anthony Hospital — 1877
St. Anthony Hospital — 1945
St. Anthony Hospital — 1945

Healing Garden Hallway
(West Side)
St. Anthony’s Chapel dedicated in 1955
Aerial View of Burned Hospital
Part of Hospital After the Fire
Help from Everywhere - A Salvation Army tent and workers

Center for Advanced Imaging Hallway
Emergency Hospital
Finance Committee for New Hospital
St. Anthony’s Auxiliary organized in 1957

Prairie Heart Hallway
(North Side)
Groundbreaking for New Hospital in 1951
Laying Cornerstone in 1951
Dedication of St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital

Prairie Heart Hallway
(South Side)
Building new Hospital – Aerial View
Building new Hospital – Street View
Building new Hospital – Front View (close-up)
Placing Bronze Statue in Front of New Hospital
1970’s Addition under construction
1970’s Addition of ER completed
Bernsmeyer Office Building
Annex (Prior to Razing)