Florence Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820, in Florence, Italy. The daughter of a wealthy landowner, Nightingale was provided with a classical education, studying German, French and Italian.

Nightingale believed from a young age that nursing was her divine purpose – by the time she was 16 years old, she had already ministered to the ill and poor people of the nearby village.

When Nightingale advised her parents that she wished to become a nurse, they were very displeased, and forbade her to pursue the profession. Nightingale was a woman of stature, and in the Victorian era, young ladies with her social status were expected to marry wealthy men. In her parents' eyes, nursing was a lowly and demeaning career. In spite of her parents, however, Nightingale enrolled as a nursing student at the Lutheran Hospital of Pastor Fliedner in Kaiserwerth, Germany in 1844.

In the early 1850s, Nightingale became employed at a London hospital, where she cared for those suffering from cholera. The disease spread rapidly, due to unsanitary conditions, and Nightingale made it her mission to improve hygiene practices, which resulted in a significant decrease of the death rate at the hospital.

In 1853, the Crimean War broke out, and England was criticized over its lack of nurses, insufficient medical attention, and inhumane conditions at its hospitals. Nightingale was urged by the Secretary of War to organize a group of nurses to tend to the ailing soldiers, and she quickly put together a team of over 30 nurses, sailing to the Crimea immediately.

Nothing prepared Nightingale and her fellow nurses for the horrific conditions they would find; the water was contaminated and the sick lay on their own excrement as basic supplies, like bandages and soap, quickly depleted. More soldiers were dying from typhoid and cholera than from battle injuries.

Nightingale procured cleaning supplies and put even patients to work, having the inside of the hospital scrubbed from ceiling to floor. Every waking moment of Nightingale's was spent ministering her patients, and at night, she moved through the hallways with a lamp, caring and comforting each and every fallen soldier. This earned her the title "the Lady with the Lamp."

The death rate fell by two-thirds, thanks to Nightingale's tirelessness, compassion and care.

Nightingale's writings sparked worldwide health care reform, and in 1860 she established St. Thomas' Hospital and the Nightingale Training School for Nurses. She died August 13, 1910, in London, and to this day, Nightingale is honored and revered as the pioneer of modern nursing.