



A Look To The Past: NC Nursing Greats, Mary Lewis Wyche

By: Phoebe Pollitt

Abstract

Mary Lewis Wyche was born on February 26, 1858 near Henderson in Vance County. As a young woman, she wanted to become a nurse but was thwarted by both family obligations and the absence of any schools of nursing in North Carolina. Her calling to become a nurse was so great that when she was able, she moved to Philadelphia to study nursing and graduated from Philadelphia General Hospital Training School in 1894. Upon graduation, she returned to the Tar Heel State and revolutionized the nursing profession (Rogers, 1949). Wyche should be fondly remembered by NC nurses for four primary achievements: the establishment of the first school of nursing in NC, the creation of the first professional nursing organization in the state, the passage of the first nurse registration law in the country and for writing the only book about the history of nursing in North Carolina.

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A Look to the Past: NC Nursing Greats

Mary Lewis Wyche

by: Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN

Mary Lewis Wyche was born on February 26, 1858 near Henderson in Vance County. As a young woman, she wanted to become a nurse but was thwarted by both family obligations and the absence of any schools of nursing in North Carolina. Her calling to become a nurse was so great that when she was able, she moved to Philadelphia to study nursing and graduated from Philadelphia General Hospital Training School in 1894. Upon graduation, she returned to the Tarheel State and revolutionized the nursing profession (Rogers, 1949). Wyche should be fondly remembered by NC nurses for four primary achievements: the establishment of the first school of nursing in NC, the creation of the first professional nursing organization in the state, the passage of the first nurse registration law in the country and for writing the only book about the history of nursing in North Carolina.

Wyche's first major accomplishment was the establishment of the first school of nursing in North Carolina. After graduating from nursing school, Wyche became the matron (Chief Nursing Officer) of the newly established Rex Hospital in Raleigh. Understanding the importance of an educated nursing workforce to the health of the states' citizens, Wyche undertook the major task of creating the first school of nursing in North Carolina - Rex Hospital Training School for Nurses. Wyche recalled the early days of the school this way: "The hospital of only 23 beds was rather small to have a school of nursing, but there were patients who needed care and young women who wanted to be taught the art of nursing" (Wyche, 1938).

Five students were in the first class. They reported to the hospital at 8 in the morning and remained until 6 pm every night. Classes were held four times a week and included anatomy, surgery, material medica, obstetrics and practical nursing. The classroom was located close enough to the patient care area that students could hear the call bells and leave class to take care of patients when needed. After 2 and ½ years of training, the first class graduated in 1897, becoming the first North Carolina trained graduate nurses (Wyche, 1938).

Wyche was responsible for the creation of the North Carolina State Nurses Association. Wyche frequently attended professional gatherings in other states. After meeting with other nurses at the International Council of Nurses in Buffalo, New York in the spring of 1901, she returned to Raleigh determined to form a statewide nursing organization dedicated to using nursing registration and legislative advocacy to improve the profession and patient care. However, her new task was not easily accomplished. Wyche sent postcards to every nurse in Raleigh requesting their presence at a founding meeting of the Raleigh Nurses Association. Unfortunately not a single nurse showed up. However, Wyche was not a quitter. In two weeks she sent a second postcard inviting the same nurses to an important meeting of the newly formed Raleigh Nurses Association. This piqued the nurses' curiosity, and every single graduate nurse in Raleigh attended the meeting. Soon the Raleigh Nurses Association started work on forming the North

Carolina State Nurses Association (Centennial committee, 2003). In 1902, the Raleigh group invited every nurse they were aware of in North Carolina to a meeting in Raleigh during the week of the State Fair. The railroads offered discount fares to Raleigh during Fair Week and the Fair itself would be a draw. Fourteen nurses from across the state met with the members of the Raleigh Nurses Association on October 28, 1902 and launched the North Carolina State Nurses Association (Centennial Committee, 2003).

At the time of the founding of the NCSNA, it was extremely rare in North Carolina for people of different races to meet together for a common purpose. Public establishments such as convention halls and restaurants were legally segregated by race. A group of African American nurses, led by Carrie Early Broadfoot organized the NC Association of Colored Graduate Nurses in 1920 and ran this parallel professional organization until the two associations united to represent all nurses in North Carolina in 1949 (Pollitt & Reese, 1997).

Wyche's work was not complete after founding the first nursing school and the first professional nursing organization in North Carolina. Her third major success occurred on March 3rd, 1903 when the NCNA pushed a bill through the state legislature that was signed by Governor Charles Aycock, making North Carolina the first state in the nation mandating registration for nurses (Wyche, 1938). For the first time, nurses had some control over the quality and education of people practicing nursing. Registration provides safeguards for the public and the profession. Josephine Burton of Craven County became the first Registered Nurse in North Carolina, and therefore the first Registered Nurse in the United States on June 4, 1903 (Wyche, 1938).

Wyche's final major endeavor for nurses in North Carolina was compiling and writing the only book on the history of nursing in North Carolina. By preserving and recording the accomplishments of early nurses and the profession in its infancy, Wyche has given all of us a gift of inspiration and motivation to continue the work she started.

Reference List

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