



Mary Rose Batterham: The Second Registered Nurse In The United States

By: **Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN**

Abstract

Mary Rose Batterham spent her first decade as a nurse battling everything from typhoid epidemics to state legislators. She was a remarkable woman possessing a range of abilities which included assisting in surgeries performed on kitchen tables in Appalachian mountain cabins, writing and speaking persuasively to numerous organizations to promote nursing practice and education, displaying leadership qualities as an elected representative of her fellow nurses, and working with imagination and resourcefulness to help create the new profession of nursing (Bullough, Sentz & Stein, 1992; Kaufman, 1988). She was one of the founders of the North Carolina State Nurses Association (NCSNA), joining a group of women whom Batterham later characterized as: "...nurses, making history, constructionists, and iconoclasts, destroying the old conception of the graduate nurse and raising the trained woman to the dignity of a professional woman."

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“Tribute must always be given to the pioneers and leading spirits in any organization. They pave the way and make it easier for those who follow”. Mary Rose Batterham, RN (n.d.)

Mary Rose Batterham spent her first decade as a nurse battling everything from typhoid epidemics to state legislators. She was a remarkable woman possessing a range of abilities which included assisting in surgeries performed on kitchen tables in Appalachian mountain cabins, writing and speaking persuasively to numerous organizations to promote nursing practice and education, displaying leadership qualities as an elected representative of her fellow nurses, and working with imagination and resourcefulness to help create the new profession of nursing (Bullough, Sentz & Stein, 1992; Kaufman, 1988). She was one of the founders of the North Carolina State Nurses Association (NCSNA), joining a group of women whom Batterham later characterized as: “...nurses, making history, constructionists, and iconoclasts, destroying the old conception of the graduate nurse and raising the trained woman to the dignity of a professional woman.” (Batterham, n.d., Nursing record of “firsts”, 1926)

Early Life

Batterham was born in Walsoken, Norfolk County, England in 1858. In 1881 her family immigrated to Asheville, NC. Although Batterham wanted to practice nursing, no nursing schools operated in North Carolina at that time causing Batterham to travel to New York where in 1893 she graduated from the Brooklyn City Hospital School of Nursing. After graduation, she secured a position as a nurse for the policy holders of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and returned to Asheville (“Miss Batterham tenderly buried”, 1927, “Weaver, Brown and Batterham”, 1960).

Upon her return to Asheville, Batterham found she was in great demand as a private duty nurse, the main occupational field in which nurses of the time worked. At the time of her arrival home, the first hospitals in Asheville were just emerging and only one operating room in the city existed. Most surgeries, both major and minor, were performed in patients’ homes. Later Batterham would recall in detail the role of the nurse in home surgeries,

describing how the nurse often arrived prior to surgery to clean the house and the patient, boil instruments and prepare a supply of extra water on a wood stove, and use the bed, dining room table or most often a kitchen table as an operating table. The nurse, working in conjunction with the surgeon, carried out whatever was required such as assisting at the surgery and administering anesthetics. Once the surgeon completed the procedure, the nurse often stayed behind to watch over the patient's recuperation and clean up the surroundings ("Weaver, Brown and Batterham", 1960).

Organizing North Carolina Nurses

In 1900, a typhoid epidemic swept through the student body at North Carolina Women's College in Greensboro, NC. College officials sent out a call for graduate nurses to help them cope with the outbreak. Graduate nurse from across the state volunteered to help, many of whom stayed for several weeks as the epidemic ran its course. During their leisure hours the nurses discussed issues related to nursing practice, education and regulation. Batterham and Mary Lewis Wyche, an 1894 graduate of the prestigious Philadelphia Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were two of these "Greensboro" nurses. In the months after the epidemic Wyche wrote to all of the "Greensboro" nurses and other nurses she knew in North Carolina asking them to send representatives to a state wide meeting in Raleigh, the state capitol. The purpose of the meeting was to determine the amount of interest in organizing a state nurse association with the main aim of working towards passage of a nurse registration law (Kaufman, 1988; Wyche, M.L., 1938).

Thirty-five nurses met in Asheville to consider the plan and elected to send Batterham as their representative to the Raleigh meeting. When she arrived in Raleigh, Batterham joined fifteen other nurses attending the meeting which resulted in the organization of the NCSNA in October, 1902. Wyche was elected President of the new organization and Batterham was elected first Vice President (Batterham, n.d.).

Work carried out on the second day of the Raleigh meeting centered on

drafting a nursing registration bill which was introduced in the State Legislature in January, 1903 and passed by the House as written by the nurses. However, by the time the bill arrived at the State Senate, a group of doctors and hospital administrators organized opposition. A weakened bill, without mandatory registration, passed the Senate and was signed by Governor Aycock on March 3, 1903. Despite the weakness of the law, the North Carolina Nurse Registration

Act stands as the first law regulating nursing practice in the United States, defining the legal criteria required for an individual to use the title "Registered Nurse". Nurses meeting the specified criteria after presenting documentation to the Clerk of Court in the county in which they wished to practice were listed in a Nurses Registry kept in each county court house and made available to the public (North Carolina Bill, 1907, Wyche, 1938, Pollitt & Miller, 2010).

The nurses of the NCSNA agreed that Batterham should have the distinction of being the first nurse to register in the state. By prior arrangement, and in honor of the work and dedication that Batterham showed to the people of Asheville and Buncombe County, the Clerk of Court of Buncombe County opened his office an hour early on the day nurse registration began to ensure that Batterham would be recognized as the first registered nurse in North Carolina and therefore the first registered nurse in the United States ("Miss Rose Batterham, 1927; Who's who, 1926).

Later Career

Over the next 24 years, until her death in 1927, Batterham continuously proved her dedication to the profession and her service to her fellow citizens actively promoting professional progress and better access to health care services. Numerous talks that she delivered on a wide range of issues testify to her advocacy for better health care.

In a speech to the 1922 session of the NCSNA, later printed as a letter to the editor in the February 1923 issue of American Journal of Nursing (AJN), Batterham addressed what was a contentious issue among nurses urging her fellow private duty nurses to broaden their practices by

volunteering and working along with public health nurses. She noted:

We can enjoy a day with the county nurse, helping with the school or office work, also giving clinical demonstrations and lectures, at the same time learning practical engineering and how to run a car. Why should the private nurse not be educators? What are they doing to interest people in the many homes they enter? Do they ever speak of welfare work or civic needs, of the unnecessary deaths among women and children in the rural districts and of the undernourished school children? Why, no other class of women has so great an opportunity to interest influential people as has the private nurse... the offspring of unborn generations will arise and bless the public health nurse, in the time when perfect health shall cover the world as the waters cover the sea (Batterham, 1923).

In a 1920 speech to the Federated Women's Clubs of Asheville she supported the passage of the Sheppard Towner Act which provided funding for nurses to work in the maternal child health field. As she explained to her audience, her support was based on her own experience in caring for mothers and children.

I have been in homes where conditions would make an angel weep; a new born baby and a mother attended by a lady whose chief pretention to cleanliness was a clean apron, taken off after the doctor left; a hatchet under the bed or a knife under the pillow to cut the pains; and not a sheet or clean gown in the house. Is it any wonder we lose 18,000 mothers and 300,000 babies every year? (Batterham, 1920)

In addition to her advocacy for the public's health she worked to upgrade the nursing profession. As noted, Batterham helped craft the first nurse registration bill and later

was involved in several of the act's revisions. She lobbied for mandatory registration for nurses; a law which did not pass in NC until 1965. As well, she campaigned for shorter hours, better pay and working and living conditions for nurses. Not satisfied with asking others to make changes she envisioned, in 1919, Batterham organized a Nurses Clubhouse in Asheville. Private duty nurses, including Batterham, lived in the Clubhouse between cases and all nurses were welcome to come to social and professional events sponsored by the Clubhouse (Bullough, Stenz & Stein, 1992; Nursing records, 1926, "Weaver, Brown and Batterham, 1960).

Upon Batterham's death, her body lay in state at the Nurses Clubhouse and her pallbearers were her nursing colleagues in full uniform. In her obituary, The Asheville Citizen newspaper wrote:

For nearly thirty five years Miss Mary Rose Batterham was a ministering angel to the people of this town ... for more than a generation, here among us, she stood valiant in the presence of pestilence, and fought to defeat pain and to conquer disease and to cheat death its untimely prey. Hers was the good fight, not for glory or gain, but, with mercy and compassion as her weapons, to disarm grief in its agony and tears" (Miss Batterham tenderly, 1927).

Batterham was recognized many times as the first registered nurse in the United States through articles in the AJN and the Asheville Citizen (Miss Rose Batterham, 1927; Who's who, 1926). It was only in 1935 when the lists of the County Nursing Registries in North Carolina were sent to the state capitol for central keeping that it was discovered that a different

nurse, Josephine Burton of Craven County, had registered on June 4th, 1903 prior to Batterham's registration. Little is known about nurse Burton (Wyche, 1938). (see article The First Registered Nurse in the United States: Josephine (Burton) Bradham, this issue).

So, it turns out that Mary Rose Batterham was not actually the first registered nurse in the United States, a distinction held by another North Carolina nurse. Yet, Batterham's work as an organizer, writer, speaker, advocate, and nurse stands as a more important testament to her impressive career. Batterham's work in improving the quality of life for the public and for nurses represents a significant contribution to the profession and the well-

being of her fellow citizens. Her story is an illuminating reminder of how much nurses did and continue to contribute to our nation's health care services.

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