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Biographical Sketch of Mary Moore Wolfe

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Biography of Dr. Mary Moore Wolfe, 1874-1962

By Christina Larocco, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Wolfe, Dr. Mary Moore (1874-1962), was born in Lewisburg, PA, the daughter of Charles Spyker Wolfe and Martha E. Wolfe (née Meixell). She received both her BA (1896) and MA (1900) from Bucknell University, also graduating with honors from the College of Medicine at the University of Michigan (1899). Returning to Pennsylvania, she became a visible member of the woman suffrage movement, serving as chair of the finance committee of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association (1912) and addressing at least one convention (1912). A voice of caution within the movement, she was skeptical of such public forms of protest as parades. Wolfe is best-known for her work as a psychiatrist. She spent eight years (1901-09) as head of the Women's Division at Norristown State Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in Norristown, PA, going on to run her own treatment center. In 1906 she testified in front of a committee of the House of Representatives of the need to protect patients from poor treatment, and the following year she served as a US delegate to the first International Congress of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Neurology, held in Amsterdam. She also spent a year as a clinical professor at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. In 1914, she was able to convince state politicians to establish a publicly-funded center for the treatment of women with intellectual disabilities. During Wolfe's tenure at the Laurelton State Village for Feeble-minded Women of Child-Bearing Age (later the Laurelton Center), patients received training in

domestic and agricultural work with the goal of self-sufficiency. Influenced by eugenics, however, Wolfe believed that these women should remain segregated from the rest of society and hoped to reduce childbearing among them. She also urged separate classes in public schools for children with intellectual disabilities. Wolfe was active in Republican Party politics, serving as a director in the Pennsylvania Council of Republican Women. In 1930, however, she fell out of favor with the state Republican Party for refusing to endorse its candidates, and she resigned from her position shortly after the party won control of the state legislature eight years later. Wolfe remained active in retirement, serving on the board of several organizations, including a local chapter of the American Red Cross and a group overseeing construction of a new hospital. She died in 1962 at the age of eighty-eight.

SOURCES:

Information about Wolfe can be found in US House of Representatives, *Hearings before the Special Committee Appointed by the Speaker . . . To Make a Full and Complete Investigation of the Management of the Government Hospital of the Insane* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906); John William Leonard, ed., *Woman's Who's Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada*, vol. 1 (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914); Ida Husted Harper, ed., "Pennsylvania," chapter XXXVII in *History of Woman Suffrage, vol. 6: 1900-1920* (New York, NY: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), pp. 550-64 [\[LINK\]](#); and Henrietta Louise Krone, "Dauntless Women: The Story of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Pennsylvania, 1910-20" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1949); as well as online through Bucknell University and the Union County (PA) Historical Society.

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