

Pioneer Psychiatrist Headed Unique Institution

Dr. Mary M. Wolfe was one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Village for Feeble-minded Women at Laurelton ("Laurelton Village"), at the time a unique institution for the treatment of mentally disabled individuals.

Mary Moore Wolfe was born in Lewisburg on March 31, 1874, the daughter of Charles Spyker Wolfe (1845-1891) and Martha Elizabeth Meixell (1847-1939).

Mary Wolfe graduated with honors from Bucknell University in 1896 and the Medical School of the University of Michigan, with honors, in 1899. She was active in the Women's Suffrage Movement, along with other prominent women in Union County. Her first professional position was in the women's division of Norristown State Hospital for the Insane.

Construction of Laurelton Village was approved in 1914, on 230 acres of land at the foot of Seven Miles Narrows in Hartley Township, Union County. The first cottage opened in 1917 with 36 women residents. Six more buildings were constructed in the next ten years, and the population increased to 500.

The facility's initial concept involved training women for self-sufficiency and for work in domestic service and agriculture. Then current theories about mental retardation meant repetitive daily routines, plain surroundings and isolation from the community. The women residents worked in the on-site dairy and laundry, grew and preserved vegetables and fruit, and worked in the facility's kitchen.

Politics entered into all aspects of Laurelton Village, from naming the administrator, to hiring staff, to funding programs. Dr. Mary Wolfe's re-appointment was threatened in 1930 when she did not support the Republican candidates for governor and congressman. The Lewisburg Saturday News (Republican controlled) editorialized against her. The Democratic win in 1934 protected Dr. Wolfe's position, however the Republican return in 1938 again undermined her position, and she retired in 1940.

Dr. Wolfe continued an active life. She served on the board of the Union County chapter of the American Red Cross during WWII. She became a member of the newly formed Board of Directors of the Evangelical Hospital in 1947 - a board that supervised construction of the new hospital, which opened in 1953.

Mary Moore Wolfe died at her home on S. 2nd Street, Lewisburg on October 18, 1962 at age 88. She is buried in Lewisburg cemetery.

Changing theories about causes and treatment of mental retardation were reflected in terminology: institutional residents changed from inmates, to students, to clients, and finally, individuals.

"Laurelton State Village for Feeble-minded Women of Child-Bearing Age" demonstrated an attempt to isolate young women and train them for return to the community when older. "Laurelton State School and Hospital" became a residence for the mentally and physically disabled, some of whom returned to the community; men were accepted in the late 1960's. Finally, "Laurelton Center" was a facility for those who most needed extensive care.

The facility had become the townships largest employer. By the mid-1980's more than 540 people worked there.

More and more community programs became available in the 1980s and 1990s, and economic factors affected the maintenance of facilities like Laurelton Center (albeit one of PA's smaller institutions). The Center closed in 1998.

Union Co. Hist. Soc. - "Accounts" - Article 36 from the
Sunbury Daily Item. "Once Upon A Time"

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