

# Pioneer psychiatrist headed unique facility

By Elaine Wintjen  
For The Daily Item

**D**r. Mary M. Wolfe was a founder of the Pennsylvania Village for Feeble-minded Women at Laurelton, which opened in 1917 as a unique institution for the treatment of mentally disabled individuals, and in the mid-1980s became Hartley Township's largest employer with 540 workers.

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.

Construction of "Laurelton Village," as it was known, 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 10 years, and the population increased to 500.

Wolfe was born in Lewisburg on March 31, 1874, the daughter of Charles Spyker Wolfe and Martha Elizabeth Meixell. She 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.

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

Wolfe had an active life. She served on the board of the Union County chapter of the American Red Cross during

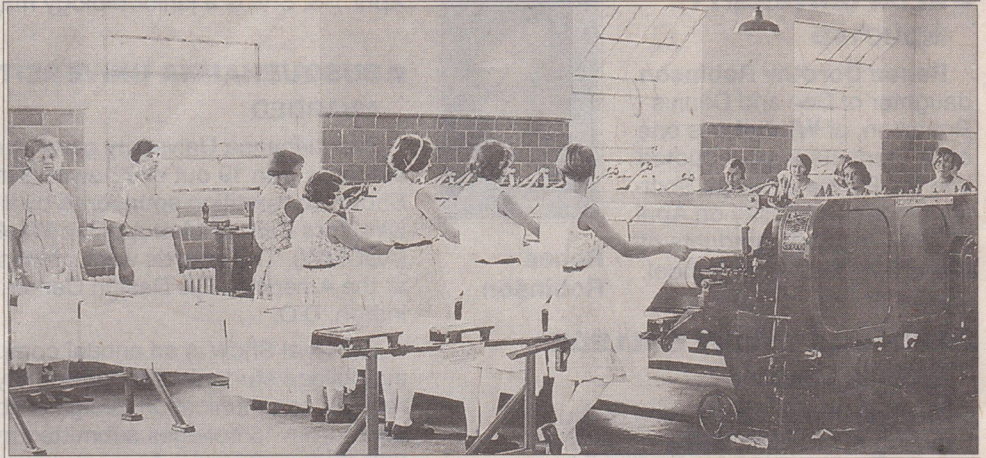


Photo provided

The laundry room at Pennsylvania Village for Feeble-minded Women at Laurelton is shown in this undated photograph.

## ONCE UPON A TIME IN ... UNION COUNTY

World War II. She became a member of the newly formed board of directors of Evangelical Hospital in 1947 — a board that supervised construction of the new hospital, which opened in 1953.

Wolfe died at her home on South Second Street, Lewisburg, on Oct. 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 1960s. Finally, Laurelton Center was a facility for those who most needed extensive care.

More and more community programs became available in the 1980s and 1990s, and economic factors affected the maintenance of facilities like Laurelton Center.

It closed in 1998.

■ "Once Upon A Time In ...." is a



Photo provided

Dr. Mary Moore Wolfe is shown in this undated photograph.

Monday feature provided by the historical societies in Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties. The columns focus on people, places and objects of historical significance in those counties. Elaine Wintjen is on staff at the Union County Historical Society. The society office/library, in the county courthouse, 103 S. Second St., Lewisburg, is open 8:30 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. For information on membership, events and reference material call 524-8666, e-mail [hstoricl@ptd.net](mailto:hstoricl@ptd.net) or visit [www.unioncountyhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.unioncountyhistoricalsociety.org).