



**Mary Moore  
Wolfe, M.D.**

1874-1962

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Mary Moore Wolfe was born in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, on March 31, 1874, into a family that exemplified intellectual pioneers. Five of her immediate ancestors were among the founders of Bucknell University and her aunt was one of the first women to graduate from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1856. Mary Wolfe, herself, became a pioneer in mental health and the education of mentally deficient women. Her ideas for helping the mentally defective develop to their fullest potential are only now, almost sixty years later, widely accepted and implemented.

Perhaps inspired by stories of her aunt, Mary Wolfe's girlhood ambition was to become a doctor—almost a dream at a time when women doctors were few. She graduated from Bucknell University in 1896 and received her medical degree from the College of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Michigan in 1899, the only woman in her class. Her first position was that of assistant psychiatrist at the Norristown State-Hospital for the Insane. After two years she advanced to chief physician of the women's department, with 1200 women under her care. From 1910 until 1914 she headed her own sanitarium at Stonyhurst, near Philadelphia. In 1907 she was accorded the singular honor of being the only woman among five delegates from the United States to the Congress of Nervous and Mental Diseases in Amsterdam, Holland.

The years from 1914 to 1919 were spent in preparation for her greatest professional work: the establishment and development of Laurelton State Village. Although an act of the Pennsylvania Legislature had authorized an institution for "feeble-minded" women in 1913, the appropriation of funds lagged, delaying the opening until December 1919, when Mary Wolfe assumed the superintendency, a post the law required be held by a woman.

In the meantime she served with distinction as a physician at the U.S. Industrial Camp at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, from 1914 to 1915. At home she showed herself an ardent feminist, leading the cause for women's suffrage by speaking in many localities in the county. When the Woman's Suffrage Party of Union County was formed, she was elected its first president. She was also actively involved in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

During her twenty-year tenure at Laurelton, Mary Wolfe, with the able assistance of the resident psychologist Mary Vanuxem, was able to develop a progressive institution that was innovative beyond its basic requirement to remove mentally deficient women of child-bearing age from the general community in order to prevent the increase of these deficiencies. In an address to the American Association for the Study of the Feeble-Minded in 1925, entitled "The Relation of Feeble-Mindedness to Education, Citizenship and Culture," she proposed a system of education that recognized the limits of the mentally deficient. After determining these limits on an individual basis, education should be provided, either academically or vocationally, that would develop the abilities of each individual to the fullest. She advocated an educational system that would allow "every child in our Country an opportunity to make the most of all its inherent capacities," encompassing both ends of the spectrum of mental capabilities. In 1935 her presidential address to the American Association on Mental Deficiency was an exposition that the problems of the mentally defective are not primarily medical but must be approached, first and foremost, through psychological, educational and sociological methods.

This was precisely the course of action followed in Laurelton. First, the population was divided into two groups. Those with very low mentality and strong anti-social behavior would always require institutional care. They were trained mainly in agricultural activities, helping to make the institution self-supporting. Those who gave evidence of being able to live in the outside world were given instruction in practical job skills, such as sewing, cooking or laundering, that would enable them to earn a living. In 1925 a community placement program was initiated for these women to lead "supervised extra-institutional lives." It proved eighty-five per cent successful during its first thirteen years; "Dr. Mary's girls" were much in demand as efficient workers. Laurelton became a nationwide model for mental institutions.

mary wolfe's role as the head of a state institution required character traits that commanded the respect, if not the personal devotion, of her associates. She proved a most competent administrator and ruled with authority. Her position, a political appointment, made her involvement in party politics inevitable. In order to keep her job, she changed her party affiliation—a matter of expediency during the Depression, rather than a change of philosophy. Thus, it was for political reasons that she was forced to resign in 1940.

Until her death in 1962, she lived in Lewisburg, actively working as a trustee for the advancement of her alma mater, Bucknell University, which had honored her with a Doctor of Science degree in 1933.

**Susquehanna Valley Branch**

Researcher: Lois Kalp

Researcher/Writer: Elsbeth S. Steffensen

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