

This Day in History... February 17, 1881

Birth of Mary Breckinridge

Nurse midwife Mary Carson Breckinridge was born on February 17, 1881, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Breckinridge was the daughter of Congressman Clifton Breckinridge and granddaughter of US Vice President John C. Breckinridge. When her father was appointed US Minister to Russia in 1894, the family moved there and she received some of her education from private tutors.

The family returned to the US in 1897. Breckinridge's mother disapproved of her cousin's decision to go to college and insisted that her daughter get married and follow a more traditional path. Breckinridge got married in 1904, but her husband died two years later. She then joined the nursing program at New York's St. Luke Hospital, earning her degree in 1910.

Breckinridge went on to join the American Committee for Devastated France and served as the volunteer director of Child Hygiene and District Nursing. While working in Europe, Breckinridge met French and British nurse midwives. She realized that American nurses should receive similar training to help rural American families.

Breckinridge visited remote European towns to see how they handled health care and found inspiration to bring back home. She also studied at the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies and received her certification from the Central Midwives Board.

Breckinridge returned to the US in 1925 and founded the Kentucky Committee for Mothers and Babies, which later became known as the Frontier Nursing Service. It was the first such service in the US to employ nurses that were certified midwives.

Breckinridge's father as well as two midwives she met in London joined the operation, which delivered its first baby in September 1925. Breckinridge's nurses would travel by horse anytime day or night to deliver babies.

The Frontier Nursing Service grew quickly, opening nine outpost nursing centers over the years. Initially, Breckinridge sent nurses to Britain for midwifery training. However, with the outbreak of World War II that was no longer feasible, so she quickly created the Frontier Graduate School of Midwifery in 1939.

During the Frontier Nursing Service's first 30 years in operation, it had better statistics than the national average in terms of maternal mortality rates and low baby birth weights. By 1959, the service had assisted in over 10,000 births.

Breckinridge worked with the Frontier Nursing Service until her death on May 16, 1965. The Frontier Nursing Service is still in operation today, overseeing six healthcare clinics.



From the Great Americans Series



Breckinridge developed some of the first modern in-depth nursing and midwifery programs in the US.



Breckinridge was named Kentuckian of the Year in 1952 and is remembered for her role in expanding healthcare in remote areas of the state.



After the deaths of her husband and two children, Breckinridge resolved to improve healthcare for children and families.

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