

Regular Feature - Librarians of Note from the Past

Marcia Crocker Noyes: The Librarian Who Never Left

Meg Fairfax Fielding

Director of the History of Medicine, Medical & Chirurgical Faculty, Maryland, USA

INTRODUCTION

Marcia Crocker Noyes was a founding member of the Medical Library Association of the United States of America. At the invitation of the famed physician, Dr William Osler, Marcia became the Librarian of the Medical & Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland in the early 1890s and held that position until her death in 1946. One of the first leaders in the profession of librarianship, Marcia was also a Suffragist.

BACKGROUND

The Medical & Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland, founded in 1799, is the fifth oldest medical society in the United States. For most of its first century, it led a rather peripatetic existence, interrupted by various moves, the American Civil War, and lack of leadership.

That began to change in 1890, when the famed physician, Dr William Osler, came to Baltimore to open the Johns Hopkins Hospital and School of Medicine. He immediately became a member of what was known as the "Faculty" and resurrected the library, which had also moved from place to place, and whose books were mostly out of date. Osler got rid of the librarian who had left things in a shambles, and consulted with his good friend, Dr Bernard Steiner, who was the Head Librarian at Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library.

Osler was looking for a librarian who had actually worked in a library and understood how a library worked. The lack of medical knowledge was not important, but being a self-starter, and having an innate intelligence was. Dr. Steiner, whose family had been associated with the Faculty for decades, suggested Marcia Crocker Noyes, a young librarian who worked in the Pratt's circulation department. Within two weeks, Marcia had a new job, and a new home! At that time, medical librarians were required to live at the library in the event a physician phoned in the middle of the night and needed a medical book. The librarian would fetch the book and meet the physician in the reading room. After reading the book, he would be on his way back to his patient.

So began a 50-year journey of the Faculty and Marcia Crocker Noyes, who literally gave her life to the library. She was treated with some disdain when she first arrived, mainly because of her youth, her gender, and her lack of medical knowledge. But she had Dr Osler in her pocket, and his friendship went a long way to ensuring her quick acceptance by the membership.

The Faculty was a neutral ground between the eleven medical schools in Baltimore at the time, Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland being the largest. There were professional, scientific, and medical meetings several evenings a week hosting physicians from Baltimore and the surrounding areas.

Additionally, the physicians came to the building to read medical journals to which the Faculty subscribed or browse through the books in the ever-increasing library.

Figure 1: Marcia Crocker Noyes, circa 1895

The MedChi Collection is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#)



Figure 2: Sir William Osler, MD, circa 1903

The MedChi Collection is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#)



Dr Osler was a firm believer in men of all ages interacting and learning from each other. The mix of physicians and staff from the various medical schools in Baltimore ensured that Marcia knew the librarians from the other medical schools and hospitals. So, when the idea of an association of medical libraries was floated, many medical librarians were already known to each other. Due to the affiliation of McGill University in Montreal, Dr Osler's medical home, with the Faculty, McGill's librarian, Margaret Charlton and Marcia had an established friendship.

Although Dr Osler was unable to attend the first Medical Library Association (MLA) planning meeting, he paid for Marcia and Miss Elizabeth Thiess from Hopkins to attend and when the early members were questioned as to why a medical library group was needed when the American Library Association already existed, the answer was, "their problems are not our problems."

Among the main objectives of the MLA were exchanging library duplicates; securing the libraries of retired or deceased physicians; distributing journals of various medical societies; and searching auction catalogues for antiquarian books (as we continue to do today). Dr George Gould from the Philadelphia Medical Journal, who had a close association with publishers of medical texts, persuaded them to save their remainders for smaller medical libraries. To give you an idea of the numbers involved in the Exchange, in 1901, 2,443 books were distributed, and 2,126 books were received. Even today with computers and spreadsheets, this would be a daunting task!

Early on, Marcia agreed to take on the Exchange with the help of a part-time employee. The Exchange ensured that duplicate books or journals went to the libraries which needed them, and that libraries which had the duplicates could be assured that their books would go where needed. As with many things MLA, the Exchange lived a somewhat vagabond life. Marcia oversaw the Exchange from 1900 to 1904, and then again from 1909 when the new building was opened, until she relinquished the responsibility in 1926.

In 1909, after moving around the city of Baltimore, each time to larger and larger quarters, the Faculty built their next (and final) building, incorporating space for large and small meetings, a banquet room, offices, and best of all, a four-story stacks library, capable of holding more than 60,000 books. Marcia worked as a de facto project manager for the building's design and construction, in part because it would be her home. Until her death, she lived in a penthouse flat on the top floor, along with her maid and a succession of Chow Chow dogs.

Figure 3: MedChi's 1909 Building

The MedChi Collection is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#)



During the five years that the Exchange operated out of the Brooklyn, New York, Medical Society, the MLA realised exactly how much Marcia did to keep the Exchange up and running in an orderly fashion. It was also during that period that Dr Osler became President of the MLA and realised how important it was to keep the Exchange as an integral part of the MLA.

Marcia was also involved in another MLA venture that had its highs and lows – the Bulletin. The Bulletin was scheduled to be a quarterly journal-type publication, however, that rarely happened and the change of names every few years didn't help. The Bulletins had a very ambitious tagline from renowned jurist and Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Libraries are the standing armies of civilization," but if civilization had to depend on the journals, then it would not have stood for long.

Once Marcia and her good friend from Baltimore, Dr John Ruhräh, poliomyelitis pioneer and medical historian, began editing the journals, the schedule stabilised, and she and other colleagues continued editing until 1926. With the instability of the journals and the Exchange, the glue that held the MLA together over its first two decades was the annual conference, which took place in a different location each year.

The first two meetings were in Philadelphia, then in Atlantic City, Baltimore, Chicago, Boston, St. Louis and others. It was at the 1901 meeting that Dr Osler was elected as President of the organization. He stepped down in 1904, most likely due to his incredible non-stop schedule of teaching, writing, and travelling, or with the idea of his possible appointment as Regius Professor at Oxford.

Perhaps because of her position at the Faculty, Marcia was very progressive. She was a member of the suffragist movement whose meetings were frequently held in the Faculty building. Marcia bought her first automobile in 1916 and was driving even before women were allowed to vote in the United States. She was friends with many of the women physicians in the area, a number of whom graduated either from the Woman's Medical College in Baltimore or Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, which had been required to admit women from its first days.

As with many other Baltimoreans, Marcia took most of the summer months off. Baltimore is a southern city, with brutally hot and humid summers. She literally decamped to Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains in up-state New York, where she ran a summer camp for girls in their early teens. She had the main building floated out to the camp's secluded location and then kept the campers busy with the "pleasures and freedom of a gypsy life" close to nature.

Although Marcia had been involved in the MLA since its inception, it was not until 1933, at the 35th Annual Meeting, that she was elected President of the organisation. She was the first non-physician and was

jokingly referred to as being the un-medicated President! She had a few items on her presidential agenda, including officially incorporating the MLA and adapting an official seal, which had been designed many years earlier. She spent a significant amount of time travelling around the United States visiting member libraries and meeting their staff.

Marcia was offered the opportunity to continue as President, but she declined. She had accomplished what she wanted to do and believed in bringing in new blood to the organisation. As much as Marcia loved to travel – she actually drove from New England to Louisiana, a distance of more than 1,500 miles – after a frenetic year, she wanted to slow down a bit.

Marcia continued to attend MLA meetings, including the 1940 meeting which took place in Oregon. This necessitated a 3,000 mile cross-country trip by train from the east to the west coast which took almost a week. But she was slowing considerably, and her staff, which was just Marcia and a houseman when she began in 1896, had now increased to 22 people, including the houseman, who would eventually work at the Faculty for 56 years.

The 1946 MLA meeting was held at Yale University, and both Marcia and Dr William Francis, Dr Osler's nephew from the Osler Library at McGill University in Montreal, managed to attend the meeting. They had been close friends since they had first met in Baltimore in the late 1890s and continued their friendship through the years as bibliophiles, MLA members, and at MLA meetings. But this would be the last meeting for both.

Figure 4: Marcia Crocker Noyes, circa 1920

The MedChi Collection is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#)



Figure 5: Marcia Crocker Noyes, circa 1934

The MedChi Collection is licensed under [CC0 1.0](#)



Although Marcia was determined to celebrate her 50th Anniversary on the exact date of her hiring at the Faculty, the physicians realized she was sicker than she knew and persuaded her to have her retirement/anniversary party in April, just after she returned from Yale. She was already poorly, and had lost her voice, so couldn't make any speeches at the party. She declined steadily over the summer and died in November of 1946, just three days after her original hire date.

Accolades came in from across the country, including a telegram from Dr Francis saying: "Well done good and faithful Sister Marcia. Farewell to Osler's earliest from his latest librarian." The MLA Bulletin wrote this: "May the spirit of friendliness and devotion to service, which Miss Noyes so well exemplified, remain with us as we carry on in the field of medical libraries which she loved so well."

Shortly before she died, she said this of herself, "If I have accomplished anything, let that speak for me, as while making a living, I have tried to make a life."

But that's not the end of the story.

Before her retirement, Marcia threatened to take a few days off and then come back and "haint" the building to make sure things got done. Marcia had lived in our building from its opening in 1909 until her death in 1946. And she's still here. She moves things around, wanders the halls and makes her presence known to those who are receptive. Music turns off and on, typewriter keys are heard clicking, and lost paintings suddenly appear in our stacks.

People have counted footsteps climbing the main staircase when no one is there. When they replicate the steps, they lead to Marcia's old flat. Just before we opened our small medical museum, the installation crew kept hearing footsteps walking up and down the hallway. The night before the opening, when we were working late, the lightweight plastic protecting some paintings began to shimmer in the non-existent breeze.

We try and explain what's happening, but really, the only explanation is that it is Marcia, the librarian who never left.

Meg Fairfax Fielding is the Director of the History of Medicine at the Medical & Chirurgical Faculty and also manages the collection of portraits and sculptures of physicians dating to the late 1700s and the rare book collection, with the oldest dating to 1567. She is a Fellow at the American Osler Society and has lectured there several times. Meg has just completed her second book, a biography of Marcia entitled "Marcia Crocker Noyes: The Librarian Who Never Left", available digitally [here](#). Funds raised from sales will go to support the lasting mission of MedChi's archives.

