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By: **Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN**

Abstract

For over a hundred years the story and even the name of the first registered nurse (RN) in the United States has been inaccurately reported and shrouded in mystery. Nurse Mary Rose Batterham went to her grave in 1927, 24 years after she registered her nursing credentials with the Buncombe County Clerk of Court, mistakenly believing and widely honored as the first RN in the United States. Meanwhile Josephine (Bradham) Burton, who was most likely truly the nation's first registered nurse, probably never knew she deserved that accolade.

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The First *Registered* Nurse in the United States: Josephine (Bradham) Burton

Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN

For over a hundred years the story and even the name of the first registered nurse (RN) in the United States has been inaccurately reported and shrouded in mystery. Nurse Mary Rose Batterham went to her grave in 1927, 24 years after she registered her nursing credentials with the Buncombe County Clerk of Court, mistakenly believing and widely honored as the first RN in the United States. Meanwhile Josephine (Bradham) Burton, who was most likely truly the nation's first registered nurse, probably never knew she deserved that accolade.

On March 3, 1903, the North Carolina State Nurse Association (NCSNA) became the first nursing organization to successfully lobby their state legislature to pass a nurse registration act in the United States. The law allowed nurses to place their names in a county registry of trained nurses by appearing before the Clerk of Court in the county in which they wished to practice after presenting their diploma from a reputable training school. The Clerk of Court then issued the nurse a Certificate of Registration and entered her name in the Nurses Registry kept in each county courthouse. Nurse registration under the new law began in each of North Carolina's ninety nine counties on June 5th, 1903.

Members of the NCSNA agreed that Batterham, a North Carolinian nursing leader should receive the honor of being the first registered nurse in North Carolina and therefore in the United States. Batterham was a leading advocate in the battle to pass the nurse registration law. (See "Mary Rose Batterham: The Second Registered Nurse in the United States" in this edition of *The Bulletin*). North Carolina nurses wanted to recognize Batterham's work on behalf of the NCSNA and nurses across the state. The Clerk of Court in Batterham's home county of Buncombe opened his office an hour early on June 5th, 1903 to ensure her place in history. For the remainder of her life, Batterham was honored in print, including in the *American Journal of Nursing*, in professional and civic meetings, and in her 1927 eulogy, as the first RN in the US.

A decade later, in 1938, Bessie Chapman, Secretary of the North Carolina Board of Nurse Examiners, as part of an effort to centralize the database containing nurse registration information, wrote to each Clerk of Court in North Carolina asking for a list of nurses who had registered in their county since 1903. Chapman was

most likely greatly surprised when she received a letter from L.E. Lancaster, Clerk of Court for Craven County, informing her that Josephine Burton appeared before the Craven County Clerk of Court with a diploma from the Philadelphia Hospital (renamed Philadelphia General Hospital in 1902) and was registered on June 4th, 1903. This was, one day before Nurse Batterham registered in Buncombe County.

Chapman was not familiar with the name or the career of Josephine Burton.

She queried older nurses in the NCSNA, none of whom knew of Burton either. In an effort to clear up the mystery, Chapman wrote to Loretta Johnson, Director of Nursing at Burton's alma mater, Philadelphia General Hospital. Chapman asked Johnson for information concerning Burton. Johnson replied quickly, "We have heard nothing from Mrs. Burton since the date she left the hospital". Philadelphia General Hospital records revealed that Burton gave her home address as New Bern (Craven County), North Carolina and her nearest relative as her brother Dr. C.D. Bradham of the same town. Since there were no employment records, census data or even death certificate related to Josephine Burton in Craven County, the trail to find out more about her grew cold and the mystery surrounding the first RN in the US remained.

Recent archival research has uncovered more information about Burton. Burton was born in 1875 in the small town of Chinquapin in Duplin County, NC. She was the daughter of George Washington and Julia Sheffield Bradham. On July 3, 1894, at age 19, she married Joel Burton also of Duplin County. Four and a half years later, Burton entered nurses training at Philadelphia Hospital on March 1, 1899 and graduated on April 1, 1902. While Burton was in nursing school in Philadelphia, her brother, Caleb D. Bradham, started a pharmacy in New Bern, (Craven County) NC and is credited as being the inventor of Pepsi Cola. It is likely that after graduation, Burton, still married but soon to be divorced from her husband, moved to New Bern to live near her brother. As a recent graduate of one of the country's finest nursing schools, Burton must have followed the debate about the nurse registration act in the North Carolina legislature. As the County Clerk's records indicate, once the act passed, Burton presented her

diploma to the local Clerk of Court's office and became the first registered nurse in North Carolina and thus the nation. There is no evidence that Burton, her brother Mr. Bradham, the Clerk of Court or anyone else was aware of Burton's new status.

Burton was divorced by 1910 and reverted to her maiden name until her death from complications after surgery in New York City in 1917. She is buried in the family plot in New Bern under the name Josephine Bradham. No evidence exists that Burton ever practiced nursing or was active in any nursing organizations. While information on Burton is

sparse what is known leads to several suppositions. It was rare in the late 1800s for a young woman from rural North Carolina to leave her family and live in another part of the country, yet Burton had the gumption to go to Philadelphia to pursue her career goal. She was bright, dedicated and hard working enough to graduate from one of the best nursing schools in the country. Further, she was savvy enough to keep up with current events and register at the Clerk of Courts office in accordance with the provisions of the new North Carolina Nurse Practice Act. Josephine Bradham Burton occupies an impressive position as the first

registered nurse in the United States. Her story illuminates an important period in nursing history.

Editor's note—For further information about North Carolina nursing history please visit <http://nursinghistory.appstate.edu/about>

For those interested in further researching the story of Josephine Bradham Burton, the Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing holds the student records of the Burton's alma mater, Philadelphia General Hospital. For information on the Bates Center please visit <http://www.nursing.upenn.edu/history/Pages/default.aspx>.