

Heroines on Horseback:

The Frontier Nursing Service of Appalachia

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The men of the Breckinridge family have a long history of service to the nation, including many politicians, soldiers, and even a vice president of the United States. But it was a woman in the family, Mary, who had, arguably, the most direct and long-lived impact on those she served. As the founder of the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) of Eastern Kentucky, Mary Breckinridge forever changed the health and well being of people of Appalachia.

This lesson examines the efforts of the nurses who provided medical assistance to isolated mountain communities and asks students to evaluate the extent to which these women were heroes or heroines. Conducted in a fifth grade class in an urban Title I school located within a small Midwestern city, this lesson was taught during a unit on the 1920s and 1930s. Instruction spanned the day's reading and social studies lessons, lasting approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Because many outside of Eastern Kentucky are probably unfamiliar with Mary Breckinridge and the FNS, a brief overview of each appears next, prior to the lesson description.

Who was Mary Breckinridge?

Born into privilege on February 17, 1881, in Memphis, Tennessee, Mary was raised to fulfill the traditional female gender roles of her time, those of wife and mother. Her wealthy and influential family traveled a lot, so she was exposed to many different cultures and lifestyles. Her education consisted primarily of private tutors in Washington D.C. and in St. Petersburg.

By 1907, Mary Breckinridge was widowed and studying nursing in New York City. After graduating, she decided not to pursue a career in nursing, but to return home to care for her ailing mother. While there she met and married her second husband.

Mary became a mother in January 1914, when her son, Breckie, was born. Unfortunately, her time as a mother was short-lived. Her second child, a daughter, was delivered prematurely and died within hours after birth. Two years later, four-year-old Breckie died of appendicitis. Following the death of the children, Mary's marriage deteriorated, resulting in a divorce in 1920. After these traumatic events, Mary abandoned her "traditional" role, took back her maiden name, and began working to improve the lives of women and children, first in war-ravaged France and, then, in the United States.¹

For two years after World War I, Mary worked in northern France, developing and administering a visiting nursing service that provided general health and maternity care to the region's residents. While in Europe, Mary became familiar with a new type of medical professional, the nurse-midwife. The British trained nurse-midwives were skilled in both traditional nursing and obstetrics. Mary was convinced that a corps of visiting nurse-midwives would greatly improve the health and well being of rural Americans, in areas that often lacked sufficient healthcare.²

Mary decided that Appalachia would be an ideal fit for her envisioned program. At the time, the region was understood to be a collection of poor, isolated, rural communities, with little in the way of public services. Mary also had a family connection to this area. Although she had never lived in Kentucky, her father was raised there, and her famous family name could open doors in the state. After surveying the Appalachian region, she decided to focus her efforts on Leslie County. This small county in Eastern Kentucky possessed few of the conveniences that Americans of the time enjoyed. Indoor plumbing was essentially nonexistent, as were telephones and electricity. The closest railroad station was located 24 miles away over mountainous terrain. Cars were not used in the county; most people traveled by foot or horse through riverbeds or trails. The isolation of this area of Kentucky was ideal for Breckinridge's efforts; in her 1952 memoir, *Wide Neighborhoods*, she explains why: "I felt that if the work I had in mind could be done there, it could be duplicated anywhere else in the United States with less effort."³

Before Mary could introduce nurse-midwives to the region, she had to first become one. In the fall of 1923, she traveled to London to study midwifery. Upon completing the program, she traveled throughout Great Britain, observing how programs like the one she proposed were enacted. She was particularly impressed by the care offered in rural Scotland, where nurses on bicycles offered in-home care to district residents; she could replicate this in the mountains of Leslie County, but on horseback.

The Frontier Nursing Service

In 1925, Mary hired two British-trained American nurse-midwives and a female researcher as the first employees of the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS). The first task for Mary and her staff was not to see patients but to gather information.

Mary felt that the only way to know the residents' health needs and the impact of her program was to collect the region's initial health statistics. By September 1925, the women had gathered data from all of the families in Leslie County and opened the first FNS clinic in Hyden, the county seat.⁴

The work of the nurse-wife was difficult but essential. The nurses were expected to spend more than forty hours a week holding clinics and regularly visiting patients at home



throughout their assigned area, providing preventive treatment, routine check-ups, and pre-natal care. They were easily identifiable in their uniform of sensible riding clothes and their two saddlebags—one for general health care and the other for maternity. Nurses responded to emergencies, day or night. In maternity cases, they were required to stay with the mother throughout the labor and delivery and then follow up daily during the infant's first ten days. This would be an intensive schedule in any situation; but, in the mountains, with only horses for transportation, it was grueling. Add the darkness of night and winter weather, and it is easy to see why the *New York Times* termed the nurse-midwives of the FNS as “heroines of the highlands.”⁵

Mary's vision of rural health care, provided by the women of a nurse-midwife corps, proved effective. By 1965, the year Mary Breckinridge died at the age of 84, the FNS had delivered 15,000 babies, treated 57,000 patients, and gave more than 250,000 inoculations.⁶

Heroines on Horseback: A Content Area Literacy Lesson⁷

This lesson utilized a “Book in an Hour” jigsaw strategy⁸ to guide students in reading and thinking about *Mary on Horseback: Three Mountain Stories* by Rosemary Wells.⁹ It is a short chapter book about Mary Breckinridge and the FNS. Students authenticated information in the book by analyzing photographs of FNS nurses and a on-line video of the FNS at work.¹⁰ Using information from the reading, images, and video, students answered the lesson's essential question “To what extent would you consider the women of the FNS to be heroes?”

Prior to teaching the lesson, I obtained four paperback copies of *Mary on Horseback*, and deconstructed three of them in order to conduct the “Book in an Hour” jigsaw activity. (I used a paperback version of the book, which was easily torn at the spine. I tore the book into four parts: one part for each of the books three short stories, and the fourth being a combination of the introduction and the short biography of Mary Breckinridge.) The intro/biography section was not utilized in the lesson, but it can be used as a supplemental reading for students who finish reading early or wish to know more.

Pre-reading: Setting the Stage for Reading

To initiate the lesson, I asked students to think about and quickly write down characteristics of a hero, which were, then, posted on the board for the remainder of the lesson. Students identified characteristics of a hero as brave, dedicated, strong, and caring.

We began learning about the women of the FNS and life in Eastern Kentucky in the 1920s. A student pointed out the eastern half of Kentucky on our physical-political map of the United States and identified its main physical feature, the Appalachian Mountains. The students then described what the terrain might look like, identifying the region as “mountainous, having lots of trees, high, and rocky.” Because this lesson was taught in a Kentucky elementary school, several of the students had a frame of reference to describe the Appalachian landscape. For students who do not live in areas near the Appalachian Mountains and have little experience with this terrain, viewing the landscape photo gallery of the Leslie County website¹¹ would be useful.

Students predicted what obstacles someone traveling in this area might face at a time where there are no roads and limited electricity, pronouncing such a journey as “dark, dangerous, hard, and scary.” Following the students' predictions, I read aloud pages 7–9 of *Mary on Horseback*, the section titled “Kentucky 1923.” This section provides a vivid description of the hardships faced by residents of the Appalachian region of Kentucky during the era, validating the students' predictions. This book excerpt served as a transition into the stories that the students read in the next activity.

“Book in an Hour” Jigsaw Reading

Students began the “Book in an Hour” jigsaw activity in their “expert” groups. Each of three groups read their assigned story: “Mountain Medicine” (10 pages), “Ireland of Scotland” (14

pages), or “How Many Stars in My Crown” (9 pages). The differing lengths of the stories offer an opportunity for differentiation by assigning chapters according to reading fluency.

As they read their assigned story, students completed a graphic organizer that required students to think about the author’s choice of title, the characters in the story, the problems they face, and what they learned about Appalachia. The activity provided students with a way to structure reading notes and process what they read. The graphic organizer was also a resource that students could refer to when retelling the story to their next jigsaw group.

When the students finished reading and completing their graphic organizers, they met with their new jigsaw groups to retell their assigned story. Students were confident in their retelling of the narratives because each group had two students who had read each story. After listening to each story, students discussed if the FNS nurses possessed the heroic characteristics identified at the beginning of the lesson. The students’ discussions at this point in the lesson helped them to answer the essential question at the end of the lesson.

Authenticating Text with Visual Evidence

In the second half of the lesson, students worked in pairs to authenticate information from the three stories. Students analyzed photographs of FNS nurses at work, which are available from the University of Louisville digital archives, two of which are reproduced on the **HANDOUT** following this article (See also the “Caption” on page 9).

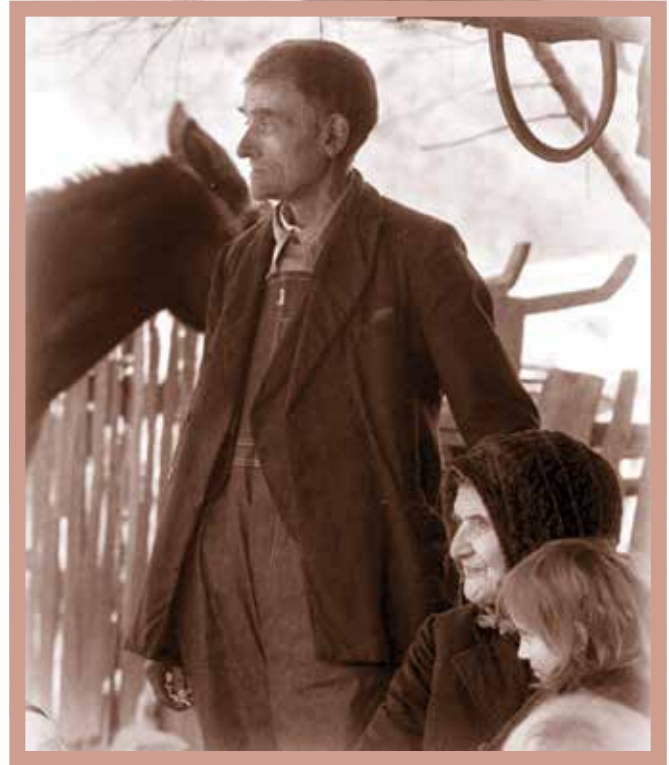
The photographs used for this activity included a nurse with a mother and infant in their home in 1932,¹² and a nurse visiting a family in a log cabin in 1932.¹³ By having students describe what they saw in the photographs, and then how that information was represented in the book, this activity led students from observation to comparison to evaluation. When students shared their findings, they indicated that they could verify that “the nurses wore uniforms, they rode horses, and they helped with babies.” The students also verified the book’s description of the structure of the homes and the area’s terrain.

For the second part of the authentication process, students viewed a 3.5-minute video segment (free at [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com)) taken from a larger film made in 1931 by Mary Breckinridge’s cousin and released as a fundraising tool.¹⁴ I played the video twice. During the first viewing, students watched without writing. During the second viewing, they answered the video questions, which also moved students to analytical thinking. In the ensuing discussion, students talked about what aspects of *Mary on Horseback* they were (or were not) able to authenticate from the photographs and video. Students found that specific individuals and events of the stories could not be verified with the photographs and video but noted that both the stories and the video addressed resistance to inoculations by some of the adults, as well as the plan to give inoculations at a local school.

Processing the Lesson

At the end of the lesson, students returned to an expanded version of the essential question, “Do you think that the nurses of the FNS deserve the title of ‘hero’? Why or why not? Provide at least three reasons for your answer.” Examples of student responses (grammar uncorrected) include the following:

Yes the nurses of the FNS deserve the title of “hero.”



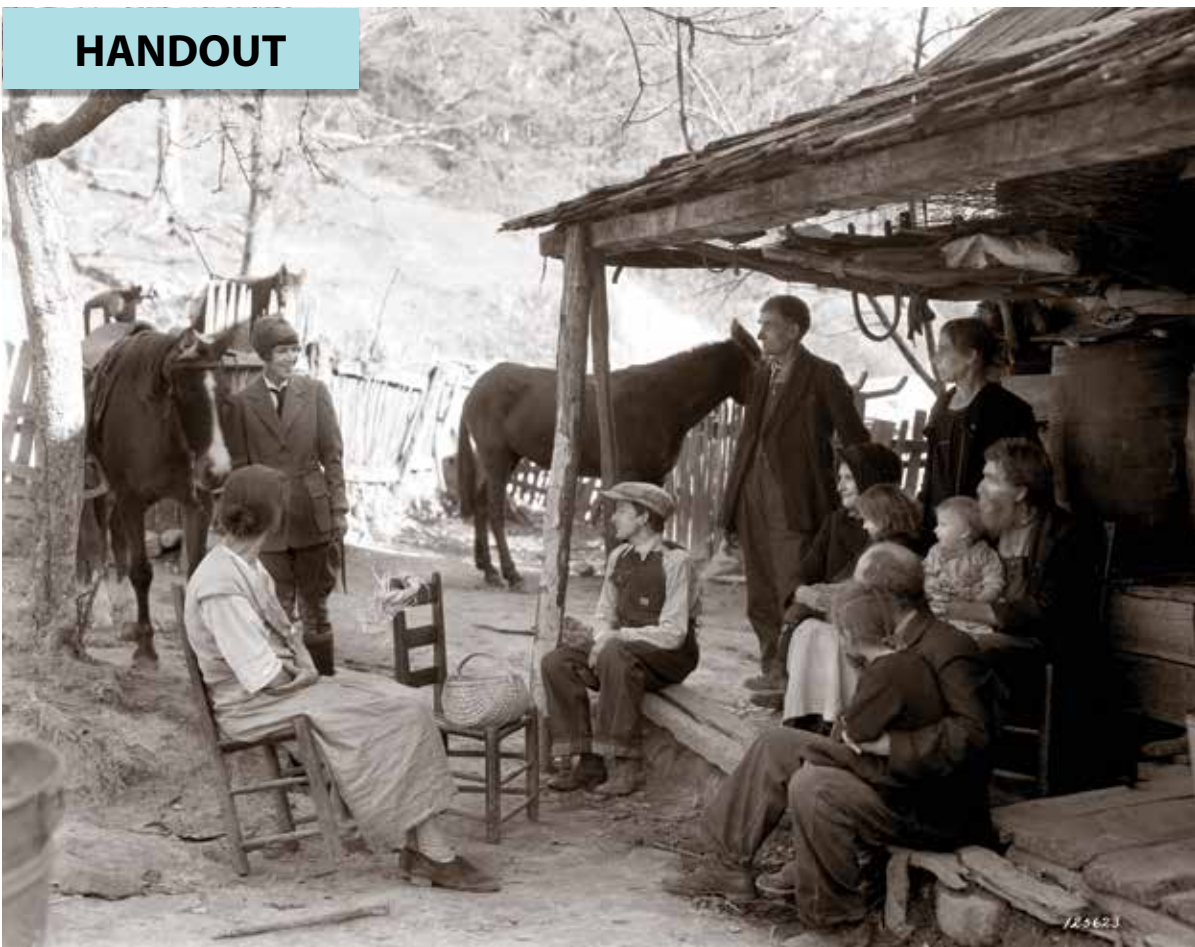
One reason is they saved lives. Another is they care for others. One final reason is they never give up on someone.

Yes, I fully believe that the FNS deserves the title of a “hero.” One reason why I believe that the nurses deserve the title of a “hero” is because one of the nurses [Mary] would travel on tough, steep mountains so she could help people. She wasn’t thinking about if she’d fail or not. She was worried about how these people would get better. Also, she saved a man’s leg along with the other nurses. She also helped prevent burns in a family.

I do think Mary Breckinridge is a hero because she saved lives even when it was a challenge she still does her job to heal injuries, sickness, and also birth.

Students’ answers varied in detail and length, but, as a class, students were able to formulate informed opinions about the essential question, based on information from all three stories and the sources that we used to authenticate the reading.

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Courtesy of the University of Louisville University Libraries, digital.library.louisville.edu.



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Modification for Younger Grades

While taught in an intermediate class, with modification, this lesson could be effective with younger students, framed as a lesson about community helpers, or community “heroes.” Suggested modifications include breaking the lesson into small chunks. Instead of attempting to do this lesson over one or two days, it could be taught over several days, with the teacher reading aloud the three stories from *Mary on Horseback* on three separate days. Instead of waiting until the end of the book, each story could be verified using the sources described in the lesson above. Instead of writing a response in paragraph form, younger students could write a list or draw a picture about the lesson’s essential question.

Beyond the Appalachians

The story of Mary Breckinridge and her frontier nurses may look like a regional story about Kentucky, but it can be much more. A local story such as this one can allow students to make connections across regions and historical time periods. The challenges posed by the Appalachians may be unique to the region, but investigating the impact of geography on women’s home and work lives can be an upper level activity for students in any setting. Mary’s life history, in which her roles shifted from traditional wife and mother to committed career woman, can be part of any unit on the transformation of women’s role in American society. Her Frontier Nurse Service is an example of a Progressive Era program of rural improvement. Like many urban reforms of the time period, the FNS had an important impact on its community. And, at its core, the story of the FNS is one of a group of women who braved the difficulty of terrain and few amenities to deliver much needed health services to an isolated population. It is a story where geography and community assistance intersect. There are many social studies lessons embedded in the story of Mary Breckinridge and the nurse-midwives of the FNS. The main difficulty turns out to be deciding on which lessons to focus. ●

Notes

1. Frontier Nursing Service, “Mrs. Mary Breckinridge,” www.frontiernursing.org/History/MaryBreckinridge.shtml.
2. Carol Crowe-Carraco, *Women Who Made a Difference* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1989).
3. Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1952).
4. Melanie Beals Goan, *Mary Breckinridge: The Frontier Nursing Service and Rural Health in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
5. Ibid
6. Crowe-Carraco.
7. CCSS ELA Anchor Standards Addressed: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1—Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7—Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. NCSS Themes Addressed: III. People, Places, and Environments; V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions, from NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
8. John A. Childrey, “Read a Book in an Hour,” *Reading Horizons* 20, no. 3, pp. 174–176. This activity, based on the jigsaw strategy, enables teachers to guide students through an entire book fairly quickly. This is the shortest book I have taught using the “Book in an Hour” strategy. The technique can easily be utilized with much larger works by assigning each individual a different part of the book to read and then sharing with the entire class. I’ve rarely had the “Book in an Hour” strategy last one hour; it usually takes two hours to complete.
9. Rosemary Wells, *Mary on Horseback: Three Mountain Stories* (New York: Puffin Books, 1998).
10. Robin D. Groce, “Authenticating *Number the Stars* Using Nonfiction Resources,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 3, pp. 6-8. The authentication portion of the lesson is derived from the concepts presented in the article. Instead of nonfiction text, this lesson utilizes visual primary sources.
11. The Leslie County landscape photographs can be accessed through the photo gallery available on Leslie County’s official homepage. Visit www.lesliecoky.com/new-gallery/index.php/Landscapes_001
12. The photograph of a FNS nurse visiting with a mother and her family in 1932 is available through the University of Louisville Libraries digital archives in the Caufield and Shook collection. The direct web address for the picture described is digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cs/id/1150.
13. The photograph of a nurse visiting a log cabin is also available in the Caufield and Shook collection of the University of Louisville Libraries digital archives. The direct web address for the described picture is digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cs/id/1149
14. FNS video excerpt from the larger 1931 film can be accessed by searching “The Frontier Nursing Service 1931” at YouTube.com.

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Captions for photos on the student HANDOUT

Top: A nurse from the Frontier Nursing Service with mother and infant in Kentucky, 1932.

Bottom: A nurse from the Frontier Nursing Service approaches a family waiting on a porch in Kentucky, 1932.