

Dr. Alice N. “Ma” Pickett

December 22, 1878 - November 17, 1971

Interred: Section D, Lot/Row 40, Space 4



On December 22, 1878, the “wise, understanding, [and] elegant” Dr. Alice Newcomb Pickett was born on a farm in Finchville, Kentucky to James Abner Pickett (1840-1899) and Alice Theresa Bailey (1845-1920). She was the seventh of their ten children. With the support of her father, Dr. Pickett would grow up to be one of the first women in Kentucky to earn a degree in medicine. She used her degree to work as an obstetrician to deliver babies, and eventually, she would teach at the University of Louisville for this practice.

Despite having no children of her own, Dr. Pickett was fondly nicknamed “Ma Pickett” by her medical students. This was due to her affectionate, motherly attitude towards them. Nevertheless, “Ma” Pickett could also be described as a demanding teacher whose “tongue could be cutting” to her students as she pushed them to work their hardest.

Even as a child, Dr. Pickett knew she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. She had been influenced by her school teacher to seek out this profession despite the societal expectations of women in the late 1800s. As she got older, Alice and her friends became more interested in working in the medical field, which almost led to a disaster. She and her friends had made plans to dig up a human skeleton from a cemetery in an attempt to study it! Luckily, the grave robbery never occurred as Alice Pickett’s father caught wind of their idea and opted to buy them a legal skeleton to study instead. Along with this act of support, James Pickett gave his daughter “endless encouragement” to become a doctor regardless of how others may have felt about a woman wanting a career outside of housework.

Alice would eventually need to move out of Kentucky to pursue her medical degree because there were no colleges in the state that would allow a woman to become a doctor. In 1909, Dr. Pickett finally earned her medical degree from the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania with her friend and classmate Dr. Annie Veech. After receiving her degree, Dr. Pickett worked in Mississippi, New York, and Pennsylvania before deciding to move back to Kentucky in 1913. Alice’s reasoning for moving back was simple: “If [she had] anything to contribute [she wanted] to give it to Kentucky.”

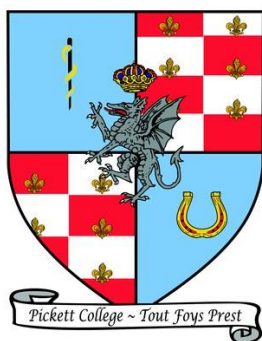
However, in 1917, Dr. Pickett decided to leave the country to serve as a volunteer civilian physician with the Red Cross during World War I. Her service lasted for over a year. Afterward, Dr. Pickett was truly back to stay in Kentucky.



Although she was not able to go to college in Kentucky, Dr. Pickett was a momentous hire at the University of Louisville (UofL) when she took on being their first woman faculty member in 1919. Here, Dr. Pickett excelled in her teaching and she eventually served as the Chief of Obstetrical Service for over 25 years.

While teaching at UofL's medical school, she also worked at the Louisville General Hospital where she delivered babies for 38 years. However, Alice didn't keep a record of the number of babies she delivered. Instead, she knew that she was "almost up to the granddaughters of [her] first patients," when she decided to retire in 1952 on New Year's Day at the age of 72. Before her retirement, Dr. Pickett had been an extraordinary doctor at the General Hospital, which led to her being given the title, "Great Lady of Medicine." At this Hospital, Dr. Pickett once saved a baby's life by performing a swift C-section on its mother using one of her medical student's pocket knives after the "late-term expectant mother with heart disease" abruptly died during childbirth.

Alice's achievements were not just her acts in the hospital as she also received many awards throughout her lifetime. She was awarded by the Alumnae Association of the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia for her "outstanding medical and scientific achievement," as well as a bronze medal from UofL for her excellent teaching, and an honorary lifetime membership in a businesswomen's club, called the Altrusa Club.



Dr. Pickett's most notable honor, however, was UofL's naming of "Pickett College," after her due to her lasting impact on the University's medical school. Despite all of these achievements, Dr. Pickett remained selfless as she was "more embarrassed than honored" by her awards and the publicity that followed her astounding career and life.

At 92 years of age, Dr. Pickett died in Louisville, Kentucky on November 17, 1971, after being bedridden for years. She was cremated and then buried in Grove Hill Cemetery in Shelbyville, Kentucky.

Resources:

- Gordon R. Tobin, M.D.
<http://louisville.edu/medicine/studentaffairs/student-involvement/advisory-colleges-1/pickett-college>
- *Courier-Journal*, "Making Life easier at the very start," April 12, 1942.
- *Courier-Journal*, "Her own Epitaph: a good rich life," November 19, 1941.

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