

Biography of Dr. Margaret Irving Handy:

From the History and Archives Collection

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Dr. Margaret Irving Handy (see Figure 1) was the first native-born Delawarean woman to become a physician, and the state's first practicing pediatrician.

Figure 1. Dr. Margaret Irving Handy



While chief of pediatrics at the Delaware Hospital, Dr. Handy worked to improve care for premature babies and helped establish the Mother's Milk Bank, which fed local children for forty years. She received numerous accolades during a fifty-two-year career devoted to improving children's health, and is remembered as one of Delaware's most respected and beloved physicians.

Margaret Irving Handy was born in Smyrna, Delaware, in 1889, the daughter of a former U.S. Representative and Mrs. Irving L. Handy. She attended public schools in Newark, Delaware, and the Girls' Latin School in Baltimore. After graduating from Goucher College in 1911, she considered becoming either a teacher or a doctor. While her father encouraged her to study medicine, her mother strongly disapproved of her entering the male-dominated field, insisting that she become a "genteel lady." Undecided, Margaret temporarily postponed her studies. After a decidedly unfulfilling year teaching Sunday school and playing whist (a card game), it became clear to everyone that Margaret Handy would never be happy without a career. "Mother was

happier than I was when I entered the Johns Hopkins University as a medical student,” she later recalled.

After earning her doctor of medicine degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in 1916, Handy interned at Philadelphia’s Woman’s Hospital and completed a residency at the Harriet Lane Hospital in Baltimore.

She then settled in Wilmington, becoming the first native-born Delawarean woman doctor, and the state’s first pediatrician. She soon found more business than she could have anticipated. When the influenza epidemic ravaged the community in 1918, she was enlisted by Dr. Robert E. Ellegood, a family friend, to assist him in caring for patients suffering from the flu. She also helped establish a children’s ward, where she acted as doctor, nurse, janitor, and “lullaby singer.” Later that year, she successfully organized a pediatric clinic at the Delaware Hospital, despite conflict with some of her male colleagues.

From 1921 until 1946, Dr. Handy served as chief of pediatrics at Delaware Hospital, where she became the leading crusader for improved care and facilities for premature babies. She frequently went out into the community to collect women’s surplus breast milk for the young babies of mothers who were unable to breastfeed. After meeting one of the hospital’s junior board members who had lost a child because she was unable to nurse him, the two joined forces to establish the Mother’s Milk Bank, which subsequently helped nourish local children for the next forty years (see Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c).

Figure 2a. Infant Feeder, Donated to the Delaware Academy of Medicine by Dr. Margaret Handy



Figure 2b. Infant Feeder, Donated to the Delaware Academy of Medicine by Dr. Margaret Handy



Figure 2c. Infant Feeder, Donated to the Delaware Academy of Medicine by Dr. Margaret Handy



Dr. Handy was regularly honored for her tireless dedication to improving children's health. The University of Delaware and Goucher College both conferred upon her the honorary degree of doctor of science, and she received the Elizabeth Blackwell Citation from the New York Infirmary and a certificate of merit from the Medical Society of Delaware. Wesley College in Dover, Delaware, presented her with the Annie Jump Cannon medal, and she was made a diplomate of the American Board of Pediatricians. In 1953, the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce awarded her the Josiah Marvel Cup, recognizing her as Delaware's most distinguished citizen of the year.

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