

Peck, Clara Jane Thornton ^[1]

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By Ethel Stephens Arnett, 1994

1 Mar. 1862–15 June 1926

Clara Jane Thornton Peck, nurse, the daughter of John and Jane Thornton, was born in Stroud, Gloucestershire, England. When she was about ten, her family moved to Pittsburgh, Pa., where she attended the public schools and was graduated in voice from the Pershing School of Music. For several years she was a member of the choir and a soloist at St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

During early womanhood she met and on 19 Sept. 1883 married Delbert Stephen Peck of Cleveland, Ohio. They became the parents of Howard Thornton (who died young), Saza Hendrick, and Cora Bliss. In 1898 the family moved to Greensboro ^[2], N.C., to be near Mrs. Peck's parents, who had moved there in hopes that a change of climate would restore John Thornton's health. The father died in 1899, however, and soon afterwards Delbert Peck died of pneumonia.

Clara Peck, in considering ways of supporting herself and her two small daughters, turned to her natural instinct to care for the ill. There was no source of nurse's training immediately available, but in 1901 local physicians opened the Greensboro Hospital and accepted her for training. She soon became the institution's first matron and began voluntarily to visit patients in their rooms. General practitioners, recognizing her skills, called on her to care for patients with unusual illnesses.

Soon after entering a home to serve as a nurse, she came to be regarded as a friend and adviser. In homes where the mother was ill and there were children to be cared for, she often took the children to her own home until other arrangements could be made. Her public-spirited service filled a community need at a time when no public agency existed to provide help. In 1909 a group of women in Greensboro ^[2] organized the District Nurse and Relief Association and volunteered their services, contributed financial support, and employed Mrs. Peck as the first district nurse in the town. Within three years she reported that she had answered 7,750 calls for assistance. She came to be called "Mother Peck" by those whom she helped and, indeed, by the citizens of Greensboro.

Before long it was discovered that many people at various economic levels were suffering from tuberculosis ^[3]. Women of the town opened a six-room cottage as a hospital and named Mother Peck as nurse and general manager. She also visited homes throughout the community to minister to the sick who could not be accommodated in the hospital. Visits to local schools as a health nurse helped to alert citizens to the need for a tax-supported public health department and a sanatorium for tubercular patients. For several years the District Nurse and Relief Committee, with Mother Peck to direct the work, provided tuberculosis control in Greensboro ^[2]. She went to a specialized sanatorium to receive training in the care of such patients and then played a leading role in securing county support for erecting a sanatorium. It was opened in 1923 as the first such county-supported institution in North Carolina. She was able to convince persons with the disease in its early stages to receive treatment, and after thirty-two years the program was so successful that the hospital site and buildings were no longer needed for this purpose. The Guilford Technical Institute ^[4] took it over as a training center.

During the influenza epidemics of 1918 and 1920 the District Nurse and Relief Association offered its nursing staff to the relief organization of the Greensboro Chapter of the Red Cross ^[5], and Mother Peck extended her already full schedule to include care for those who fell victim to this new illness.

Having worked for "the rich and the poor, the sick and the fallen" in and around Greensboro for almost a quarter of a century, Mother Peck retired with the gratitude of the community. Numerous tokens of appreciation were extended on the occasion and a little later the Clara J. Peck Elementary School was named in her honor. She died suddenly and was buried in Green Hill Cemetery, Greensboro. She was survived by two daughters.

References:

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Guilford County Health Department files

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From:

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