

Petty, Mary Maria ^[1]

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By Maurice M. Burse, 1994

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Mary Maria Petty, chemist and educator, was the pioneer woman chemist in North Carolina. Born in the Quaker ^[2] community of Bush Hill (since 1887, Archdale), she was the third of seven children of William Clinton and Mary Victoria Petty. Her father's family was from Kentucky, her grandfather and his mother, a Macy, from Nantucket, Mass., and her mother's family, the Hayworths, had gone to Philadelphia with William Penn. William Clinton, though a farmer, had—perhaps more to his interest—made the first power loom shuttles for the South's cotton mills, invented a device to fit the shoes of Confederate soldiers with wooden pegs, and, in 1866, began to produce building supplies, the only business of its kind in a large area. Later he was the contractor for the old Trinity College ^[3] buildings.

Mary Petty was first educated in a school in Bush Hill built by members of the community to supplement the three-month public schools and staffed by teachers from New Garden Boarding School (now Guilford College ^[4]), Trinity College (Duke University ^[5]), Haverford College ^[6], and other institutions from as far away as Indiana. She transferred to New Garden School, and in 1881 her father took her and a friend, Gertrude Mendenhall (who later was her faculty colleague for many years at Greensboro) ^[7], by train and by ship, to Wellesley College ^[8]. She received a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1885, at a time when higher education for women was not at all widespread and emphasis on science in their education almost unheard of. Later she did graduate work at Bryn Mawr ^[9] (1895–96) and in summer schools at Harvard ^[10], Cornell ^[11], and the University of California ^[12].

She first filled the chair—or, as she described it, the settee—of mathematics at Statesville College (late Mitchell College ^[13]), and after a period in a Philadelphia hospital in 1888 was called to be one of the founding members of the faculty of Guilford College ^[4], where she taught mathematics, botany, history, Latin, and English literature. In 1893, one year after the opening of the State Industrial and Normal College (later the Woman's College of The University of North Carolina ^[14]) and then the University of North Carolina at Greensboro ^[15], she returned again from medical treatment in Philadelphia to join its faculty to teach physics, chemistry, and mathematics and in 1903 became head of the Department of Chemistry. She was the first female member of the American Chemical Society in North Carolina ^[16], was responsible for setting up the first chemistry laboratory for women in the state, and ultimately planned and saw built several buildings for chemistry as the institution grew. She set high standards for her students in this field opening to women and had to struggle to see that these standards were maintained. Her lectures were down-to-earth, exciting, inviting; she sent her classes to the Pomona clay pits to bring back the material to make crystals of alum; and soap—good soap!—was made with infectious enthusiasm. She succeeded in painting a broad background of the science for her students, but also in drawing many of them into the field for a career, contemporaries with Madame Curie.

Mary Petty retired in 1934, but for two more decades was active in the Woman's College, with an office in the administration building, as chairman of the social committee that she had many years before originated; her enthusiasm in planning activities for the faculty was legendary. In 1936 she was named the first woman trustee of Guilford College. In 1920 she had been one of three North Carolina delegates to the World Conference of Friends in London on world peace and was again a delegate to a similar conference in 1937. She was an organizer and then president of the Greensboro Women's Club ^[17], the first secretary of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, and for many years recording clerk of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends.

Never married, she lived at the family home in Archdale with other unmarried or widowed brothers and sisters in the summer, and on Ashe Street in Greensboro ^[18] during the winter. Death came quietly for her at the Oakdale Nursing Home near Greensboro, and she was buried in Springfield Cemetery, near her childhood home.

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