

McVea, Emilie Watts ^[1]

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by Martha S. Stoops, 1991

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Emilie Watts McVea, nationally recognized educator, was born in Clinton, La., the daughter of Judge Charles and Emilie Rose Watts McVea. Her ancestry was Scottish and French. After Judge McVea's death, Mrs. McVea moved with her young daughters to [Raleigh](#) ^[2] to be near her sister, Mrs. John Esten Cooke Smedes, wife of the second president of [St. Augustine's College](#) ^[3]. Young Emilie was educated at St. Mary's School in Raleigh (1877–84), where her record was outstanding. She remained active in St. Mary's alumnae affairs and in the Episcopal church throughout her life.

In 1886 she returned to St. Mary's to teach and in 1898 became lady principal. She worked with the Reverend Dr. Bennett Smedes, second rector of the school, to enrich the curriculum. She was, according to her students, an inspiring teacher who made her classes in literature and history "an unforgettable experience . . . an introduction to life." Scholarly and deeply religious, she was also forthright and tough-minded. Perceptive, friendly, and witty, she was so quick to sympathize that her young students loved as well as respected "Emmie Mac." A large and energetic woman, she gave the impression of vitality, always accomplishing incredible amounts of work. In reality, she endured chronic poor health that eventually forced her into early retirement.

After the death of Dr. Smedes in February 1899, Miss McVea supervised the school until the new rector, the Reverend Theodore DuBose Bratton, was established. She then began long-planned advanced studies at [George Washington University](#) ^[4], where she received an A.B. degree in 1902 and an A.M. degree the next year.

She taught English literature briefly at the [University of Tennessee](#) ^[5], where she was active in extension work with public school teachers. When Dr. [Charles W. Dabney](#) ^[6], formerly director of the [North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station](#) ^[7] and then president of the [University of Tennessee](#) ^[5], was named president of the [University of Cincinnati](#) ^[8], he recommended Miss McVea for the position of assistant professor of English literature at the latter institution. In 1909 she was elected dean of the Women's Departments.

Emilie McVea's career at the [University of Cincinnati](#) ^[8] was distinguished and her contributions to the life of the city were considerable. When she left Ohio in 1916, she was honored at a civic reception by tributes from the leaders of almost every reform movement of the time. She worked and lectured on behalf of many liberal causes—child labor laws, better secondary schools, more competent teachers in women's colleges, an open university forum, the parity of men and women in university posts, and, above all, the right of women to equal education, equal job opportunities, and suffrage. She also gave lectures in support of the [YWCA](#) ^[9], and in 1903–4 she served as secretary-treasurer of the [Southern Association of College Women](#) ^[10]. Among the administrators at Cincinnati, she was the indisputably equal colleague whose firmly held convictions came to be "the solidifying force" of the institution, while, according to one of her fellow professors, the home she shared with her mother was "the social heart of the university."

[Sweet Briar](#) ^[11], a small, nonsectarian academy and college for women near Lynchburg, Va., was barely ten years old when Dr. McVea became its second president. By 1925 Sweet Briar was a fully accredited and respected college with a scholarly faculty and a strong liberal arts curriculum. The endowment had been increased and a number of buildings added. Dr. McVea believed that the times demanded rigorous training of women and that women should attack the root causes of social and economic problems. She continued her interest in local and national affairs, lecturing widely on education and, during World War I, for the Federal Food Administration. In recognition of her contributions, she received the honorary Litt.D. degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1916 and an honorary LL.D. degree from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[12] in 1921. In 1922 she was appointed to a four-year term on the board of visitors of the [University of Virginia](#) ^[13]; she was the first woman member of that body.

When she retired in May 1925, Dr. McVea was made president emerita of Sweet Briar College. By then she was nationally recognized for over forty years of service to the cause of women's education. From 1926 to 1928 she lectured on English literature at Rollins College. She died while on a visit to Cincinnati and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh.

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