

## First Rural Nurse-Midwife Service in the U.S.

In 1925 Mary Carson Breckinridge, the granddaughter of Vice President John Breckenridge, established the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) to provide infant and maternal care to those living in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky. This effort was the first introduction to nurse-midwives in the U.S. With no formalized training available in the country, nurses were recruited from Great Britain or sent overseas for training.

Due to the inaccessibility and harsh terrain of travel in the region, nurses rode on horseback with their supplies packed in specially designed saddlebags. “Mrs. Breckenridge’s Nurses” provided midwifery and general nursing care to about 10,000 people in a 700 square mile area around their Hyden headquarters. Due to the region’s poverty, the annual fee per family was one dollar with additional services charged on an hourly basis. Often payment was accepted in chickens or produce in lieu of cash.



To finance the FNS, Breckinridge sought philanthropic support outside the mountains by traveling extensively on fundraising tours and lecturing about the rural health care effort in Kentucky. By the time of her death in 1965, she had raised approximately \$6 million for the Frontier Nursing Service. Today, the FNS influence reaches far beyond Eastern Kentucky through the Frontier Nursing University, which was the first family nurse practitioner program in the U.S. The school was founded in 1939 when travel abroad during WWII for formalized midwifery training was unfeasible.

Oral histories with Frontier Service Nurses and about rural health care in Kentucky can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

“Pass the Word” is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.