

Meeting House Hill's Safford-Blake paved way for 19th C. women doctors

by Anthony Sammarco

Today, one doesn't think twice about doctors who happen to be female. However a century ago there were very few women doctors, let alone general practitioners, to serve the general public.



Dr. Mary Jane Safford-Blake

One woman who became well known as a physician was Dorchester native Mary Jane Safford-Blake, who was described as "a small slight woman with a sweet voice and full of helpful experiences which added much to her lectures" at Boston University, where she taught. Dr. Safford-Blake was born in Dorchester and was married at an early age to Peter Blake. They lived at 5 Percival Street on Meeting House Hill after their marriage. An advocate of women's rights and equal education for females, Mary Blake became estranged from

her husband and enrolled in medical school in New York. Studying with Isabel Chapin Barrows, a fellow medical student and the first woman ophthalmologist in America, they travelled to Germany where they attended Heidelberg. Returning to this country, Mary Safford-Blake became a member of the faculty of the Boston University School of Medicine.

Dr. Safford-Blake, as she was to be known, was among the first, if not the first woman gynecologist in this country. She specialized in the care of the poor and indigent females of the inner city, which at that point meant not Dorchester but the impoverished, immigrant inner core of Boston -- the North, South, and West Ends and the South Bay area of South Boston. She opened her office at 308 Columbus Avenue in the South End and offered medical treatment for the diseases of women. As a professor at the BU School of Medicine, she offered courses on "Menstruation as a natural function, and its deviations; hysteria; ovarian tumors, their diagnosis and treatment; diseases of the uterine ligaments and diseases of the mammae". In the category of "Diseases of Woman" in the 1874 Boston University catalogue of courses, she was one of only two professors in the gynecological field. Her research, and education on gynecology was to earn her a prominent place in *Women in Medicine*, a bibliography of prominent women in medicine.

THOUGH MEDICAL RESEARCH WAS HER primary interest, Dr. Safford-Blake maintained her friendship with Dr. Isabel Barrows, the wife of the Rev. Samuel Barrows of the First Parish Church in Dorchester, who later served as editor of "The Christian Register". As a coterie, Doctors Barrows, Safford-Blake and Alice Stone Blackwell maintained a friendship with Catherine Breshkovsky, known as "The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution", Breshkovsky dictated her memoirs through Isabel Barrows, who spoke fluent Russian, to Alice Stone Blackwell who edited them and published them in her book "The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution". Their interest in this fierce patriot was to lead to Barrows' trip to Moscow to secure her release from prison by appealing to Tsarist officials.

As an obstetrician and gynecologist, Mary Safford-Blake was not just well known, but a humanitarian who deserves present day recognition. Her interests in medicine and human rights places her in the forefront of the women of Dorchester.

Anthony Sammarco's award winning history columns are a regular feature of Dorchester Community News.