[9]

Mary Emma Byrd

Lawrence’s Forgotten Astronomer

David Kolb

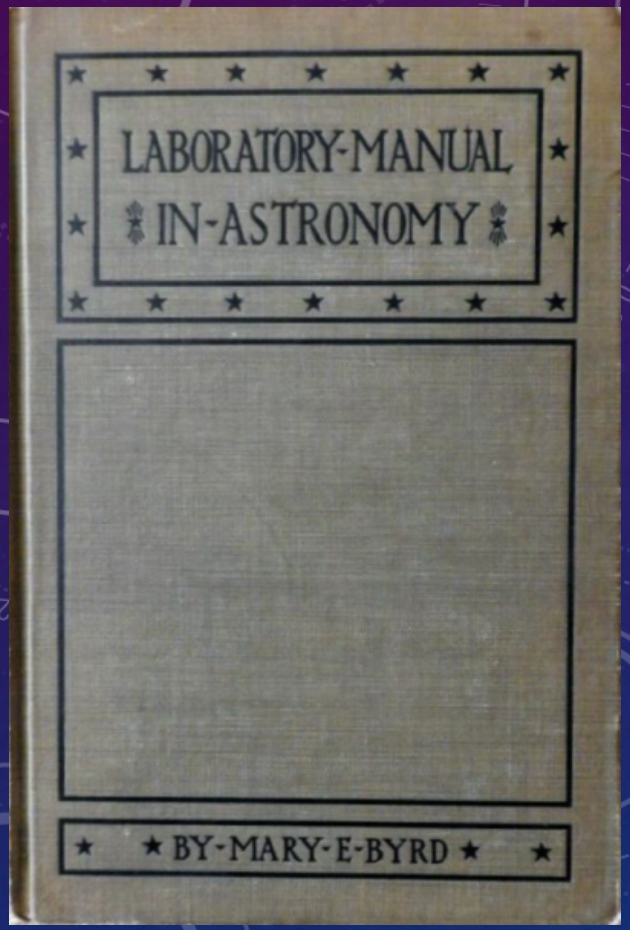
SpaceFest 2026

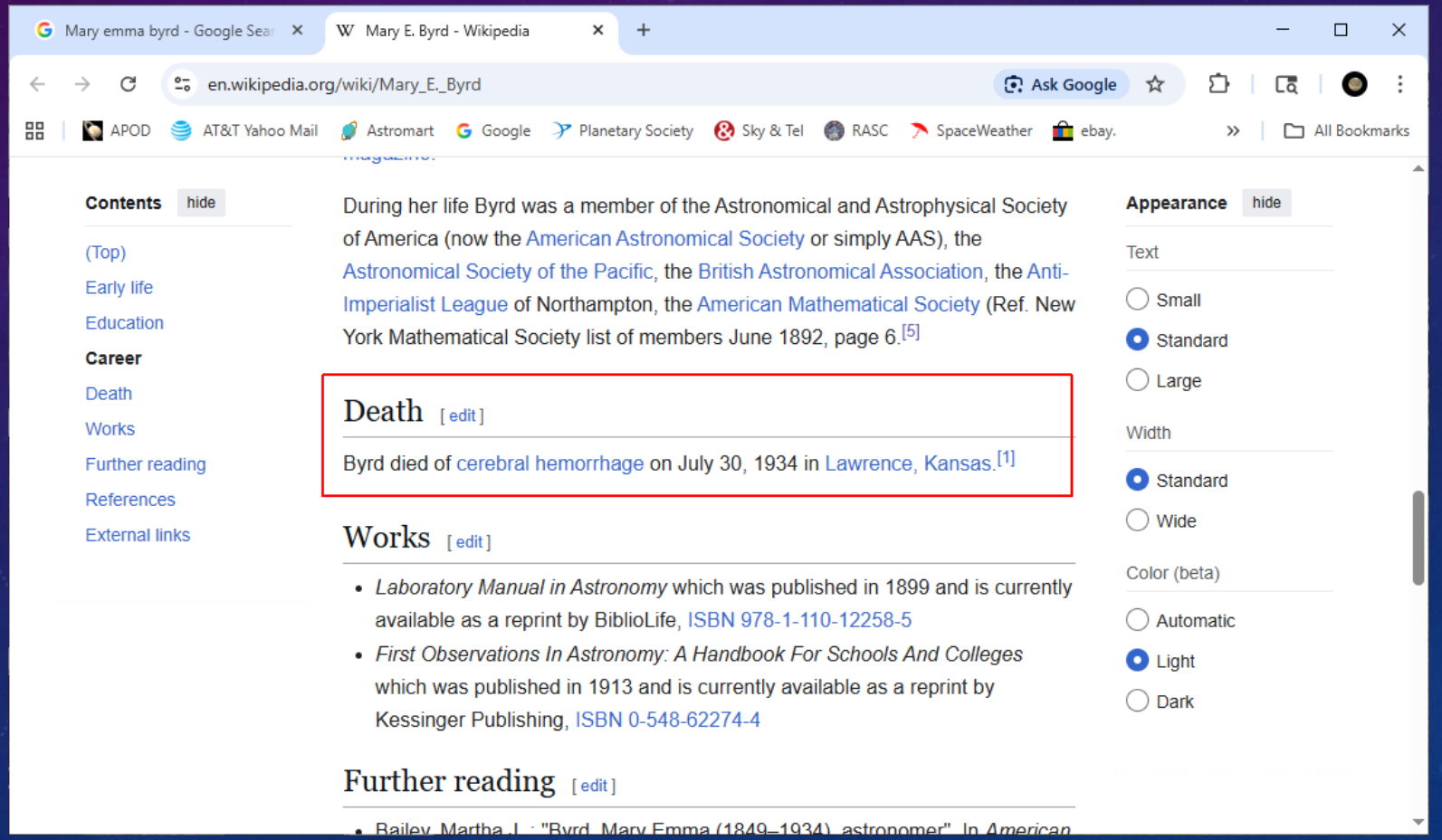
University of Kansas

Department of Physics and Astronomy

May 8, 2026

Discovered that Mary E. Byrd died in Lawrence while cataloging one of her books that I had added to my collection. This made me want to learn more about her.

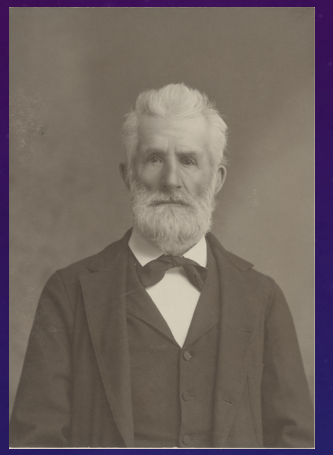




Family Headstone, Oak Hill Cemetery, Lawrence, KS

Family History

Rev. Byrd [21]



- Born in LeRoy (East LeRoy) [1], Michigan on November 15, 1849 to abolitionist parents Reverend John and Elizabeth Byrd. [2] [3]
- The family moved to Leavenworth, Kansas in 1855 where the parents operated a safe house on the underground railroad. [2]
- They resettled near Lawrence in 1874. [4]
- Mary's uncle, David Lowe, was a territorial judge and served one term in Congress. [5]

Education

[5]

- Graduated from Leavenworth High School in 1871. [6]
- Attended Oberlin College from 1871 to 1874. [2][17]
- Graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in 1878. [3][17]
- Studied astronomy at Harvard College Observatory under Dr. Edward Pickering between 1882 and 1883. [7][17]
- Received an honorary PhD from Carleton College in 1904. [2][17]

Career

- Principal of Wabash High School in Indiana from 1879 until 1882. [2][17]
- In 1883 she became First Assistant of the Goodsell Observatory at Carleton College, where she was responsible for the Observatory's time service, and taught mathematics and astronomy. [2][7]
- In 1887 she was appointed Director of the Smith College Observatory, where she held no academic rank. [2][7][17]
- Published her first book "*A Laboratory Manual in Astronomy*" in 1899.
- Resigned her position at Smith College in 1906. [2][17]

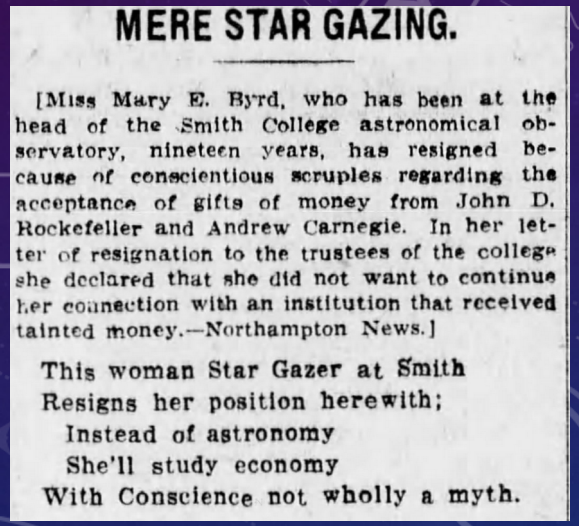
Smith College

[9]

[8]

Resignation From Smith College

Mary resigned in protest over Smith College accepting ‘tainted money’ from Rockefeller and Carnegie.

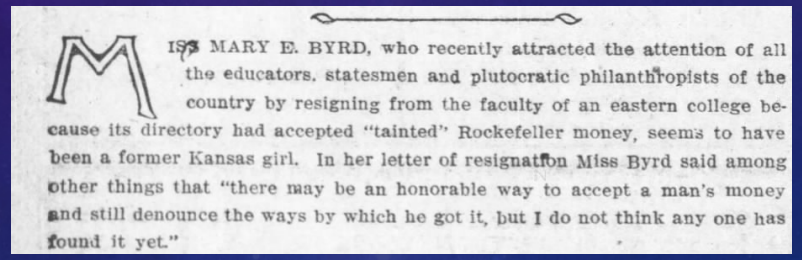


MERE STAR GAZING.

[Miss Mary E. Byrd, who has been at the head of the Smith College astronomical observatory, nineteen years, has resigned because of conscientious scruples regarding the acceptance of gifts of money from John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. In her letter of resignation to the trustees of the college she declared that she did not want to continue her connection with an institution that received tainted money.—Northampton News.]

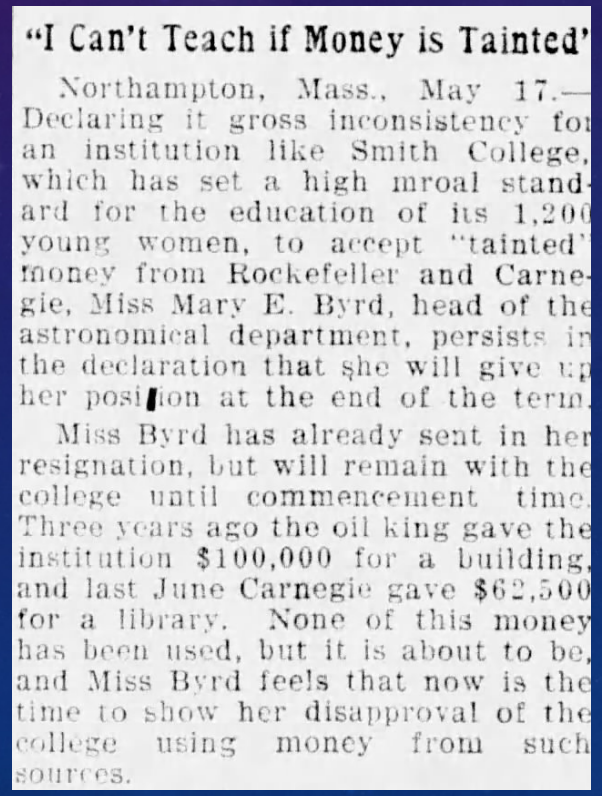
This woman Star Gazer at Smith
Resigns her position herewith;
Instead of astronomy
She'll study economy
With Conscience not wholly a myth.

Brooklyn Eagle (Brooklyn, NY) · Sun, May 20, 1906



MISS MARY E. BYRD, who recently attracted the attention of all the educators, statesmen and plutocratic philanthropists of the country by resigning from the faculty of an eastern college because its directory had accepted "tainted" Rockefeller money, seems to have been a former Kansas girl. In her letter of resignation Miss Byrd said among other things that "there may be an honorable way to accept a man's money and still denounce the ways by which he got it, but I do not think any one has found it yet."

The Wichita Eagle · 18 Jul 1906



"I Can't Teach if Money is Tainted'

Northampton, Mass., May 17.—Declaring it gross inconsistency for an institution like Smith College, which has set a high mroal standard for the education of its 1,200 young women, to accept "tainted" money from Rockefeller and Carnegie, Miss Mary E. Byrd, head of the astronomical department, persists in the declaration that she will give up her position at the end of the term.

Miss Byrd has already sent in her resignation, but will remain with the college until commencement time. Three years ago the oil king gave the institution $100,000 for a building, and last June Carnegie gave $62,500 for a library. None of this money has been used, but it is about to be, and Miss Byrd feels that now is the time to show her disapproval of the college using money from such sources.

The World-News (Roanoke, VA) · Fri, May 18, 1906

Resignation From Smith College

Miss Byrd is a woman of intense convictions and taking a stand for conscience sake “is in the blood” – Boston Globe, May 7, 1906 [17]

THE BOSTON GLOBE—T

IT IS "IN THE BLOOD."

May 7, 1906

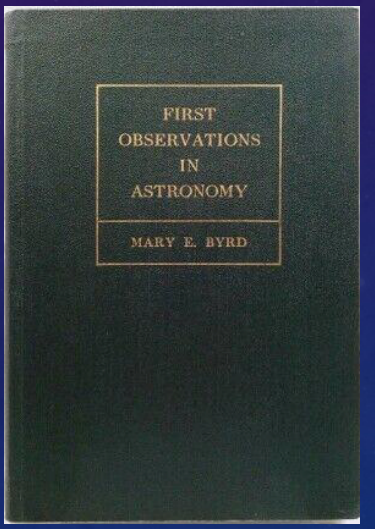
New England and Revolutionary Stock Makes Prof Mary E. Byrd Resign From Smith College for 'Conscience' Sake.

MARY EMMA BYRD,
Smith College Professor Who Resigns Because of Antipathy to Oil And Steel Money.

Mary inherited her strong moral convictions from her father, whose stand against slavery, and active participation in the Free State movement, made him a frequent target for physical violence.

Post Resignation

- Returned to the family farm near Lawrence, where Bishop Seabury Academy is now located. [17]
- Began writing her second book "*First Observations in Astronomy*".
- Took a one year teaching position at the Normal College of the City of New York in 1913, where her second book was completed. [11]
- Returned to Lawrence in July of 1914. [10]
- Did independent research at the KU Observatory during the summer of 1920. [12]
- Observations of Winnecke's Comet with Dinsmore Alter in 1921. [22]
- Astronomy outreach in Lawrence. [23]



Memberships

- American Astronomical Society [2]
- Astronomical Society of the Pacific [2]
- British Astronomical Association [2]
- American Mathematical Society [13]
- Anti-Imperialist League of Northampton [2]
- Society for Practical Astronomy – Director for “Section for the Practical Teaching of Astronomy” [14][15]

Publications

- Popular Fallacies about Observatories, The Observatory, Vol. 9, pp.389-392, 1886
- Hints on the Popular Study of Astronomy, Sidereal Messenger, Vol. 6, pp. 151-156, 1887
- Longitude of Smith College Observatory, Annals of the Harvard College Observatory, Vol 29, pp. 35-63, 1893 (co-authored with Mary Watson Whitney)
- A Laboratory Manual in Astronomy, Ginn and Company, Boston, 1899
- Comet Observations in Professional Journals:
  - Observations of Encke's Comet, Astronomical Journal, Vol. 15, p. 103, 1895
  - Observations of Comet b 1900 (Borrelly-Brooks), Astronomical Journal, Vol. 21, p.115, 1901
  - Observations of Comet b 1902 (Perbine), Astronomical Journal, Vol. 23, p. 15, 1903
  - Observations of Comet d 1902 (Giacobini), Astronomical Journal, Vol. 23, p. 127, 1903
  - Observations of Comets, Astronomical Journal, Vol. 24, p. 188, 1905
  - Observations of Comets, Astronomische Nachrichten, Vol. 169, p. 191, 1905
- Daniel's Comet, Lawrence Daily Journal, 6 Sep 1907, p. 3
- First Observations in Astronomy, The Rumford Press, Concord, 1914
- A Pleasure Without Price, Publication of the Pomona College Astronomical Society, Vol. 5, pp. 86-89, 1916

Publications

- Popular Astronomy Articles
  - First observations of the Sun and Moon, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 1, pp. 216-221, 252-257, 1893-1894
  - Stars and the Milky Way, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 6, pp. 288-294, 1898
  - A Laboratory for General Astronomy, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 10, pp. 131-135, 1902
  - Astronomy in the High School I, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 11, pp. 550-552, 1903
  - Astronomy in the High School II, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 12, pp. 24-26, 1904
  - Astronomy in the High School III, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 12, pp. 199-202, 1904
  - Anna Winlock, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 12, pp. 254-258, 1904
  - Astronomy in the High School IV, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 13, pp. 545-549, 1905
  - Astronomy in the High School V, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 15, pp. 227-237, 1907
  - Astronomy and the Normal School, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 21, pp. 2-4, 1913
  - Astronomy in the High School VI, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 21, pp. 74-78, 1913

Publications

- Popular Astronomy Articles
  - Astronomical Teaching in the City, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 23, pp. 154-159, 230-232, 1915
  - Astronomy in the High School VII, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 23, pp. 546-553, 1915
  - A Class for Amateurs, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 25, p. 211, 1917
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies I, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 33-37, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies II, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 81-86, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies III, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 143-148, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies IV, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 199-204, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies V, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 275-281, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies VI, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 314-320, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies VII, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 28, pp. 476-481, 1920
  - First Study of Heavenly Bodies VIII, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 29, pp. 102-108, 1921
  - Meteor Observed, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 38, p.509, 1930

Publications

- Society for Practical Astronomy (An early attempt at a national organization for amateur astronomers in the USA, 1909 – 1918)
  - A Plea for a New Section in the Society for Practical Astronomy, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 7, No. 3 April-May 1915
  - A few Words about the Youngest Section in the Society for Practical Astronomy, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 7, No. 5, July-Aug 1915
  - The Section for the Practical Teaching of Astronomy, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 8, No. 2, Mar 1916
  - The Annual Report of the Section for the Practical Teaching of Astronomy for 1916, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 8, No. 7, Oct-Dec 1916

Retirement

- Active with Russian relief efforts during 1922. [16]
- Left Lawrence toward the end of 1922 for Dunedin, Florida. This move occurred after the death of Mary's older sister Abby in 1922. [18][19]
- Returned to Lawrence in 1930. [20]
- Published a single article in Popular Astronomy (meteor observation by her sister Alice H. Byrd) in 1930. [20]
- Died of a cerebral hemorrhage on July 13, 1934. [2][24]

Table of contents from A Laboratory Manual in Astronomy

CONTENTS.

Table of contents from First Observations in Astronomy

CONTENTS.

Acknowledgments

Sharon Gasser, Leroy Township Clerk's Office
James D. Lowenthal, Smith College Astronomy Department
Nichole Calero, Smith College Special Collections
Elise Kennedy, Smith College Special Collections

References

1. Leroy Township Tax Records, Sharon Gasser, Leroy Township Clerk's Office, Calhoun County, MI, private communication
2. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/4/resources/342
3. https://lsa.umich.edu/lsa/news-events/all-news/search-news/lsa-women-in-history--mary-e--byrd.html
4. Lawrence Daily Journal-World · 7 Apr 1922, p. 1
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_E._Byrd
6. The Leavenworth Times, 13 Jun 1871, p. 4
7. The Harvard College Observatory, B. Z. Jones & L. G. Boyd, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 414
8. Mary E Byrd Photograph, James D. Lowenthal, Smith College Astronomy Department, private communication
9. Mary E Byrd Photographs, NIchole Calero, Smith College Special Collections, private communication
10. Lawrence Daily Journal-World, 8 Jul 1914, p. 8
11. Lawrence Daily Journal-World, 27 Jan 1913, p. 5
12. The Coffeyville Daily Journal (Coffeyville, Kansas), 27 Jul 1920, p. 8
13. https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Byrd/

References

14. New Members, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 7, No. 2, Mar 1915

15. Election of Officials of the Society for Practical Astronomy for the Years 1916-1917, The Monthly Register of the Society for Practical Astronomy, Vol. 7, No. 8, Dec 1915

16. Lawrence Daily Journal-World, 3 Nov 1922, p. 8

17. Mary E Byrd biography and other scanned documents, Elise Kennedy, Smith College Special Collections, private communication

18. Detroit Observatory, Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage, Vol. 6, pp. 69-106, 2003

19. The Tampa Tribune (Tampa, Florida), Nov 5, 1923, p. 2

20. Meteor Observed, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 38, p. 509, 1930

21. https://www.kansashistory.gov/archives/90636

22. University Daily Kansan, 12 May 1921, p. 1

23. Lawrence Daily Journal-World, 14 Aug 1922, p. 3

24. Mary E Byrd Obituary, Popular Astronomy, Vol. 42, pp. 496-498, 1934

Questions?