



Mary Emma Byrd

Lawrence's Forgotten Astronomer

David Kolb

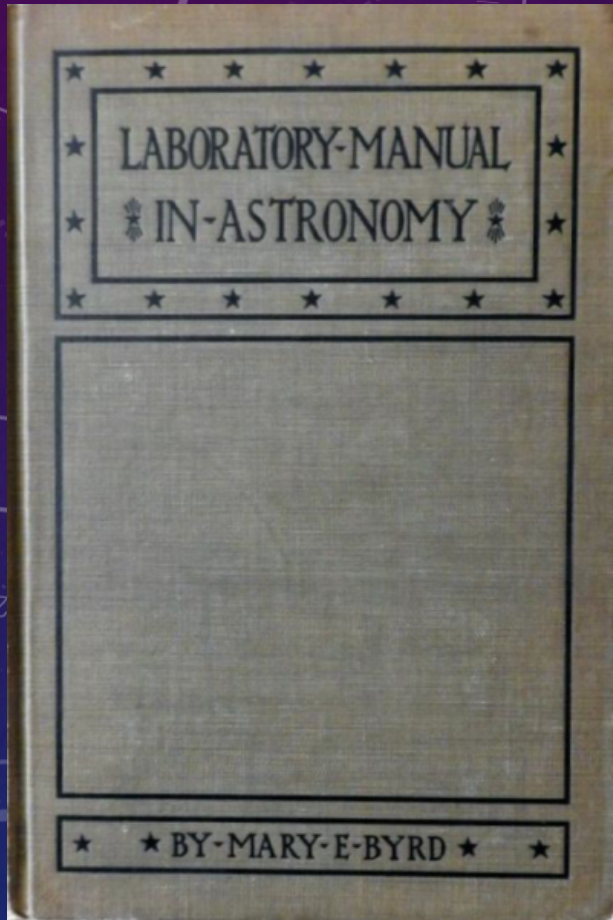
SpaceFest 2026

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.



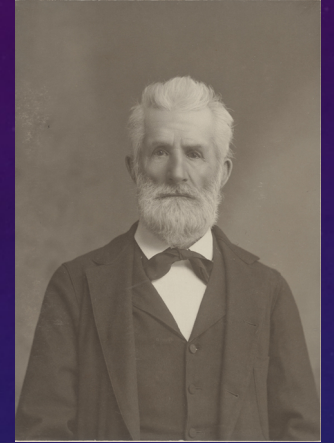
A screenshot of a web browser displaying the Wikipedia page for Mary E. Byrd. The browser's address bar shows the URL "en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_E._Byrd". The page content includes a table of contents on the left, a main text block, and a "Death" section highlighted with a red box. The "Death" section states: "Byrd died of cerebral hemorrhage on July 30, 1934 in Lawrence, Kansas.[1]". Below the "Death" section is the "Works" section, which lists two books: "Laboratory Manual in Astronomy" (1899) and "First Observations In Astronomy: A Handbook For Schools And Colleges" (1913). The "Further reading" section is partially visible at the bottom. The browser's interface includes a search bar, navigation buttons, and a list of bookmarks.

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

- 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]

[5]



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]

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Horn, E. McClellan

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 moral 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

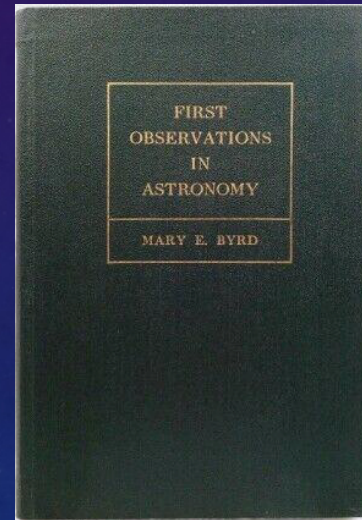
Miss Byrd is a woman of intense convictions and taking a stand for conscience sake “is in the blood” – Boston Globe, May 7, 1906 [17]



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]

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Acknowledgments

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Nichole Calero, Smith College Special Collections

Elise Kennedy, Smith College Special Collections

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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/>

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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
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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

The background features a dark blue gradient with a subtle pattern of small white dots. Overlaid on this are several faint, light-colored circular elements. A prominent feature is a large circular scale with tick marks and numerical labels (140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, 260) arranged in a semi-circle. Other elements include dashed circles with arrows indicating clockwise or counter-clockwise rotation, and solid circles with partial arcs. The overall aesthetic is technical and scientific.

Questions?