

Curator's Choice

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Leaving a Mark, Leaving a Legacy: The Frontier Nursing Service Embosser

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In January of 2024, 661 boxes arrived at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum after nearly five years in offsite storage, miles away from Saint Leonard. In the four months that followed, an army of staff and volunteers gathered to process the artifacts in these boxes, taking photographs and recording condition, location, and measurements.



Figure 1: FNS Embosser.

Although many of the artifacts examined convey the fascinating and varied history of Jefferson and Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson, one artifact transports us to a groundbreaking chapter in Mrs. Patterson's life and the history of maternal and neonatal healthcare in the United States.

The artifact is a hand-operated embosser associated with the Frontier Nursing Service (Figure 1). Embossers are machines that create a raised image on a surface, typically paper. They can be used for branding and design in many contexts but often are used to provide authenticity to official documents and certificates. This embosser's image shows a person riding a horse, encircled by the text: "1925 Frontier Nursing Service / For Mother and Child" (Figure 2). To operate the embosser, the user puts a piece of paper between the metal dies and then depresses the lever at the top, which causes the simple machine to press the dies together, creating a raised image on the paper.



Figure 2: Embossed image with pencil shading.

The Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) was a healthcare and midwifery service created by Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson's (also known as Marvin) second cousin, Mary Breckinridge in 1925. The nurse-midwives of the FNS would travel on horseback through the remote Appalachian Mountains to meet the needs of mothers and babies in southeastern Kentucky ("Frontier Nursing Service" 2025) Marvin joined Mary as a courier for the FNS after her graduation from Vassar College in 1927 at the age of 21 (Patterson and Lomask 2006:75). The next year, Mary recruited Marvin to create a film to promote the organization (Patterson and Lomask 2006, 90).

References Cited

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"Frontier Nursing Service, Frontier Nursing University, and the Courier Program." Frontier Nursing University - Banyan Tree Portal. Accessed September 20, 2025. <https://portal.frontier.edu/web/fnu/courier-history>.

"History of FNU." Frontier Nursing University. Accessed September 20, 2025. <https://frontier.edu/about-frontier/history-of-fnu/>.

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Mrs. Patterson writes in her memoir, *My American Century*:

"Cousin Mary's instruction was explicit. I was to write a script and record it with a 35-mm camera she would supply. We would use no professional actors, but we would, where necessary, stage the events where they had occurred with the nurses and doctors of the FNS, and the people of the mountains would play themselves. There would be no costumes and no makeup, but an approximation of cinema verité" (Patterson and Lomask 2006:90).

The Forgotten Frontier, released in 1930, told the story of the FNS and is an example of not only maternal and neonatal healthcare in the early 20th century, but also of women in film and photography within the same era (Carter 2018).



Figure 3: Infant in a saddlebag. Photographed by Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson. Patterson Collection.

In 1939 the FNS established the Frontier Graduate School of Midwifery, which continues today as the Frontier Nursing University, located in Versailles, Kentucky ("History of FNU" 2025).



Figure 4: Mary Breckinridge on horseback. Year unknown. Patterson Collection.

Mrs. Patterson's involvement did not end with *The Forgotten Frontier*. She became a FNS board member in 1955, was chairman from 1960 to 1975, and then honorary chairman until her passing in 2002 (Patterson and Lomask 2006:192).

You can watch *The Forgotten Frontier* on the Library of Congress website:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2024600522/>

You can find FNS oral histories on the University of Kentucky Libraries' Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project website: <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7kwh2dlt7n>



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Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

