IMAGINING IN TIME

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An Unsung Hero: Anne Penland, Nurse Anesthetist

On September 16, 2017, a group of people gathered to remember nurse anesthetist Anne Penland, a remarkable but long-forgotten daughter of North Carolina. Anne Penland, the first nurse anesthetist to serve in battle in WWI, at the Battle of Passchendaele, was also the first to graduate from the nurse anesthesia program at Presbyterian Hospital, Manhattan, in 1912.

The event was at the site of Anne Penland’s childhood home on Haywood Street in Asheville, overlooking a beautiful mountain ridge north of downtown. Pack Memorial Library and the Vanderbilt Apartments now stand where the once-imposing Penland house was located until it burned in October 1903, when Anne was 18.

Those who gathered to commemorate and honor Anne Penland’s service included nurse anesthetists from Asheville’s Mission Health Hospital and nearby Western Carolina University; representatives of the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists; members of the Daughters of the American Revolution, of which Anne Penland was a member from 1915-1974; local history buffs, and a few family members, most of whom had previously known little or nothing about their remarkable relative.

Following the ceremony—whose keynote speaker was Former AANA President Sandra Ouellette, MEd, CRNA, FAAN—Dr Kevin Cherry, deputy secretary of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, presented the proclamation of Anne Penland Day in North Carolina and led in the unveiling of the historical marker the department placed in front of the library recognizing the work of this unsung hero. Just a few weeks later, on Oct. 21, the North Carolina Association of Nurse Anesthetists honored Miss Penland with a posthumous Life Achievement Award.

If Anne Penland is someone you know little or nothing about, even though you are a nurse anesthetist and extremely knowledgeable about the profession, you are not alone. Very little has been written about Miss Penland; she makes a brief appearance in an official history of the Army Nurse Corps by Dr Mary T. Sarnecky, and she figures in two anniversary histories of the Presbyterian Hospital nursing school (Neighbors, by Eleanor Lee, published 1967, and Nurses of a Different Stripe, by Gary Goldenberg, published 1992.) But like others of her time, she quietly made contributions that ultimately laid the foundation for today’s AANA. This article begins with discussion of her early years, education and employment in the United States, and her role in anesthesia services on the front
line in France and Belgium from May 1917 until February 1919. It highlights her expertise in the administration of anesthesia, as well as education of others in the specialty, and presents her commendation from the British Army Medical Service in 1917. It clearly links Anne Penland’s contributions toward the ultimate recognition of anesthesia as a nursing specialty, conflicts faced by those early pioneers when they returned to the United States, and the need for a national organization.

Who Was Anne Penland?
Anne Penland was born in Asheville on January 22, 1885, the daughter of banker William Henry Penland and Mary Blair Penland, daughter of a hotelier. They had three daughters. The middle and youngest of them, Anne and Margaret, left Asheville for New York City and nursing school before 1910. Margaret studied at St. Luke’s Hospital, and Anne went to the nursing school at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital; in 1912, she became the first graduate of the school’s new six-month postgraduate program in nurse anesthesia, studying under Margaret Boise. (The School of Nursing at Presbyterian Hospital did have in its curriculum “Administration of Anesthesia” from 1893-94 and in 1903-04.) The ambitious Penland girls’ father, William Henry, did not send them to the big city with his blessing. According to

Anne Penland’s passport photo.

Anne Penland’s niece and namesake, the late Dr Anne P. Folger Decker, Mr Penland said that all nurses did was change bedpans, and he did not speak to them for quite some time. Anne was undeterred, saying that if she stayed in Asheville that she would end up an old-maid librarian and she couldn’t stand the prospect.

Anne Penland volunteered to serve in the Great War, with a group of about 67 from Presbyterian Hospital, in April 1917. That July, she became the first nurse anesthetist to serve on the front lines. Her 83-page diary opens on Monday, May 14, 1917, the day her group boarded the St. Louis for a voyage to an unknown English port. Aboard the St. Louis, Anne spent a good part of her time feeling extremely seasick, which she didn’t know whether to attribute to the typhoid vaccine or the actual motion of the ship. On May 22, they got their first sight of Great Britain when they saw the Bull, Cow and Calf islands off the Irish coast. Anne and the other volunteers from Columbia Presbyterian stayed at the Great Western Hotel, Liverpool, then took an express train to London, where they had a few days to visit the Tower of London and Westminster and go to the theater; they were hosted for tea at the US embassy by US-born Lady Randolph Churchill and the US ambassador, Walter Hines Page. The group had sailed in such haste that they had no passports; Anne reports spending one whole morning in London at the embassy waiting for emergency passports to be issued. Always conscious of money and expenses, Anne was indignant that the passport cost her $2, and that this document had not been provided free of charge, since she was on government business.

A few days later, the group crossed the English Channel and were driven on dusty roads from LeHavre to Base Hospital 2, an existing British military hospital housed at the Casino in Etretat, an ancient Norman village on the English Channel. After a brass-band welcoming parade, the Americans went to work with their British counterparts from the UK, but Anne soon encountered barriers to her work, in the form of UK military regulations and customs that limited anesthesia administration to physicians only. Working with PH surgeon Maj William Darrach, whom she clearly regarded as a mentor, Anne worked as an anesthetist despite those regulations. She reported on operating room work beginning on June 7, 1917. She had seven cases and anesthetized the patients with chloroform for short cases and CHCL3 followed with the Bennett inhaler for longer cases.

But in late July the problem came to a head when a surgical team from Presbyterian Hospital—with Anne Penland as anesthetist—was deployed to the front at what would be known as the Battle of Passchendaele.

Here is a contemporary account from A History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, prompted by a British surgeon’s asking where the American anesthetist was:

“Major Darrach indicated Miss
Penland… “But often there are eight or ten patients at once, big chaps,” expostulated the Britisher, “and they struggle!”

“Wait and see,” promised Major Darrach.

During a lull in the work which followed, the British officer came back to Major Darrach, praised Miss Penland's work and concluded, “But she always seems to draw the quiet, peaceful chaps.”

“Come and see,” suggested the American surgeon.

They approached the table where Miss Penland was anesthetizing a broad-shouldered Tommy who seemed inclined to fight the ether. Miss Penland leaned over and murmured soothingly:

“There, dear, it won't hurt you a bit – there, – there.”

At the sound of her low, distinctly feminine, southern voice, the Tommy looked up in surprise, then grinned with perfect confidence, and went under without a struggle. So successful was her work that the British decided to train their own nurses for this service and thus relieve several hundred doctors for medical and surgical work.

About 200 Presbyterian nursing school alumni, more than a third of all the school's graduates at the time, served overseas during World War I. Many, including Anne Penland, received medals for their dedicated service.

Anne received official word that her work had made a difference to nurse anesthetists' training and position in the military in this letter, dated Nov. 29, from Col Herbert Bruce of the Army Medical Service:

“Dear Miss Penland:

As you are probably aware, it has been decided by Sir Arthur Sloggett, the director general of the Royal Army Medical Service, that a number of nurses and V.A.D. s (nursing aides) shall be trained in the administration of anesthetics for service in the (Casualty Clearing Stations) and other base hospitals. This departure will liberate medical men for other duties, and in this way will be of great assistance in relieving the strain upon the medical services due to shortage of medical men. The suitability of nurses for this important work was made evident to the authorities by the practical demonstration of efficiency in the administration of anesthetics shown by you and some other American nurses in the C.S.S.'s and base hospitals in France. I think it right that I should inform you of the high appreciation which we all have of the splendid services you are rendering the wounded and medical service in taking the places of medical officers, whose services are urgently needed for the other work.”

In January 1918, Anne was given the job of training UK nurses as anesthetists, with trainees brought to her in groups of three for several weeks at a time, a service she performed throughout the rest of her time in France. “I can hardly take it in,” she wrote on Jan. 10. It seems that her newly proud father had gotten over his prejudice against the profession of nursing, because at about this time he began sending Anne's letters to the local papers.

During her service, Anne Penland reported in her diary on a new anesthesia formula and method of administration, which she learned from two physicians who had gone on a visit to La Panne, just across the Belgian border, to a hospital run by the famous Dr Antoine Depage.

The formula was chloroform, 1 cc; ethyl chloride, 5 cc; and ether, 24 cc.

“The face is covered with a layer of flannel; anesthetic mixture is poured on a small piece of double thick flannel and placed on top of the layers.
already on the face. The entire face is then covered with oiled muslin tightly held in place by an Esmark bandage. Some fullness is given the oiled muslin over the nose to allow for expansion when patient rebreathes and a small hole is cut over the nose for air. “She tried this new technique on June 29, 1917, and expected to give it an “extensive try-out” in subsequent weeks. (Depage’s wife Marie Picard, a well-known nurse, had worked closely with the famous nurse Edith Cavell, who was shot by the Germans for spying.)

Through the pages of the diary kept by Anne, it is possible 100 years later to relive the victories and defeats of World War I. She speaks of trench warfare, mustard-gas attacks, nighttime air raids, barbed wire, and mud, which created a nightmare experience for soldiers, medical personnel, and civilians. She speaks often in her journal of the seemingly endless rain and horrible dust, beginning with her first day in France, telling of the 18-mile drive from LeHavre to Etretat: “They told us it would be slightly dusty going this way … but we could never have imagined it would come up in clouds thick enough to chew and stick to hair and eyebrows until we looked as if we have been in a snowstorm.”

Dust was bad enough, but the mud was often fatal. On Aug. 3, while she was serving at Passchendaele—a period during which there was record rainfall—Miss Penland wrote: “Some of the best English and German regiments were caught in the mud, fired upon and almost wiped out. The mud is waist-high in some places, one of the wounded was telling me. And if a mule falls in a shell hole, he sinks in up to his neck and has to be shot, as they cannot pull him out.”

She records multiple instances of being shelled, this one on Saturday, August 18, 1917:

“Seven searchlights were coming to a focus in the skies, and there I saw a very beautiful sight, for in the center of these lights was the enemy plane looking like a silver butterfly. … The fight not being directly overhead was lovely to watch. The night was beautifully clear with the stars shining & the fire from the aircraft guns looked like more twinkling stars. Thinking everything was over for the night we went back to bed. I must have just fallen to sleep when awakened by the explosion of a bomb close to our tent in the woods. Judy and I ran out as did everybody else and Maj. (Darrach) came running over to see if we were all right. Almost over our heads another fierce fight was going on and there seemed nothing to do but stand and watch it. About this time a bomb exploded in our very midst I thought. As it seemed so very near there was a blinding flash which seemed to travel along the ground and a deafening crash which shook the earth. In a few seconds a third was exploded a little further away. This continued until eight had been dropped. Having exhausted his supply, the bird of prey flew away.

Judy and I put on our ‘tire lids’ when we ran out to see what was doing, but they seemed a small protection, and in looking back on my sensations during those few minutes, I seemed hardly conscious of having any. The thing happened as suddenly as a bolt dropped from the skies. Was probably too stunned to feel terror, only a sort of quivering inside and wondering if the worst would happen in the next few minutes — and then it was over — with a long breath of thankfulness, we were spared.

At breakfast we received the terrible news, but Miss MacDonald was among those wounded at #61. A piece of shrapnel penetrating her right eye
home more forcibly when one hears of a particular wounded soldier. … Lt. Osler, son of the famous Dr. Osler and a big blond lad about 21 years old, was brought in so badly wounded he was pulseless. The colonel discovered his identity and sent for Major (Darrach) as he thought he probably knew his father when in America. He had a penetrating wound of chest and probably lung, penetrating wound of abdomen. … and was also shot through the leg. Major (Darrach) sent for Majors Brewer, Crile at #14 and Cushing at #19, all of them at CCS’s near us, and all of them knew his father so well. Major Crile brought his blood transfusion apparatus and Major (Darrach) operated, assisted by Major Brewer. Major Cushing kept his finger on his pulse and I gave a few drops of ether.

It isn't often in a small countryside so many famous surgeons could be brought together in such a short space of time. The transfusion went beautifully, his pulse became perceptible and gradually became stronger and his color became quite pink. The operation lasted 30 minutes, the abdomen was opened and found to have several perforations in the gut which were sutured. The chest and leg wounds were only dressed."

But the next morning, Lt. Osler suddenly began having difficulty breathing, "and he died in a few minutes. It is a glorious thing to give one's life for one's country, but how unutterably sad such numbers of lives being sacrificed in a strange land with no loved ones there. What grief and agony to those waiting at home."

Who made up this distinguished team of surgeons? George Washington Crile of Lakeside Hospital, Cleveland, was the first surgeon to succeed in a direct blood transfusion. Dr Crile selected Agatha Hodgins to become his nurse anesthetist in 1908; she accompanied him to France and was obviously close to Anne Penland's location at this time; like Miss Penland, she trained nurse anesthetists after Passchendaele. Harvey Cushing was a notable neurosurgeon who previously had been at Johns Hopkins and at the time was with the Harvard Unit in France. George Brewer was chief of surgery, Presbyterian Hospital, and Major Darrach, a famed hand surgeon at PH, was later dean of the medical school at Columbia University.

Anne Penland remained in France until January 1919. Her diary recounts with both happiness and sadness her experience during the Great War. She recounts stories of hospitals being shelled, friends and coworkers injured or killed but also happy stories of Christmas parties, weddings, field days, and concerts for patients. She leaves us wonderful visions of dining on lobster and strawberries and champagne, of visiting the battlefield of the Somme, of exploring abandoned trenches to collect spent shell casings. She leaves us descriptions of amateur theatricals, concerts played by doctors, nurses and patients and baseball games with doctors, nurses, and recovering patients. Fourteen times in her diary she mentioned chocolate. After one deployment to the front, she wrote that the thing that pleased her most was the sight of chocolate again. The diary she left gives us a glimpse of the art of anesthesia, an American nurse anesthetist icon, the tragedy of human suffering, and the joy of service.

Anne's last diary entry was on January 22, 1919, her birthday. She and the rest of the volunteers from Base Hospital 2 returned to New York soon afterward, departing on February 11, 1919. She received her honorable discharge on April 10, 1919. She traveled immediately to Chattanooga, where her parents had gone to stay with her sister Margaret, who was an operating-room nurse at Erlanger Hospital; their ailing father died on May 1. She soon returned to Columbia Presbyterian, and resumed her career there. She taught a class in operating-room
techniques and became chief anesthetist, a post she held almost until her retirement in 1952. She never became that old maid librarian in Asheville, but today, outside the Asheville's Pack Memorial Library, a state historical marker honors her service. This honor was made possible by the Edward Buncombe Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Miss Penland was a member of this chapter from May 1915 until November 1974. Anne Penland died in September 1976, after living for a few years at a nursing home in Paramus, N.J., but her ashes are buried in Asheville, at Riverside Cemetery, overlooking the French Broad River.

**Discussion**

This year marks the centennial of World War I, also known as the Great War, which had broken out in Europe in July-August 1914. The United States entered on April 16, 1917, and hostilities ended November 11, 1918. Miss Penland is an example of an American nurse anesthetist who cared for multiple injured soldiers, often at the same time. She not only took care of American soldiers but also provided excellent anesthesia to those of other countries such as England, Scotland, France, Belgium, Jamaica, and even Germany. She was recognized by surgeons for skill, dedication, and endless hours of care, and they acknowledged her expertise in the art of administering anesthesia. She taught nurses from England and Australia, countries that do not recognize nurse anesthetists today, how to administer safe anesthesia. Her recognition by the Royal Army Medical Service gave her great pride and satisfaction, though typical of her self-effacing character, she gave the credit to Dr Darrach in a journal entry from Friday, August 10, 1917:

“I am very pleased to record what Major D. told me today: the CO told him that they had decided after watching my work for several days that I might be allowed to continue to give anesthesia. They were very much in doubt when I arrived whether it would be permissible for a woman to give it, as it is against the English laws. So after giving me a try-out he had recommended that I be allowed to remain to the consulting surgeon of his division. I here acknowledge the success of my work to Maj. D who talked me up to everybody he came in contact with. (He) used to often describe me as the only one in captivity. I owe it all to him and he never once failed to give me the encouragement I needed whenever the cases were difficult. I have come to look upon him as one of the best surgeons I have seen operate and it wasn't long before he had made a like impression on the MDs here. He is extremely popular with all and most of the nurses have said, “If anything happens to them, I want your Major to operate.””

As we reflect on Miss Penland and other nurse anesthetists at the time, it is obvious they paved the way for the specialty we enjoy today. They were noticed because they were competent and dedicated. On returning to the United States, physician opposition began, and soon many nurse anesthetists were charged with practicing medicine without a license. The end result was the Frank v South ruling in 1917, which legitimized anesthesia administered by a nurse as a practice of nursing. That ruling has never been overturned and is another 100-year milestone for nurse anesthesia practice today.

Fourteen years after the Frank v South ruling, an organization that would become the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists was founded by Agatha Hodgins. The pioneers of that time realized when issues became too difficult to handle individually, groups needed to organize for the common good. We need to pause today and remember those who gave us the opportunities we may at times take for granted. These pioneers opened the door for recognition of anesthesia administration by nurses, were noticed by surgeons, appreciated by patients and through their vision, tenacity, and courage, the profession thrives today.

Since World War I and possibly as far back as the Civil War, nurse anesthetists like Anne Penland have responded to world conflict and often have done so at great personal risk, serving on the front lines of battle. In 2018, reflect on Frank v South. Nurse anesthetists should not forget icons like Anne Penland who through dedication, ability, and skill, and often in the face of family opposition, paved the way. It has been said that we all drink from wells we did not dig, and certainly we drink from the wells dug by the Penland generation, as well as those who followed. We need to continue to dig wells for the next generation by, like Miss Penland, giving our family opposition, paved the way. It has been said that we all drink from wells we did not dig, and certainly we drink from the wells dug by the Penland generation, as well as those who followed. We need to continue to dig wells for the next generation by, like Miss Penland, giving our
How the Story of Anne Penland Came to Light

As regent of the Edward Buncombe Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, I received an intriguing document: the old minutes book from 1914-1920. This was a worn, black-bound notebook, and one cold winter day in late 2013 I started reading it. My first thought was that the ink was fading, and my second was that what if this book got lost—lost again, because it had been misplaced for some years before it came into my hands—and how I could prevent that from happening.

It was a nasty winter, so I began transcribing, fascinated by local details such as the names of members whose surnames are now the street names in downtown Asheville. I took no special note of the entry for May 1915, which included this sentence: "The papers of Mrs. Fred Hodges, Miss Annie Penland, and Miss Margaret Penland were passed upon." (Mrs Hodges was actually Ellen Penland, the oldest Penland sister.) But the name rang a bell when several weeks later I got to the entry for March 1918: "Report was made of the wonderful services which Miss Annie Penland, one of our members, is rendering in administering anesthesia on the 'firing line' in France."

This sent me to Google, to try to find out anything I could about Annie Penland, but it was an almost vain search. The only thing I found was one phrase in the AANA’s Wikipedia page, stating that she had served in WWI as a nurse anesthetist. I called a fellow chapter member, Theresa Halliday, an Army Nurse Corps retiree, to see what she could come up with. A few days later, Theresa called back to tell me that Anne Penland really appeared to be a person of interest because she was mentioned on page 130 of the Nurse Corp’s official history. This was still frustratingly little to go on, but another Google search in February or March 2014 turned up something new: The newsletter of the American Association of University Women in Ashland, Oregon, included an announcement that someone was doing a program on Anne Penland, WWI nurse, for an upcoming meeting. Giddy with excitement, I emailed the editor of the newsletter and asked if she would please ask this speaker to contact me because I was trying to research Anne Penland.

One Wednesday evening in March, my phone rang, and I heard the voice of Dr Anne Penland Folger Decker, the niece and namesake of “my” Anne Penland. We had a wonderful conversation and she told me about her grandfather’s aversion to his daughters’ chosen field of nursing, about her aunt’s blue eyes, curly brown hair, and the fact that she never put on an ounce of weight and could wear the same uniforms to the end of her life. (Dr Decker was a retired professor of sociology from New York; she was the daughter of Anne’s younger sister Margaret.)

And here was the unbelievable part of the conversation: Dr Decker said she had her aunt’s wartime diary, and would I like a copy? Practically drooling over this unexpected offer, I said of course, I would love to see it, and gave her my address. A few days later, a padded envelope arrived, containing a computer disk, which to my delight I discovered included not only the diary of Aunt Anne but also her wartime photo album. (Dr Decker, who passed away in April 2017, had just before I talked to her given the original diary and photo albums to the Imperial War Museum, London.)

Reading Anne’s own words was captivating. Full of life, self-confident about her work, extremely conscious of the cost of things (she
frequently tells what she paid for things or how much of a discount she got because of her military uniform), and seemingly unafraid of almost everything, she clearly loved her work. She had evidently studied French in school in Asheville, but it proved inadequate, so she found a local woman to give her French lessons. She cared deeply for her fellow nurses and the doctors she worked with, but she could also be hilariously blunt about what she did not like. Her principal gripe was the fact that the American nurses were sent to France with white uniforms that were impossible to keep clean (later replaced with donated gray chambray), but she was also really unhappy with anti-fraternization rules that prevented nurses from dancing with recovering patients at parties. She reports almost M*A*S*H-like details: some officers, who were not at all short of money, rented private apartments in Etretat so that they could socialize and not be bothered by rules.

I resolved that Anne Penland, who never married, had no children, and did not even have an obituary in the Asheville paper when she died in September 1976, would no longer be forgotten, and began casting about for ways to make this happen. A bronze statue? Way too expensive. A DAR marker at her grave? Doable but still expensive, and I could not at the time locate a relative who would sign the required letter of permission.

State highway historical markers I had always assumed to be chosen by some august board of historians, but investigation led me to a state website that explained how to propose such a thing. This took quite a while; I initially talked with a helpful woman at the state Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, whose frustrating reply to my question about deadlines was that applications were accepted quarterly, but their funding had been drastically cut in 2014 and 2015, so there was no point in submitting a request any time soon due to the backlog. She recommended that I wait until November 2016, when maybe the situation would improve, but warned me that the approval process could take many months.

So, I went ahead and prepared the application, a laborious project akin to writing a research paper, with the added challenge that I was working almost solely from primary sources, with little available for citations or to bolster my argument. The only qualified person I could find to supply a required endorsement of my application was Stephen Novak, the wonderfully helpful archivist at Columbia University Medical Center; he had never heard of Anne Penland before I called him, but was able to supply me with her many years of academic and employment records. (The state required letters from three historians; they let me off with just the one, since no one but me knew anything about her.) It gave me great pleasure that I was able to put Mr Novak in contact with Anne Penland’s niece shortly before her death last April; the niece donated her remaining Anne Penland papers—letters, photographs, and other mementos from Base Hospital 2—to the Columbia University Medical Center archives. Mr Novak also put me in touch with Columbia graduate and nurse anesthetist Judy McLaughlin Martin, who attended the event representing the only qualified person I could find to make this happen. A bronze statue? Way too expensive. A DAR marker at her grave? Doable but still expensive, and I could not at the time locate a relative who would sign the required letter of permission.

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I did not expect a quick reply from the state. It is no exaggeration to say that I was stunned to receive a letter of approval dated Dec. 22, just 6 weeks after the application went in. One wonderful and very affirming thing about this experience was that Ansley Wegner and Jessica Bandel, who worked for the department, were in constant communication with me about the application once it was submitted, suggesting ways to create a stronger case that would appeal to the panel of university history professors who would make the decision. I am grateful for their help and suggestions, and for the speedy production of the marker itself.

I would like very much to thank the staff at the AANA for their assistance in involving members of the organization in the dedication of the Anne Penland historical marker. Senior Director of PR and Publications Christopher Bettin, MA, was very helpful in enlisting Former AANA President Sandra Ouellette, MEd, CRNA, FAAN, to speak. Former Presidents Richard Ouellette, MEd, CRNA, and Nancy Bruton-Maree, MS, CRNA, and Region 2 Director Angela Mund, DNP, CRNA, attended, as well as incoming North Carolina Association of Nurse Anesthetists President Paul Packard, DNP, MSNA, CRNA, NEA-BC.

RESOURCES

AUTHORS
Luann Nelson, regent of the Edward Buncombe Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution, lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She is former managing editor of Business North Carolina Magazine, Business Atlanta Magazine, and a number of other business periodicals. She currently is writing a biography of Anne Penland.
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