

# Dr. Helen L. Miller

*Advancing Medicine & Cancer Detection in Northern New Jersey*

**By Beth A. Bjorklund, MSHP**

c.1950 portrait of Dr. Miller. *Image courtesy of the Kinnelon Historical Commission*

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## **25 Kiel Avenue in Kinnelon, New Jersey**

is an unassuming white house not far from Route 23. Passing by, one would not know this particular building played an important role in the medical history of rural Morris County. It served as the home and office of Dr. Helen L. Miller who was responsible for bringing modern medicine to Kinnelon and the surrounding area during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. What began as Dr. Miller spending time in Kinnelon as an escape from New York City, turned into her opening a medical practice out of her home and eventually two separate medical office buildings, one of which included a state-of-the-art cancer detection center. During her lifetime, Dr. Miller contributed much to Kinnelon and the greater medical community.

Helen Louena Miller was born on June 27, 1896 in Corvallis, Oregon to Henry and Mary Miller. She was one of twelve children and her father, a farmer, died when she was only five years old. To support itself, her family opened a bookstore for Oregon State University students. Dr. Miller said she knew by the age of eleven that she wanted to be a doctor, but faced challenges from the beginning, explaining, “As the youngest in the family, and with two brothers already struggling to get through medical school, I was not actually cheered on. I think my family hoped I would change my mind and choose something more ‘suitable’ for a woman.”<sup>1</sup> There were no nearby pre-medical training programs and she could not afford to go away to school, so Dr. Miller attended Oregon State University to study Home Economics, working many part-time jobs to support herself. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Home Economics in 1917 and spent the next five years working several different jobs to save money for medical school including teaching home economics at a high school.

In 1922, Helen Miller began studying at the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland. One of the oldest medical schools in the western United States, today it is known as the Oregon Health and Science University School of Medicine. The school has roots in Willamette University in Salem, which began the first formal medical education program in Oregon in 1867, and later combined with the University of Oregon in Portland, which had the only medical school in the Pacific Northwest in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. The University of Oregon Medical School admitted female students as early as 1890, but saw few women in attendance. When Dr. Miller attended school there she was one of only two women in a class of 47 students.



**Dr. Helen Miller's 1926 commencement portrait from the University of Oregon Medical School.**

*Image courtesy of the Oregon Health & Science University, Historical Collections & Archives.*

Dr. Miller graduated from medical school in 1926 and passed the Oregon State Examination to practice medicine. She originally planned to practice medicine in Oregon, but received a coveted internship at the New York Infirmary

for Women and Children and ultimately stayed in New York. At the Infirmary she served as “Interne and House Physician” from July 1926 to January 1928. Speaking about her time at the Infirmary she stated, “For the first time I saw women doctors—dozens of them—all full-fledged members of the medical profession. By the time I completed my residency here, I knew I couldn’t leave New York.”<sup>2</sup> In 1927,

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she received her license to practice medicine and surgery in the state of New York, and she received her license in New Jersey the following year. After completing her residency, the New York Health Commissioner selected Dr. Miller to establish the first pre-natal clinics at three settlement houses in New York City, aiming to lower the maternal death rate through education, prenatal care, and special attention for complicated pregnancies. She continued to work at the New York Infirmary as well and would do so for most of her career. She also established a private practice in New York City, specializing in obstetrics and gynecology.

Dr. Miller entered the medical field at a time when it was still difficult for women to become physicians. In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. However, by the 1920s, women doctors were still struggling to enter the field as men’s equals. There were many significant milestones for women in medicine in the second half of the 19th century: in 1850, the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, the first medical college for women, opened; in 1857, sisters Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell along with Dr. Maria Zakrzewska opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, which was the first hospital operated by women and also offered clinical training for women; and in 1870, the University of Michigan became the first coeducational medical school. By the end of the 19th century, the number of women physicians had increased significantly from around 200 in 1860 to over 7,000.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these achievements, the early-20<sup>th</sup> century saw a decrease in the percentage of women graduating from medical school and the number of women physicians in practice. The reversal of progress was due in part to the misconceived idea that separate medical schools were no longer necessary because of the increase and success of

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women doctors in the preceding decades. Many women's medical schools either closed completely or merged with other schools to become coeducational. This led to renewed discrimination against women and a drop in the number of women attending medical school. The University of Oregon Medical School where Dr. Miller went had 17.24% female enrollment in 1893–1894, which dropped to 6.82% in 1907–1908<sup>4</sup>; when she was in school there her class had only 4.25% female enrollment. An overall decline in openings at medical schools exacerbated the problem; between 1904 and 1915, the total number of medical school graduates declined by 37%, while the number of women graduates declined by 54%.<sup>5</sup> Further adding to the difficulty for women doctors was the shift away from general practitioners to specialists beginning in the 1920s. In 1928, three-fourths of doctors identified themselves as generalists, but by 1942 less than half of doctors did; this decline continued in subsequent decades.<sup>6</sup> This decline was due to a concerted effort to remove “unqualified” practitioners, which was considered by many to be anyone who did not have specialty training or was not a member of a specialty medical society. This made it especially difficult for women as they were often discriminated against for intern positions and society memberships. Women were frequently considered *de facto* specialists in gynecology and obstetrics, though not having actually received specialty training, and therefore had to fight to prove their legitimacy.

While her career was taking off in New York City, Dr. Miller began spending time in New Jersey. She was involved with L'Ecole Corporation, founded by a group of businessmen from New York City; little information is available about the group, but incorporation documents indicate the corporation's purpose was to buy, hold,

improve, and sell real estate. In July of 1927, the corporation purchased the one-room Meadtown Schoolhouse in Kinnelon, New Jersey and converted it into a country retreat that they named "L'Ecole," the French word for school.

Kinnelon, located just 30 miles west of New York City, was a rural community in the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Originally part of Pequannock Township, settlers first arrived to the area in the late-17<sup>th</sup> century. Pequannock Township was established in 1740 and developed in part due to iron mining and related activities such as forges and furnaces. After a decline in the iron industry in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kinnelon section of the Township became a small, isolated farming community. The Morris Canal was not built through Kinnelon, so the area did not experience the revitalized boom of the iron industry seen by other places. Railroad service was never built through Kinnelon either, although it was built through nearby Boonton in 1857 and neighboring Butler (then Bloomingdale) in 1871. The small, scattered population led to there being few institutional or commercial buildings in Kinnelon, and most employment opportunities were found in the neighboring borough of Butler. Poor roads, utility services, and education system continued the isolation of Kinnelon. In 1922, the Borough of Kinnelon was incorporated following a movement for independence and municipal improvements. The major roads were paved, and electricity and telephone service were eventually installed along these roads from Butler. The population of Kinnelon was estimated to be around only 400 at the time of incorporation and had not increased much when Dr. Miller first visited.

The Meadtown Schoolhouse, which brought Dr. Miller to Kinnelon, was constructed on land originally owned by the Mead family, one of the first families to settle in present-day

Kinnelon. The Meadtown Schoolhouse was constructed for the 1873 school year and replaced an earlier schoolhouse nearby that was in poor condition. The schoolhouse was a

gable-front building with a central double - door entrance. The one main room had a large wood or coal-burning furnace at the back wall. The schoolhouse could comfortably seat 70, but the average annual attendance was much lower, ranging between 20 and 50 students. In addition to its educational use, the Meadtown Schoolhouse also served as a community meeting space. The school closed in 1925 when a new two-room school was constructed in the Borough. In 1927, a real estate agent purchased the former schoolhouse and later that



L'Ecole c.1930.

*Image courtesy of the Kinnelon  
Historical Commission*

same year sold it to L'Ecole Corporation.

How Dr. Miller became involved with the L'Ecole Corporation is not known, but she served as Treasurer and as a member of the Board of Directors. The corporation made several changes to the building over the next few years. To function better as a residence, the roof was rebuilt to create usable attic space; a large porch was added onto the east side of the building; and a small wing with a kitchen and screened patio was built onto the rear. Upon completion of the schoolhouse renovation, members of the

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corporation, including Dr. Miller, began staying there as a weekend getaway.

In 1930, Dr. Miller suffered from incipient tuberculosis. She retired to Saranac Lake, New York to rest and recuperate from her illness. She returned to her practice in New York City later that year, though she would continue to face related health issues throughout her life. Dr. Miller maintained her residence and practice in Manhattan, and she also began to stay more frequently at L’Ecole throughout the 1930s, as it was a place to relax and recover. Reflecting back on her early years in Kinnelon, Dr. Miller said, “I wanted to come out to the fresh air when I could. I loved the new house. It was all woods here. There was no shopping center. For 20 years I sat on the veranda and all I could see was woods.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1937, Dr. Miller married Alexander F. Armstrong, a civil engineer from Albany who later was the President of the Albany Card and Paper Company. Not much is known about their relationship. Dr. Miller said of their marriage, “Both our lives were so busy we had to take trips in order to have time together. Needless to say, we traveled a great deal.”<sup>8</sup> Her scrapbooks and photo albums as well as digitized passenger manifests reveal that she indeed loved to travel, both with and without her husband. She visited Honduras, Jamaica, Barbados, France, Finland, Australia, the Netherlands, and the Philippines among many other places. Dr. Miller also went on a 100-day round-the-world cruise that took her to 25 ports in 14 countries.

In 1943, Dr. Miller purchased L’Ecole from the L’Ecole Corporation and made it her second home.<sup>9</sup> She continued to maintain her home on Park Avenue in Manhattan and used the Kinnelon home as a weekend retreat. She made additional changes to the former schoolhouse to make it her home including dividing the main schoolroom into



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several spaces. Due to lack of doctors in the Kinnelon area, people often showed up at Dr. Miller's house seeking medical assistance. Neither the 1930 nor 1940 Federal Census for Kinnelon (where legible) lists any physicians in the Borough. Dr. Miller is listed in the 1940 Census, but very little information except for her name is provided; since this was not her permanent residence, she may not have been available when the Census was taken and perhaps a neighbor provided her name.

Dr. Miller saw the need for professional medicine in the remote town and eventually opened a practice out of her home at L'Ecole. In 1951, she purchased a small parcel of land to expand the rear of her property, and in 1954, she had a large addition built onto the west side of her home. The addition included a waiting room and two exam rooms on the first floor, additional living space on the first and second floors, and an attached garage and tool shed. In addition to her new practice in Kinnelon, Dr. Miller continued to run her private practice in New York City and to work at the New York Infirmary. She was also on the staff of other area hospitals including the Gotham Hospital and Doctors Hospital. With the new practice in Kinnelon, she moved her focus from obstetrics and maternity to gynecology.

While working in Kinnelon, Dr. Miller saw that the community needed larger medical services than what she ran out of L'Ecole. She soon began plans for a medical center to be located next to L'Ecole that would meet all the needs of the growing town. She wanted to bring more medical services to the area, as well as attract young medical professionals. Ground was broken in 1963 on the lot immediately to the east of L'Ecole. The Kinnelon Medical Center was officially dedicated in 1966, but was occupied beginning in 1964. The total cost of the building was \$175,000. The medical center featured eight medical suites



Groundbreaking ceremony for the Kinnelon Medical Center, September 15, 1963. Pictured left to right: New Jersey Senator Harry Sears, Dr. Helen Miller, Henry Ricker, and Kinnelon Mayor William Collier.

*Image courtesy of the Kinnelon Historical Commission*

of 900-square feet each, nurses' offices, a lounge, waiting rooms, a laboratory, and behind the building, parking for 40 cars. With the opening of the new medical center, Dr. Miller moved her practice there and stopped using L'Ecole as a medical office.

One of the highlights of the new medical facility was the Kinnelon Cancer Detection and Research Center, believed to be one of only two dozen cancer centers in the country at that time.<sup>10</sup> The Cancer Detection and Research Center, later known as the Cancer Detection and Women's Health Center, was founded in April of 1964 with a focus on early cancer screening and detection in women, a personal interest of Dr. Miller. She hired Frances Bogatko, a cancer-detection specialist, who came out of retirement to run the Center. Dr. Bogatko had previously directed the Strang Cancer Prevention Clinic in New York City. Founded as the Kate Depew Strang Tumor Clinic in 1933, the Strang Clinic was the first-ever clinic for early detection and prevention of



Interior of L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum showing Dr. Miller's exam room.

cancer. Dr. Miller would have been familiar with the Strang Clinic and its pioneering work because it was housed at the New York Infirmary.

A 1969 article in the local newspaper *Trends* indicated Dr. Miller was the first woman in the country to build a medical center and install a cancer detection center in it.<sup>11</sup> Through the new center, Dr. Miller and Dr. Bogatko conducted cancer research projects and were advocates of early cancer testing. Dr. Miller encouraged women to get mammograms and pap tests, two early screening tests for breast and cervical cancers, respectively. The pap test was first introduced at the Strang Clinic in 1940 and promoted by the American Cancer Society in the early 1960s. Mammography screening was first studied in the late 1960s, but not officially recommended by the American Cancer Society until 1976. While there was some debate

over the benefits of these preventative tests early on, Dr. Miller was an advocate for their use in early cancer detection, and they continue to save millions of women's lives today.

Her center featured "some of the most modern and sensitive cancer detection equipment to be found in northern New Jersey and even in some sophisticated New York hospitals,"<sup>12</sup> including a senographe used to detect breast tumors and a

colposcope for use in cervical and uterine examinations. Dr. Miller felt so strongly about these screenings that she offered free tests for women who could not afford them; she allocated \$20,000 of her own money for these free clinics. Her work in women's cancer research, promoting early testing, and raising public awareness about cancer coincided with the women's health movement of the 1960s and 1970s when women challenged the patriarchal medical system and public policies regarding cancer, and when breast cancer came into the forefront of public discourse.

Dr. Miller was named "Woman of the Year" in 1965 by the Women's Medical Society of New York State for her "outstanding contributions to her profession as a general practitioner for the last 37 years."<sup>13</sup> She served as President of the Women's Medical Society of New York State from 1962 to 1964 and also served as the Society's delegate to the International Women's Medical Association in Manila in 1962. She was a member of other medical societies as well as the Cosmopolitan Club and the New Jersey Garden Club. She also was acknowledged for having started a scholarship for women to attend medical school; by 1969, she had put two women through school.

Dr. Miller retired from practice in New York City in 1976,



Dr. Miller's signs on display at L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.




Dr. Miller's Kinnelon Medical Center, today called the Kinnelon Professional Center. L'Ecole is visible in the background at the far right showing the proximity of the two buildings.

but continued to work full time at her Cancer Detection Center. She served the Kinnelon community for several more years, working until 1987. In 1989, at the age of 93, she oversaw plans for Kinnelon Commons, a second medical professional building to be located next to her Kinnelon Medical Center. The second facility was opened because she wanted to bring more young medical professionals to the rapidly growing community. She also dreamed of building a senior housing complex in Kinnelon, but that dream never came to fruition. Dr. Helen L. Miller died on June 18, 1990 just before her 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. She had served the Kinnelon community for nearly 60 years and was responsible for bringing modern medicine to Kinnelon and the greater northern New Jersey area.

Upon her death, Doctor Miller left L'Ecole to the Borough of Kinnelon, stipulating in her will that "it be accepted and dedicated as an historic site and utilized and maintained as a museum for preservation and display of memorabilia and other items of historic significance to the borough." L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum opened in August of 1991 to tell the history of Kinnelon, the Meadtown Schoolhouse, and the legacy of Dr. Miller. The Museum is run by the Kinnelon Historical Commission and has a mission to "encourage an



L'Ecole today, operated by the Kinnelon Historical Commission as a museum.

appreciation for the history of Kinnelon by researching and recording all pertinent data relating to the area's history; holding meetings of historical interest; encouraging the preservation of historical landmarks; and collecting and displaying historical materials." The Museum houses historic objects, documents, and photographs from the Borough and interprets the building's roles as both a one-room schoolhouse and a doctor's office. L'Ecole is open to the public for tours on weekends, for school tours and other groups during the week by appointment, and also hosts various community events throughout the year. 

1. From a never-published 1965 *New York Times* article "Woman of the Year: Dr. Helen L. Miller." *From the files of L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.*
2. "Woman of the Year: Dr. Helen L. Miller."
3. Mary Roth Walsh, "Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply" *Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1835–1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 186.
4. Walsh, 193.
5. Ellen S. Moore, *Restoring the Balance: Women Physicians and the Profession of Medicine, 1850–1995* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 98.
6. Moore, 96.
7. Deborah Walsh, "At Ninety Years She Still Weaves Dreams," *Suburban Dreams*, date unknown. *Newspaper clipping from the files of the L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.*
8. "Woman of the Year: Dr. Helen L. Miller."
9. While many secondary sources indicate Dr. Miller purchased L'Ecole in 1931, the deed for the property shows she officially purchased it in 1943.
10. Cecilia King, "Kinnelon Doctor Turns Dream to Reality," *Newark Sunday News*, June 16, 1968. *Newspaper clipping from the files of the L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.*
11. Claire Unger, "Kinnelon Center Plans Area Pap Smear Clinic," *Trends*, January 15, 1969.
12. "Cancer Detection Clinic Marks 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Trends*, unknown date. Clipping from the files of the L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum. *Newspaper clipping from the files of the L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.*
13. "OSU Graduate Woman of Year in New York," clipping from unknown newspaper printed in Corvallis, Oregon. July 1965. *Newspaper clipping from the files of the L'Ecole Kinnelon Museum.*