

Dr. Mary E. Phelps Video - Script:

PART 1-WATERFRONT: Walking along this river always gives me pleasure. Yes, it is a beautiful thing to behold, don't you think? It is wide and full of wonders. Here in Newburgh it serves as a means of transportation and commerce as well as recreation...like fishing. (Maybe show photo of Mary w dog and fishing pole..she could say.."That's me with my dog fishing!") Why when I was a young girl...after the great Civil War, it was customary to see 20 or more very large boats docked right here! Workers swarmed this very street...Water Street...loading and unloading all kinds of important goods. Paddle wheelers and steam boats arriving from big cities such as Pittsburgh PA and Louisville KY brought us the latest fashion in hats, parasols and clothing, fancy china and glassware, books, seeds for planting even the United States mail!! It was so exciting. Our local farmers brought crops of wheat and corn to town, cattle too..for shipping on down the river. Coal mined near where I am standing was in great demand for powering these boats and for fuel to warm the homes of others down the river. Do you see the great woods behind me (that's Kentucky, you know!)? Well, this side of the river was also deeply forested. Woods everywhere! Trees were cut down by the thousands, sawed into lumber at sawmills right here and stacked on the boats to sell. Wooden barrels as tall as me (I never grew up to reach even 5 ft!) filled with pork, flour, even tobacco were put on these boats to be sold in other towns down the river all the way to New Orleans, LA! Yes, indeed! This Newburgh was busy and exciting!

Of course, I had personal experience with this Ohio River! You see, I arrived here in Newburgh by boat. Yes, I traveled here when I was just old enough to remember..maybe about 7 years old. I came with my brother and parents all the way from Brooklyn, New York! I was born there in October of 1852. You might not know that Brooklyn is part of New York City! I barely remember it. But I do recall it being a very large city with many people and buildings. My parents decided to leave Brooklyn and travel west to places offering more opportunity. We traveled a long way by land until we reached Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh is where this great Ohio river begins. We then traveled on a boat almost 800 miles before reaching Newburgh. Oh, I still remember the sights along the way...the Appalachian mountains, farms and fields, water wheel mills along the river bank, so many towns, even small islands right in the middle of the river! Near Louisville we even saw little waterfalls called the Falls of the Ohio in the river. Our captain steered us safely around them. Now that was sure fun!

Finally, we reached Newburgh and my parents decided to stop here. Newburgh became our new home. Just a few years later...I was 8 or 9...something sad happened. Both of my parents died! My brother and I became orphans. In short order, however, something sad turned into something good. A man by the name of Robert Phelps and his wife adopted me. I now had another home and loving parents to raise me. I remember learning to play the piano and studying hard at school. Eventually, I grew up to become the first female medical doctor of Newburgh!!

Say! Meet me at 218 State Street...my home..and I'll tell you more about my life of adventure as a medical doctor!

End of Part 1

PART 2 - STATE STREET HOME: Well, here we are in front of my lovely home. I had it built on this lot about 1910, as I recall. The land was left to me by my dear adopted mother, Jennie Bates Phelps. You can see for yourself, although not a large home, it is big enough for me and my small medical office. I don't see many patients nowadays. I am at retirement age and perhaps being the first woman doctor in Newburgh makes a few still hesitant to trust me. Let me tell you though, my services were eagerly sought and deeply appreciated out west in Canon City, Colorado!! Oh, but I am getting ahead of myself!

As I mentioned earlier along the waterfront, I learned to play the piano as a child and even became an accomplished pianist. Our whole Phelps family was very musically gifted. After high school, my parents encouraged me to accept an opportunity to attend the Consistory of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio. I did not, but I did oblige my parents for a time...giving piano lessons at home. I love music but I wanted to help others in a different way. When I was in my 30s, I went all the way to Chicago to attend a Women's Medical College..part of Northwestern University. I graduated at age 41! Returning to Newburgh, I found few patients willing to allow a diminutive woman (I am just 4'10"!) be their doctor. So...I decided to move to Canon City, Colorado! Colorado had just become a state in 1876 and the transcontinental railroad had been finished about that same time making fast travel out west through the mountains possible. On my way there I saw the vast Great Plains and herds of thousands of bison among other interesting things. Canon City is located on the Arkansas River high up in the mountains. It is surrounded by mountains..the Rocky Mts! There is a hot water spring nearby. And scientists have found fossils of prehistoric mammals there! It is also a land with rich soil for farming and orchards. Like Newburgh, coal is mined there...but unlike Newburgh...gold and silver is mined as well! In fact, Canon City was founded during a gold rush of 1860. Some of my patients paid for their doctor visits in nuggets of gold!! (She whispers to camera.." I have a trunk in my attic full of wonderful things from Colorado...gold and silver included! Sssh!) In Canon City was a prison for men. I helped take care of the prisoners there. Many considered that dangerously foolish but I was determined to help those who needed my help the most. I ended up spending 18 wonderful years in Canon City!

About 1910 I left Colorado and treated myself to a well deserved vacation. I traveled all over the world! By ship I crossed oceans and seas. By train I crossed great mountain ranges. I saw vast deserts, ancient cities and remarkable man-made monuments. I met interesting people who spoke various languages, dressed differently than I and enjoyed foods I had never eaten before. It was so interesting and I learned so much!

By the time I returned to Newburgh from seeing the world, my home was built. I am so proud of it. . Notice the two front doors. One was for my office. And the wide front porch is a place where I sit often and watch Newburgh go by! My flower garden is in the back yard It is full of rose bushes that bloom so beautifully all summer. On the north side of the house notice the tiny door about half way along....That was for the milkman to leave his delivery for us each morning! though I am pretty much retired now, I am still active in the local library and help at the infirmary I donated for the Thornton Home. The Thornton Home is a large home for retired church ministers, missionaries and their wives. It is located right where I grew up overlooking the river. And an infirmary is a sort of hospital or nursing home attached to the big house for those who become sick. I used much of my savings to build that infirmary. That was in 1916. It is now the 1920s! My how things have changed. The 19th amendment to our U.S. Constitution was finally passed...Women now have the right to vote! I am so pleased to have been a part of the Women's Franchise League here in Warrick County that helped advance women's suffrage.

Now I am nearing age 72! Quite old! Yet I have lived a very active, purposeful life. It has been an adventure!! I was given much and I have tried to give back to others all that I can. Thank you for sharing your time with me today

and I hope you too help make Newburgh a healthy place to live, learn and have fun!

End of Part 2

PART 3 - AT MUSEUM: Dr. Mary Phelps died at age 72 in 1924. As she herself told us...she lived an active and adventurous life full of purpose and meaning. Her last contribution may have been one of her most lasting achievements....working towards passage of the 19th Amendment to our Constitution giving the right for all women to vote. The 19th Amendment became law in August 1920. She surely was one of the first women to vote in a Presidential election that November of 1920.

And as Dr. Phelps so vividly told us...Newburgh was a place of importance especially in the mid 1800s while she was growing up here. In fact, 1840 to 1870 is often referred to as the years of greatest growth locally. (Show wall display). Newburgh was one of the busiest and most important ports along the Ohio River at that time. We can be proud of our past and the people like Dr. Phelps who helped lead our town. Today we continue to grow. And tomorrow is just around the bend in this our beautiful Ohio River home ...Newburgh, Indiana.

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