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Portrait of a Leader: Caroline Flatt Rupert

Cynthia R. Miller
Illinois Wesleyan University

Donna Hartweg, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

Joseph Freedman, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

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PORTRAIT OF A LEADER: CAROLINE FLATT RUPERT

Cynthia R. Miller, School of Nursing, Donna Hartweg*, Joseph Freedman*

The existence of the Caroline Flatt Rupert Endowed Chair for Nursing and the Caroline Rupert Award for Outstanding Nursing Senior served as impetus to question the relationship of this woman to Illinois Wesleyan University and to the nursing profession in general. Archival materials at Sheean Library, A.E. Livingston Health Sciences Library, and the Midwest Nursing History Center in Chicago were reviewed and later validated and enriched through oral interviews of relatives and colleagues.

A profile emerged of a nursing leader whose life pattern was similar to those of other influential women of the era. As a young, determined nursing leader, Caroline Flatt Rupert combined a brief professional life with one of social and political community action to significantly impact nursing, nursing education, and the public health in central Illinois. Following graduation from the Illinois Training School for Nurses of Chicago in 1894, she became the first Superintendent for Nurses at Brokaw Hospital and the founder of the Brokaw School for Nurses in Normal, Illinois. A marriage to L.S. Rupert changed the character of her influence from her formal leadership as Superintendent to that of professional and political leader for nursing education and the public health in the region. Successful lobbying in the State Legislature for stricter nursing education standards was one of the exceptional accomplishments for this woman, who herself did not yet have the right to vote. Through her roles in numerous women's organizations in Bloomington-Normal and through support of her husband's status in the community, she was also able to impact public health decisions at the local level. Caroline Rupert's commitment and belief in the importance of strong education for nurses, including that at the University level, led to her support for the relationship which developed between Illinois Wesleyan and the Brokaw School for Nurses. Letters written shortly before her death revealed the strength of those beliefs and her love for nursing education at Illinois Wesleyan. This commitment was formally expressed through her establishment of the nursing award and the endowed professorship for nursing.