

Mrs. Wolfe's World (gr.1-4)
Teacher's Guide

This tour uses Mrs. Wolfe's perspective of life at the Old Kentucky Home to help students in grades 1-4 explore different ways that families operate today and in the past. It also addresses economic decisions and the relationship between the individual and the community. Students experience Mrs. Wolfe's life in the boarding house through a blend of inquiry-based learning, role-play, and hands-on exploration. Through pre and post visit activities students are challenged to express their ideas/analysis of what they've learned in writing and/or mathematical exercises. All aspects meet grade-specific curriculum goals. This tour is especially recommended for Women's History Month.

Social Studies Curriculum Goals addressed:

Grade 1

Competency Goal 1: Analyze how individuals, families, and groups are similar and different

Competency Goal 3: Understand the concept of change in individuals, families, and communities

Competency Goal 6: Understand basic economic concepts

Competency Goal 7: Recognize uses of technology

Grade 2

Competency Goal 3: Analyze how individuals, families, and communities are alike and different

Competency Goal 4: Recognize change in communities over time

Competency Goal 6: Understand the ways people depend on the physical environment and use natural resources

Competency Goal 7: Understand basic economic concepts and the use of economic resources

Competency Goal 8: Recognize the ways people use technology and its impact

Grade 3

Competency Goal 2: Recognize the multiple roles of individuals in families and communities

Competency Goal 3: Recognize how individuals can initiate change in families, neighborhoods, and communities

Competency Goal 5: Apply basic economic principles to the study of communities

Competency Goal 6: Recognize the relationship between technology and the community

Grade 4

Competency Goal 1: Apply the five themes of geography to North Carolina

Competency Goal 6: Understand the relationship of basic economic principles to life in North Carolina

Competency Goal 7: Analyze the influence of technology on change in North Carolina

Background

Julia Wolfe was born Julia Westall in 1860 in the mountains of North Carolina. Her family on both sides had been “mountain folk” for several generations. Born on the cusp of the Civil War, Julia grew up during the hard post-war years and learned to fear poverty and value independence. Her intelligence and drive enabled her to study briefly at two female seminaries, the late 19th century equivalent of junior colleges. She then took a teaching position near Asheville.

In order to insure her economic security, Julia sold books on the side. It was in this capacity that she met and married William Oliver (W.O.) Wolfe in 1884. Later in life she recounted a discussion with her new husband that reveals much about her personality. She had taken a teaching position in Swannanoa prior to agreeing to marry W.O. and proposed to him that she honor the contract, live in Swannanoa during the week, and come home on weekends. This did not sit well with her new husband, who questioned the value of marriage under these circumstances. Her response was to ask him “where am I going to get any money?” When he replied that he could keep them both, as was expected of a proper Victorian gentleman, she objected, “I am too independent to ask for money, I never liked to ask Father or Mother” (*The Marble Man’s Wife*. p.187). In this respect, Julia appeared to be in harmony with the more radical Suffragettes, although there is no evidence that she had any interest in or connection with the movement.

In many ways, Julia Wolfe did not fit the standard mold of a Victorian middle class lady. Her son Thomas frequently mentioned her “masculine” gesture of hand on hip and pointed finger in *Look Homeward Angel* and expressed mortification at her deep involvement with the male-dominated business of property speculation. Although ultimately Julia turned much of her boarding house earnings over to the family budget, her initial motivation for buying the Old Kentucky Home was to secure her financial independence, and to occupy her mind after the death of her twelve year old son Grover in 1904. Other women of her status ran boarding houses, but they were usually widows

or hired another woman to deal with the daily affairs of the house. Julia, however, insisted on a hand-on approach until the 1920s, by which time her children were grown.

Julia had experience in the boarding house business before she bought the Old Kentucky Home. Shortly after her marriage she opened up her dining room to workers in the town and then to travelers. In 1904 she leased a house in St. Louis during the World's Fair and catered in particular to fellow North Carolinians visiting the Fair. Ironically this experience ended in the tragedy that prompted her purchase of the boarding house on Spruce Street in 1906. Initially she ran the Old Kentucky Home while continuing to sleep in the Wolfe residence on Woodfin Avenue, but within a year she took up official residence on Spruce Street, taking Thomas with her. From then on, if not earlier, the family members shuttled back and forth between the two houses, although Thomas usually breakfasted at Spruce Street with his mother and the boarders while his sister Mabel fixed breakfast for his father and siblings at the family home.

Running the boarding house took a great deal of energy. Julia hired help from the African-American community, girls for the kitchen and a man for general repairs and yard work, but she worked alongside them. Again, this did not fit the upwardly mobile middle class ideal, where the lady of the house was expected simply to oversee the servants. She seems to have been a particularly adept cook, and to have spent much of her time in the kitchen. Things began to change around 1916 when she directly oversaw the addition of several rooms, probably intended to capitalize on Asheville's growing reputation as a summertime health resort. These included a sun parlor, five bedrooms and two sleeping porches, as well as three bathrooms. The additions brought the total number of bedrooms to fifteen, sixteen if you included the enlarged dining room that Julia could turn into a bedroom during the off season if need dictated. She probably also added the gas cooking stove at this time.

The enlargement of the Old Kentucky Home coincided with developments that shifted Julia's attention away from the direct management of the house. Despite being absorbed with the business, she was always aware of her family's needs. By 1917 it became increasingly clear that W.O.'s health was in serious decline. By 1918 Spruce Street was his permanent residence. In that same year, her son Ben, who had been Grover's twin, became ill with influenza during the peak of the summer season. Julia, busy with the summer crowd, had to call in one of her cousins, who worked as a nurse, to care for him. Flu turned into pneumonia, possibly complicated by tuberculosis, and Ben died in that fall. She probably never recovered from her guilt over his death. America's entry into WWI caused a slump in the tourist trade, and by the 1920s Julia became fixated on the real estate market in Florida and the growing development around Asheville. Property matters took up more and more of her time and attention. She stopped serving meals, probably as early as 1920, and left the running of the Old Kentucky Home to one of her permanent boarders.

In 1927, hurt by the crash of the Miami real estate market, and spread very thin at home, Julia turned the management of her finances over to the Wachovia Bank and Trust. She once again turned her attention to the Old Kentucky Home, but its heyday was over. Asheville then had a number of new hotels that competed with the boarding houses for the tourist trade, and Spruce Street had become essentially a commercial district. The advent of the Great Depression only made matters worse. Wachovia foreclosed on the house, and, although she ultimately recovered the property, Julia lived the rest of her life largely on the proceeds from her son Thomas' estate.

Pre-visit Activities

1. Familiarize students with the definition of the following terms, or have the students look them up: Boarding House, "Room and board," flatiron, coal, autobiography
2. Ask students to find out what jobs members of their family/household have within the house or community. How do these jobs help the family or community?
3. Ask students to find out where they get their food, water, and electricity. As an extension of this activity, students can identify devices that help them meet their household needs and count how many use electricity.
4. Have students ask their mother or another adult female what she does to earn a living or to help supply the needs of the family. As an extension of this, students can ask whether her mother did the same thing—grandmother?
5. Ask students to tell the class (1st, 2nd grades) or make a list (3rd, 4th grades) of what they think they would need to do to run a boarding house today (i.e. to meet the wants and needs of modern guests).

Tour Outline (brief)

Time and numbers permitting, the tour will consist of the following:

Porch

Introduction to Thomas Wolfe, boarding houses, and women's jobs; one student will role-play Mrs. Wolfe recruiting boarders.

Dining Room

Students role-play diners; discussion of importance of food to life and culture; guests as type of temporary "family."

Kitchen

Center of Mrs. Wolfe's production for guests and family; illustrates different jobs and impact of changing technology; one student will role-play Mrs. Wolfe, two students will role-play helpers.

Mr. Wolfe's Bedroom

Mrs. Wolfe's roles as wife and businesswoman

Boarders' Room (may use either downstairs room or upstairs room)

Discussion of what Mrs. Wolfe needed to do for boarders' needs; students identify tools used for some of these tasks from prop basket.

Sun Parlor

Discussion of how Mrs. Wolfe might have entertained guests (comparison with how they entertain themselves); students may be allowed to look through a stereopticon/stereoscope.

Sleeping Porch

Discussion of Mrs. Wolfe changing house to meet the wants of her guests/improving the house to meet new fashion and get more business; students examine an advertisement for Asheville and re-examine Mrs. Wolfe's business card.

Ben's Room (suggested for 3rd and 4th grades only)

Conflict between Mrs. Wolfe's roles as businesswoman and mother=Ben's sickness and death during tourist season.

"Birthing" Bedroom

Mrs. Wolfe as mother; bed where all her children, including Thomas, were born.

Downstairs Hallway

Students identify where Mrs. Wolfe might have done her "office" work; students may be allowed to "use" early telephone and discuss how it might have helped Mrs. Wolfe.

Post-visit Activities (grades 1-2)

1. Ask students to make an advertisement for their own boarding house. What do they think would make it appealing to people?
2. If Mrs. Wolfe had been able to use a computer, what would her advertisement have looked like? What did she want potential guests to know?
3. A. If it cost Mrs. Wolfe 15 cents a day to feed 1 boarder, and 10 cents a day for laundry, how much would she have left out of the \$1 that the boarder paid?
B. Mrs. Wolfe wants to give each boarder 2 pieces of chicken. She has 25 boarders. How many pieces of chicken does she have to fry that day?

Post-visit Activities (grades 3-4)

1. Have students write a postcard to a friend as if they were a guest of the Old Kentucky home telling them about their visit.
2. Ask students to imagine what Mrs. Wolfe would have written about her day if she had kept a diary and to write an entry that includes her interactions with guests, servants, and/or family members. These entries can then be put together to make the diary.
3. Have the class create a play about a day at the Old Kentucky Home soon after the renovations of 1916 (remember that this included the new gas stove). Students can be boarders, Mrs. Wolfe, Mr. Wolfe, servants, Mabel Wolfe, and Tom Wolfe. What might each of them have done during the day? What might they have said to each other?