

# WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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### SIGNE SKOTTCOOPER

**1921-2013**

**City: Madison, Middleton**

**County: Dane**

**Signe Skott Cooper was a World War II army nurse and an influential nursing professor.**

Signe Skott Cooper was born in Clinton County, Iowa, on January 29, 1921, and moved with her family to Middleton, Wisconsin, in 1937. After earning her certificate in graduate nursing at the University of Wisconsin, she passed her state board exams in February 1943 and immediately volunteered for the Army Nurse Corps. She was first stationed in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and then sent to India, where she served as First Lieutenant at two different military hospitals. Conditions were harsh, and nurses were understaffed and overworked. They treated patients as well as they could, but not many antibiotics were available in those days, and death was common. Still, many lives were saved through the nurses' efforts. Cooper was discharged from the Army in November 1945.

Once Cooper returned to the United States, she accepted the position of head nurse in the obstetrical unit at University of Wisconsin Hospital in 1946. She returned to school, continued to work full-time, and finished her bachelor of science in nursing in 1948. That same year, the head of the UW School of Nursing asked Cooper to join the department, and in 1951, she was promoted to assistant professor. She quickly became passionate about teaching. While continuing to teach, Cooper earned a master's degree in education from the University of Minnesota. In 1955, she took an additional position on the faculty of the UW-Extension while continuing to work at the School of Nursing. She taught classes all over the state until 1966, when she developed one of the first distance-delivered courses in Wisconsin. Broadcast over the radio, the lectures initially reached over 600 nurses at 24 "listening posts" (spots where nurses could gather to hear the radio lectures). Eventually, the program was able to reach all 72 counties in Wisconsin at 170 listening posts.

Cooper retired from nursing in 1983 and turned her attention to the history of the nursing profession. Though the topic had always interested her, she now had the time to dedicate herself to research. She wrote the book *Wisconsin Nursing Pioneers*, which tells the stories of 17 important nurses in Wisconsin's history. She also wrote profiles of over 100 nurses that were featured in the Wisconsin newspaper *Nursing Matters*.

Cooper was recognized as a leader in nursing locally and nationally, having received many awards. In 1981, she received the Pioneer Award of the Adult Education Association of the USA. In 1998, she received the Wisconsin Nurses Association Image of Nursing Award, and the award was renamed after her the following year. In 2000, she was inducted into the American Nurses Association Hall of Fame, and in 2003, the American Academy of Nursing called her a "living legend."

Cooper died on July 16, 2013. She left her estate to the UW Foundation, so the funds could be used to support the construction of a new facility for the UW-Madison School of Nursing. Signe Skott Cooper Hall opened in 2014.

**To learn more, visit <https://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/sign-skott-cooper/>**