

# Mary Shiel Waldron

*Bloomington, Monroe County*

March 28, 1858 – April 14, 1940

Mary Waldron (1858-1940) was both a leader in modernizing social service in early twentieth-century Bloomington, Indiana, and a pillar of Bloomington's small Catholic community.

Born Mary Shiel, the daughter of Irish immigrants, Waldron grew up in Jackson County, Indiana, where she made her way into the male-dominated ranks of high school teachers. In 1884 she married a Bloomington businessman, John Bonacum Waldron, the son of an Irish-born family friend prominent in banking, real estate, city politics, and St. Charles Church. In 1886, when Waldron's husband died, she moved back to Jackson County with her infant son, returning to Bloomington in 1899. Months later, Waldron spearheaded the first successful attempt to create a system to investigate the needs of Bloomington's poor, coordinate the efforts of different charities, and record aid given and its outcome. In 1906 she helped establish the Council of Social Agencies and became its director. (The United Way of Monroe County's time line of its own history begins with the council's founding.) For decades, she continued to launch local health and welfare agencies and often to sustain them by her unpaid labor. The city government gave Waldron quasi-official status by providing her office space in the city hall from 1915 until her death.

In 1916 Waldron, then 58, enrolled in Indiana University, earning bachelor's (1920), master's (1922), and doctoral (1924) degrees. Her undergraduate thesis on the history of social service in Monroe County and her master's essay on social work cases she had handled convey the shift from a volunteer to a professional approach to issues of poverty and dependency-- a shift that Waldron lived and cheered on.

Devout, Waldron attended church daily, sang in the choir, and wrote a history of her parish. But in social service, she reached across denominational lines. Perhaps her closest collaborators were Alex Hirsch, a member of the leading Jewish family in Bloomington, and Susan Russell, a descendant of the Reformed Presbyterians who had been early settlers in the city. At her funeral, Hirsch and two Protestant clergymen were among the honorary pall bearers.

Waldron not only exemplified the diversity among Bloomington's civic leaders but embraced diversity in her public life.



Photo Courtesy: Monroe County Public Library



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This profile was written by Susan Armeny, local historian.

*References will be published at the end of Women's History Month.*