

BEFORE THE C-SECTION, THERE WAS THIS BARBARIC BIRTH PRACTICE

by Kristina Gaddy // September 25, 2016

Around midnight on Dec. 18, 1885, Mrs. McK — her real name was left off historical records to maintain her privacy — started feeling pains. It was her third pregnancy in three years, and the two previous deliveries had required forceps, both resulting in the infant's death.

The patient was a short, stout, powerful Irishwoman, and that winter night in Baltimore, she knew what to expect. She had access to the University of Maryland's Free Lying-In Hospital and a number of other hospitals, but calling a midwife and delivering at home was still the most common practice. At around 10 a.m., the midwife manually broke Mrs. McK's water in hopes of getting labor to progress. It didn't, and a few hours later, two doctors arrived to try to deliver the baby with forceps. They tried, unsuccessfully, five times.

Mrs McK remained alive, and in a great deal of pain. In the 19th century, women feared "going through labor and having babies not survive," but the fear of dying themselves was also very real, says Carole McCann, chair of the women's studies department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. It was unusual for women to not know someone who had died while giving birth.

A full day into the ordeal, Mrs. McK's life was in danger. The baby was stuck, and if the doctors couldn't manage to remove it, Mrs. McK would die. In 1876, Eduardo Porro performed the first successful operation to extract a baby through an incision in the [uterus](#) and have both mother and babe survive. His improved Cesarean section — variations had been around for centuries, usually employed to try to save the baby after a mother died during childbirth — was a breakthrough that enabled doctors to save both mother's and baby's lives. But by 1885, the procedure was still not common practice.