

WOMEN OF WINSLOW



Emma Bachelder Lee French

(born 1836, died 1897)

This *“amply built woman with a determined jaw
was remarkably qualified by bitter experience.”* – Author Maurice Kildaire

**Despite her tough self-reliance, “Doctor” Grandma French
was known for her healing abilities and gentle nature.**

Emma Louise Bachelder was born on April 21, 1836, in Sussex County, England. She received some nursing training as a young woman, though she never earned a degree. She converted to Mormonism when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints visited England in the 1850s.

Emma traded one year of service to the church for steerage to America in 1856. Upon arrival, she joined hundreds of church members in a treacherous walk from Iowa City, Iowa, to Salt Lake City, Utah. Emma acted as a nurse and midwife along the way while pulling a handcart full of her belongings.

In 1858, Emma became the sixteenth wife of John Doyle Lee and ultimately bore him seven children. Because of his participation in the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, John was excommunicated and the family was forced to move to a remote Colorado River crossing point in Arizona Territory in 1871. There they established Lee’s Ferry, which Emma was responsible for operating during her husband’s long absences. John was executed for the massacre in 1877, and Emma ran the ferry and their Lonely Dell Ranch homestead on her own for two more years.

Emma married prospector Franklin H. French in 1879, and they settled near what is now Holbrook. In 1880, a flood in nearby Cottonwood Wash destroyed the rail bed and injured many workers. With no doctor in the area, Emma’s tireless efforts and healing skills led to an ongoing relationship with the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad. In 1887, she and Frank followed the railroad to Winslow and settled on the northeast side of town in what is now Bushman Acres.

In Winslow, Emma became known as “Doctor Grandma” because of her abilities and kindly nature. She assisted the contract doctor in the small railroad hospital west of the Harvey House, and she was also on call along the line from Flagstaff to Gallup. She was especially skilled as a midwife, and she was ahead of her time in demanding sanitary work areas. Always prepared and willing to help, Emma was held in high esteem by local railroaders, ranchers, and Native Americans alike.

Emma died of a heart attack on November 16, 1897, at the age of 61. Her funeral was attended by scores of railroad officials, government officers, and townspeople. The railroad ordered all passing trains to halt for several minutes and sound no bells or whistles as they passed through the yards. Emma was one of the first people interred at Winslow's Desert View Cemetery.

Today, Lee’s Ferry and the Lonely Dell Ranch Historic Site are maintained as part of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, where volunteers maintain the buildings and orchards as a tribute to Emma for her role in Arizona’s settlement. In 2019, Emma Lee French was inducted into the Arizona Women’s Hall of Fame based on a nomination from the Winslow Historic Preservation Commission, which placed a plaque commemorating her induction near her headstone in Desert View Cemetery. (www.azwhf.org/emma-lee-french)

