The Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses

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tie in Williamsport, was one of the few physicians who steadfastly support-
ed the hospital and its mission of caring for the poor and working classes. In 1881, she urged her medical school classmate, Rita Church, to assume the supervision of the hos-
pital. This was a turning point for the hospital. 

Dr. Saylor Brown and Church were pioneers in their field. Each had gradu-
ated in 1874 from the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in Phila-
adelphia, which had been founded by Quakers in 1850, only the second college in the United States to confer the M.D. degree on women. See “Dr. Rita B. Church: First Superintendent of the Williamsport Hospital,” by Dr. Judith Gouldin, Williamsport Sun-Gazette, Feb. 14, 2016 and “Jean Saylor Brown: Physician, champion, activist,” by Mary Sieminski, Williamsport Sun-Gazette, March 9, 2014.)

Nursing school established

“For the next three years,” according to 100 Years of Tradition: 1883–1983, “Dr. Church and Brown faced the driving force behind the hospital. They made the nurses stay for three years and treat-
ed their patients with great care and attention. During those years the hospital was working at full capac-
ity, and the difficulty of the nursing care created an increasing burden on the doctors. It became evident that additional help was needed to care for the many patients. Out of this need, Doctor Church, with the aid and support of Dr. Brown, established The Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses.” The training program was modeled after that of the Woman’s Hospital of Philadelphia, associated with the Woman’s Medical College. The hospital, founded in 1863, was one of the few hospita-
tals where women physi-
cians were allowed to practice. 

The Hospital began a training school, for nurses two years later, the first ever chartered school for nurses in the United States. 

The hospital’s physicians and medical his-
torian, Dr. Judith Gouldin, suggests that Drs. Church and Brown recognized the importance of the medical school-based nursing program at Woman’s College and the importance to patient care of having well-edu-

cated woman covering for the off-duty physicians. Since the Drs. Church and Brown were also the program instructors, the trainees used the information gleaned in their classes to give more uniform care day and night.

On-the-job training

Their training was on-the-job and not easy. Nursing students worked without pay for a 3-month probationary period. If a student successfully com-
pleted probation, she received a stipend of $5 a month. Students lived on the hospital premises and worked 12 to 16 hours a day, six days a week. On Sundays they were off from noon until 2 p.m. In addition to caring for the patients, trainees cooked, cleaned and carried in the coal used for heating.

The women’s personal lives were tightly con-
trolled. According to Dr. Church, “Graduate nurses in good standing with the director of nurses will be given an evening off each week for courting purposes or two evenings a week if you go to church regularly.” It seems that a nurse in training would hardly have any time to court or do anything else, but Dr. Church stipulated further that “Any nurse who smokes, uses liquor in any form, gets her hair done at a beauty shop or frequents dance halls will give the director of nurses reason to suspect her worth, intentions and integrity.”

After more than 10 years of administering the program, Dr. Church resigned in 1890. Miss Lownia Louisa was hired as the nurse super-
tendant, and the pro-
gram length was extend-
ed to 2 years. In 1894, there were 14 women enrolled, one of whom was African-American. It was not until the 1970s that another African-
American woman was admitted to the program, the first male student had been admitted in 1961.

In the last years of the 19th century, the nurses were moved out of the hospital to make room for more capable patients from the Spanish American War, and the need for housing for the nurses was acute. Ida Hays McCormick, a long-
time and generous sup-
porter of the hospital, donated $20,000 to build a home with space for 27 nursing students. Located on the southwest corner of Campbell and Louise streets, it featured both central heat and electricity.

The opportunity for women to train formally for the nursing profession opened doors that had previously been closed to 19th-century women. Training gave the gradi-
ates professional status, respect, and greater eco-

nomic opportunities.

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