Margaret A. Hagan, electrician

An entrepreneur’s path to success in 19th century Williamsport

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
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Margaret Hagan probably is the most flamboyant of the local women featured in this series. She also is one of the few women of her era about whom we know more than we do about her husband. Margaret was an entrepreneur. In an advertisement for one of her Williamsport businesses, she described herself as “one of the most practical and shrewd business women here.”

Margaret Mahammitt Hagan lived in Williamsport for 50 years — from the 1860s until the early 1900s. In the 1880s, Margaret opened “The Electric Baths,” a 17-room sanitarium on East Third Street, where she administered electrotherapy, a very popular medical treatment at the time. Prior to that, she owned and operated Star Laundry, also on East Third Street, a business that had several employees and that, in Margaret’s words, was “patronized by the first families” of Williamsport.

She also provided the elite women of Williamsport with fashionable women’s furnishings from a small shop adjacent to the laundry.

Who was this bold, gutsy lady, who called herself “colored” and was the daughter of an “Arab” from the island nation of Madagascar and the granddaughter of a former slave and a Supreme Court judge? How did she establish and maintain successful businesses in Williamsport, where female business owners and medical practitioners were uncommon and businesses owned by African American or mixed race women were even more uncommon?

Two articles, available online in the Lycoming County Women’s History Collection (www.lycoming.edu/library/orgs/lchwbc) brought Margaret to my attention — the first article is from the Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin found in the files of the Lycoming County Historical Society. The other article, “Margaret Mahammitt of Maryland” by Sheila Gregory Thomas, Margaret’s great-great-granddaughter, was published by the Association of the Study of African American History and Life for Black History Month in 1984.

Electrotherapy

Electrotherapy was widely practiced at the time. (See MARGARET, Page E-3)
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time, but Margaret's clinic seems to have been the only one in the area. Electricity, generated by batteries, was applied to treat many ailments, including headaches and muscle pain. In an "electric bath," a patient was connected by wire to a source of electricity, and then a low charge of electricity was made to travel throughout the body and "bathe" the patient, inducing calm, reducing pain and stimulating sluggish organs. The medical practitioner was called an electrician.

During her years in Williamsport, Margaret Hagan and her electrotherapy practice made headlines a number of times. The Washington Bee, a Washington D.C. newspaper distributed nationally, headlined a June 22, 1887 article on Hagan "MODERN MIRACLES (sic) WONDBRDS OF ELECTRICITY DEMONSTRATED BY MRS. HAGAN. Persons Literally Snatched from the Grave." The Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin, the local newspaper of that time period, published several news stories about Hagan. Headlined "Mrs. Margaret A. Hagan, Well Known and Successful Electrician," a June 29, 1885, article went on to say, "Mrs. Margaret A. Hagan, proprietress of the Electric Bath rooms, 583 East Third Street, is a living example of what a

Margaret's mother, Serena, was a daughter of Supreme Court Justice Roger Brooke Taney. While the truth of this

Neighbors of the Hagans included the L.L. Stearns, the James V. Browns, the Pages, the Metzgers, Dr. Jean Saylor

enrolled at Howard University, the newly established college for African Americans in Washington, D.C. There, Fannie met her future husband, Oberlin graduate and Howard University professor

all places that Thomas's father had visited on "vacation" with his grandmother in Williamsport. Margaret looms large in family lore.

In 1903, when she was about 77, Margaret moved to
Clockwise from top right is an advertisement for Star Laundry as it appeared in the 1882 edition of Industries of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, Edwards); an electrotherapy cartoon, reprinted from Electrifying Medicine (Himrich and Thornley, Lerner 1995); portrait of Margaret Hagen from the collection of Sheila Gregory Thomas; and "Modern Miracles," Washington Bee, June 22, 1887.

In the late 19th century, the electric bath was used to treat severe headaches and muscle pains.

Margaret's Children


Son John, who was born in Frederick, Maryland, about 1851, came to live in Williamsport and worked with his stepfather as a blacksmith. He also had an interesting history. A newspaper article about him says, "At the age of nine or ten years, he left Frederick City with the first regiment of Union soldiers that passed through and went with them to Harper's Ferry.

In the 1860s, when daughter Fannie Emma was school age, Williamsport schools were not open to African Americans. "Colored" students were taught in rented rooms, and the school term was three months long, not the eight months of schooling available to white students. Nonetheless, in 1871, when Fannie was about 16, she enrolled at Howard University, the newly established college for African Americans in Washington, D.C. There, Fannie met her future husband, Oberlin graduate and Howard University professor James Monroe Gregory. According to Christ Church records, the Rev. William Paret married the couple in Williamsport on Dec. 29, 1873. The many contributions of Fannie to the Williamsport community and their descendants to education in America, especially for African Americans, are a rich story for another day.

Sheila Gregory Thomas

In her article, Sheila Gregory Thomas paints a vivid portrait of her great-great-grandmother. Margaret was a headstrong, proud and seemingly fearless. She studied at Huskford's Sanitarium in Washington, D.C., and in Baltimore and Philadelphia. She stood up to people in high places in Williamsport and wherever she was. She would not tolerate discrimination. She took on a medical school in Philadelphia where she felt discriminated against her restaurant owners, who refused to serve her, and city fathers who did not want to put a trolley stop at her business.

Thomas visited Williamsport in the fall of 2011 and together we visited the sites of the Hagan family's various homes, business and churches — all places that Thomas's father had visited on "vacation" with his grandson in Williamsport. Margaret's home is in family lore.

In 1903, when she was about 77, Margaret moved to Bordentown, N.J., to be with her daughter Fannie. By that time, Fannie's husband, James, had earned his master's degree at Harvard and was the headmaster of the Bordentown School, a residential high school for African American students. The Bordentown School would later become known as the "Tuskegee of the North." Margaret died in 1914 in New Jersey and is buried there.

Fannie and James had several children, among them Thomas Montgomery Gregory. And it was his granddaughter, Sheila Gregory Thomas, who brought to light the story of Margaret's notable achievements and a sense of what was needed in Lycoming County at the end of the 19th century to rise above the limits generally placed on its "colored" citizens.

Sieminski is project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative community undertaking between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society. Visit online at www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lewsc. Her column is published on the second Sunday of each month. To contact her, email lwsc.manag@gmail.com.