

Sylvia Bowman Hays: Socialite, genealogist and librarian

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

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Many "Williamsport Women" stories get their start because something about an individual woman, organization or historical event intrigues me. What piqued my interest in exploring the life of Sylvia Bowman Hays was a 1918 photograph of her in her Red Cross Motor Corps uniform, found in the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society and online in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.

Born Sylvia Eliza Bowman in Williamsport on June 2, 1886, she was the daughter of Francis and Fanny Harman Bowman. Her father had several business interests in the area, and her grandfather Benjamin C. Bowman, an early lumberman, had been president of the Susquehanna Boom Company.

As her role as Regent of the Lycoming Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution shows, Sylvia Bowman Hays was very proud of her heritage. One of her colonial ancestors was Levi Munson, who responded to the "Lexington Alarm" for troops in April 1775.

In the newspaper

The name Sylvia Bowman appeared in the local
(See SYLVIA, Page E2)



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is Sylvia Hays Bowman in her Red Cross Motor Corp Uniform in this 1918 photo from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is the Gibson Farmhouse in Nisbet. It was built in 1865. This photo is from the collection of the James V. Brown Library.

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(From Page E1)

newspapers frequently. As an 8-year-old, she was chosen May Queen at a festival held in the Lycoming Opera House for dance students of Professor C. Victor Zebley. She attended Fairmont Seminary, an exclusive school for girls in Washington, D.C., and in 1906 hosted a gathering for classmates at the Bowman Cottage on Loyalsock Creek. She participated frequently in fundraisers for the Williamsport Hospital and other charities.

In 1908, at age 22, Sylvia Bowman married John Coryell Hays at Christ Episcopal Church. Her engagement party, as detailed in the Sun-Gazette of Feb. 17, 1908, featured an afternoon tea and a dinner held at the Bowman home at 528 W. Fourth St. The newspaper coverage was effusive: "The function was one of special beauty and uniqueness that has seldom been equaled in the social life of this city. Miss Bowman is an exceedingly popular young society woman and the announcement of her betrothal to Mr. Hays is an event of import among the younger society people."

John Coryell Hays (1886-1955) was the son of John K. Hays and Sarah Coryell Hays. He, too, could trace his family back seven generations, to colonial times. Sylvia and John Hays had three children: John Bowman (1909); Francis Carlton (1912), who died as an infant; and William Harvey (1917).

Red Cross Motor Corps

The local chapter of the Red Cross was organized in 1917, according to the 1981 Centennial

History of the Lycoming County Chapter of the American Red Cross. Previous to that, the group had been a chapter of the Pennsylvania Women's Division for National Preparedness. The Red Cross's Williamsport Motor Corps was established in January 1918, under the direction of Ida Hays (Mrs. John) McCormick. There were 22 active and 10 reserve members. The all-female corps made deliveries, collected used clothing for "refugee nations," participated in parades and provided cars for emergencies and for funerals.

According to the Red Cross history, the most valuable work rendered by the Motor Corps was during the Spanish influenza epidemic in 1918, when members handled 271 ambulance calls. They helped set up an emergency hospital and delivered food to the day nursery set up in the Parish House of Trinity Church on West Fourth Street for children whose parents were hospitalized.

Lycoming County Historical Society

Hays was a member of the Women's Club. She also organized costume parties, Christmas parties and picnics for the Lycoming County Historical Society, where, according to her obituary, she was a curator during the 1930s and 1940s. And she did extensive genealogical research for many local women who sought membership in the DAR. Her papers are available at the Lycoming County Historical Society.

During that same period, Hays worked at the James V. Brown Library as an assistant librarian. In 1937, she headed up a



PHOTO PROVIDED

Sylvia Hays and J. Morrison Rhen. Hays was May Queen in 1894; J. Morrison Rhen was her escort. Dean Photograph from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

WPA project begun years before, inviting churches to record births, deaths and marriages from their church files. These were added to the newspaper index and are still in use today. In 1938, she was appointed by the governor to the Lycoming County Board of Assistance.

The Hays family lived in several places in Williamsport, Montoursville, and Loyalsock Township. On May 6, 1910, they were living at 718 Louisa St. when J. C. Hays placed an advertisement in the Sun-Gazette: "Wanted—White girl for general household work of three by then."

In 1940, they purchased the historic Gibson farmhouse in Nisbet and renamed it

Nippesing. The home, built in 1865 on the banks of the Susquehanna River, was on one of the earliest tracts of land to be developed on the West Branch frontier.

John Coryell Hays died in 1955. Sylvia Bowman Hays died in 1968 at the age of 81 in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where her son William was living. The couple are buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

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