

Dr. Rita B. Church: First superintendent of the Williamsport Hospital

Williamsport Women



By DR. JUDITH GOULDIN
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The American Civil War caused widespread social upheaval. The obvious upheaval involved the abolition of slavery. But arguably the disruption with greater reverberations was the change in the lives of women.

The war took millions of men from their homes and businesses, forcing women to assume roles previously deemed inappropriate or forbidden for females. After the war, genteel domesticity was no longer the presumed future for young women. In fact, many wouldn't have a suitor to marry.

When the rebellion ignited in 1861, the U.S. population was 31 million. Three million men went to war. An esti-

mated 620,000-800,000 died. The largest losses occurred among men born between 1835 and 1845—the so-called Lost Generation. Women born in the 1830s and 1840s faced the possibility of never marrying and of having to provide for themselves. In response, they forged new paths.

Rita Biansia Church

Rita Biansia Church was born during this era. She never married. Her family was neither prominent nor wealthy. Armed only with her formidable intelligence and penchant for hard work, she earned her medical degree and transformed medical care in north central Pennsylvania.

Dr. Church was born on a farm near Utica, New York, in 1841. She attended public schools and the Whitestown and Utica Seminaries nearby. After graduation, she taught languages at Utica Seminary. She enrolled at Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia in 1872 and two years later graduated with top honors.

The Female Medical College of

Pennsylvania (later Woman's Medical College) had been founded in 1850 to train women for the M.D. degree. However, students and graduates of the school were shunned by the male bastions of medicine, who believed that women were physiologically incapable of becoming "good" doctors. Denied the chance to hone their skills in the established clinics and hospitals, the women built and staffed their own facilities, including the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia (1861) and the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston (1862).

After graduation, Church planned to open a practice with classmate Ellen Ingersoll in Canton, Illinois, Ingersoll's hometown. Both women were awarded coveted residencies at Woman's Hospital, which delayed the opening of their office, but the extra training gave them tremendous clinical experience compared to other newly minted graduates. In addition, Ingersoll was invited to the renowned New England Hospital for Women and Children to master the

(See DR. RITA, Page E-3)



PHOTO PROVIDED

In this photo, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is Dr. Rita B. Church, first superintendent of the Williamsport Hospital.

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(From Page E-1)

latest innovations in obstetrics and gynecology under the guidance of female mentors. The institution had recently established the first hospital-based nursing degree program in the United States. Ingersoll's sabbatical experience in Boston planted seeds that came to fruition in Rita's career.

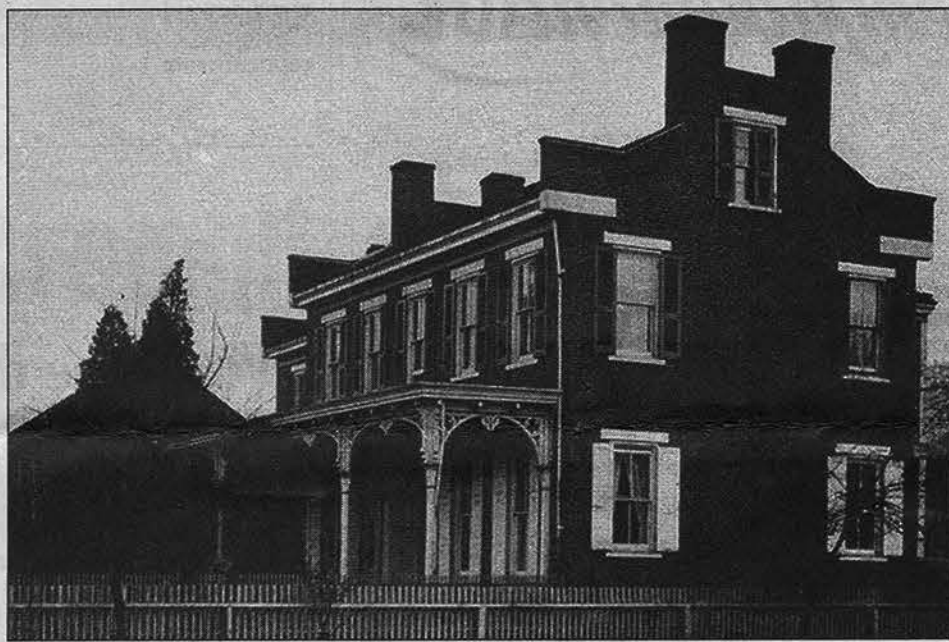
Return to Pennsylvania

In 1879, another medical school classmate, Dr. Jean Saylor, contacted Church, asking for her help. (See "Jean Saylor Brown: Physician, Feminist, Activist," Williamsport Sun-Gazette, March 9, 2014.) Saylor served patients in Williamsport and Lock Haven and needed a physician to take on her Lock Haven practice. Church accepted.

The reasons for her decision to move are unknown. Perhaps western Illinois was too rustic even for a former farm girl from central New York. By contrast, a new college (Central State Normal School) founded in 1870 in Lock Haven gave the city an academic aura.

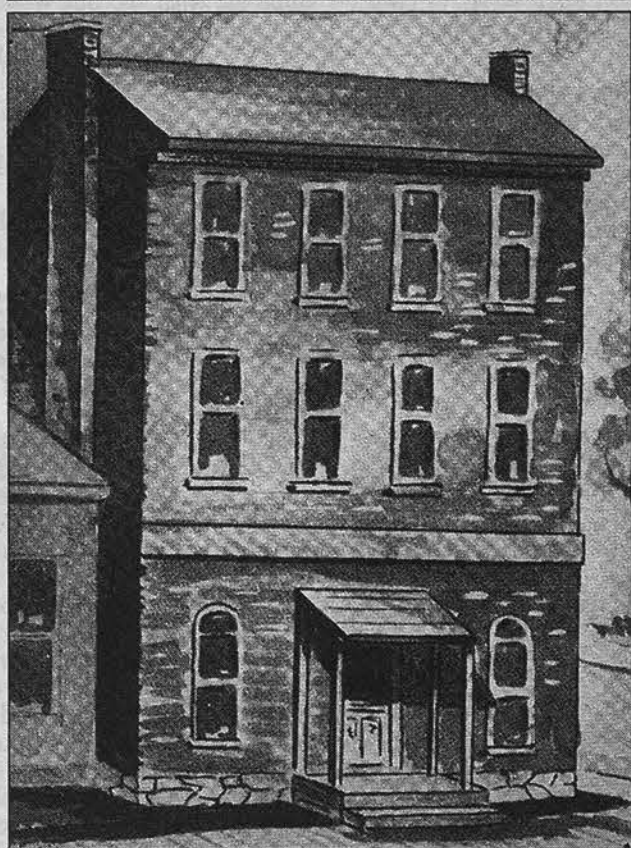
Church had no sooner settled in than another offer came from Saylor. In 1877, the Lycoming County Medical Society had bought and remodeled (with an 8 percent mortgage) a building at the corner of Elmira and Edwin streets to serve as the first hospital in the region. The frequent injuries in the logging industry warranted such a facility. Unfortunately, it was managed by non-medical individuals, and admission rates were dismal and dropping. The enterprise was careening toward bankruptcy.

In November 1881, Church accepted the offer to be the superintendent and resident physician of the Williamsport Hospital. The annual stipend was \$250 plus on-site living quarters. The brilliant physician rose to the challenge. As she wrote to the Alumnae News of her alma mater, "This institution is still in its infancy, and badly in need of money; but we mean in spite of all we have to contend with, that it shall be a success." Her familiarity with female-run hospitals no doubt buoyed her



PHOTOS PROVIDED

In the above photo, courtesy of the Ross Library, Lock Haven, is the Proctor Myers House, East Water Street, Lock Haven, the site of the first Lock Haven Hospital. In the photo at left, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is the original Williamsport Hospital on the southeast corner of Elmira and Edwin streets.



confidence that nothing lurking in her physiology would prevent her from developing a first-rate medical facility.

As patient admissions dramatically increased, Church and Saylor realized they needed the help of trained nurses. In 1883, they founded and became the first instructors at the Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses. The students received a 15-month course involving lectures and hands-on patient care demonstrated by the women physicians.

After 12 years of managing a burgeoning hospital, providing patient care and teaching nurses, Church was drained. In addition, the hospital had moved twice — first to a larger building on Pine Street and then, after that facility flooded in 1889, to a new hospital on higher ground at

Campbell and Louisa Streets. In 1893, she resigned her position, and a nurse, Virginia Loomis, was appointed superintendent.

Move to Lock Haven

In 1897, Lock Haven recruited Church to start a hospital in the Proctor Myers homestead (on East Water Street) and be its superintendent. She established a nursing school soon after. Church never met a task too menial; the hospital initially had 14 beds, with straw mattresses personally stuffed by Church.

Church retired in 1900 to Elmira, New York. Her health deteriorated, leaving her unable to walk and virtually blind and deaf. She died there in 1928.

Church is remembered not just as a "good" physician but as a transformative one.

Ingersoll became a prominent physician in Illinois, esteemed and sought out for her obstetric skills. She never married and died in 1888 of heart failure following breast mass excision. Her colleagues wrote in tribute, "The medical women have lost one of the most noble and gifted of the sisterhood." Saylor-Brown married twice-widowed Col. William Brown in 1883 when she was 39 (and he was 59). He died 12 years later.

Gouldin is a retired physician, who practiced nuclear medicine in Lycoming County. Since retiring, she has pursued her fascination with history, including preserving local medical history.

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