



PHOTOS PROVIDED

In the above left photo is the Bethune-Douglass girls' basketball team in 1949. In the above right photo is the Bethune-Douglass sewing group held in the Center library in 1947. Both photos are provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Isabella Russell Fairfax: Prominent African-American civic leader



Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

(EDITORS NOTE: In this month's Williamsport Women history column, the former road, "Nigger Hollow," is mentioned — the original name is used in the column for historical accuracy.)

"If folks in Williamsport and vicinity didn't know her personally, it is certain they had heard of her. And what they heard was good. Such was the life of Mrs. John W. Fairfax. Her death removes a prominent Negro civic leader from our midst."

— Williamsport Sun-Gazette, Aug. 19, 1952

The community memo-

ry of the contributions of Isabella Russell Fairfax to civic life in Lycoming County has faded in the 53 years since her death in 1952. But at a time when society imposed limitations on the lives and work of African-Americans and of women, she became an outstanding leader.

Isabella Tanner Russell was born in Pittsburgh on Feb. 28, 1877, the second of the six children of the Rev. John Emory Russell (1846-1887) and Mary Tanner Russell (1849-1935). Her family moved to Williamsport around 1885, when her father



FAIRFAX

was appointed the pastor of Bethel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church. Under the Rev. Russell's direction, a new church was built at the corner of Hepburn Street and Memorial Avenue. Bethel AME Church continues to be an active ministry and features a stained glass window with Russell's portrait.

The family lived at 955 Second St., near the present-day Pennsylvania



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Shown in the above photo provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society is the Masonic Temple at the corner of Market and E. Fourth streets (1936). Isabella and John Fairfax were caretakers of the Temple and lived in an apartment on the premises. At left is a photo of Isabella Fairfax, which accompanied her obituary in the Sun-Gazette on Aug. 19, 1952.

College of Technology campus. When Russell died in 1887, Isabella's mother opened a grocery store from their home to support the family. Isabella graduated from

Williamsport High School in 1897, one of the first African-American graduates. Following graduation, she worked as a clerk, then married John W. Fairfax Jr. Fairfax

was born in Williamsport, the son of John W. Fairfax Sr., and Annie Newman Fairfax. John

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Lifestyle

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Isabella Russell Fairfax: Prominent African-American civic leader

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Fairfax Jr., also had worked as a clerk. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette ran the announcement of their marriage at Bethel AME Church under the headline "Pleasant Side of Life."

In 1904, Isabella and John Fairfax were appointed caretakers for the Masonic Temple at East Fourth and Market streets, where the couple lived and worked for 42 years until they retired in 1945. They had three daughters, Helen Evelyn (1902), Isabella Beatrice (1907) and Esther Russell (1911).

Walnut Street YWCA

Isabella Fairfax was active in community affairs, particularly African-American and interracial affairs. She sustained this interest and activity for more than 30 years, from 1919, when she was named president of the newly established Walnut Street (or "Colored") branch of the Young Women's Christian Association, until her death.

At the Walnut Street branch, she and the other female board members organized musical and social events, held classes, provided tutoring and maintained a library. The branch also provided temporary housing for African-American women for whom housing in local hotels was not possible because of segregation.

(Lila Fisher also was very active at the "Colored Y"; see "Sophie Reighard and Lila May Fisher: Notable Williamsport Teachers," Williamsport Sun-Gazette, July 14, 2013.)

When the Walnut Street branch lost its YWCA funding in 1930, the Bethune-Douglass Center was formed. Isabella Fairfax wrote personally to Mary McLeod Bethune, inviting the African-American leader and founder and president of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida, to speak in

Williamsport. Bethune accepted the invitation and spoke to a large group at St. Paul's Lutheran Church on Nov. 2, 1937. After P. D. Mitchell came to Williamsport in 1943 to head Bethune-Douglass, Isabella continued her volunteer activities as a member of the board and chair of the educational committee.

Isabella Fairfax was active not only in the affairs of the Center, but throughout the community. She was a board member of The Home for Aged Colored Women, a home for poor women established by Mary Slaughter in 1897. She and her husband maintained strong connections to Bethel AME Church. John Fairfax was vice-chairman of the Trustee Board, and Isabella Fairfax was a member of the Trustees' Aid Society.

She is remembered with a nameplate secured on the center chair of the church's pulpit.

Advice sought

Government officials at the local and state level sought her advice. In the 1920s, she was one of six people, three of whom were "colored," appointed by Williamsport's mayor to serve on a committee studying interracial affairs in the city. In the 1930s, the depression years, she was appointed by Governor George Earle to the Lycoming County Relief Board. The Relief Board advised local welfare and charitable agencies on community needs.

Isabella Fairfax often was the spokesperson for Williamsport's African-American community, speaking to church and civic groups not only about current events but also about African-American history. She presented a lecture on "The Colored Race" for Negro History Week in the 1920s.

The Sun-Gazette's editorial on her death cited her "quiet dignity and calm purpose" as



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Shown in the above photo provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society is the Bethune-Douglass Center on Park Avenue (1968).

she promoted interracial affairs. I would like to have seen those in action as she approached the board of the YWCA in 1931 to ask that "colored girls" be allowed to attend YWCA camp. (The answer was "not this year.")

She likely was among the group of concerned citizens who approached Williamsport Mayor Wolfe in 1936 to insist that the infamous road named "Nigger Hollow" be renamed. It is now "Freedom Road," celebrating the Underground Railroad active on that road for decades.

Commitment to education

What stands out about Isabella Fairfax is her pride in her own heritage and her tireless commitment to education — not only her own education and that of her three daughters, but that of all the African-American children of

Williamsport. She was born into a family that valued education and she passed that value on whenever and wherever she could.

The oldest daughter, Helen, was salutatorian of her Williamsport High School class and graduated cum laude from Bucknell University in 1924, one of few African-American students. She later headed the English Department at Kentucky State College in Frankfort, Kentucky. As Helen Fairfax Holmes, she challenged segregation law and policies. According to the Kentucky African American Encyclopedia (2015), "Her involvement in Frankfort's community led to the integration of some eating establishments, the public library, the YMCA, two hotels ... and the employment of blacks on the local police force and in city offices."

Isabella and John Fairfax's

younger daughters also were Williamsport High School graduates, and both went on to graduate from Howard University in Washington, D.C., Isabella in 1928 and Esther in 1932.

All three sisters married and moved out of Williamsport, and each continued to be involved in civic affairs. Isabella and John's nieces and nephews and their children and grandchildren continued to be active in the community, ensuring that her mentoring of the African-American children of Williamsport has had a lasting impact.

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