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

Hagen 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/lchw) 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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(Margaret's mother, Serena, was a daughter of Supreme Court Justice Roger Brooke Taney. While the truth of this may never be known, it is a fascinating tidbit of history, because Judge Taney is best known for the Dred Scott decision, handed down by the Supreme Court in 1857.

In that decision, Taney decreed that African Americans were not citizens and "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.

Margaret came to Williamsport just after the Civil War with her second husband, George Washington Hagan Jr., Maryland. According to the Gazette and Bulletin of Aug. 27, 1903, Hagan was "mild in Frederick, Md., apprenticed to a blacksmith.

During the Civil War, he became acquainted with Philip A. Holtz of Williamsport. Both Hagan and Holtz were soldiers. After the war, Hagan relocated to Williamsport and worked for Holtz before going into business for himself.

George Washington Hagan was a prominent and well-respected businessman and politician. He is buried in the Veterans Circle at Wildwood Cemetery.

The family lived and worked on East Third Street - the section of town that was "front of" before Millionaire's Row on West Fourth Street was developed by Peter Herdic.

Margaret's father, Jeremiah (or Polly) Mahanmitt, came to this country from Madagascar on an educational tour in the early 1890s. He purchased Margaret's mother's (a mulatto) from a Frederick family and they were married. Family oral history states that

Margaret A. Hagan - Star Laundry, 44 S. Third St., third door west of Crawford House.

Mrs. Hagan offers to the public one of the most complete Laundries in this State, or, in fact, any other.

Mrs. Hagan is the most recent of the electric laundry service. She employed some of the most competent and carefully hand to do the work, it is a well-known fact that it takes very skillful persons to do fine work, such as lace, lawn, and other fine material. Mrs. Hagan's laundry is equipped with the most modern apparatus, and she holds in her charge the laundry at Congress Hall, Washington, D.C., and the Federal Hotel, Philadelphia.

She has been in the laundry business for twenty years. She is a native of Maryland, and is considered one of the most practical and efficient business women here. All classes praise her work, and she is patronized by the best families.

PHOTOS PROVIDED

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 Electrotherapeutics (McHarg and Thornley, Lerner 1995); portrait of Margaret Hagan 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.

MRS. M. A. HAGAN - Star Laundry, 44 S. Third St., third door west of Crawford House.

Sheila Gregory Thomas

In her article, Sheila Gregory Thomas paints a vivid portrait of her great-great-grandmother, Margaret, who was headstrong, proud and seemingly fearless. She studied at Haford'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 in a medical school in Philadelphia and 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. She is especially interested in the fact that Thomas's father had visited on "vacation" with his grandmother in Williamsport. Margaret looms large in family lore.

In 1914, 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. Bordentown School would later become known as the "Fuskego 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.

Seminowski is project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative venture between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society.

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