



PHOTOS PROVIDED

The Louisa Street nursing residence received funding from Ida Hays McCormick to build and furnish the new dormitory, at left. Pictured is the nursing class of 1894 with resident physician and superintendent. Photos were provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Application to graduation

Nursing education during the 20th century in Williamsport



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Following up on a Nov. 13, 2016, article in this column on the founding of the Williamsport Hospital School of Nursing, this article will look at some of the students who attended the school during its early days.

Applications

Applications of a few of the women who applied to the Williamsport Training School for Nurses tell us nothing about why these individuals chose nursing as their vocation, but the applications do provide a wealth of personal data, as privacy laws did not yet exist.

The early forms had to be in the applicant's handwriting and were sent to the superintendent of nursing, along with a letter from a clergyman or teacher testifying to moral character and a certificate of good health from a physician who had conducted a recent physical examination.

Applicants had to state their height and weight, whether they had good hearing and vision, and whether they had a tendency to consumption. There were questions about what church they attended and whether they had any experience in a hospital.

Martha Lay, of Lock Haven, was 22 when she applied to the school in 1899. She was single, a Methodist and had no previous experience in a hospital.

Lulu Thompson, of Williamsport, was a nontraditional student. Her 1897 application gave her marital status as widow, the ages of her children as 3

and 5 and asked how child care would be arranged — she cited grandparents.

The forms sent to references asked if the prospective student had any “physical defects or peculiarities” and inquired if the woman was likely to be called away before completing three years of study.

Contracts

Upon acceptance, students signed contracts with the school that clearly outlined expectations.

A 1919 contract states the financial remuneration per month: \$6 the first year, \$7 the second year, \$8 the third year and \$36 upon completion of the course. To receive a diploma, the student had to pass her examinations and have satisfactory conduct. She could be terminated at any time “for any cause deemed sufficient.”

In 1925, Beatrice Forsyth, of Williamsport, received a letter from the director of nursing informing her of the items she would need to bring for her three-month probationary period: Several plain non-white wash dresses, two laundry bags, a shoe bag and a watch that records seconds. She was to bring her own scissors, fountain pen and napkin ring. Besides having a “successful vaccination,” she was required to have her teeth recently checked and in good condition.

Job competencies

Days were long, study hours enforced and rules about conduct strict; time for pleasure was scarce. The program of instruction was originally 15 months long and then was extended to two years.

By 1900, the program had become three years in length. In the first years, because only graduates of established nursing programs were hired by the Williamsport Hospital, local graduates

had to seek employment elsewhere.

Not until 1899 did Josephine Heiney become the first nurse to be hired by the Williamsport Hospital after graduating from the Williamsport Training School.

The following questions, from a 1903 examination paper, offer some insight into expectations for students' medical knowledge: How would you prepare a patient for an abdominal operation? How do you treat shock? What is sepsis? Along with acquiring medical expertise, the students prepared for their future occupation by cleaning the patients' rooms, taking care of linens and removing dead flowers.

In the early years, duties also included washing the windows, sweeping and mopping floors and carrying coal. By the beginning of the 20th century, more emphasis was placed on patient care than on housekeeping duties. This time period coincided with the redesign of the nurse's cap to eliminate ruffles and bows.

Housing

Before the 1890s, no more than one or two women per year graduated from the training program. But with an increase in the number of student nurses making housing more of a challenge, the new hospital building, constructed in 1891, included a third-floor dormitory room for the students.

By the end of the decade, Ida Hays McCormick had donated funds for building and furnishing a new nursing residence on Louisa Street. This building would be used for that purpose for the next 60 years.

Graduation

The first and only graduate of the program in 1884 was Alta King. The elaborately designed diploma awarded to her stated simply that she “has completed the prescribed course of instruction in the Williamsport Hospital

Show-and-Tell at the Taber

The Thomas T. Taber Museum of the Lycoming County Historical Society, 858 W. Fourth St., welcomes everyone back to its first Coffee Hour since June with a Show and Tell. It will be held in the Community Room of the museum at 10 a.m. Thursday. The program is free and open to the public.

Guests are invited to bring in an example of their collecting interest or passion or a treasured memento from their past. The item could be a toy from their childhood, examples from their collection, something passed down from generation to generation or something that tells a story.

The Show and Tell is part of a Lecture Series which features collections and collecting, crafts and craftspeople and decorative arts.

The next lecture follows at 2 p.m. Sept. 15 and will feature Ron Roan of Roan's Auction House talking about some of the highlights of the many auctions held at Roan's.

The lecture series is underwritten through a generous grant from the Woodcock Foundation for the Appreciation of the Arts.

For more information, call 570-326-3326.

Training School for nurses and has passed a satisfactory examination.”

Graduation exercises would retain the same basic format for at least 30 years, as evidenced by a 1913 program. There would be a ministerial invocation, address and benediction, three interludes of music and the awarding of diplomas and prizes.

An Alumni Association, started by the nurses in 1895, continues to this day, with members very supportive of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.