

# The Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses

## Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

The Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses opened its doors on June 5, 1883, with two women accepted into the 15-month program. The training school was established and directed by two extraordinary women of the time period — Dr. Jean Saylor Brown and Dr. Rita Church.

The Training School, later called the Williamsport Hospital

School of Nursing, was one of the first in the state. A majority of the women who graduated from this school were from the Williamsport area, stayed in the area, and contributed to the local community. The school educated women (and, in later years, men) for 105 years before it closed in 1988.

According to 100 Years of Tradition: 1883-1983, a history produced by the

Alumni Association on its centennial, "The Williamsport Hospital and the School of Nursing came into being only a few years apart, and in response to the same growing need for improved health care in Lycoming County. Therefore, their histories are closely intertwined, especially in the earliest stage of their development. Until the mid-1800s, Williamsport had had little need for a hospital. The community, after all, was very small and its people had long been used to looking after their own needs. But in the two decades following 1850, a significant amount of industry came to the area, bringing with it a larger population and the inevitable increase in ill-

ness, accidents and disease."



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Nine young women are in parlor setting. All but one are photographed dressed in nurses caps and uniforms.

Hospital struggles

The hospital struggled

in its first years. Many physicians continued to treat patients in their homes, rather than at the hospital. The first superintendents were not professionals, but a barber

and his wife and then a tavern keeper.

Jean Saylor Brown, who had a private prac-

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tice in Williamsport, was one of the few physicians who steadfastly supported the hospital and its mission of caring for the poor and working classes. In 1881, she urged her medical school classmate, Rita Church, to assume the supervision of the hospital. This was a turning point for the hospital.

Drs. Saylor Brown and Church were pioneers in their field. Each had graduated in 1874 from the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia, which had been founded by Quakers in 1850, only the second college in the United States to confer the M.D. degree on women. (See "Dr. Rita B. Church: First Superintendent of the Williamsport Hospital," by Dr. Judith Gouldin, Williamsport Sun-Gazette, Feb. 14, 2016 and "Jean Saylor Brown: Physician, feminist, activist," by Mary Sieminski, Williamsport Sun-Gazette, March 9, 2014.)

## Nursing school established

"For the next three years," according to 100 Years of Tradition: 1883-1983, "Doctors Church and Brown were the driving force behind the hospital. They made their own suppositories and ointments and treated their patients with great diligence. During these years the hospital was working at full capacity, and the demands of nursing care created an increasing burden on the doctors. It became evident that additional help was needed to care for the many patients. Out of this need, Doctor Church, with the aid and support of Dr. Brown, established The Williamsport Hospital Training School for Nurses."

The training program was modeled after that of



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Funded by long-time benefactor Ida Hays McCormick, the McCormick Nurses Home, dedicated in 1900 was at the southwest corner of Campbell and Louisa streets.

the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia, associated with the Woman's Medical College. The hospital, founded in 1861, was one of the few hospitals where women physicians were allowed to practice. Woman's Hospital began a training school for nurses two years later, the first known chartered school for nurses in the United States.

Williamsport physician and medical historian Dr. Judith Gouldin suggests that Drs. Church and Brown recognized the importance of the medical school-based nursing program at Woman's College and the importance to patient care of having well-educated women covering for the off-duty physicians. Since the Drs. Church and Brown were also the program instructors, the trainees used the information gleaned in their classes to give more uniform care day and night.

## On-the-job training

Their training was on-the-job and not easy. Nursing students worked without pay for a 3-month probationary period. If a woman successfully completed probation, she received a stipend of \$3 a

month. Students lived on the hospital premises and worked 12 to 16 hours a day, six days a week. On Sundays they were off from noon until 2 p.m. In addition to caring for the patients, trainees cooked, cleaned and carried in the coal used for heating.

The women's personal lives were tightly controlled. According to Dr. Church, "Graduate nurses in good standing with the director of nurses will be given an evening off each week for courting purposes or two evenings a week if you go to church regularly." It seems that a nurse in training would hardly have any time to court or do anything else, but Dr. Church stipulated further that "Any nurse who smokes, uses liquor in any form, gets her hair done at a beauty shoppe or frequents dance halls will give the director of nurses reason to suspect her worth, intentions and integrity."

After more than 10 years of administering the program, Dr. Church resigned in 1893. Miss Virginia Loomis was hired as the nurse superintendent, and the program length was extended to 2 years. In 1894, there were 14 women enrolled, one of whom was African-American. It was not until the 1970s

that another African-American woman was admitted to the program; the first male student had been admitted in 1961.

In the last years of the 19th century, the nurses were moved out of the hospital to make room for more typhoid patients from the Spanish American War, and the need for housing for the nurses was acute. Ida Hays McCormick, a long-time and generous supporter of the hospital, donated \$20,000 to build a home with space for 27 nursing students. Located on the southwest corner of Campbell and Louisa streets, it featured both central heat and electricity.

The opportunity for women to train formally for the nursing profession opened doors that had previously been closed to 19th-century women. Training gave the graduates professional status, respect, and greater economic opportunities.

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