



by MARY SIEMINSKI

## Sophie Reighard and Lila May Fisher — notable Williamsport teachers

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In the 19th and early 20th centuries, professions open to women were few and far between. There were limited options for unmarried women and widows to support themselves. One option, for those who were educated, was to teach school.

Historians tell us that women flocked to teaching during that era. According to the PBS website, "Only a Teacher" ([www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/timeline](http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/timeline)), women "[w]ere they grateful for the salary, however meager, they also welcomed the independence and sense of purpose teaching gave them. No doubt some regretted having to leave their homes and earn their own livings. Many assumed they would teach only a few years until they married. But many others welcomed the escape from a life of drab labor, isolation or frivolity. Teaching gave women a window onto a wider world of ideas, politics and public usefulness."

Exploring the Lycoming County Women's History Collection ([www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc](http://www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc)), two female teachers in the Williamsport schools piqued my curiosity — Sophie Reighard and Fisher. Reighard was one of the first female high school teachers and a principal. Lila May Fisher, an African American, taught African American students at a time when there were still very real vestiges of racial segregation in the Williamsport school system.

### Sophie Reighard

I had only to look at the small photograph of Sophie Reighard to realize that I wanted to know

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MISS LILA M. FISHER PLANS TO RETIRE after teaching in Williamsport 40 years since 1909. Her career in the community



Shown clockwise from top left is a photo of Lila M. Fisher, 1949, from the Sun-Gazette; Sophie S. Reighard, 1876; Bethune-Douglass Center, formerly Emery School; Transeau School students on a playground with their teacher and Williamsport High School, 1883, located at the corner of Market and Jucker Streets; all from the Lycoming County Historical Society.

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more about her. The photograph, from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society, is inscribed on the back, "My Favorite Teacher, High School, 1876." There is no other mark of ownership on the photograph.

Reighard has a high forehead, large expressive eyes and a firm mouth. Her dress is ornate but very modest, befitting a teacher. I wondered how such a young woman was appointed a high school teacher in 1876? How was she educated? How long did she teach?

Born in Jersey Shore in 1849, Reighard was the daughter of Daniel Reighard, an innkeeper, and his wife Elizabeth Henry. The Reighard family had been in Lycoming County since the early 1800s, when John Reighard established a farm on Long Reach, what is now South Reach Road. Sophie had four sisters — Margaret, Matilda, Caroline and Jennie — and one brother, Oliver Hazard Perry Reighard, who was active in Lycoming County politics.

Sophie attended the former Dickinson Seminary (now Lycoming College). College archives records indicate that she graduated in the class of 1866 when she was about 17. The next year, according to Boyd's City Directory, both Sophie and her sister Jennie were teachers at the George Washington School, which stood at the corner of West Third and William Streets.

### First high school

Jennie was promoted to assistant principal in the high school in 1871. That year Williamsport school system had 45 schools and 3,300 pupils. The system had grown tremendously with the influx of population employed in the lumber industry. Like many young female teachers, Jennie soon married and did not continue teaching. In general, married women were not permitted

to teach. Sophie remained single and taught in the Williamsport schools for 23 years. After several years teaching in the Washington School, she became the assistant principal at the high school at the age of 28.

The high school, first organized in 1869, at first was only one room. It had several locations until 1887, when the first Williamsport High School building was constructed at the southeast corner of Third and Walnut streets, according to the 1858 Williamsport Educational Association publication, Williamsport Schools Through the Years. (<http://archive.org/details/williamsportscho00will>). When Sophie went to teach there, the high school was on the second floor of the fire station.

### Tributes

Sophie Reighard died of a stroke in November 1915 at the age of 66. The Sun-Gazette and Bulletin had a lengthy story about her — a rarity for a woman in those times, especially an unmarried woman. The large-type headline reads, "One of the Greatest Teachers Williamsport Has Ever Known. AN INSPIRATION TO ALL WHO CAME TO HER. Left Her Impress Upon Every Pupil Who Studied Under Her."

According to the article published after her death, Sophie was revered for her teaching skills, especially in mathematics. She was active in her profession and in the community. She attended statewide teachers' conferences. Locally, she donated to charities — to the Home for the Friendless, the YWCA and the missions. In 1903, she was elected board chair of the YWCA, but she refused the appointment. She joined other Williamsport churchwomen and signed the temperance pledge. She belonged to the Clio Club that was founded to provide forum for women to educate themselves. For most of her years,

she lived with her two sisters, Margaret and Matilda, at 706 Hepburn St., just above Seventh Street. It was rare for an unmarried woman to own property on her own, perhaps even more rare for someone living on a teacher's salary.

### Lila M. Fisher

Overlapping Sophie Reighard's 23-year tenure in the Williamsport schools was the career of Lila May Fisher, who taught in Williamsport for 40 years. She was hired in 1909 to teach African-American students at the Emery School.

In 1938, she began teaching at Transeau School and remained teaching there until she retired in 1949. Emery was located at 520 Park Avenue; when it closed in 1938, it was turned over to the Bethune-Douglass Center and was eventually torn down. Transeau was located between First and Second Avenues on Park Lane; it closed in 1955. The building is now the School Apartments.

When I look at the photograph of Lila Fisher that accompanied the newspaper story about her retirement, I see an attractive black woman with a round face framed by gracefully styled hair. Her deep dark eyes express her life experiences. She looks directly at you — just expecting that you will pay attention and listen. Her whole face/being seems to invite you to join her and learn from her.

In 1873, there were a sufficient number of black students in Williamsport to justify the construction of a school exclusively for them, according to "Black History in Lycoming County," (Greater Williamsport Community Arts Council. A Picture of Lycoming County, Vol. 2 (1978) (<http://archive.org/details/pictureoflycoming02grea>).

The Hepburn Street School, between Canal and West Third Streets, was known as the "colored school" in official school department records; it would have

been approximately where Wegmans stands today. Williamsport schools remained segregated until 1881, when a new state law required them to integrate.

After 1881, black students attended schools within their district, but because the black population was concentrated between the borders of Curtin, Stevens, and Emery School Districts, most black students attended those schools. In later years, according to the above publication, Emery School was unofficially called the "colored school." At that time in Williamsport schools, black teachers were not permitted to teach white students.

### Retirement

At the time of her retirement, "Miss Lila," as she was known to her students, taught black students in grades one through three in a single classroom at Transeau. The year of her retirement, 1949, also marked the end of the official segregation of Williamsport public schools.

"Miss Lila" had taught in public schools in her native state of North Carolina for four years before she moved to Williamsport with her family. According to an article in the Sun-Gazette and Bulletin, published at the time of her retirement, her father, Rev. Dr. R.A. Fisher had been appointed the pastor of Salem A.M. E. Zion Church in 1906.

Lila Fisher recalled that, "being a minister's daughter, her education was procured in many places. It started in Petersburg, Va. It was continued during the years that her father occupied pulpits in Washington, Philadelphia and York. In later years she took courses from what are now Lock Haven University, Bucknell University, Penn State University and Columbia University." (Williamsport Sun-Gazette, June 10, 1949).

Religion and education were a family affair for the Fishers. Lila's brother,

Rev. Dr. Farley Fisher, also was a pastor at Salem Church after their father's death. Lila's sister, Constance, or "Miss Connie" as she was called, taught music to private students in Williamsport. Another brother, Leon, also taught music. Both Constance and Leon were listed as "pianoforte" students in the 1918 to 1919 Dickinson Seminary catalog.

### Former students

Several of Miss Lila's former students, including former city council woman Madelyn Whaley and Bloomsburg resident Harry Evans, remember both Fisher sisters — each had Miss Lila at Transeau and took music lessons from her sister. Miss Lila, they recall, was a strict teacher, but it was clear to her students that she cared about each and every one of them.

Both Whaley and Evans commented that, although it seems strange to them today that their first years of school were spent with three classes in one room with only black children and only one teacher, in retrospect Miss Lila imparted in them a sense of self-worth that they might not have gotten in a mixed-classroom. The black community was close-knit and good behavior was expected. Miss Connie also is fondly remembered by her students.

Those who liked music and practiced their voice and piano remember her more fondly than others.

Like Sophie Reighard and other teachers, Miss Lila and Miss Connie never married and never owned a home of their own. City directories list the Fisher sisters as "boarders" at various locations in the city — including Walnut and Penn Streets and Park Avenue.

Also like Sophie Reighard, both Lila and Connie Fisher were active in the community. Miss Lila served as vice-president at the Walnut Street branch of the YWCA for many years. Miss Connie was on the board and was in charge of music programs. The Walnut Street facility was established in 1913 as the "colored" branch of the segregated YWCA.

In 1930, the YWCA eliminated their support for the branch and it eventually became the Bethune-Douglass Center.

Lila Fisher was active not only in the community, but active nationally in the National Association of Colored Women, the first national black organization in the United States.

These women impressed me. I thought of them not as "old maid school teachers," but professional women in an age when few professions were open to women. Not only were they excellent teachers, but each had an active role in the community at large and each made Williamsport a better place to live.