

Jean Saylor Brown: Physician, feminist, activist

Williamsport Women



By MARY SIEMINSKI

student, Helena Mussina, daughter of Williamsport's temperance crusader Jerusha Mussina.

Jennie worked as a seamstress for a few years before she enrolled in the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia. There were very few female physicians at that time and very few medical schools were even open to women. "So controversial was the rewarding of M.D. degrees to women," said an article in the June 27, 1982 Sunday Grit by Everett Rubendall, "that 500 male students and their friends protested at the first graduation ceremony."

Jean Saylor earned her medical degree in 1874, when she was 31. She returned to Williamsport and set up a successful medical practice on East Third Street. Saylor remained single until she was 38, when she married a wealthy lumberman almost 20 years older than her, William D. Brown. He was a cousin of James V. Brown, who founded the local public library. She added his name to hers and became known as Jean Saylor Brown.

It is said that the lumber barons were not significant financial supporters of the new Williamsport Hospital,

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Of the women who made Williamsport their home in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jean Saylor Brown is one of the best known. She was the first female physician in the county and played an important role in the establishment of the Williamsport Hospital. She is one of the very few women whose names appear in the standard printed histories of Lycoming County.

Jean Sinclair Saylor was born in New Jersey on Dec. 1, 1843. She moved to Williamsport when she was 11, along with her parents, Daniel Saylor and Catherine Crouse; her older brother, John; and her older sister, Ann. Jean graduated from the former Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, when she was 18, in 1862. At school she seemed to have been known as "Jennie." The only record of her handwriting that I could find is an inscription in the autograph album of fellow



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but Saylor Brown donated money, including \$100 for an operating room. And she performed the first operation herself, perhaps using those skills she had developed as a seamstress. In 1881, according to the county medical society history, she "performed successful surgery upon a resident of Danville after many surgeons from metropolitan areas had refused to attempt relief of the particular condition of the patient."

She persuaded one of her classmates at the Women's Medical College, Dr. Rita B. Church, to become the first professional administrator of the hospital. The previous administrators had been a barber and his wife and then a tavern keeper.

Once the hospital was on a firm foundation, Church and Saylor Brown founded a Training School for Nurses. Established in 1883, it was one of the first in the nation. The school not only gave the hospital a core of skilled workers but also provided women from the county and beyond with a profession and a means to support themselves and their families. In 1913, Saylor Brown established a visiting nurses program; each visit cost 25 cents.

As I read between the lines, studied newspaper articles that mentioned her, and looked at material from the archives of the YWCA and the Home for the Friendless, it became clear that she was more than a skilled physician and surgeon — she was a social activist, a community organizer and a feminist.

Saylor Brown mentored at least one other woman who took the daring step of becoming a physician. Saylor Brown brought Dickinson graduate Flora Ruch into her medical practice as an assistant a few

years after Ruch graduated. Ruch then went on to medical school herself and became a prominent physician and professor of medicine in Michigan.

Saylor Brown was a founder of the Williamsport YWCA, established in 1893. The YWCA provided housing for young women who came to town to work in the newly established silk mills. In addition to serving as an officer, Saylor Brown gave health lectures to the residents and even taught exercise classes.

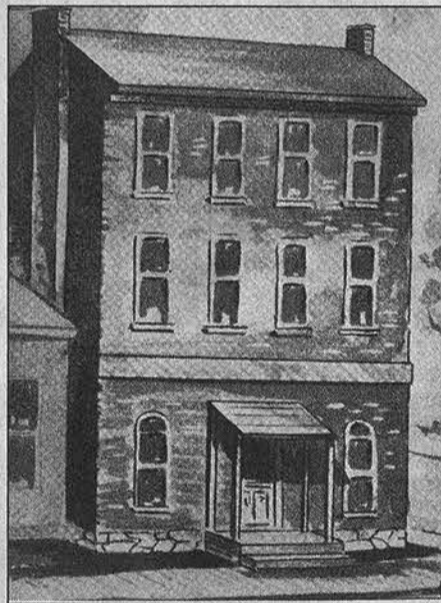
Seeing to the needs of working women was critically important to Saylor Brown.

She was a founder of and on-call physician for the Home for Fallen Women, established in 1895 in rented quarters on Jefferson Street to provide shelter for girls and women who had gone "astray" — prostitutes as well as women who were pregnant and unmarried with no place to go or simply young and delinquent. The Home evolved into the Florence Crittenton Mission, a volunteer organization that provided care for unwed mothers for generations.

Saylor Brown was active in her profession. One paper she published was particularly intriguing.

In March 1894, she spoke to members of the Lycoming Medical Society on her paper on "Hysteria." According to the Gazette and Bulletin, her paper was well prepared and "the discussion became general and was participated in by all present and became decidedly interesting before it was finally disposed of."

"Hysteria" was a medical diagnosis popular at that time, which attributed almost any medical problem a woman might have to a vaguely defined "disturbance of the uterus." Often it was more narrowly defined as "sexual dysfunction."



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown, above left, is a drawing of the original Williamsport Hospital building located at the corner of Edwin and Center Streets, from the Lycoming County Historical Society. The above right photo from the Lycoming County Women's History collection, shows a group of nurses, resident physician and superintendents. This is the earliest photo available that is known to picture students of the Williamsport Hospital School of Nursing, taken Aug. 23, 1894.

Typical treatment was massage of the patient's genitalia by the physician or by vibrators or water sprays to cause orgasm. No wonder the discussion was lively.

Saylor Brown became very involved in sexual mores and how they affected women. In 1912, she helped establish the Williamsport Society for the Prevention of Social Diseases (a "social disease" was a sexually transmitted disease). She served on the society's Women's Advisory Board and was a speaker for the school system Parent Teachers Association on "Social Purity."

As member of the Clio Club, a women's club established in 1897 whose purpose was to pursue "study as a means of intellectual culture and general improvement," she gave a talk on her trip to Italy. She also joined with several other mem-

bers of the Clio Club in a meeting with Judge Whitehead, petitioning him to appoint a woman probation officer.

Saylor Brown contributed both her time and her money to a variety of social welfare causes in the city. Her name was frequently found in the newspaper in lists of donors to the YWCA, the Home for the Friendless, and other charities. The Williamsport Community Foundation Partnership has a fund established in her name. She even submitted a recipe for "Tonic Broth" to a cookbook published in 1895 as a fundraiser for the YMCA. Her recipe called for "3 pounds of mutton, 3 quarts of water, 1 carrot, 1 turnip, and 1 bunch of parsley stems."

Jean lived with her husband, William, on East Third Street near Basin Street. She had her practice there also, and her

aged parents eventually moved in with her. She did not have children, though her husband had been married and widowed twice before and had children by his previous marriages. William died in 1897 at the age of 71. Jean died on June 23, 1928. She was 84.

The Grit, in an editorial published the day after her death, called her "Williamsport's pioneer woman physician" and noted that she "supported all welfare movements as her time and money permitted. By nature, she was a builder of human welfare."

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at life@sungazette.com.