

# A woman's place is in the Y: The beginning of the YWCA in Williamsport

## Williamsport Women

By **JANET McNEIL HURLBERT**  
Special to the Sun-Gazette

In 1858, in New York City, The Ladies Christian Association established the first United States location for the Young Women's Christian Association movement.

Over the years, the organization developed programs for young

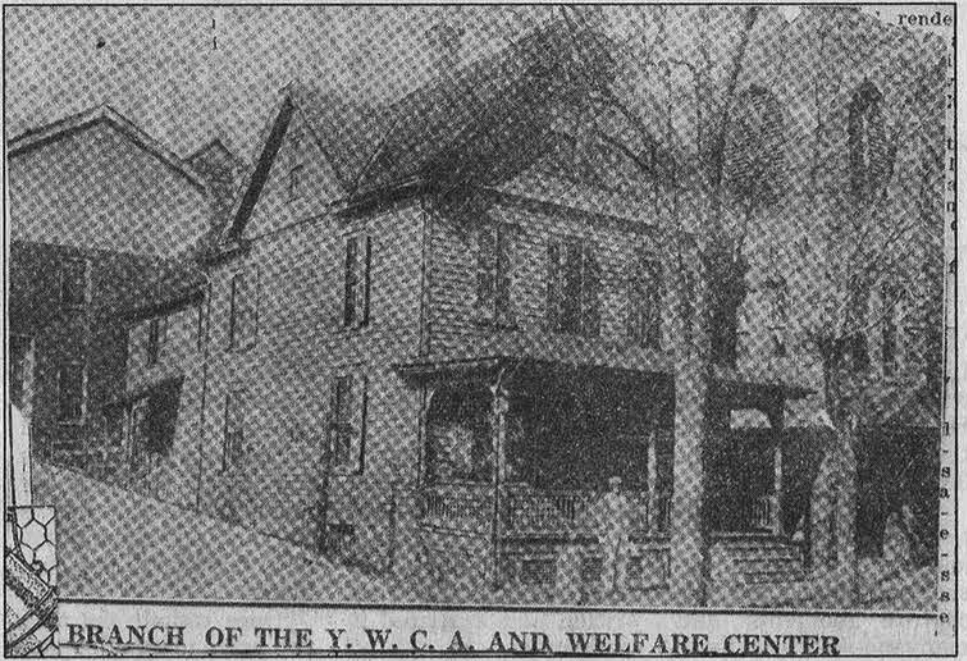
women who moved from rural life to city jobs, reaching out to African-American and Native-American women as well. The programming also stressed physical fitness, at a time when young women were considered too frail for such activities. The Boston YWCA offered the city's first calisthenics classes and installed pulley weights on the backs of closet

doors so that girls from farms could continue to exercise while in the city. The YWCA has been a pioneer in social movements, empowering women and giving them a collective voice as they found new roles and life styles in a changing society.

### The YWCA comes to Williamsport

Thomas Lloyd's "History of Lycoming County" says it best: "The YWCA has grown out of the willingness of a few, zealous, women to assume the responsibility for womankind." In response to a public call to

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BRANCH OF THE Y. W. C. A. AND WELFARE CENTER

PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the Lycoming County Historical Society is the YWCA, 58 E. Third St.

## Lifestyle

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Captains of Y. W. C. A. Campaign Teams, Prominent Officers of Association and Their Building.

PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown in the above left photo from the Lycoming County Historical Society is the YWCA Walnut Street branch. Above right are captains of the YWCA capital campaign teams and administrators from 1913. Shown are George H. Young, Mrs. D.L. Furey, J.Roman Way, James B. Graham, Augusta S. Dumond, Elsie Smith, Anna Gilmore, Mrs. A.K. Carrothers, Mrs. H.P. Lincoln, William P. Beeber, Robert H. Thorne, J.H. Foresman, Fannie Page, Mrs. Robert F. Gibson, H. Melick Foresman, Anna McClure, Alice O. Gibson, Charles C. Krouse, Dr. Saylor Brown and Mrs. Edgar Munson. The picture hangs in the Williamsport YWCA board room.

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establish a local YWCA, the Rev. James Carter chaired an organizational meeting on Jan. 17, 1893, in the parlor of the Second Presbyterian Church, for women who were concerned about the welfare of young girls in the city of Williamsport. The newly created board elected Mrs. James Carter as president.

In her brief history of the board, Mrs. F. E. Manson described the women as "hard-working, dedicated and straight thinkers," with progressive views. The board put a constitution in place, rented space in the Susquehanna Trust Co. for \$10 a month and hired a secretary at a salary of \$10 a month. The group's original name, The Women's Friendly Society of Williamsport, would change to the Young Women's Christian Association by the end of the year. The board minutes described meetings that began with a scripture reading and prayer, outlined ambitious goals and recorded contributions and door counts for the increasing number of sponsored activities.

### Services expand

A small library, started with reading material donated by the Ross Club, attracted factory girls to daily "noon rest periods" at the facility, where they were given coffee and tea donated by Mrs. Stearns. Bible study, business, physical fitness and sewing classes followed. Within a year, the membership was

close to 90 women, and the year's door count was 1,730.

A diverse group of women's organizations found a home at the YW. Two of the most vital ones were the Organization of the Industrial Girls and the Business and Professional Women's Club. The Red Cross offered classes there, and the YW became the official arm of the Travelers' Aid Society.

In the early 1920s, 400 girls assembled to register for the YW sponsored Girl Scouts, and were treated to a circus, a vaudeville show, a mock wedding, a spoof of an exercise class and peanut butter sandwiches.

Safe housing was an immediate need for young women new to the city. Providing rooms for permanent boarders and transients became a priority for the YW. An informal employment service turned into a formal employment agency. A nursery, started with money raised by the Clio Club, benefited working mothers. It opened in 1913, with a charge of five cents a day.

The cafeteria, also opened in 1913, provided well-balanced meals to the community as well as to the "house girls," with no item costing more than 10 cents. Not only was the restaurant the first cafeteria in Williamsport, but it also was one of the few respectable places a woman could eat. It was not wise for a woman to risk her safety and reputation by frequenting a tavern.

The YW held exercise classes and hosted scheduled basketball games. The former

Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, opened its swimming pool to the YW. Other health initiatives, such as the "Good Shoe Campaign" with the slogan "Save a Foot" encouraged women to choose sensible shoes. The sharing of health information and offering of health classes taught by Dr. Jean Saylor Brown formed the basis for developing more formal health services, as well as coordinating the city's visiting nurses.

The YW presented programming on working issues (such as an eight-hour work week), personal grooming and religion at their central location, and also took these programs into local churches and factories. Popular noon gatherings at the Dayton Shoe Factory or the Holmes Silk Mill might include an address by a minister, band music or a program on a work topic like "Your Grandmother's Job and Yours." The YW also loaned "miniature libraries" to factories, since the women did not have free time to visit the public library.

### Walnut Street branch

Leaders at the YWCA became aware of the need to provide services to "colored girls" in the community. This realization was amplified by the Scouting program's refusal to admit two young black girls. The Y staff worked with the Temple Association of Fraternal Lodges, and in 1918, the Temple Association bought a house at 429 Walnut St.,

which it then rented to the YW for \$25 a month.

The location became the Walnut Street branch, and it provided temporary housing, classes and services to young African-American women. Members of a cooking class wrote their own "cooking class song" and offered a supper for 35 cents. As it became obvious that black men and boys were in need of expanded programs, the operation separated from the YWCA and became the Bethune Douglass Community Center. The YW often used this model — identifying a need and financing it until another agency could assume responsibility for providing services.

### Finances

One of the first fundraisers, in 1896, was a street car party. Frequent rummage sales provided some steady income, as did "Y" Sundays, when church collection plates were designated for the YW. Membership drives at churches and neighborhood teas both raised funds and helped to explain the value of the YWCA. Starting in 1922, the YW benefited greatly from The Community Chest, a fundraising organization that collected money from local businesses and distributed it among local charities.

### Finding a home for the Williamsport YW

Through its first few decades, the YW changed its location several times as its pro-

grams expanded and the need for housing grew. After renting space in various places, in 1913, the board launched a capital campaign, and with the funds raised bought and remodeled the former Crawford Hotel at 58 E. Third St.

By the early 1920s, it was obvious to YW leaders that a larger and more suitably equipped space was needed. A new chapter for the YWCA was about to begin, as the board considered property locations and fundraising for this major venture.

For a detailed history of the early years of the Williamsport YWCA, consult a paper by Margaret M. Hayden, written in 1990, for a senior capstone history class at Lycoming College. It is available through The Lycoming County Women's History Collection at [www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc/](http://www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc/).

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