

Williamsport Women

Margaret Young Coleman: First female physician in Lycoming County

By DR. JUDITH GOULDIN
Special to the Sun-Gazette

It seems to be a law of nature that when you find the answer to one mystery, you uncover more mysteries to replace it. Such is the case with the first woman physician who practiced in northcentral Pennsylvania — Dr. Margaret Young Coleman.

The original mystery was a question Matt Herbison, archivist at Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, posed to Mary Sieminski, project manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection: "Did Mary know who Dr. Margaret Coleman was? Coleman was listed as the physician preceptor for Jean Saylor (Brown) when she began her studies in 1871 at Woman's Medical College (now part of Drexel University)." The archivist thought that Coleman was likely a doctor in the Williamsport area.

Dr. Saylor-Brown and her classmate Dr. Rita Church had taken the helm of

the former Williamsport Hospital, now Williamsport Regional Medical Center, during its fragile, formative years and also had founded its School of Nursing. Sieminski knew of my interest in Saylor-Brown and forwarded the query to me.

Coleman was an unfamiliar name. She is not mentioned in the county medical society archives. I joined Sieminski's network of history sleuths attempting to uncover a woman hidden beneath a century of time. We started with a short biography of Margaret Coleman in John Meginness's "History of Lycoming County, Pennsylvania."

The pieces of information we managed to gather formed an intriguing but incomplete image of Coleman. She was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in April 1822, the second child of Mary and John Young. The family immigrated to America in June 1827.

John Young's livelihood led to multiple family moves, from Rhode Island to Maryland. Eventually the family settled

(See WILLIAMSPORT, Page E-3)

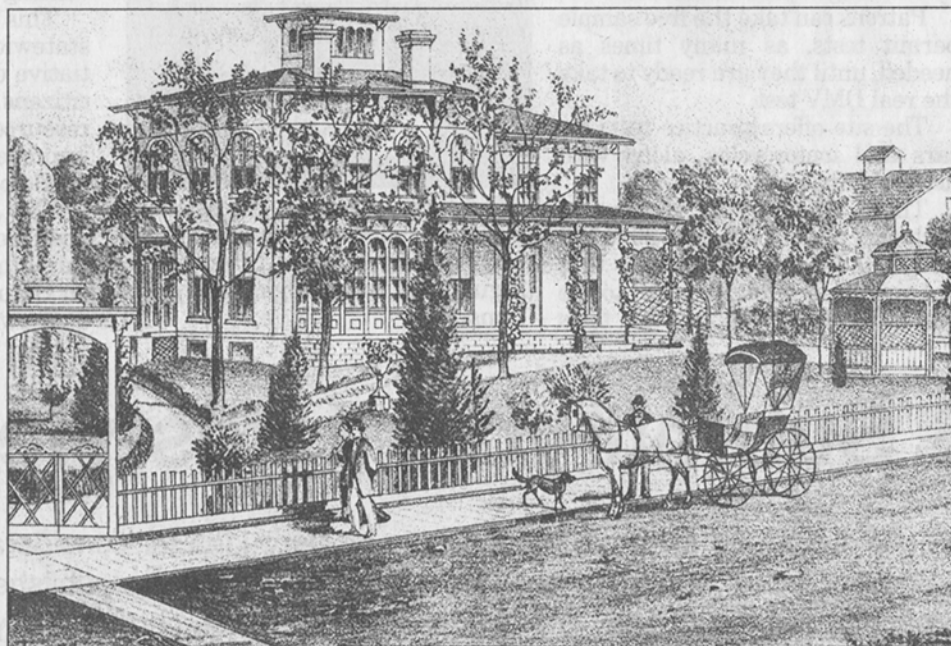


PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is a drawing from the "History of Lycoming County," illustrated in 1876 by D.J. Steward of Dr. Margaret Coleman, 20 High St.

(From Page E-1)

on a farm in Tioga County. Despite the upheaval of moving, Margaret was well-educated. She taught at several rural schools in Lycoming and Tioga Counties, including Blossburg, Ralston and Block House.

Pivotal moment

A pivotal moment in her life occurred in 1849. Two of her brothers and a sister died of typhoid fever within an eight-day period. Distressed by their medical care, Coleman vowed to become a physician.

The typical patient with typhoid has fever, headache, confusion, cough and, initially, constipation. The treatment given to Coleman's siblings was most likely calomel (mercury chloride), a laxative and antiseptic. Today we know that this standard 19th-century remedy only added to a patient's misery and did nothing to fight the infection.

Coleman's determination to become a physician also may have been spurred by two landmark events. In the same year that Coleman's siblings died, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to be awarded the medical doctorate degree in the United States. Two years later, Female (Woman's) Medical College in Philadelphia graduated its first class of physicians.

Dr. Joseph Longshore, a founder of Woman's Medical College, recognized that doctors trained by the female-only school were shunned by the male medical community. So in 1853 he founded Penn Medical University,

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BLOCK HOUSE,
Corner of
CENTRAL AND PITMAN AVENUES,
OCEAN GROVE, N. J.

Dr. Margaret G. Coleman, practicing physician, has established her office as above. A practice of 20 years in Williamsport, Pa., and the best of reference as to skill and experience.

The house, by recent enlargement, offers first-class accommodations to patients and others desiring all the comforts of home life at moderate rates.

based on two radical ideas: Men and women would meet the same criteria for admission, and all forms of treatment, including Native American remedies, would be worthy of study to determine their effectiveness. Only two remedies would not be taught — bloodletting and calomel. Longshore felt they already were proven worthless.

Margaret Young, 36, earned her medical doctorate degree at Penn Medical University in 1858. She settled in Williamsport, where she practiced successfully for more than 40 years. Like other women physicians of her time, she specialized in the needs of female patients.

In keeping with her training, she used techniques from different (often rival) medical traditions, including allopathic, homeopathic,

hydro-therapeutic and electro-therapeutic care. She mentored Saylor-Brown, who later wrote her medical school thesis on electro-therapy.

Personal life

Coleman's personal life was as unconventional as her choice of profession. On June 14, 1864, when she was 42, she married a 26-year-old German immigrant named Joseph Coleman. Joseph worked in a number of trades over the years — as a carpenter, groom, liveryman and grocer.

In 1866, at 43, Coleman gave birth to Albert. According to the 1870 census, Elizabeth, a child five years older than Albert, also lived with the Colemans; no relationship to either Margaret or Joseph is recorded. The family lived in an Italianate mansion at 20 High St. (later No. 406). They offered rooms to out-



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Top left is an advertisement for Margaret Young Coleman, practicing physician, from Boyd's Williamsport City Directory, 1875. At left is an advertisement for the Block House, Coleman's practice in Ocean Grove, N.J., from the Ocean Grove Record, June 22, 1878. The above photo, courtesy of the Lycoming County Genealogical Society, is Coleman's gravestone at Wildwood Cemetery.

of-town patients who needed lodging.

By the late 1870s, the Coleman marriage was apparently failing. Margaret left town in 1877-78 and settled in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, a seaside resort, religious center and early feminist enclave.

She created a spa at "Block House," offering first-class accommodations and treatments with the popular electro-therapy baths. The 1880 census indicates that she was back in Williamsport living with her husband on High Street, but after 1880, they had separate residences. Margaret also may have maintained a presence in Ocean Grove in the early 1880s.

Albert Coleman attended medical school in Washington, D.C., but never completed his studies. He took over Joseph's Grocery at the corner of Sherman and Sheridan

streets when his father died of lockjaw (tetanus) in July 1894. Margaret, 72, sold the home on High Street and moved in with her son.

Later they rented rooms at 812 Washington St., where Albert, 34, died in August 1900. Margaret lived there until her death on Jan. 9, 1904, at age 81.

Returning to the original question from Drexel's archivist — yes, Margaret Coleman was a physician in Williamsport. But she continues to pique our curiosity. We have found no pictures of her.

How did she meet and marry her husband (a man 16 years younger)? What pulled their marriage apart later? In 1864, most young men in Williamsport were serving in the Union Army — did Joseph pay \$300 to be exempt from the draft? Who was Elizabeth, the 9-

year-old child who was a part of the Coleman household on the 1870 census but disappeared afterward? Why did Margaret abandon her practice in Ocean Grove? Are there readers who can shed some light on these mysteries? We'd love to hear from you.

Gouldin is a retired physician who practiced nuclear medicine in Lycoming County. Since retiring, she has pursued her fascination with history, including preserving local medical history.

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