

# Margaret A. Hagan, electrician

## An entrepreneur's path to success in 19th century Williamsport

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI  
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Margaret Hagan probably is the most flamboyant of the local women featured in this series. She also is one of the few women of her era about whom we know more than we do about her husband. Margaret was an entrepreneur. In an advertisement for one of her Williamsport businesses, she described herself as "one of the most practical and shrewd business women here."

Margaret Mahammitt



Hagan lived in Williamsport for 50 years — from the 1860s until the early 1900s. In the 1880s, Margaret opened "The Electric Baths," a 17-room sanitarium on East Third Street, where

she administered electrotherapy, a very popular medical treatment at the time. Prior to that, she owned and operated Star Laundry, also on East Third Street, a business that had several

employees and that, in Margaret's words, was "patronized by the first families" of Williamsport. She also provided the elite women of Williamsport with fashionable women's furnishings from a small shop adjacent to the laundry.

Who was this bold, gutsy lady, who called herself "colored" and was the daughter of an "Arab" from the island nation of Madagascar and the granddaughter of a former slave and a Supreme Court judge? How did she establish and maintain

successful businesses in Williamsport, where female business owners and medical practitioners were uncommon and businesses owned by African American or mixed race women were even more uncommon?

Two articles, available online in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection ([www.lycoming.edu/library/orgs/lcwhc](http://www.lycoming.edu/library/orgs/lcwhc)) brought Margaret to my attention — the first article is from the Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin found in the files of the

Lycoming County Historical Society. The other article, "Margaret Mahammitt of Maryland" by Sheila Gregory Thomas, Margaret's great-great-granddaughter, was published by the Association of the Study of African American History and Life for Black History Month in 1984.

### Electrotherapy

Electrotherapy was widely practiced at the

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time, but Margaret's clinic seems to have been the only one in the area. Electricity, generated by batteries, was applied to treat many ailments, including headaches and muscle pain. In an "electric bath," a patient was connected by wire to a source of electricity, and then a low charge of electricity was made to travel throughout the body and "bathe" the patient, inducing calm, reducing pain and stimulating sluggish organs. The medical practitioner was called an electrician.

During her years in Williamsport, Margaret Hagan and her electrotherapy practice made headlines a number of times. The Washington Bee, a Washington D.C. newspaper distributed nationally, headlined a June 22, 1887 article on Hagan "MODERN MIRACLES (sic) WONDERS OF ELECTRICITY DEMONSTRATED BY MRS. HAGAN. Persons Literally Snatched from the Grave." The Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin, the local newspaper of that time period, published several news stories about Hagan. Headlined "Mrs. Margaret A. Hagan, Well Known and Successful Electrician," a June 29, 1895, article went on to say, "Mrs. Margaret A. Hagan, proprietress of the Electric Bath rooms, 581 East Third Street, is a living example of what a woman can accomplish when imbued with energy and determination." According to the article, Margaret also had a practice in the summer months in the young resort town of Eagles Mere.

What was especially impressive, according to the article, was that Margaret Hagan was able to accomplish so much despite her race — she was, in her own words, "colored" and she was "born in obscurity and reared in poverty during that dark period when her race was withering under the slave driver's whip."

### Mahammitt Family History

Margaret might have embellished on her poverty-stricken upbringing as good sales copy, because actually, according to her great-great-granddaughter, Sheila Gregory Thomas, Margaret was a free person from birth, well-educated and a landowner. According to family oral history, Margaret's father, Jeremiah (or Po) Mahammitt, came to this county from Madagascar on an educational tour in the early 1800s. He purchased Margaret's mother (a mulatto) from a Frederick family and they were married. Family oral history states that

### MODERN MIRACLES.

WONDERS OF ELECTRICITY DEMONSTRATED BY MRS. HAGAN.

Persons Literally Snatched from the Grave. The Great Invention of a Washington Physician and the Cures Wrought by Its Agency.

[The Sunday Breakfast Table.]

A few years ago the masses did not even dream of the wonderful forces and properties of electricity. It was a mighty giant, whose magic power, for the mighty forces of the commercial world, and its healing for the nations, were undiscovered and unknown.

Wonderful and mighty as have been the revolutions caused by this great sphere, the revolutions caused by this great agency in the physical domain are acknowledged by scientists and medical men to be still more wonderful and mighty.

Clockwise from top right is an advertisement for Star Laundry as it appeared in the 1882 edition of Industries of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, Edwards); an electrotherapy cartoon, reprinted from Electrifying Medicine (Himrich and Thornley, Lerner 1995); portrait of Margaret Hagan from the collection of Sheila Gregory Thomas; and "Modern Miracles," Washington Bee, June 22, 1887.

Margaret's mother, Serena, was a daughter of Supreme Court Justice Roger Brooke Taney. While the truth of this may never be known, it is a fascinating bit of history, because Judge Taney is best known for the Dred Scot decision, handed down by the Supreme Court in March 1857.

In that decision, Taney decreed that African Americans were not citizens and "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

Margaret came to Williamsport just after the Civil War with her second husband, George Washington Hagan, an African American. According to his obituary in the Gazette and Bulletin of Aug. 27, 1903, Hagan had been slave in Frederick, Md., apprenticed to a blacksmith.

During the Civil War, he became acquainted with Philip A. Moltz of Williamsport. Both Hagan and Moltz were soldiers. After the war, Hagan relocated to Williamsport and worked for Moltz as a blacksmith. Later he went into business for himself. George Washington Hagan was a prominent and well-respected businessman and citizen; he is buried in the Veterans Circle at Wildwood Cemetery.

The family lived and worked on East Third Street — the section of town that was quite "in" before Millionaire's Row on West Fourth Street was developed by Peter Herdic.

CITY OF WILLIAMSPORT.

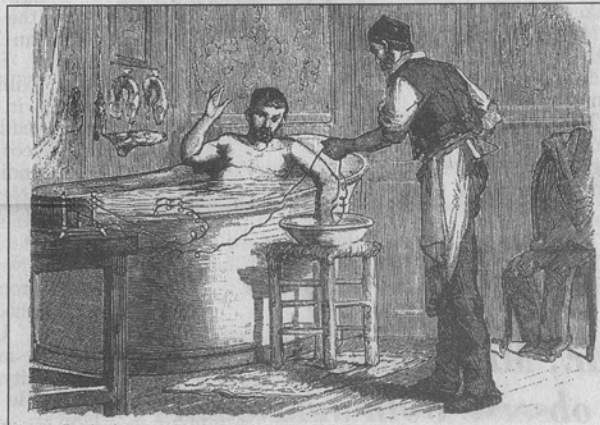
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**MRS. M. A. HAGAN.**—Star Laundry, 44 S. Third St., third door west of Crawford House.

Mrs. Hagan offers to the public one of the most complete Laundries in this State, or, in fact, any other. She gives her especial attention to all the work done; she employs none but the most competent and careful hands to do her work; it is a well-known fact that it takes very skillful persons to do fine work, such as laces, lace curtains, embroidery, and many other fine articles. Gents desiring handsome laundered shirts, collars, and cuffs, should remember that Mrs. Hagan makes them a specialty. Special arrangements made with families and business houses, and all orders attended to at the shortest notice. She has been in this business for thirty-five years, and understands it thoroughly. She has had charge of the Laundry at Congress Hall, Saratoga; Logan House, Altoona, and Minnetonka Springs, Pa. She has also been in business at Albany, Philadelphia, and elsewhere; and has been at Williamsport for twenty years. She is a native of Maryland, and is one of the most practical and shrewd business women here. All classes praise her work, and she is patronised by the first families.



PHOTOS PROVIDED



In the late 19th century, the electric bath was used to treat severe headaches and muscle pains.

Neighbors of the Hagans included the L.L. Stearns, the James V. Browns, the Pages, the Metzgers, Dr. Jean Saylor Brown and other prominent families. The Hagans were members of Christ Episcopal Church along with other leading Williamsport families.

### Margaret's Children

It appears that Margaret had three children with her first husband Isaac Whiting — John, Fannie Emma and Eleanor Whiting — and two with George Washington Hagan — George Washington Jr. and James Taney Hagan.

Son John, who was born in Frederick, Maryland, about 1851, came to live in Williamsport and worked with his stepfather as a blacksmith. He too had an interesting history. A newspaper article about him says, "At the age of nine or ten years, he left Frederick City with the first regiment of Union soldiers that passed through and went with them to Harper's Ferry."

In the 1860s, when daughter Fannie Emma was school age, Williamsport schools were not open to African Americans. "Colored" students were taught in rented rooms, and the school term was three months long, not the eight months of schooling available to white students. Nonetheless, in 1871, when Fannie was about 16, she

enrolled at Howard University, the newly established college for African Americans in Washington, D.C. There, Fannie met her future husband, Oberlin graduate and Howard University professor James Monroe Gregory. According to Christ Church records, the Rev. William Paret married the couple in Williamsport on Dec. 29, 1873. The many contributions of Fannie and James and their descendants to education in America, especially for African Americans, is a rich story for another day.

### Sheila Gregory Thomas

In her article, Sheila Gregory Thomas paints a vivid portrait of her great-great-grandmother. Margaret was headstrong, proud and seemingly fearless. She studied at Hosford's Sanitarium in Washington, D.C., and in Baltimore and Philadelphia. She stood up to people in high places in Williamsport and wherever she was. She would not tolerate discrimination. She took on a medical school in Philadelphia she felt discriminated against her restaurant owners, who refused to serve her, and city fathers who did not want to put a trolley stop at her business.

Thomas visited Williamsport in the fall of 2011 and together we visited the sites of the Hagan family's various homes, business and churches

— all places that Thomas's father had visited on "vacation" with his grandmother in Williamsport. Margaret looms large in family lore.

In 1903, when she was about 77, Margaret moved to Bordentown, N.J., to be with her daughter Fannie. By that time, Fannie's husband, James, had earned his master's degree at Harvard and was the headmaster of the Bordentown School, a residential high school for African American students. Bordentown School would later become known as the "Tuskegee of the North." Margaret died in 1914 in New Jersey and is buried there.

Fannie and James had several children, among them Thomas Montgomery Gregory. And it was his granddaughter, Sheila Gregory Thomas, who brought to light the story of Margaret's notable achievements — and a sense of what was needed in Lycoming County at the end of the 19th century to rise above the limits generally placed on its "colored" citizens.

Sieminski is project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative community undertaking between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society.

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