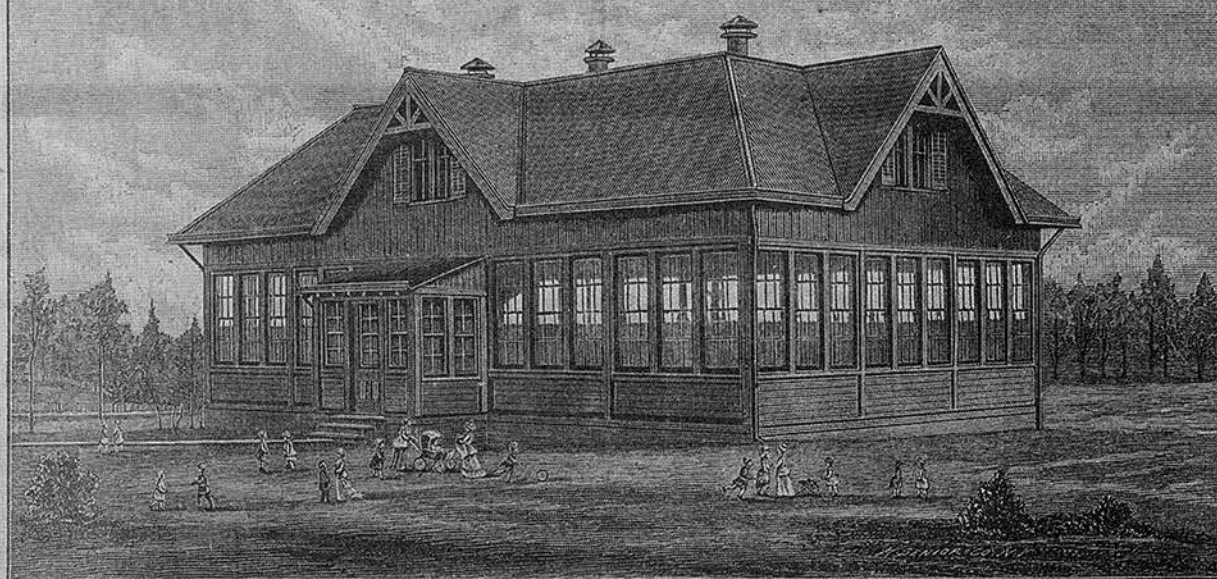




SANITARIUM, MOUNT VERNON, N. Y.

PHOTO PROVIDED

The hospital building of the Mt. Vernon Division of the New York Infant Asylum. The photograph is from the 1884 annual report of the asylum.

Dr. Caroline Gould Marr

The fourth woman to join the Lycoming County Medical Society

Williamsport Women



by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

By JUDITH GOULDIN, M.D.
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Correspondent

In 1885, Dr. Caroline Gould Marr became the fourth female physician to practice in Lycoming County. Her story is a cautionary tale of the bigotry that festers decades after an exclusive group is opened to others, and the innocent people this prejudice often wounds.

Like Drs. Jean Saylor-Brown and Rita Church (class of 1874), Caroline Marr graduated from Woman's Medical College (class of 1880). Many men still believed women were intellectually, emotionally and physically unsuited for medicine. The women responded by increasing their skills. Woman's Medical College expanded its curriculum from two to four years and post-graduate training became more commonplace.

As a senior, Marr worked "after hours" at the Hospital for Women and Children, Philadelphia. She interned the next year at the renowned New England Women's and Children's Hospital, Boston, and subsequently filled a temporary assistant physician position at a pediatric hospital.

In May 1883, Marr was named the resident physician of the Mt. Vernon division of the New York Infant Asylum, a large residential home for children without parents. Five months later, she was being censured by a coroner's jury in the lethal poisoning of an infant.

The irritant that evolved into a legal battle was a decision made months before Marr arrived at Mt. Vernon: Dr. Edward F. Brush, a local physician, accepted a temporary position as the resident physician. He had been advised of the institution's preference to have a woman

doctor in that role, so it was no surprise when, after the highly recommended Caroline Marr applied and interviewed well, she was offered his job. Brush was discharged, with two months' bonus pay. He returned to the Mt. Vernon pharmacy he owned and fumed.

It wasn't the loss of the \$500/year position that fueled his anger; it was the loss of revenue from a scam that the asylum didn't uncover until June 1883: as a physician he ordered medications and then as a pharmacist he supplied them at a large mark-up. Especially profitable was a nutritional supplement called koumyss — a fermented milk that Brush's pharmacy manufactured.

That summer, the infant asylum endured two epidemics — pertussis (whooping cough) and a virulent form of Rubeola measles. And as if battling lethal microbes weren't enough, Marr had to deal with Brush berating her for her inexperience and lack of skills.

When the epidemics receded, Marr took a leave to rest. In her absence Brush was quietly reinstated as resident physician by his cronies. Koumyss orders rebounded.

Marr, learning of Brush's return, ended her leave and advised him that she was back on duty. He left, warning her to expect an autopsy, searching for clinical errors, on every child who died. Meanwhile koumyss orders plummeted.

True to Brush's threat, the coroner performed autopsies in fatal cases even when there were no suspicious circumstances surrounding the death. Then a night nurse claimed that she misadministered one teaspoon of aqua ammonia in place of quinine. She notified Marr of her error, but



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown, in this photo provided Carol Litchfield, is the gravesite of Caroline Gould Marr Keller at the Green Hill Cemetery in Waynesville, North Carolina.

Marr recommended "doing nothing," believing that the amount wasn't problematic.

The child died the next day and an autopsy was scheduled. Marr's request to have a neutral physician present was denied. The coroner's report condemned Marr's inaction, triggering an inquest. Three employees testified to frequently smelling alcohol on her breath, adding further disgrace. Marr herself testified that she was a non-drinker.

The rubber-stamping jury concurred with the coroner, saying "in our opinion [the child's] death was caused by the inexcusable, culpable, and criminal negligence of Dr. Caroline G. Marr," according to the New York Times, published Nov. 10, 1883. In addition they condemned the asylum's administration for mismanagement in retaining Marr. Allies of Brush fed the headline-making story to the New York Times and the former Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, now the New England Journal of Medicine. The articles predicted her imminent arrest.

The asylum came to her defense. Prominent physicians spoke to the skill of both the asylum's management and Marr, especially given the difficult circumstances that prevailed, including the interference by people who clearly put their spiteful needs ahead of the children's interests.

The judge described

Marr as "a worthy woman who had suffered the grossest injuries and wrongs during the proceedings brought for malicious reasons." Neither the Times nor the Boston Journal reported Marr's exoneration.

In 1885, Marr returned to Williamsport, where she had grown up. Her father, Isaac Gould, and uncle Stephen had run a sawmill in Loyalsock Township near Canfield Island in the 1850s; her brothers Elijah and Robert had operated the mill into the 1870s.

Marr practiced medicine for two years, first on Pine Street and subsequently on East Third Street. In 1887 she married her neighbor, Simon Keller. They relocated to the South, eventually settling in Waynesville, North Carolina, leaving behind long winters and, sadly, the practice of medicine.

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. Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. Hurlbert is a Professor Emeritus of Library Services at Lycoming College. Their column is published the second Sunday of each month and the author can be reached at lcwhc-manager@gmail.com.