

Sister act



3 women excelled in business, philanthropy a century ago

An image of Page Furniture, 209-213 E. Third St., around the year 1900 from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society. PHOTO PROVIDED

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
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A hundred years ago, the business community was dominated by men, and most of the female leaders in the community were the wives of prominent men.

But three sisters, Nellie, Jennie, and Fannie Page, were the exception to that rule. They owned and managed the Page Furniture Company at 209-213 E. Third St. for over 40 years, and none of the three ever married.

In addition to their family business, the women were active in multiple charitable institutions, all within a few blocks of the family home on East Church Street, including the YWCA and the First Presbyterian Church. One sister, Fannie, even founded a community center and a neighborhood playground.

The furniture company was established in 1840 when their great-grandfather, Abram Page (1790-1855) opened a shop at the same location, specializing in homemade rocking chairs. The business was passed down to his sons, Ephraim, Abraham, and

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BY MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

Harry, and then his grandson, Alfred Washington Page (1844-1906), and lastly to four of Alfred's children, Abraham (1867-1935) and Nellie, Jennie, and Fannie.

Page Furniture Company

Established before Peter Herdic came to town and before the height of the Lumber Era, the Page Furniture Company was in business for 105 years. In 1930 Fannie Page was the president, Nellie Page, secretary, and Jennie Page, treasurer. On June 1, 1945, the sisters sold the business to J. P. & M. Sullivan. The building is now the offices of Bayada Home Health Care.

Their father was a Civil War veteran, and with their mother, Caroline Reighard Page (1844-1909), had a total of six children. The Lycoming County newspaper collection (available online through the James V. Brown

Library) reveals details about their lives.

All three sisters attended Williamsport public schools, first the Franklin School, on Mulberry Street just south of the

former Pennsylvania Railroad tracks (now Little League Blvd.), followed by Williamsport High School, then at the corner of West Third and Walnut streets. (They often made the honor roll, according to newspapers.) Jennie, the middle daughter, taught at Franklin School for several years and was the assistant principal in 1904.

Nellie Grant Page (1872-1946) was born after her father returned from his Civil War service, perhaps inspiring her middle name (Ulysses S. Grant was a Civil War general before he became president). In 1904 Nellie enrolled in nursing school at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. She returned two years later, at the time of the death of her father, and began to take an active role in the business, which was now furniture sales, rather

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3 sisters excelled in business a century ago

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than manufacturing.

Jennie Murray Page (1877-1962) was born at the height of the lumber era. The same year that Nellie returned from Philadelphia, Jennie resigned her teaching position at the Franklin School and joined the family business.

Fannie E. Page (1882-1953) was a community activist. In 1913, the YWCA, a few blocks from their home, launched a capital campaign to purchase and renovate the former Crawford Hotel, a large four-story building at the corner of East Third and Mulberry streets. Fannie was a captain in the fund-raising effort, the third-most successful of its campaign chairs. She made a bold move to recruit several "working girls" to join her, resulting in employees of the local silk mill collecting over \$30 to aid the effort.

Fannie also showed her concern for families less fortunate than hers by working for over a decade with another young woman, Mary Young, the daughter of John M. Young, a prominent businessman and his wife Amelia, to establish a community center and playground for their neighborhood. The neighborhood was slowly becoming home to many Italian immigrants and was also the location of first Jewish house of worship in Williamsport.

The community center established by Fannie and Mary Young was called the Home Club. They rented a building at 118 Chatham Street. The Club became the social center for the community, especially women and girls, hosting events for all ages, a sewing cir-

cle, and even a grocery section where members could obtain goods at cost. The Home Club organized a kindergarten class for the mostly Italian and Jewish children. Public school teachers reported that the kindergarten students entered first grade well prepared.

East End Playground

The East End Playground was an outgrowth of the Club and also managed by Fannie and Mary Young. It was located at Basin, Academy, and Canal streets (where Starbuck's is located now) on land leased from the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. This allowed neighborhood kids who lived in crowded conditions to have space and supervision for play. There was a baseball field and a basketball court, and flower gardens lined the playground.

Nellie and Jennie were also active in the community, including as members of the First Presbyterian Church (now Liberty Church) located at the corner of Mulberry and East Third streets. Jennie served as the president of the mission board. They both had leadership roles in the YWCA. Jennie was on the Board of Directors in 1921 and both were active in the YWCA's Business and Professional Women's Club, even travelling to the national convention in Hot Springs, Ark., in 1922. They also traveled recreationally. Multiple newspaper stories document the frequent travel of the two older sisters—to New York City and Boston, to England and Scotland, to Alaska and many other places.

In the 1920s, Nellie, Jennie and Fannie moved to 810 Hepburn St.,

where they lived for the rest of their lives. They were successful businesswomen who also acted for the betterment of their community — and most unusually for the time, all without a husband.