

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

Rebecca May Cooper Capron: Feminist, suffragist, abolitionist and spiritualist



Lycoming County is proud to pay tribute to the local women who worked tirelessly in the 19th and early 20th century to win the right to vote. In March of this year, that effort was honored by the Pomeroy Foundation when a historical marker was installed on the front lawn of the YWCA of Northcentral PA in celebration of the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920.

One of those women was Rebecca May Cooper Capron (1825-1864), who lived in Williamsport for only a few years in the mid-19th century. She was a feminist, a suffragist, an abolitionist and a spiritualist. She attended the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, 72 years before women won the right to vote. She also attended the first National Women's Rights Conventions in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850 and 1851. She studied medicine at the Women's Medical School in Philadelphia in 1854 and 1855. Only four years after this school, the first medical school open to women was founded.

Originally from upstate New York, Rebecca lived in Williamsport with her husband, Elias W. Capron (1820-1892), a newspaper publisher and printer, and their daughter, Evalyn May (1856-1943). Both having been born into Quaker families, Rebecca and Elias held progressive views and were activists. They were passionate about their beliefs, which caused them to be sometimes outspoken and controversial.

Growing Up on the Underground Railroad

Rebecca was born on Jan. 11, 1825, in Williamson, New York, on the south shore of Lake Ontario. Her parents, Griffith Morgan Cooper (1791-1864) and Elizabeth Hodgson Cooper (1790-1873), were activists on behalf of the rights of both Native Americans and African Americans. Griffith Cooper oversaw a link on the New York–Canada route of the Underground Railroad. He was a reformer, a mediator with the Onondaga and Seneca nations, and, in 1836, a missionary to a reservation school outside Buffalo, New York.



PHOTO PROVIDED An Underground Railroad Historical Marker lies at the home of Griffith and Elizabeth Cooper, parents of Rebecca Cooper Capron.

The Cooper home itself was a station on the Underground Railroad. A secret room over the family's kitchen could hide ten runaways. Frederick Douglass often stayed at their home and would have known their daughter, Rebecca. Elizabeth, better known as Eliza, taught Douglass to read and write. Today, a New York State historical marker commemorating their role stands in front of the Cooper home.

In 1895, at the time of Douglass's death, an article in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle (Feb. 22, 1895) noted an occasion on which three men escaping from slavery were taken to the Coopers' home, where they remained until they could be dressed in women's clothes and sent to Canada. Douglass referred to Griffith

Cooper in print, calling him “*the veteran friend of the Indian as well as the African*” (North Star, March 3, 1848).

Living in a Utopian Community

Elias W. Capron was born in New York in 1820. He was a member of the Farmington (New York) Monthly Meeting until he resigned in 1844, having found that its members were not active enough in the attempt to secure the rights of African Americans.

Elias joined the short-lived Fourierist phalanx at Sodus Bay on Lake Ontario. Fourierism is a philosophy of social reform developed by the French social theorist Charles Fourier, who advocated the transformation of society into self-sufficient, independent “*phalanges*” (phalanxes). It was one of several utopian communities that emerged in the second quarter of the 19th century in upstate New York and New England.

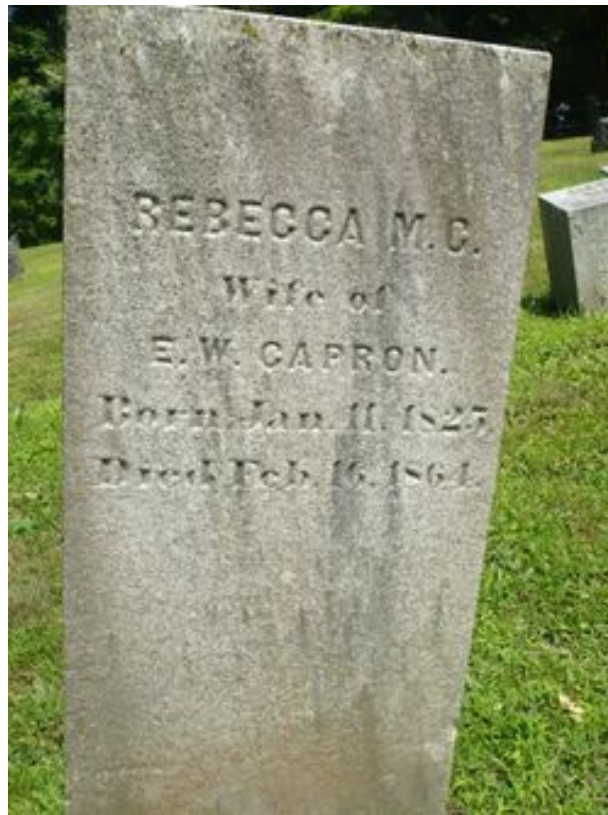


PHOTO PROVIDED The gravestone of Rebecca Capron Cooper can be found in Wildwood Cemetery, Williamsport.

It was at Sodus Bay that he married Rebecca May Cooper on June 12, 1844. In the Quaker tradition, they were married “*by themselves*,” exchanging vows without clergy or a justice of the peace. Charles Fourier had disdain for what he alleged were the outmoded and oppressive strictures placed upon women through what he called “*the barbaric tradition of marriage*.” (Under Pennsylvania law, a couple today can

still legally marry with what is called a “*self-uniting license*”; they need just two witnesses to the exchange of vows.)

The Sodus Bay community was fully defunct by 1846. The Caprons likely departed sometime in 1845, moving to Rochester and then Auburn, New York.

Traveling to Seneca Falls and beyond

In 1849, the couple went together to Seneca Falls for the first Women’s Rights Convention. There, Capron was signer number 96 of the Declaration of Sentiments, which included the sentiment that all men and women are created equal.

The Caprons moved around New England, New York, and Pennsylvania, staying for a few years at a time in cities where Capron found jobs in newspaper publishing and printing. Both husband and wife were intrigued by phrenology (the study of the skull) and the Fox Sisters’ way of communicating with the dead by knocking. They were members of the Auburn Phrenological Society, for which Elias was the corresponding secretary and Rebecca was the recording secretary.

When they lived in Philadelphia, Rebecca attended lectures at the Female Medical School. She did not complete the course, perhaps because she gave birth to their daughter, Evalyn, in October 1856.

The couple’s wide circle of friends and fellow activists and reformers included not only Frederick Douglass but also Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abby K. Foster, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, and Amelia Bloomer, who fought for dress reform as well as women’s voting rights.

Living in Williamsport

Rebecca and Elias Capron moved to Williamsport about 1862 and established a printing and publishing business. Their home and business were at 134 West Third Street, in “*Old Town*.”

Rebecca’s life was cut short. She died in 1864 in Williamsport when she was only 39 and her daughter was 7; she is buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

In 1867, Frederick Douglass brought his campaign for civil rights to Williamsport when he spoke at Doebler Hall, on the corner of West Fourth and Pine Streets. It would be interesting to know if he lodged with Elias.

“A Picture of Lycoming County” (1939) describes the scene in Williamsport when Black suffrage was realized. *“After 32 years of protest and campaigning, blacks finally won the right to vote in March 1870 when the 15th Amendment was ratified. Blacks across the state organized celebrations.”* In Williamsport, hundreds of people lined the street to *“watch a procession of forty-one carriages and buggies, people carrying banners, and costumed marchers.”* The parade was led by a Baltimore band because Daniel Repasz, refused to lead the band under any circumstance. However, Repasz Band historians were aware that members of the Repasz Band had been present at Appomattox at that time that the surrender was signed.

Elias Capron was a speaker at the celebration. Among the other speakers, both African American and white, were Abraham Updegraff, president of the First National Bank and an Underground Railroad conductor, and Cornelius and Simon Gilchrest, Black men (father and son) who both were conductors and active in civil rights.

Elias was at various times an owner or publisher of the West Branch Bulletin, Lycoming Gazette, and Gazette and Bulletin. Newspapers of the era were competitive, changed hands and editors often and had differing political views. He was criticized for his editorial views, including urging newly enfranchised Black voters to use their right to vote and promoting women’s rights.

Elias retired in 1871 and founded his own paper, the Epitomist, which failed after only a few months. He died in New York City in 1892.

Evalyn became a teacher of deaf children in Philadelphia. After holding various teaching and other positions, she died in 1943 in New York City.

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