

## DR. ELEANORA BENNETT SAUNDERS

By Paul Gettys

*While doing research on another project in a local newspaper from 1907, I ran across the following short item: “Miss Eleanora Bennett Saunders is first honor graduate of 1907 at the Medical College of South Carolina. She is from McConnellsville in York County. She graduated from McConnellsville High School, studied for four years at Winthrop College, and then four years at the Medical College. She said she had good advice from Dr. W. M. Love from McConellsville.” I was intrigued that such a remarkable student came from a small community in York County, and I wondered what became of her. The following is my attempt to answer that question.*

Eleanora (often called Nora) was born January 17, 1883<sup>1</sup> in McConnellsville (now known as McConnells), the daughter of Olive Lee Saunders and Eleanora Bennett Saunders. Both her parents were natives of Chester County. Mr. Saunders’s parents were Ezekial and Sarah Freer Saunders, who had a farm in Chester County. The couple moved to McConnells about the time that Eleanora was born, and Mr. Saunders opened a mercantile store. He was a successful merchant for 23 years, and also served as Magistrate for Bethesda Township for nine years and as a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1908 to 1914.<sup>2</sup> The family had four children: Ada Lee Saunders (1881-1930), Eleanora Bennett Saunders (1883-1933), Belva Lockwood Saunders (1884-1970), and Eaton Love Saunders (1887-1933).<sup>3</sup>

In 1914, after the children were grown, Olive Lee Saunders and his wife moved to York, the county seat, where they built a house at 218 East Liberty Street.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Saunders continued in the mercantile business. The family joined First Presbyterian Church in York, and Mr. Saunders was also active in the local Masonic lodge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Her gravestone has the date of her birth as February 17, 1883 while her application for passport and other official records state the date as 1884. Her sister Belva was born on February 20, 1884, so it is likely that the correct year for Eleanora is 1883.

<sup>2</sup> The *Rock Hill Record*, December 2, 1918 had an obituary for Olive Lee Saunders which provided a sketch of his life.

<sup>3</sup> All members of the family are buried at Rose Hill Cemetery in York.

<sup>4</sup> Roots and Recall web site, page for 218 East Liberty Street in York.

Eleanora attended the public schools in McConnells, where she graduated from McConnells High School. She then attended Winthrop College in nearby Rock Hill. She enrolled in the Sophomore Class in 1900, but left Winthrop in December 1901 with no degree.<sup>5</sup> At some point, she attended Chicora College, where she received her B. S. diploma.<sup>6</sup> Chicora was a Presbyterian school for women. It began in Greenville in 1893, merged with a similar school in Columbia in 1915, and eventually merged with Queens College in Charlotte, N. C. in 1933. In Columbia, the school was located in the Hampton-Preston Mansion at 1615 Blanding Street.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear when or where she attended Chicora. In a time when the medical profession was overwhelmingly male, she decided to enter the Medical College of South Carolina in Charleston. She credited Dr. W. M. Love of McConnells as an advisor and inspiration.<sup>8</sup> The first female graduated from the medical school in 1900. Eleanora received her medical degree in 1907, and she was the first honor graduate in her class, the first female to have that distinction. Within a week of her graduation, she was named as Assistant Physician at the State Hospital for the Insane in Columbia.<sup>9</sup>

South Carolina had been a leader in the early 1800s in the ethical treatment of the mentally ill. The South Carolina Lunatic Asylum was established in 1821, the second state institution to serve the mentally ill. The first building was designed by Robert Mills and was constructed between 1822 and 1827. It was revolutionary in its design, featuring bright hallways, a central heating system, and classical architecture. Mills was the first native-born American architect, a native of Charleston who studied under Thomas Jefferson and other leading designers. He designed many public and private buildings in South Carolina and in Washington, D. C. and Maryland. The asylum was originally intended to be supported by fees from the families of those who were sent there. Over the years, a larger and larger percentage of patients had no support, and the state was forced to appropriate funds. This led to long-term problems of underfunding and overcrowding. Additional buildings were constructed over the years. Both white and African-American patients were treated. In 1892, a nursing school was instituted to ensure a good supply of nurses for the institution. In 1896, the name was changed to the South Carolina State Hospital for the Insane. By 1900, there were 1,040 patients. In 1913, a separate hospital for African-Americans was built north of Columbia, and in 1919, the original institution was renamed the South Carolina State Hospital.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Registrar's records located at the Louise Pettus Archives at Winthrop University.

<sup>6</sup> When applying for the position of Campus Physician at Winthrop in 1918, Eleanora submitted a resume, which is preserved at the Louise Pettus Archives at Winthrop University. It contains a long list of educational qualifications.

<sup>7</sup> Information from the web site of the Historic Columbia Foundation, which now owns the Hampton-Preston House.

<sup>8</sup> *Rock Hill Record*, April 29, 1907.

<sup>9</sup> *Rock Hill Record*, May 2, 1907.

<sup>10</sup> A good summary of the history of the State Hospital was written by Susan Craft, "Changing Minds, Opening Doors," in the May 1996 issue of FOCUS, the periodical of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

When Dr. Eleanora Saunders arrived in 1907, the hospital complex was in a state of crisis from long-term underfunding by the state. Dr. James Woods Babcock (1865-1922) had become Superintendent in 1891, the first leader trained in psychiatry. A native of Chester County, he was the son of Sydney Eugene Babcock and Margaret Faucette Woods. The Babcocks were an old New England family with a branch in Charleston, which ran a printing business, S. Babcock & Co. on King Street. Sydney Babcock studied medicine in New York and Paris, returning to Chester to practice. He served as a surgeon in the Confederate Army in Virginia, Columbia, and finally operating a large hospital at the end of the war in Chester. A family story is that young James was born on the night Columbia was burned, and the delivering physician in Chester held him up to show him the faint glow in the sky.<sup>11</sup> The young Babcock had excellent credentials, graduating from Phillips Exeter Academy, Harvard College, and Harvard Medical School. He interned in psychiatric hospitals in New England and in Europe. When he arrived at the State Hospital, his goals were to modernize the facility and improve services to the patients. However, he faced constant struggles with the Governor and Legislature, both of whom resisted progressive treatment efforts and increased funding.<sup>12</sup>

In 1907, Babcock hired Dr. Saunders as a promising honor graduate of the state Medical School. The two made a good team, and together they made some important observations on the diagnosis and treatment of Pellagra. This disease is now known to be caused by a deficiency of niacin (Vitamin B-3). Largely confined to the South, Pellegra was characterized by diarrhea, dermatitis, and eventually dementia and death. By some estimates, Pellegra affected about 250,000 Americans in fifteen southern states, causing about 7,000 deaths per year.<sup>13</sup> The patients with dementia would often wind up in the State Hospital. Babcock and Saunders developed effective treatments and saved a number of sufferers. Both published articles in national journals, and Babcock helped found the National Association for the Study of Pellagra and served as the organization's President. Dr. Saunders authored articles on the subject in several scholarly publications, including the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 1911.<sup>14</sup> "For lasting scientific value, her observations on Pellagra probably surpass those of all the other asylum doctors, including Dr. Babcock."<sup>15</sup> In fact, her presentation at the national conference on Pellagra in 1909 "established her as the American authority on Pellagra as it specifically affected women."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Family background information from *Asylum Doctor: James Woods Babcock and the Red Plague of Pellagra*, Charles S. Bryan, Columbia: USC Press, 2014, pages 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Facts on Dr. Babcock's life taken from an article in the *South Carolina Encyclopedia* (USC Institute for Southern Studies) by Peter McCandless, titled "James Woods Babcock."

<sup>13</sup> Bryan, page xxiii.

<sup>14</sup> An extensive study of the disease is found in *The Butterfly Caste: A Social History of Pellagra in the South* by Elizabeth Etheridge, published by Greenwood in Westport, CN in 1972.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan, page 199.

<sup>16</sup> Bryan, page 199.

Dr. Saunders replaced another female physician, Dr. Sarah Allan, who had served from 1895 to 1906. The position was one of three full-time physicians at the hospital, including Dr. Babcock. Dr. James Lawrence Thompson was in charge of white male patients and Dr. Saunders of white female patients. Three part-time physicians included those in charge of African-American males and females and a pathologist. Dr. Saunders was known for her sincere caring attitude for the patients. She insisted that each new female patient under her care would receive a full exam for history and medical condition and a mental analysis over a period of time. She kept up with the latest theories and knowledge, traveling to New York and Philadelphia at her own expense to study procedures in other institutions. She introduced hydrotherapy, mechanotherapy (exercise and massage) and for some, electrotherapy. She standardized the record-keeping system for the hospital, established for the first time a central supply room, and improved the dining facilities. Dr. Saunders also introduced activities such as dances, movies, and automobile rides for some patients.<sup>17</sup> A young female physician in her mid-twenties who was energetic, innovative, and bright was bound to attract resentment from the other physicians and the establishment.

Dr. Saunders was known as “Nora” to her friends. While working at the State Hospital, she lived in a room on the second floor of the main building, later known as the Babcock Building. She seemed to be consumed by her work, spending many extra hours in the lab or on patient work. She seldom left the hospital grounds, although she did take voice lessons. Music seemed to be her sole outside interest and she had virtually no social life.<sup>18</sup> The nurses who worked under her in the white female wards were extremely loyal and supportive of Dr. Saunders, while the other physicians admired her abilities but resented her to some extent.

In 1909, the state legislature ordered an investigation of the State Hospital, citing complaints of overcrowding and substandard facilities, staffing, and care. Most of these problems, of course, were the direct result of inadequate funding provided by the legislature itself. This was the beginning of a long period of controversy which would ensnare both Dr. Babcock and Dr. Saunders. During the 1909 investigation, Dr. Saunders testified before a state legislative committee, serving as the most effective witness supporting Dr. Babcock. Her testimony runs for 23 pages in the committee records.<sup>19</sup> The end result of this investigation was that the leadership of the hospital was vindicated, with recommendations for improvements.

In 1911, Cole Blease took office as Governor. Blease was from Newberry and ran a racist, populist campaign designed to appeal to the marginalized white working class. He was opposed to any progressive agendas, had a dim view of women taking leadership roles, and was openly

---

<sup>17</sup> Bryan, page 198.

<sup>18</sup> Bryan, page 198. In her resume for employment at Winthrop in 1918, she listed a diploma in voice from Columbia College.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan, page 124.

crude in his language.<sup>20</sup> In 1913, Governor Cole Blease publicly attacked Babcock and called for the resignation of Dr. Saunders. There were spurious personal attacks against her. In a long and rambling letter to the legislature published in January 1914, Blease stated that he came into office determined to remove Babcock from his position because Babcock had failed to support the Governor's friend in a court case.<sup>21</sup> He then proceeded to list the failures of the hospital. The legislature appointed another Committee to Investigate the State Hospital for the Insane. Saunders, Babcock and many others were called upon again to testify. Saunders's father, who was a member of the legislature at the time, attended the hearings. Blease was especially opposed to Dr. Saunders and her work. He spread false rumors that she had had an affair with Dr. Ernest Cooper, the former pathologist at the hospital and a married man. Blease was especially incensed that Saunders tested women patients for syphilis and other venereal diseases, which he thought distasteful for a woman physician. The hearings of the investigating committee were held in the packed chambers of the state Supreme Court. "Blease's testimony, like the governor himself, was colorful, coarse, and contradictory."<sup>22</sup> Blease stated that Saunders had compromised herself because she had worked with syphilis patients, which no decent woman would do.

The final report of the committee stated:

"Your committee went fully and minutely into the complaints, insinuations, innuendos, inquiries and charges against Dr. Eleanora B. Saunders. We find no evidence to sustain any of them. She is not guilty of any wrong intention or wrongdoing. There is no breath or even a suspicion as to her moral character – none against her professional reputation and conduct and career – in her ethical deportment and in all her conduct in or out of the institution of the State Hospital for the Insane... We condemn the method of trial of Dr. Saunders..."<sup>23</sup>

The legislature eventually adopted a series of new rules for the operation of the institution, but both Dr. Babcock and Dr. Saunders were fully exonerated. The outcome was a major political setback for Governor Blease, and he continued to lose support with the legislature and public. He was defeated that summer in a campaign for the U. S. Senate. However, Eleanora Saunders became a public heroine. She was a young woman with obvious talents who stood steadfast

---

<sup>20</sup> A good summary of the Blease movement and governorship can be found in *South Carolina, A History* by Dr., Walter Edgar, Columbia: USC Press, 1998, page 468 and following.

<sup>21</sup> Babcock was a witness to the murder of N. G. Gonzales, editor of the *The State* newspaper, by Lt. Gov. James Tillman on January 15, 1903. Tillman, the nephew of former Governor Ben Tillman, was an ally of Blease. Babcock testified truthfully to what he had seen. Although Tillman was acquitted by the jury, Blease never forgave Babcock.

<sup>22</sup> Peter McCandless, *Moonlight, Magnolias and Madness: Insanity in South Carolina From the Colonial Period to the Progressive Era*, Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996, page 312.

<sup>23</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina*, Regular Session beginning January 13, 1914. Columbia, S. C.: Gonzales and Bryan, State Printers, 1914, page 1196.

against slander, ignorance, and held her ground. Her photo appeared on the front page of *The State* newspaper under the headline “Dr. Saunders Exonerated By Legislative Probers.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the results of the investigation, both Dr. Babcock and Dr. Saunders soon left the institution. When Dr. Saunders announced her resignation, many of the nurses who served under her wanted to leave the asylum immediately, but Dr. Saunders spoke to them and urged them to remain until matters were adjusted. The nurses wrote a letter stating: “... Your complete vindication - although not a surprise in any way – is a source of great gratification to us.”<sup>25</sup> Babcock and Saunders opened South Carolina’s first private mental hospital, Waverly Sanitarium, in Columbia in 1915. Waverly, located at what is now 2315 Taylor Street, was intended to serve private patients of both races and genders as outpatients. It also had an inpatient section for white women. Dr. Saunders went with him, helped to co-found the new asylum, and was half owner.<sup>26</sup> She stayed there for three years, living in the institution.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Saunders left Columbia and served in several important positions. During the 1918-1919 school year, she returned to Rock Hill to serve as resident physician at Winthrop College.<sup>28</sup> This move may have provided her with an opportunity to help care for her aging parents. Her father died in November 1918 and her mother died in October 1919 following a long period of ill-health.<sup>29</sup> Dr. J. B. Johnson, President of Winthrop, wrote to Eleanor on August 8, 1918 asking her help in filling the position, and she offered her services. Johnson offered a salary of \$1,500 for nine months, as well as room, board, and laundry services. In her application, she described herself as unmarried, a Presbyterian, and listed her home address as York. She listed three years of service as campus physician at Chicora College, which may have been served while she was working at the Waverly Sanitarium. When asked for references, she listed “any banker, physician, or business man of Columbia.”<sup>30</sup>

By 1920, she had moved to Washington, D. C., where she was a physician at St. Elizabeths Hospital and living on the grounds of the hospital.<sup>31</sup> St. Elizabeths<sup>32</sup> opened in 1855 and was the first federally operated psychiatric hospital. At its height in the 1950s, it served more than 8,000 patients. The campus on Alabama Avenue in the District of Columbia is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was named a National Historic Landmark in 1990. The hospital

---

<sup>24</sup> *The State*, February 26, 1914.

<sup>25</sup> *The Union Times*, March 20, 1914, page 7.

<sup>26</sup> Application for employment at Winthrop, dated August 15, 1918, Louise Pettus Archives, Winthrop University.

<sup>27</sup> *Columbia City Directory*, 1915, 1916, 1917.

<sup>28</sup> *Rock Hill Herald*, September 27, 1933.

<sup>29</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 21, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> Application for employment at Winthrop, dated August 15, 1918, Louise Pettus Archives.

<sup>31</sup> The 1920 Census reports her residence in Washington. She probably moved there in 1919 after her work at Winthrop College was completed.

<sup>32</sup> The hospital’s website states that the legislation authorizing the hospital omitted the apostrophe at the end of Elizabeths, and that has been the official name since.

is now largely vacant and the 346-acre site is being redeveloped by the federal government and the District government.<sup>33</sup> While working at St. Elizabeths, Saunders also attended George Washington University, where she earned a PhD degree.<sup>34</sup>

After a short time in Washington, Dr. Saunders moved to Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland, just north of Baltimore. This hospital was built in 1891 by Moses Sheppard and endowed by a gift from Enoch Pratt in 1890. The institution has grown into the Sheppard Pratt Health System, which is today one of the largest non-profit providers of mental health, substance abuse, and special education in the nation. When Dr. Saunders worked there in the 1920s and 1930s, it was already a well-known psychiatric hospital.<sup>35</sup> In May 1924, she received a passport in order to travel to Europe to inspect various psychiatric hospitals in the British Isles, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.<sup>36</sup> She departed in September and arrived back in New York on December 31. She sailed home on the *RMS Aquitania*, sister ship of the *RMS Mauritania* and *RMS Lusitania* of the Cunard line.<sup>37</sup> In her passport application, she described her appearance: height 5 feet 4 inches, eyes blue, hair reddish, complexion ruddy, face oval, and a distinguishing mark of a squint in her right eye. She also made a trip to Europe in 1929, presumably for the same purpose, arriving in New York on March 18 on the *S.S. Deutschland* from Hamburg. In the 1930 Census, she is reported as a resident of Dwelling #4 at Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital with five other physicians and employees. The history of the hospital relates that Dr. Saunders lived for her work, was self-effacing, and was a delightful companion with a happy sense of humor. She was of special assistance to the junior physicians, over whom she had general supervision.<sup>38</sup>

Dr. Eleanora Saunders died of cancer at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital on September 26, 1933.<sup>39</sup> She never married. Interestingly, it appears that she never owned a home, having been a resident on the grounds of each of the institutions where she worked. She is buried in the family plot with her parents and siblings in Rose Hill Cemetery in York.

It is remarkable that the general public in York County has very little knowledge of the life and work of Dr. Eleanora Saunders. One reason may be that the immediate family has no descendants. None of the four children of Olive Lee and Eleanora Saunders married. Ada Lee Saunders graduated from Winthrop in 1902 with a four-year degree in the literary course and a certificate in bookkeeping. Belva Lockwood Saunders graduated from Winthrop in 1905 with a

---

<sup>33</sup> Information from the St. Elizabeths Hospital web site.

<sup>34</sup> Bryan, p. 254.

<sup>35</sup> Information from the Sheppard Pratt Health System web site.

<sup>36</sup> U. S. Passport service records, passport issued May 21, 1924.

<sup>37</sup> Passenger list information for 1924 and 1929 trips from Ancestry.com web site.

<sup>38</sup> Bryan, page 255, citing information in *The Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital, 1853-1970. A History* by W. Bryon Forbush.

<sup>39</sup> *Rock Hill Herald*, September 27, 1933. She was reported to have been ill for some time. She evidently received treatment in the hospital where she worked.

four year degree.<sup>40</sup> In the 1910 Census, they are both living at home in McConnells and are both listed as school teachers. By 1920, they are both living at 218 East Liberty Street, soon after the death of their parents. Ada is listed as the head of the house, and is employed as a community worker at the Cannon Mill. Belva has no employment listed. In the 1930 Census, Belva is reported living in Asheville and owned her home at 76 Houston Circle. She was a supervisor in the local school system. Ada Lee continued to live at the family home in York until her death in December 1930 at the age of 49. Belva lived in Asheville until her death in November 1970 at the age of 86 at the Mountain Sanitarium in Fletcher, N. C.<sup>41</sup>

Eleanora's younger brother, Eaton Love Saunders, was mentally handicapped, although we do not know the nature of his disability. Perhaps his condition influenced her decision to enter the field of psychiatry. During World War I, he was required to register, and his form describes him as "disabled by mental invalidism." He is described as tall with a medium build, blue eyes and light hair.<sup>42</sup> It appears that Eaton was cared for by Eleanora at various institutions where she worked. In 1917, his registration card listed his address as the Waverly Sanitarium in Columbia. The 1930 Census lists him as a resident of the South Carolina State Hospital. Eleanora's obituary lists his residence as Baltimore when she died in 1933,<sup>43</sup> so he must have been with her at Sheppard and Pratt. He died in 1971 at the age of 84, and at that time he was living in Columbia, possibly again at the State Hospital or another state institution.<sup>44</sup>

Dr. Saunders was definitely a woman ahead of her time. In an age when young women were expected to limit their activities to the home or, at most, the profession of school teaching, she ventured into the male-dominated field of medicine. She dedicated herself to her patients, undertaking numerous efforts to learn about diseases and conditions that affected people with mental disabilities and applying the latest techniques to help them. She stood up to the power structure when it interfered with the best treatment for her patients. She worked at some of the premiere institutions for psychiatric medicine in the nation and was a leader in seeking the end of diseases such as Pellagra, writing numerous scholarly articles. She constantly sought to improve her knowledge with ongoing education.<sup>45</sup> She certainly deserves to be recognized as a small-town girl from York County who made a lasting contribution at the national level to the field of medicine.

---

<sup>40</sup> Information on the records of the sisters is from the Louise Pettus Archives at Winthrop University.

<sup>41</sup> Death Certificate for Belva Lockwood Saunders, State of North Carolina, November 23, 1970.

<sup>42</sup> World War I registration card for Eaton Love Saunders, dated June 5, 1917.

<sup>43</sup> *Rock Hill Herald*, September 27, 1933.

<sup>44</sup> Social Security death record lists his death in January 1971 in Columbia zip code 29202.

<sup>45</sup> In her application for employment at Winthrop in 1918, she listed short term studies at Polyclinic Medical School in New York, East Side Dispensary in New York, School of Mechano-therapy in Philadelphia, Fordham University, Columbia College (diploma in voice), Mt. Sinai Hospital, Harvard Medical College, John Hopkins University, Peter Bent Brigham Hospital Boston, and Boston Psychopathic Hospital. Her later PhD at George Washington University is in an unknown field.



