

Women who played key roles in health, education

One wrote many books, the other helped make books available to kids

March is Women's History Month. Our choice of a woman to salute this year is Eleanora Saunders (1883-1933). She was a native of York County's McConnellsville, now called McConnells.

We could find nothing on her early life before she enrolled at Winthrop College, where she left an excellent record and then headed to Charleston to study at S.C. Medical College. She wasn't the first woman to enroll at the college, but she was the first woman to finish at the head of her class.

Apparently Eleanora's first employment was at the S.C. Lunatic Asylum in Columbia. By 1912, she was assistant director. The director was Dr. Havilah Babcock, a Chester native and Harvard graduate.

Babcock gained fame for his discovery that pellagra - a disease marked by skin eruptions and digestive and nervous system disturbances - was due to a niacin deficiency in the diet. Fifty percent of all patients admitted to the asylum had pellagra when they arrived.

It was in that setting that Eleanora Saunders determined to learn as much as she possibly could about women's health and the relation of emotions to health. Babcock had studied psychiatry, and he encouraged Eleanora to do the same.

In 1914, Babcock set up the Waverly Sanitarium in Columbia for patients who could obtain psychiatric treatment on a scale far above that of the State Asylum, which was notoriously underfunded. It appears that Eleanora helped with Waverly, but whether it was a full-time or part-time position is not clear.

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



Records are sparse and the exact order in which Eleanora attended institutions of higher education after 1915 is not clear, but records do show that she earned a Ph.D. in addition to her M.D. and that she was variously enrolled at the New York Polyclinal Medical School, the Pennsylvania Orthopedic Institution, Fordham University and George Washington University. She also did post-graduate work at several European universities.

The school year of 1918-19 was spent as resident physician at her alma mater, Winthrop College, the S.C. College for Women. Saunders spent at least one year working at St. Elizabeths Hospital, the U.S. Hospital for the Insane, which is now a psychiatric hospital in the District of Columbia. Whether it was before or after her stint at Winthrop is not clear.

In the spring of 1920, Eleanora applied for a position in Enoch Pratt Hospital, a psychiatric hos-

pital in Baltimore. She stayed there until her death in 1933.

Enoch Pratt Hospital (now Sheppard Pratt Health System) kept very sketchy records in the time that Saunders was there, according to Byron Forbush, current chairman of the board of trustees. Dr. Forbush did find this in the September minutes of the board about Dr. Saunders: "... her work had been so unusual and valuable that it was a distinct contribution to the Hospital."

In a history of the institution written by Forbush's father in 1971, Saunders was described in this manner: "She lived for her work, and it was said of her that she was self-effacing, a delightful companion with a happy sense of humor. ... Dr. Saunders was of real assistance to the junior physicians over whom she had general supervision."

Saunders wrote several books on medical subjects and many articles that appeared in the American Journal of Insanity. Some of her articles were reprinted in booklets for lay persons. Three received wide circulation: "The Sick Person," "Psychiatry and Occupation" and "The Emotional Handicaps of the Professional Woman."

Following a long illness, she died at the age of 50. Eleanora Bennett Saunders was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in York beside her parents, Olive Lee and Eleanora Bennett Saunders, her sis-

ters Belva and Ada Lee and a brother, Eaton Love Saunders.

Pioneer in S.C. House

Another Winthrop graduate also deserves a salute. Harriet Frazier Johnson was the first woman elected to serve in the S.C. House of Representatives. In 1945, she entered a race to replace Henry Mills, who resigned to become sergeant-at-arms of the House. She defeated three men by only three votes. A recount was demanded, and that time her margin was five votes.

Johnson was a staff member of the S.C. Extension Division of the Department of Agriculture, which was stationed at Winthrop until 1954. For 23 years, she had headed the state 4-H clubs.

When she took office, she announced that her major objectives were to better S.C. education, to improve teacher training and to raise teachers' salaries.

She managed to get two bills passed. One bill established the Negro Girls Industrial School (a reformatory with a strong education component). The other was a bill to provide free school books for York County high school students with a \$1 rental fee. The idea was so popular that the bill was amended to cover all the high schools in South Carolina.

Harriet Johnson did not run for re-election. Instead, she accepted a three-year appointment as a Methodist missionary-teacher in Lucknow, India. She then retired in Spartanburg and died there on Jan. 27, 1972, at the age of 82.