

Then & Now: Women who made a difference in Tompkins

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Dr. Emma Corinne Brown Galvin, professor, community activist, author, consultant, board president of the Southside Community Center, and more, was a pillar of the Ithaca community for more than 40 years.(Photo: PROVIDED PHOTO)

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Women have always played a prominent role throughout the history of Tompkins County, and while some have been locals, many of them moved here from other parts of the country to pursue their ambitions, either academically or professionally.

One of the locals was Samantha S. Nivision. One of 12 children, she was born in 1833 in a small hamlet northwest of Ithaca. In 1855 she graduated from the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania and became the first woman to practice medicine in Tompkins County, opening her office in Mecklenberg.

In 1862 she purchased the old Dryden Springs House on the outskirts of town. Joining her in this endeavor were several of her sisters, Anna T. Nivision and Mary W. Nivision, also both doctors. Her brother, Dr. Nelson Nivision, also joined her staff.

The Dryden Springs House was operated as a water cure sanitarium for invalids. While digging for salt, sulphur springs had been discovered in Dryden, and with her medical training, Dr. Nivision understood that hydrotherapy, the therapeutic healing and relaxation power of these waters, could help patients recover from a myriad of ailments, including alcoholism and even mental illness, a radical idea for the time.

Dr. Nivision was also a firm believer in preventive medicine, which also put her far ahead of her time in the mid 19th-century, and only added to the scorn she often received from her male counterparts of that era.

Cascadilla Hall was built in 1866 with the vision that it would become a sanitarium for Ithaca and a school for female doctors. It had been funded by Ezra Cornell and other investors, but Dr. Nivision's plan for it was never realized, as the building of the University became Ezra Cornell's main focus once the Civil War was over.

Having been unsuccessful at establishing a second sanitarium in Ithaca, Dr. Nivision eventually moved to New Jersey and established a sanitarium in Hammonton. Many of her employees from Dryden followed her there. Dr. Samantha S. Nivision died in 1906.

Emma Brown Galvin

In 1909 Emma Corinne Brown was born in Richmond, Va. She attended Shaw University, a private Baptist University in North Carolina that had been founded in 1865, where she received her bachelor of arts degree. In 1931 she received a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She then taught high school in Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida before coming to Cornell University, where she received her doctorate in 1943.

While in Ithaca, she married Dr. G. Alx Galvin, who was the first black doctor to establish a practice in Ithaca, and also was the first African American to become president of the New York State Academy of General Practice.

Dr. Emma Corinne Brown Galvin became a professor and lecturer at Ithaca College, an academic consultant to the Ithaca City School district, and board chairman of the Southside Community Center, the Ithaca Community Women's building and the First Baptist Church. Her community involvement was extensive, and included being president of the Tompkins County Community Chest, president of the Ithaca Business and Professional Women's Club and president of the Ithaca P.T.A

On the national scene she belonged to the Citizen's Advisory Committee on Environmental Quality for New York State, was a member of the National Committee of the American Association of University Women, and served as a delegate to the national Convention of the League of Women Voters.

During President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration she published a book on achievements for a better America, and in 1959 she was named the Ithaca Business and Professional Woman of the Year. In 1974 she was named the Shaw University Woman of the Year and also received a local community service award. In 1985, she was listed in that year's edition of Who's Who Among Black Americans.

Dr. Galvin died in Ithaca in 1988, and her memorial service was held at the First Baptist Church in DeWitt Park, where she was honored for her numerous and impressive life achievements.

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