

Sarah Berlinger

Dr. Borg

History 337

April 20, 2009

Big City Influence in Turn of the Century Harrisonburg

The L.H. Gary Millinery, located in downtown Harrisonburg on Court Square, catered to some of Harrisonburg's female elite. The women of Harrisonburg, some transplanted here from more cosmopolitan areas, expected to be served in the same manner of craftsmanship and exclusiveness available in larger cities. Miss Lillie H. Gary, having grown up wealthy in the city of Baltimore, understood such expectations, and established her shop in 1897 to serve the ladies of Harrisonburg and the surrounding areas.

Gary's shop focused on selling millinery, or women's hats and headwear. Miss Gary's shop sold bonnets, straw hats, and fascinators, a small hair decoration usually made from feathers or flowers, as well as other feminine accessories. The last location for Miss Gary's shop occupied the building at 76 Court Square, in the same building now occupied by the James McHone jewelry shop.¹ Before this, Gary's business was located at 90 North Main Street, next door to Coffman Brothers, as stated in the first of her newspaper advertisements in the *Rockingham Register*.² The earliest advertisement located is dated April 13, 1900. The advertisements in the *Register* are definitively known to run until November 16, 1908. There may have been later advertising, but the James Madison University microform library does not have any post-1908 issues of the *Rockingham Register* on file. Searches of the other area newspapers, including the *Daily*

News-Record, yielded no results. Miss Gary continued in business until at least 1910, because she was featured in “Rockingham County: Its Past and Present Illustrated” published in that year. This special insert was included in a copy of the *Harrisonburg Daily News*.³

Many people are probably surprised to discover that there were other women, in addition to Gary, who ran their own businesses in the area. Also surprising is the idea that Gary, a well-bred and unmarried woman, would consider it socially acceptable to run her own store, and run it successfully. However, examples abound of successful women entrepreneurs around the turn of the Twentieth century. Women such as Madam C.J. Walker, a dominating force in early African-American hair care, and Elizabeth Arden, one of the most successful beauty care proprietors of the first half of the Twentieth century, fortified the burgeoning image of an ever-growing class of powerful female business owners.⁴ The turn of the twentieth century brought with it the combining of the separate social worlds males and females occupied. The former female world, that of working in the home, and the former male world of working and bringing money to the family, slowly joined as the nineteenth century progressed.⁵ Miss Gary, perhaps because she never married, did not let the separate spheres inhibit her desire to open a business. The businesses of hatmaking and dressmaking appealed to women because of the freedom the trades provided; the freedom of ideas and design, and the freedom to pursue economic independence.⁶

The wider acceptance of women in American business had an impact directly in Harrisonburg. By 1912, there were three different stores listed on the Sanborn map of downtown Harrisonburg that were listed as exclusively millinery shops. All three shops

were also located on Court Square. Though it may be a more popular twenty-first century belief that it is strange for a man to operate a store specifically geared towards women, twentieth century civility probably did not approve of such a practice.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that all three of these businesses were run by women. In addition to the three shops devoted exclusively to millinery, downtown stores such as B. Ney & Sons and G.M. Effinger's also sold women's millinery. Though not devoted to the trade, these stores were probably able to compete for business among the women of the area. Because both establishments were general stores, their products were most likely of a lesser design and quality than those products sold at the specialty shops. Akin to the Wal-Mart of today, a store carrying a wide variety of cheap products, including cheaper versions of current fashionable objects, was much appreciated by the poorer people of Harrisonburg and the surrounding area.

One of the most intriguing questions pertaining to Miss Gary's store is "What is she doing here?" At first blush, one might liken the City of Harrisonburg to the rest of Rockingham County- a rural region with no need for such a sophisticated shop to exist. Much of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County subsisted in a "happy state of mediocrity", content to live as "plain men and women, not ladies and gentlemen."⁷ This belief can be expelled by a quick walk downtown. Just walking past the huge mansions that once housed the upper classes of the city is proof enough of the desire and need for such an establishment. Lillie Gary was born in 1866 or 1867, in Baltimore County, Maryland. Her grandfather, James S. Gary, was a well-known and successful cotton mill owner in the 1850s and 1860s. In 1861, Lillie's father James A. Gary became a partner in the company, and in 1870 become sole proprietor. The Gary family was quite

wealthy; the 1870 census, when Lillie was four years old, listed her father's real estate at \$200,000 and his personal estate at \$20,000. The 1880 census lists James A. Gary's occupation as "Cotton Broker".⁸ Lillie's interest in the textile and millinery fields may have come from her family's heavy involvement in the textile business. The actions and interests of the upper-class society her family occupied most likely spurred on Gary's establishment of such a high-class business, a business that catered to the upper classes of the area.

Just by looking through the advertisements Miss Gary placed in the *Rockingham Register*, one can trace the development of her business, as well as the changing trends in fashion. Gary's first documented advertisement, dated April 13, 1900, is devoid of any adornment or decoration. The text of the advertisement is informational, with a self-serving spin. Gary's invitation to "inspect these goods and compare styles and prices with anything shown on this market" shows her belief in the value and quality of her products and goods. A year later, in an April 18th 1901 advertisement, Gary boasts a 'beautiful line of corsets', as well as gloves and belts. This advertisement hints at an expansion in business and demand. Though Gary was not a dressmaker, she did seem to be attempting to compete with dressmakers on some level. Later advertisements include images, mainly from the Kalamazoo Corset Company, depicting the 'F.C. Corsets' for sale in the Gary shop. Gary's advertisements continue to express an expansion of inventory, until sometime between November 1905 and March 1906, when she moved her shop from North Main Street to Court Square. Sadly, the building Miss Gary formerly occupied at 90 North Main Street has been demolished and replaced; however, it is still reasonable to theorize that an expansion in business and inventory led to the

moving of the store. Court Square in Harrisonburg remains the center of city life, as it was 100 years ago. Court day, as well as horse sales, brought many out-of-town people into the city limits, and into the square. By moving her shop from North Main Street to Court Square, Gary undoubtedly increased her exposure in the area, as well as increased her client base.

Several special newspaper articles highlighted the importance of Lillie Gary's business to the area. A June 1901 issue of *The Evening News* featured Gary's store as one of its highlighted industries of the area. The Illustrated Trade edition article called Gary's inventory "one of the most superb stocks of millinery goods, notions, and ladies' furbishings to find habitation in the Shenandoah Valley."⁹ This article also provided some information on Gary's life before coming to Harrisonburg; she traveled as a saleswoman for the Baltimore-based wholesale clothing firm of Armstrong, Cater & Co. Gary was then featured in the December 1905 Industrial Supplement published in *The Spirit of the Valley*. The changing beliefs of woman's clothing were highlighted in this article: "Ten years ago a woman was satisfied with a hat for spring and another in the fall. Now however, she must have one in accordance with every dress and as a general rule they are multitudinous." The article classified Gary as an "exclusive milliner" who "is a leader in our thriving little city and enjoys almost the entire trade in this line."¹⁰ The last located article highlighting Gary's business appeared in "Rockingham County: Its Past and Present Illustrated", published in a 1910 issue of the *Harrisonburg Daily News*. It is smallest of the three articles, but the only one that includes a picture of Lillie Gary. The article established the first year she was in business (1897), as well as her dedication to her clients. According to the article, Gary "visits Baltimore and New York twice

annually, and personally inspects and selects from the largest stocks those designs of style and quality that never fail to please.”¹¹ These three articles, along with her straightforward and informative newspaper advertisements, helped to cement Lillie H. Gary’s status as one of the most well-respected entrepreneurs, male or female, in the City of Harrisonburg. The reasons behind the closing of Gary’s shop remain unknown, but her long-ago influence on and success in the City of Harrisonburg is still apparent.

Notes

-
- ¹ *Downtown Harrisonburg*. This booklet, written and illustrated by a longtime Harrisonburg resident, depicts scenes of Downtown Harrisonburg in several different time periods. This book contains a watercolor painting that documents Gary's store in the present-day McHone location.
- ² *Rockingham Register*, from April 13, 1900 to November 16, 1908. For some reason, Gary did not advertise in the *Register* for the first three years of business.
- ³ This article includes the only image located of Miss Gary. She was about 45 at the time of publication of the insert.
- ⁴ Virginia G. Drachman, *Enterprising Women: 250 Years of American Business*. This book documents the most successful female entrepreneurs in American history. The book is a companion piece to an exhibition of the same name that toured the country from 2002-2005. The exhibit divided American history into five time periods: "Seeking Independence, 1750-1830", "Profit in the Service of Women, 1830-1890", "Fashioning the Business of Beauty, 1890-1960", "Breaking New Ground, 1890-1960", and "Women Take Charge, 1960-2000."
- ⁵ Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*.
- ⁶ Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930*. Gamber's research focuses on the Boston, Massachusetts area, but the ideas put forth are still relevant in a study in the Shenandoah Valley and, more specifically, Rockingham County and Harrisonburg.
- ⁷ Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra eds., *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900*.
- ⁸ Clayton Colman Hall, *Baltimore: Its History and Its People*. This book highlights the lives of Lillie Gary's father and grandfather; both were successful textile businessmen, as well as respected Baltimore citizens.
- ⁹ *The Evening News, Illustrated Trade Edition*. January 8, 1901.
- ¹⁰ *The Spirit of the Valley*, Industrial Supplement. December 1, 1905.
- ¹¹ *Harrisonburg Daily News*, "Rockingham County: Its Past and Present Illustrated". 1910.