



*Courtesy Library of Congress*

Cartoon from 1878 showing opposition to newspapers that permitted ads for female doctors treating female patients

### One of the Brightest of Iowa Women

Margaret Abigail Cleaves was only 15 years old when her beloved dad died. She had always been especially close to him—more than ever after her only brother died at the age of seven months. “From that time on I was my father’s ‘boy’ and we were close companions and comrades,” she remarked.

Margaret’s dad, John, had been a doctor; and that may have influenced her interest in the profession. However, when John died and Margaret, or Abbie as she was known, had to go out into the world to work, her mother, Elizabeth, discouraged her medical pursuits. So, she went into the teaching profession.

Abbie was born in Louisa County in southeastern Iowa in 1848. She was the third of seven girls. Her teaching career lasted seven years. But in 1870 she began to pursue her dream of a medical career. When the State University of Iowa established its medical department, Abbie was one of the first women to enroll. She graduated at the top of her class in 1873.

The university medical school was “open, upon equal terms, to students of both sexes,” and it promised that all students “will be afforded equal opportunities.” That may have been true, but it didn’t mean women were immune to harassment at the hands of their fellow male students. One of those classmates remembered those days in medical school with Abbie. “I recall with shame the treatment we hoodlums accorded those pioneers within the medical school,” he wrote.

Immediately after completing medical school, Abbie took a position as staff physician in the “female department” at the State Hospital for the Insane at Mount Pleasant. Only one other woman in the United States held such a post. It was here that Abbie cemented her belief that it was imperative for female patients to be treated by female doctors. With so few female physicians practicing, she resolved to set about reform in this area.

After three years at Mount Pleasant, Abbie moved to Davenport and set up a private practice on Brady Street in the Forrest Block of downtown. Abbie began to make a name for herself as a respected physician and scientist.

In 1879 she delivered a paper at the National Conference of Charities in Chicago about her research on the medical and “moral” care of female patients in insane hospitals. It was said to have attracted the attention of “all the leading professional men” connected with the conference. Within a year of Abbie’s talk, nine more women had been hired by hospitals for the “insane” across the country. Many credited Abbie for the movement.

In 1880 Abbie was a keynote speaker at the National Association for the Protection of the Insane at a Cleveland convention. Here she was “the subject of marked evidences of respect.” By now she was known as “one of the brightest of Iowa women” and “best of Iowa doctors.”

Abbie had caught the attention of other medical facilities in the country. In July 1880 she was hired as principal physician of the female department of the Pennsylvania State Lunatic Asylum. Her salary was \$2,500 per year.

After three years in Pennsylvania, Abbie left to do research in European asylums and then returned to practice in Iowa. She became interested in the use of electricity to treat nervous disorders. In 1895 she moved to New York City and established the New York Electro-Therapeutic Clinic, Laboratory, and Dispensary where she conducted research and trained other physicians.

Abbie diagnosed herself with a nervous disorder and believed she suffered from it all her life. In 1910 she published a book about her struggles: *An Autobiography of a Neurasthene: As Told by One of Them and Recorded by Margaret A. Cleaves*.

By the time she died in 1917, Dr. Margaret Abigail Cleaves had become a well-known and highly respected woman in the field of medicine throughout the United States.

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