

# MAY FRANCIS HEATH

## 1873–1961

*"I am convinced that Saugatuck would have been a much poorer place without her. She helped mold the community's sense of identity."* —Kit Lane

May Heath was a local entrepreneur, church and civic leader, artist and poet who broke gender barriers for women in early Saugatuck. She was a Mother, Teacher, Story Teller, Shop Owner, Author, Librarian, President of the Saugatuck Woman's Club, Realtor, Painter, Composer, Organizer, and most importantly the Local Historian.

May Francis Heath was born May 13, 1873 to Saugatuck residents John Francis and Julia Francis Morrison. She attended the old wooden school at the top of Allegan Hill. May was hired to teach the primary department of the Ganges School in March 1892, before receiving her High School Diploma. She felt she had to delay her education to help support her impoverished family.

She later finished her high school degree and graduated as Valedictorian of the Saugatuck High School Class of 1893. She went on to teach intermediate grades in the Saugatuck Union School. October 30, 1895, May Francis at the age of 22 married Doc Heath, 29, at the Congregational Church. They had two children, Gladys born in 1895, and Francis born in 1900, both in Saugatuck.

May was a hard worker and thrived in the business arena. She one wrote "When asked if I had a hobby, I replied "Yes I have two, Business and Writing, both of which I really love." May operated the Ferry Store on the west shore of the Kalamazoo River. *The Commercial Record* of June 7, 1917 reported, "A concession has been opened in the Heath boat house at the west side of the ferry landing. She often told of getting up at 4am to bake her cupcakes for her customers."

"We sold the Little Handy Shop in 1920 and opened a Real Estate office and we had a most successful business for 25 years—selling the town over and over again". After her husband Doc died in 1947, she remained "ambitious to sell real estate" and in 1949 shared that she was "working on my 3rd sale this year—pretty good for an old woman of 76."

It was natural for May Francis Heath to become Saugatuck's first historian. Her grandparents, Stephen A. and Mary Peckham Morrison, were among the first settlers and "living history" of the town. May was a young mother in her early 30s when her grandfather died, and her interest in his stories of the early days was evident. She inherited his many papers, diaries, and photo albums, as well as his dedication to the town of Saugatuck.

When May's husband Doc died in 1947, May sold a number of buildings Doc had built and then moved to a small home she called Heathcote at 525 Butler Street.

May began spending winters in in Florida, keeping an active club life of art and bridge. She only picked up the brush at age 78 when she took an art class in Lake Worth, Florida, where she wintered. Her paintings are still cherished, they captured her memories. May enjoyed her art experience so much at the age of 80 she organized the Saugatuck Art Club in 1953. Never to slow down, May traveled to Paris at the age of 81. She soaked in the museums, the history, the art, and the people of Paris. She came home to record her trip on canvasses, ... always living and breathing her philosophy of life. "Life is wonderful... people are delightful."

May died unexpectedly of a heart attack in September of 1961 at the age of 88. The Historical Society formed a committee in 2009 to study her contributions. At the culmination of this study a program was held at The Village Square on August 10, 2010 to honor Saugatuck's first historian. A bronze plaque was installed on the water fountain and remains there today. At the same time, the Saugatuck Woman's Club named their 4 -year educational scholarship "The May Francis Heath Scholarship".

May Francis Heath researched by fellow  
Team HerStorian, Peg Sanford.

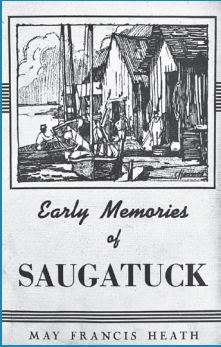
Peg Sanford



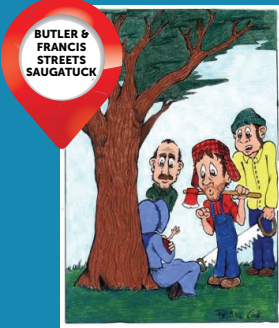
May was hired to teach the primary department of the Ganges School in March 1892, before she had even received a High School Diploma. She felt she had to delay her education to help support her impoverished family. She did finish her high school degree as a member of the Saugatuck High School Class of 1893. She gave the Valedictory address, an essay entitled "Drifting" at the Commencement Ceremony and began promptly teaching the intermediate grades in the Saugatuck Union School.



On July 14-16, 1930, Saugatuck celebrated the Centennial of the settlement by William Butler, who arrived in the fall of 1829. The Commercial Record reported that May Heath "was chosen...chairman of the Centennial...a wise choice, since she will inspire the whole corps of assistants by her own enthusiasm."



May Frances Heath loved to write. Her love of history and writing is represented by her book Early Memories of Saugatuck (1930); she served for 17 years as the local correspondent for the Grand Rapids Press. She took correspondence courses on writing to hone her skills. She also wrote at least three songs heralding the town she loved.



### MAY FRANCIS HEATH SAVES THE TREATY OAK

One of the many "legends" of May Heath is the story of how she saved the Saugatuck Treaty Oak from being cut down by a crew of workmen. The Treaty Oak still stands at the corner of Holland and Francis in Saugatuck, and was the reputed site of an agreement between the local Indigenous people and Saugatuck founder William Butler in the 1830s.

In about 1896, May and Doc lived at the corner of Butler and Francis streets with their infant daughter Gladys. May had a good view out the kitchen window and saw the cutting crew coming down Holland, leaving stumps in their wake. May grabbed up her baby and rushed out to defend this living bit of village history. She placed herself in front of the tree and would not let the men approach it.

After several hours the workmen felt that the hungry infant would break the impasse. Surely, she would go home to feed the child? To their great dismay, this prim Victorian lady proceeded to breast feed the child in for the rest of the day. The workmen knew they had been defeated and they departed. May saved the tree for us to enjoy today.