

CONTACTS:

Binh Nguyen
(267) 603-4512, binh@visitphilly.com

Natalie Peralta
(267) 367-7746, natalie@visitphilly.com

Fact Sheet: Women's History and Culture in Philadelphia

A closer look at the women who helped shape Philadelphia and the nation

PHILADELPHIA, Aug. 26, 2026 – Trailblazing women have played a pivotal role in Philadelphia's history since its founding. Their sacrifices, hard work and vision helped make the city what it is today. History makers and heroines such as Esther de Berdt Reed, Betsy Ross and Lucretia Mott have ties to Philadelphia and some of its oldest sites.

From knocking on doors to rally support for the American Revolution to crashing the Centennial Celebration at Independence Hall, courageous women have repeatedly pushed Philadelphia – and the nation – forward. Their legacies remain visible throughout the region's historic sites, museums and cultural institutions.

Here is a brief snapshot of significant moments, places and people connected to Philadelphia's women's history:

The Timeline: Revolutionary War to Suffrage Movement

- **1780:** Esther de Berdt Reed published [“The Sentiments of an American Woman”](#) – a plea to support the Revolution – while canvassing with the Ladies Association of Philadelphia.
- **1787:** John Poor established the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, the first chartered female academy in the United States, located on Cherry Street.
- **1819:** Jarena Lee became the first woman authorized to preach by Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She later published [“The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,”](#) the first autobiography by a Black woman in the United States.
- **1833:** Lucretia Mott helped form the [Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society](#), with support from Black leaders like Charlotte Forten Grimké and Harriet Forten Purvis. The group first met in Catherine McDermott's schoolroom (North Fifth and Arch Streets).
- **1848:** The first women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, where attendees drafted “The Declaration of Sentiments.” Key Philadelphia leaders attended, including Charlotte Woodward Pierce, who later became the first woman from the convention to cast a vote in a presidential election.
- **1855:** The Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania was founded at 229 Arch Street. [Dr. Ann Preston](#) was named dean in 1866, becoming the first woman in the United States to serve as dean of a medical school, while fighting to allow her female students to attend lectures at Pennsylvania Hospital.

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- **1876:** Members of the National Woman Suffrage Association crashed the Centennial Celebration at Independence Hall. Led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the protesters pushed through the crowd and handed out copies of their [“Declaration of the Rights of Woman.”](#)
- **1915:** Chester County’s [Katharine Wentworth Ruschenberger](#) created the Justice Bell, a replica of the Liberty Bell. It had a clapper chained to its side and was not to be rung until women could vote. As Ruschenberger said: “The women’s Liberty Bell will announce the completion of democracy.” Today, it is at Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge.
- **June 24, 1919:** Pennsylvania ratified the 19th Amendment, which was added to the U.S. Constitution in August 1920. (see: [National Constitution Center](#) exhibit).
- **1921:** [Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander](#) became one of the first three Black women in the United States to earn a Ph.D. and the first to earn a Ph.D. in economics. She was also the first Black woman to earn a law degree from Penn and the first Black woman admitted to the Pennsylvania bar.
- **Jan. 11, 1968:** Ernesta Drinker Ballard and Wilma Scott Heide founded the Philadelphia Chapter of the National Organization for Women. They advocated for adding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the [Pennsylvania Constitution](#).
- **1971:** Pennsylvania became the first state to add an ERA to its constitution: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania because of the sex of the individual.”
- **Oct. 25, 1997:** The Million Woman March took over the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Organized by Black activists Philé Chionesu and Asia Coney, this grassroots protest was one of the largest demonstrations in American history, with estimates between 750,000 and 2 million attendees.
- **July 30, 2000:** Unity 2000 brought 5,000 activists down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in support of abortion rights, women’s rights, gay rights and opposition to capital punishment.
- **2023:** Rue Landau became the first openly LGBTQ+ member of Philadelphia City Council. “Without a doubt, I am the first and I absolutely will not be the last,” Landau said during her victory speech in Philadelphia’s Gayborhood ([Nov. 7, 2023](#)).
- **2024:** Cherelle Parker became the first woman—and first Black woman—to serve as mayor of Philadelphia in the city’s 341-year history. “By every statistic imaginable, I am not supposed to be here,” Parker said during her inauguration speech ([Jan. 2, 2024](#)).

The Places: Where to Experience Women’s History

- [Arch Street Meeting House:](#) This historic Quaker meetinghouse is the site of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting regional congregation gathering. Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society co-founders Lucretia Mott and Harriet Forten Purvis fought for women’s equality here.
- [Belmont Mansion:](#) Cornelia Wells may not have owned this 1742 mansion in Fairmount Park, but her story resonates here. Judge Richard Peters employed Wells and her daughter at the mansion after helping them escape slavery. The Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion highlights Wells’ struggles and successes.
- [Betsy Ross House:](#) Visitors can stop by to meet a Betsy Ross reenactor, learn about Ross and her family and discover the stories of many other 18th-century women who helped build the new nation. Be sure to spend time in the courtyard, where the flag maker was laid to rest in 1836.

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- [The Colored Girls Museum](#): Located in Historic Germantown, the museum explores the everyday lives of African American women through emotive exhibitions and art installations. Schedule your visit to the museum's *One Room Schoolhouse* exhibit in advance.
- [Elfreth's Alley Museum](#): Check out the oldest residential street in the country, and learn more about its hero, Dolly Ottey, who founded the Elfreth's Alley Association in 1934.
- [Guild House Hotel](#): Now a stunning invisible-service boutique hotel, this National Historic Landmark once housed the New Century Guild, a pioneering club formed in 1882 to support working women. The 12 rooms and suites are named for members of the guild.
- [Historic Fair Hill](#): This 1703 Quaker burial ground is the final resting place of Female Anti-Slavery Society co-founders Lucretia Mott and Harriet Forten Purvis, as well as Mary Ann M'Clintock, who helped plan the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights.
- [Justice Bell at Valley Forge](#): This 2,000-pound Liberty Bell doppelganger toured Pennsylvania in 1915 to connect the fight for women's rights to the Founding Fathers' struggle. Today, visitors can find the bell at the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge National Historical Park.
- [The Kelly House](#): Although Grace Kelly's childhood home in East Falls is not typically open for public tours, you can check out the historical marker outside where the Oscar winner and Prince Rainier III announced their engagement in 1956.
- [Laurel Hill Cemetery](#): Many notable women are buried here – Esther de Berdt Reed, who raised funds to support the Revolution; Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, organizer of the Women's Pavilion during the 1876 Centennial Celebration; and bacteriologist and engineer Mary Engle Pennington.
- [Pearl S. Buck House](#): A visit to the home of internationally acclaimed author Pearl S. Buck in Perkasee includes viewing many items associated with her Pulitzer Prize-winning work, including the typewriter she used to write the 1931 novel *The Good Earth*.
- [Powel House](#): Eliza Powel, a resident of this 1765 Society Hill mansion, was known for her intelligence and wit. President George Washington counted her among his close friends, and it was Powel who convinced him to serve a second term.

For a complete list of historic sites honoring women, check out [The Women's History Trail](#).

The People: Who's Who

- **Hannah Callowhill Penn (1671–1726)** – In 1696, Callowhill became the second wife of William Penn, founder of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, and the couple had eight children. In 1712, after the Penns returned to England, William Penn suffered a series of strokes, and Callowhill Penn took over managing the family's proprietorship at Pennsbury Manor. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Elizabeth Willing Powel (1742–1830)** – Born to a politically elite family, Powel established her husband Samuel Powel as an important figure. When Samuel served as mayor of Philadelphia, the couple's home on South Third Street became a center of social and political life, including the site of John Adams' "[sinful feast](#)." Historical marker [here](#).
- **Esther de Berdt Reed (1746–1780)** – In 1780, the wife of Founding Father Joseph Reed created the [Ladies Association of Philadelphia](#) to raise funds for the Continental Army. She invited the wives of influential men to join her effort and published and distributed a broadside titled "Sentiments of an American Woman." Historical marker [here](#).
- **Betsy Ross (1752–1836)** – Ross was a widowed upholsterer on Arch Street when Declaration of Independence signers George Washington and Robert Morris asked her to stitch a flag. At home,

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she lost two husbands to the Revolutionary War and cared for a third during his late-life illness and raised five daughters. She lived until age 84. Historical marker [here](#).

- **Dolley Payne Todd Madison (1768–1849)** – James Madison asked his friend Aaron Burr to introduce him to Payne Todd following the tragic death of her husband and infant son to yellow fever. The two married and lived in Philadelphia. In 1808, James Madison was elected president and Payne Todd Madison mastered the role of First Lady. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Oney “Ona” Judge (1773–1848)** – Born into slavery at Mount Vernon, Judge was Martha Washington’s personal servant while George Washington served as the first U.S. president in Philadelphia. Judge labored in the President’s House at Sixth and Market streets until 1796, when she made a daring escape from enslavement. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Sarah Grimké (1792–1873) and Angelina Grimké Weld (1805–1879)** – Growing up on a plantation in South Carolina, the Grimké sisters witnessed the cruel effects of slavery. By 1829, both Sarah and Angelina had become Quakers and moved to Philadelphia, where they joined abolitionist groups and spoke out against slavery. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Lucretia Mott (1793–1880)** – A distant cousin of Benjamin Franklin, Mott co-founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in the 1830s and helped organize a convention for abolitionists in Pennsylvania Hall. She also co-planned the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, where she and others signed the “Declaration of Sentiments.” Historical marker [here](#).
- **Sarah Mapps Douglass (1806–1882)** – Born to prominent abolitionists, Mapps Douglass worked as an administrator and teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth, which opened in 1837 at Seventh and Lombard streets. In 1833, Douglass helped found the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Fanny Kemble (1809–1893)** – Married to a slave owner, Kemble saw first-hand the barbaric cruelty of plantation life, leading her to jot down her observations on enslaved people in “Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation.” Today, it remains one of the truest and most detailed accounts of life on a Southern plantation. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Ann Preston (1813–1872)** – In 1850, at age 38, Preston was in the first graduating class at the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania (627 Arch Street) – and went on to serve as professor of hygiene and physiology. At WMCP, Preston became the first woman to serve as dean and fought to expand clinical training opportunities for women medical students. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Jane Johnson (1814/1830–1872)** – While traveling through Philadelphia in 1855 with her two children and enslaver, John H. Wheeler, Johnson sought help from the city’s abolitionist community. With assistance from William Still, Passmore Williamson and five Black dockworkers, she escaped enslavement and later risked her freedom by returning to Philadelphia to testify for the men charged in connection with her escape. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906)** – In 1869, Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and began planning a Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States. The women intended to read the Declaration at the Centennial Celebration at Independence Hall on July 4, 1876, but were denied permission. Instead, they bought tickets and distributed their paper. Historical markers [here](#).

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- **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)** – In 1859, she became the first Black woman to publish a short story, “The Two Offers,” with her poem “Eliza Harris” appearing in Frederick Douglass’ paper. Harper is buried at Eden Cemetery. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Rebecca Cole (1846–1922)** – The second African American woman physician in the United States, Cole returned to Philly and opened the Women’s Directory Center, which helped poor women and children obtain medical and legal services. She also served as a representative for the Ladies’ Centennial Committee of Philadelphia. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Caroline LeCount (1846–1923)** – Born in Philadelphia, she graduated first in her class from the Institute of Colored Youth. Shortly after Philadelphia passed integrated streetcar legislation in 1867, LeCount was among the women activists who tried to board streetcars and, when denied, took legal action. LeCount was engaged to civil rights leader Octavius V. Catto until he was assassinated in 1871. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Mary Engle Pennington (1872–1952)** – In 1890, at age 18, she enrolled at Penn, where she earned a “certificate of proficiency” in chemistry and biology. Later, Pennington became one of the first women to receive a Ph.D. from Penn. Her work on frozen food preservation earned her the nickname the “[Ice Woman](#).” Historical marker [here](#).
- **Violet Oakley (1874–1961)** – Oakley was a painter, muralist, industrial designer and civic leader who attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1896. Later, she studied under Howard Pyle at Drexel University, where she formed the “[Red Rose Girls](#)” with classmates Elizabeth Shippen Green and Jessie Willcox Smith. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Dolly Ottey (1892–1968)** – After moving into 115 Elfreth’s Alley in 1933, Ottey saw the value of preserving the nation’s oldest residential block. She formed the Elfreth’s Alley Association in 1934, working with the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks. Thanks to her efforts, the alley achieved National Landmark status in 1966. Historical marker [here](#).
- **Barbara Gittings (1932–2007)** – A pioneer in the LGBTQ+ rights movements, Gittings helped organize the first public demonstrations for gay rights, now known as the Annual Reminders. Activists symbolically chose Independence Hall as the site of annual July 4 pickets from 1965 to 1969. In 1972, Gittings helped organize a panel that helped move the American Psychiatric Association to drop the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder. Historical marker [here](#).

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