



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

In honor of Women's History Month, and the overwhelming number of stories to share, I'm publishing two issues. Enjoy!



Seraph Young:

The First Woman to Cast a Ballot in the United States.

On Valentine's Day in 1870, [Seraph Young](#) became the first woman in the U.S. to cast a ballot. The 23-year-old voted in a Salt Lake City municipal election two days after the Utah Territory unanimously passed legislation giving women full voting rights.

Utah women were the first to have the opportunity to exercise their new political power. Twenty-five women voted that first day. Six months later, in August, 1870, thousands of Utah women voted. Seraph was born in 1846 to a Mormon family who moved to Utah a year later. She became a school teacher and in 1872, she married a Union Army veteran named Seth Ford. They had three children and spent most of their married life in New York and Maryland. Seth died in 1910. Seraph died in 1938 and was buried next to him at Arlington Cemetery.

Sidebar:

Utah's polygamist history complicated [women's suffrage in the state](#). Mormon pioneers found refuge in Utah where they had moved en masse to avoid persecution for practicing polygamy. Utah Territory was repeatedly denied statehood because of polygamists.



Mural of Seraph Young by David Koch, Utah State Capitol

The federal government supported Utah women having the vote because Congress expected women to vote against polygamy. Polygamist husbands and church leaders believed women would vote in step with their husbands. Utah women mostly voted as they were directed, but having the ballot opened up new opportunities. Church programs were created to educate women on political life, and Utah suffragists joined the ranks of the national women's movement.

Unfortunately, women's voting rights in Utah were short lived. In 1887, Congress passed the [Edmunds-Tucker Act](#) which rescinded those rights. Two years later, the Mormon Church disavowed polygamy. In 1896, Utah was admitted to the Union and women's voting rights were reinstated.



**A professor said to me,
"You know you have
as much education as
a lot of white people."
I answered, "Doctor,
I have more education
than most white people."**

Dr. Joycelyn Elders, U.S. Surgeon General

Famous for being outspoken, [Dr. Elders](#) once said, "I am who I am because I'm a black woman." No stranger to sexism, racism, and controversy, Dr. Elders has been an advocate for sex education and contraception for teens, especially within the Black Community.

Born in 1933 to a poor, sharecropping family in Arkansas, her path to becoming the Surgeon General was fraught with racism and rumor. Sadly, many of those early controversies still overshadow her remarkable accomplishments.

At 15, a scholarship along with money earned by her brothers from chopping cotton, enabled her to attend college. She graduated in 1952 and then joined the Army.

Three years later, she enrolled in medical school, becoming a pediatrician in 1960. At the time, less than 7% of doctors in the U.S. were women, and less than 1% were Black. By 1987, Dr. Elders had earned a reputation as unstoppable. Then-governor Bill Clinton appointed her Director of the Arkansas Department of Health. In 1993, as President, he nominated Dr. Elders to serve as U.S. Surgeon General. Her appointment met with strong opposition which she believed was due to sexism and race.

In an [interview](#) with the New York Times, she remarked, “Some people in the American Medical Association...didn’t even know that I was a physician...They don’t expect a black female to have accomplished what I have and to have done the things that I have.”

But Dr. Elders also generated controversy within the Black community. A Christian, she sharply criticized Black men and African American ministers for “exploiting Black women and stripping them of their reproductive health choices.” She also declared that unwanted pregnancies are a form of slavery. “If you can’t control your reproduction, you can’t control your life.”

Her public comments on abortion, sexuality, and contraception for teens, proved to be too much for the White House. In December, 1994, she was asked to resign.

But during Dr. Elders’ political career in Arkansas and in Washington, D.C., she produced significant results. Her initiatives, such as providing contraception at school-based clinics, dramatically reduced teen pregnancies.

She expanded immunization rates for toddlers in poor communities, and she significantly expanded HIV testing when HIV/AIDS was rampant. After leaving office, Dr. Elders returned to teaching. She became a professor of pediatrics and lectured widely on the importance of sex education in schools.

In partnership with the University of Minnesota, in 2009, she established the nation’s first Chair in Sexual Health Education. Dr. Elders is 87.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Too often women are viewed as political pawns. **Seraph Young** may have been the first to vote, but the struggle Utah women faced is still common today as often rights are won, then lost.

Ask a Friend: What are contemporary examples of this? What can you do to change it?

Dr. Elders was controversial because she spoke truth to power.

Ask Yourself: Would you risk your career for standing firm?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex-ed and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's greatgrandson. Last year, [Time magazine](#) included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her journalism has appeared in BOLD and Utah Stories. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and dog, Gus.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements in the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com

