



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“True emancipation lies in the acceptance of the whole past, in deriving strength from all my roots, in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors.”

Pauli Murray
Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family



Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray: the most remarkable person you've never heard of

Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, (she/they) is one of the most important and – least well-known – feminist and [civil rights scholars](#) of the 20th century.

Born Angelina Pauline Murray in Maryland in 1910 to bi-racial parents, Murray became the first Black person to earn a Doctorate degree from Yale Law School, was a co-founder of the [National Organization for Women](#), and was the first Black woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest. Their legal scholarship [shaped](#) many of the most important civil rights cases of the 20th century. Murray also struggled with gender identity and today would likely identify as [non-binary](#). (Note: in writing about Murray, scholars vary the use of pronouns.)

When Murray's mother died in 1914, her father suffered severe physical and mental health issues. Soon after, Murray went to live with an aunt in Durham, N.C. Her father was institutionalized and murdered in 1923 by a white guard. Murray was just thirteen. Murray later [referred](#) to the experience of being an orphan, and the emotional feeling of being untethered and alone, as “the most significant fact of my childhood.”

Murray graduated from high school in 1926 at the age of fifteen. Not wanting to be hemmed in by segregation, Murray refused to apply to Black colleges. Instead, Murray applied to Columbia University in New York, but was denied admission because of gender. They attended Hunter College, at the time a women's only school, and supported herself by working odd jobs. Murray graduated in 1933 with a degree in English Literature.

Finding steady work during the Depression was difficult, so Murray and a close female friend disguised themselves as boys and began to travel, hopping freight cars filled with hobos and itinerant workers. During these travels, Murray realized she was in love with her friend. The feeling was unrequited and throughout their life, Murray struggled with sexual identity. In photos from this period, Murray referred to herself as different personas including "The Dude," "The Vagabond," and "The Crusader."



Pauli Murray, 1931, Schlesinger Library and the Pauli Murray Foundation

In private journals and correspondence, Pauli identified variously as a man or as a woman. The world related to Murray as a woman and she spoke of herself publicly as one. For several years, Murray wanted to undergo gender-affirming treatments, including hormone therapy, and later [exploratory surgery](#), to see if she had undescended testicles. Murray changed her [name](#) from Anna Pauline, to the gender neutral, Pauli, in the 1930s.

It was also during the Depression that Murray began teaching under the auspices of the Works Projects Administration and also began publishing articles and poems. In 1938, Murray applied to graduate school at the all-white University of North Carolina. Murray argued that two of her white ancestors had attended the college and that one was then serving on its board. Denied entry because of

race, Murray launched a campaign to draw attention to educational disparities facing African Americans. Murray wrote to then President Franklin D. Roosevelt accusing him of caring more about fascism abroad than about racism at home. The President shared Murray's letter with his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, who responded to Murray thereby launching a [life-long friendship](#) between the two.

In 1941 – fourteen years before [Rosa Parks](#) took similar actions – Murray refused to sit in the "colored" section on a public bus. Arrested and jailed, Murray was convinced they could win in court and thereby change discrimination laws regarding public transportation. However, Murray didn't get the chance. The judge reduced Murray's sentence, effectively dismissing the charges.

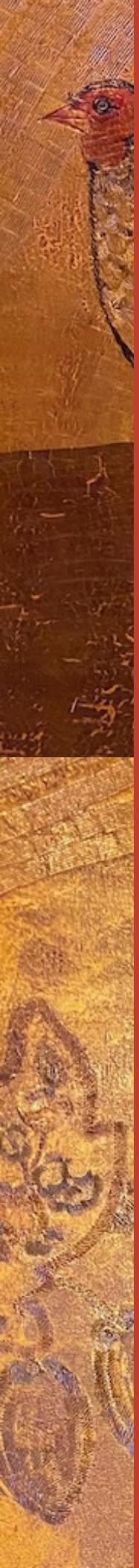
Unstoppable, Murray enrolled in law school at [Howard University](#). As a student, Murray wrote an important paper that established the foundational argument later used to overturn the [doctrine of "separate but equal."](#) Murray argued that the doctrine violated the 13th and 14th Amendments. In 1954, the professor for whom they had written the paper, used it to argue before the Supreme Court that segregation in education violated the Constitution. Murray's legal strategy was at the heart of winning the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1944, Murray earned their Juris Doctorate and graduated from Howard as valedictorian. Murray also earned a prestigious fellowship which their predecessors had used to attend Harvard Law School. Murray was denied admission because of gender. Murray coined the term, "Jane Crow" to identify the double bind faced by Black women: gender and race. Murray went on to earn their Master of Laws degree from the University of California at Berkeley.

Throughout their life, Murray's writing influenced social justice issues and civil rights. In 1951, Murray wrote [States' Laws on Race and Color](#), a book which future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall referred to as the "Bible" for civil rights litigators. Like other



Pauli Murray, 1946, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



activists, during the infamous [McCarthy](#) witch hunts of the 1950s, Murray was targeted. They lost a post at the U.S. State Department in 1952 because the people who had supplied Murray's references – [Eleanor Roosevelt](#), [Thurgood Marshall](#), and [A. Philip Randolph](#) – had been labeled by Senator McCarthy as radicals.

In 1956 Murray published their first autobiography, [*Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*](#), which chronicles the impact of white supremacy on multiple generations of Murray's family. They also met Ruth Bader Ginsberg who later credited Murray's legal scholarship as the basis for a legal argument Ginsberg used that the Equal Protection Clause applied to women. It was also in 1956 that Murray met the woman who became their life-long, but clandestine, partner.

In 1960, after teaching for a semester at a law school in Ghana, Murray enrolled at Yale Law School where they earned their doctorate, becoming the first African American woman to do so. They also mentored other women activists, including [Marian Wright Edelman](#), [Eleanor Holmes Norton](#), and [Patricia Roberts Harris](#) each of whom became important civic and political leaders.

A year later, President John F. Kennedy appointed Murray to serve on the [Commission on the Status of Women](#). Working closely with leaders from various organizations, Murray grew frustrated that the organizations were dominated by men. Murray criticized the "... disparity between the major role which Negro women...are playing in the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle, and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions."

Similarly, in 1966, after co-founding the [National Organization for Women](#) (NOW), Murray later distanced themselves because they thought that NOW didn't fully address the issues facing Black and working-class women.

From 1968 – 1973, Murray taught at Brandeis University. Following the death of their partner in 1973, Murray left teaching to fulfill what they called a spiritual longing. In 1977, Murray was the first African American woman [ordained](#) as an Episcopal priest. Murray died of cancer in July 1985.

Murray's second autobiography, [*Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*](#), was published posthumously in 1987 and later re-released as [*Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest and Poet*](#). Murray's most famous poem, [*Dark Testament*](#), written in 1943, was included in their only volume of poetry, [*Dark Testament: and other poems*](#), in 1970, and republished in 2018. To hear Murray reading *Dark Testament*, click [here](#). A documentary about Murray's life, entitled, [*My Name is Pauli Murray*](#), was recently released on Amazon Prime.

If Banned Books had a Hero, Mine would be Mary Ware Dennett.

Exciting news! My article about Mary Ware Dennett and her 1929 obscenity trial was featured in [Smithsonian Magazine](#). It tells the story of Mary's conviction for mailing a pamphlet called *The Sex Side of Life*, that she had written for her two boys in 1915.

Mary would have gone viral on TikTok, don't you think?

To read *The Sex Education Pamphlet that Sparked a Landmark Censorship Case* on Smithsonianmag.com, click [here](#). Let's show them how important it is to read about women we didn't learn about in school. Scroll past my bio at the end, and add your comments.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask Yourself: Scholars still debate what pronouns to use for Dr. Pauli Murray. How did you decide on the pronouns that best fit you and what do you imagine will be important about pronouns in the future?

Ask a Friend: Which pronouns best fit you?



Sharon Spaulding discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's great-grandson. Dennett has been included in [Time magazine](#) 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 [Smithsonian Magazine](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), [BOLD](#), and [Utah Stories](#). She lives near Salt Lake City with her

family and two dogs.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of 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

