



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“It may seem strange...but it is the dream of my life to see this wilderness turned into a prosperous country. Where this tangled mass of vine, brush, trees and rocks now are, to see homes with modern improvements surrounded by beautiful grassy lawns, flowers, shrubs and shade trees.”

Julia DeForest Tuttle



Julia Tuttle 1888, courtesy Broward County Library

The Mother of Miami

Julia DeForest Tuttle (1849-1898) was an American businesswoman, visionary, and developer of what became the City of Miami. She is recognized as the only woman in the U.S. to found a major city.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in January 1849, Julia Sturtevant married at the age of 19 and had two children. When her husband, an iron magnate, died ten years later and left her in debt, the resourceful Tuttle turned her home into a boarding house to pay the bills.

Writing to her long-time friend and fellow Cleveland native, John D. Rockefeller, Tuttle said, “I shall need to do something to increase my income...I have been thinking of getting something to do for a part of the year in a more genial climate...I could not do what would confine me constantly indoors or at a desk.”

Tuttle was already thinking of South Florida where her father had homesteaded an orange grove. In 1891, Tuttle’s father died and left her his estate. The area, known as Fort Dallas, after an old military outpost, was remote, rugged, and mostly uninhabited. But Tuttle jumped at the opportunity. She sold her house in Cleveland and arrived by barge in Biscayne Bay “with her adult children, furniture, and cows.”

Tuttle was convinced that a city located at the mouth of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay, would become one of the greatest in the country. She envisioned it as “a center of trade for the United States with South America.” Tuttle decided to make it happen. With money from her parents’ estate, she purchased 640 acres at the mouth of the river and also bought Fort Dallas. Tuttle renovated the building, made it her [home](#), and it became one of the area's grandest estates.

Tuttle also built the first major lodging site, Hotel Miami. Later, it was used to house workers who came to build the city. She is also credited with establishing the first laundry, bakery, and dairy. But Tuttle knew that to build a strong economy, merchants, citrus growers, and tourists needed a railroad line. She launched an extensive campaign to convince railroad tycoon, [Henry Flagler](#) to extend his train track to the area. To underwrite the costs, Tuttle offered to divide her real estate holdings with Flagler.

Tuttle’s efforts were ignored until the [Great Freeze](#) of 1894–1895 devastated the orange crops of central and northern Florida, destroying fortunes overnight. The orange groves where Tuttle lived in the south, were unharmed.

Although there is some debate about the details, the story is that when the freeze hit, Tuttle picked fresh orange blossoms from her garden and sent them to Flagler. He gave in. As promised, Tuttle deeded land to Flagler to build the Royal Palm Hotel and a railroad station.

On April 22, 1896, the [Florida East Coast Railway](#) line opened. Three months later, Tuttle, who was unable to vote because of her gender, watched as male residents voted to incorporate the new city of Miami. After its incorporation, Tuttle became one of the first directors of the Bank of Bay Biscayne. When customers complained that a woman was handling their money, Tuttle resigned.



Bronze statue of Julia Tuttle, erected 2010

Although Tuttle lived to see her dream realized, she didn’t live long enough to witness a return on her significant investment. She died two years later in 1898 from meningitis. She was 49. With her untimely death and the large tracts of land she had deeded to Flagler, Tuttle left behind large debts, forcing her children to sell her remaining properties.

The [Miami Commission on the Status of Women](#) launched a campaign in 1996 to give Tuttle the recognition she deserved. A bronze statue of Tuttle was erected fourteen years later facing the seaport. It depicts Tuttle holding oranges and orange blossoms, and her skirt is embossed with scenes of early life.

Recently, the New York Times ran an [obituary](#) of Tuttle in its "Overlooked" series.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask a friend: Have you ever risked everything for the possibility of something greater?

Ask Yourself: Would I be unwilling to give up everything to fulfill a dream? What would be the hardest thing to let go?

[Sharon Spaulding](#) is an historian and researcher who specializes in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Spaulding is at work on a book about Dennett. In 2020,



[Time magazine](#) included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Spaulding received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her journalism has appeared in [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), [BOLD](#), and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband 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.

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