



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“A country...which fails to allow its women to choose and develop their individual beings...thrusts away from itself a large part of the human resources which can give it strength and vitality.”

Eunice Hunton Carter



The Mastermind Behind a Mob Take Down

The granddaughter of slaves, Eunice Hunton Carter was the [first](#) Black woman in New York to become Assistant District Attorney. The only person of color and woman among an all-white male team of special prosecutors, Carter was the mastermind that took down the notorious [Lucky Luciano](#), then most powerful Mafia boss in the country and one of the most brutal in history.

[Born](#) in 1899 in Atlanta, Georgia, Eunice Carter grew up in a well-educated family of activists. Her parents held high-level jobs with the NAACP and the YMCA, and were active in the fight for racial justice. Her mother was also a suffragist. In 1906, in what became known as the [Atlanta Race Massacre](#), white mobs stormed into Black neighborhoods killing dozens, wounding others, and setting fire to homes, businesses, and

churches. Fomented by the [Ku Klux Klan](#), the violence was so horrific that Carter's family was forced to head North where they settled in Brooklyn, New York, a year later.

The experience made a lasting impression on the young Carter. [According](#) to family lore, at the age of eight, she declared her life's mission to be "putting bad people in jail." An honor student, in 1917 she enrolled at [Smith College](#) and majored in government. Four years later, she completed both her undergraduate and master's degrees. She was the second woman in the school's history to earn both degrees in four years. At Smith, she befriended one of many political connections, [Calvin Coolidge](#), who, in 1923, became President of the United States. He mentored Carter and she later included such luminaries as [First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt](#) and civil rights activist [Mary McCloud Bethune](#), among her friends.



Following graduation, Carter became a social worker and married a dentist. She also became active in the [Pan-African Congress](#), a forerunner to the United Nations. The Congress regularly convened leaders from African nations to strategize about the peaceful liberation of their countries from colonial rule. This helped to shape Carter's world views that issues of race, gender, and economic opportunity, were not limited to the U.S.

By the end of the 1920s, Carter was ready for change. She enrolled in [Fordham Law School's](#) evening program while working full-time for the Harlem Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee. She graduated in 1932, the [first](#) African American woman to do so. At the time, there were few female attorneys and Black women lawyers were almost non-existent. Carter set up her own practice in Harlem, but struggled to find clients. Soon, however, New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia [appointed](#) her as a prosecutor in what was known as ["Women's Court"](#) which dealt with prostitution and so-called "morals" cases.



In 1934 she was [nominated](#) by the Republican Party to run for state assembly. She campaigned on a platform of enforcing legal compliance for tenement housing and also providing unemployment insurance for workers. She lost by just 1,600 votes.

The following year, Carter became the [first](#) Black woman to serve as assistant district attorney in the State of New York. She joined an elite team of 19 white male lawyers who were then known as the ["Twenty Against the Underworld."](#) Carter was the only person of color and the only woman.

Their mission was to end New York's organized crime syndicates which had gained enormous power during [Prohibition](#) and the [Great Depression](#). The mob was known for its brutality in running racketeering and illegal gambling operations, supplying bootleg liquor, and corrupting the political system. In particular, the team focused on the mob boss, "Lucky" Luciano. Luciano had united the biggest crime families across the city's five boroughs and was considered to be untouchable by law enforcement.

The team set to work trying to connect Luciano to criminal activity, but he was well-insulated against prosecution. According to Carter's grandson and biographer, [Stephen Carter](#), "While the 19 white men...investigated corruption of the sort that made the front pages of the papers, Eunice was sent into the wilderness, consigned to what prosecutors of the era considered women's work."

Yet in that wilderness, Carter cracked the case. Drawing on her experience in the Women's Court, she pieced together a connection between prostitution rings and organized crime. At first, her boss dismissed the theory, but after several months of dead ends, Carter finally convinced him to reconsider the evidence she had amassed. This time, Carter's boss approved wire taps and raids on more than 80 brothels. The hope was that a few of the women arrested might be willing to talk.

Carter conducted more than 100 interviews and succeeded in getting three women to connect Luciano to the brothels. This was key evidence at trial. In June 1936, Luciano was convicted to 30 to 50 years in prison and later deported to Italy.

During the trial, Carter was consigned to the role of courtroom observer and didn't help to argue the case. Yet her strategy earned her the [nickname](#), "Lady Racketbuster." In 1937, Carter was promoted to lead the Special Sessions Bureau of New York County's criminal justice system, a department that handled 14,000 cases a year and made Carter one of the highest paid African American lawyers in the country. In 1945 she returned to private practice.

Following the end of WWII, in 1945 Carter was one of 15 women [invited](#) to the founding session of the [United Nations](#). Two years later, she became a consultant to the UN serving on several economic, social, and legal councils. In 1955, she was elected to the highest position held by a woman at the UN. In 1962 she joined the U.S. Committee for the UN Economic and Social Council.

Although Carter's success was unparalleled, one goal eluded her: becoming a judge. Twice she was passed over in favor of an African American man.

Throughout her career, Carter traveled and lectured in support of racial justice. She was active in the [National Council of Negro Women](#), the [National Association of Women Lawyers](#), the [New York Women's Bar Association](#), the [YWCA](#), and the [Harlem Lawyers Association](#).

She died from cancer on January 25, 1970.

Carter's legacy was all but forgotten until her grandson, Stephen L. Carter, a professor at Yale Law School, published her biography in 2018: [Invisible: The Forgotten Story of the Black Woman Lawyer Who Took Down America's Most Powerful Mobster](#). She was also the inspiration behind a character in the [HBO series Boardwalk Empire](#).



*Eunice Carter Plaque
at Manhattan DA's Office*

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask a friend: What qualities did Eunice Carter possess to overcome such racial and gender opposition and set so many "firsts?"

Ask yourself: How does her legacy inspire you?

Thank you!

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[Sharon Spaulding](#) specializes in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Sharon is writing a book about Dennett. In 2020, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her essays have appeared in [Ms. magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and her black lab, Hank.

Sharon is available to speak about Dennett and the forgotten stories of other women, as well as the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her at [SharonSpaulding.com](#).

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