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Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“There is nothing in Greek sculpture finer than her figure.”

Referring to Hettie Anderson
The New York Journal and Advertiser 1899



Photo, Norman L. Coe Studio

The Face of Liberty: Meet Hettie Anderson

After escaping the violence of Jim Crow segregation in the South, in the 1890s and early 20th century, art model [Hettie Anderson](#) came to embody the face, figure, and spirit of America in monumental sculptures, paintings, and U.S. currency. Muse to many of the leading artists of the [Gilded Age](#), Anderson portrayed the physical and spiritual representations of ideals such as *Liberty*, *Fame*, and *Victory*.

Yet little is known about the iconic Anderson.

Harriette Eugenia Dickerson was [born](#) in 1873 in Columbia, South Carolina. For unknown reasons, she later adopted Anderson as her last name. Around 1895, Anderson and her mother [moved](#) to New York where she worked as a seamstress and attended classes at the Art Students League.



Photo, Jay Dobkin, Wikimedia Commons

One day, Anderson stepped in front of the easel to model. It changed her life. Soon, newspapers [lauded](#) Anderson for her “imposing” and “quintessential” figure and her features were described as “heroic.” She captured the imagination of some of the most important sculptors and painters of the day, including [Augustus Saint-Gaudens](#), [Daniel Chester French](#), and [John LaFarge](#).

Light-skinned, Anderson and her family had been identified in the South Carolina Census as “mulatto.” In New York, she was described as “White.” No one knows what she told her friends, but at least some of her art colleagues were aware of her African American heritage.

By 1897, Saint-Gaudens had chosen Anderson to model for his [monument](#) to the Civil War General Tecumseh Sherman. As the Greek, winged Victory, Anderson blazes a path ahead of Sherman, holding a torch in one hand and an olive branch in the other.



Describing Anderson to his niece, Saint-Gaudens wrote:

“...I commence the nude of Victory from a South Carolinian girl with a figure like a goddess.” He described her as “the handsomest model I have ever seen of either sex...” Anderson again posed for Saint-Gaudens as Liberty when he was commissioned



Daniel Chester French, *The Spirit of Life*. Photo, Williams College.

to design new American coins. Borrowing from the Sherman monument, Anderson's likeness appears on one side of Saint-Gaudens' \$20 gold coin.

Saint-Gaudens died in 1907 but Anderson's place as one of the most sought-after muses, was secure. She portrayed the goddess, Athena, for [John La Farge](#) in his [mural](#) for the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. She also posed for Daniel Chester French's [The Spirit of Life](#), a sculptural monument in Saratoga Springs, NY.

Anderson's figure can be seen on the [doors](#) of the Boston library and she appears in a mural by [Edwin Blashfield at the Library of Congress](#). There is evidence that she posed for Adolph Alexander Weinman's sculpture, [Civic Fame](#), which crowns New York City's Municipal Building.



Photo by Victor Pytko

In the 1890s, Saint-Gaudens made a bronze bust of Anderson and gave it to her as a gift. Anderson copyrighted the portrait. After his death, she loaned it to a traveling retrospective of his work, but when Saint-Gaudens' heirs requested permission to make replicas of the bust, Anderson refused. This led to a [dispute](#) with the family who then omitted Anderson's identity and the bust from the sculptor's official catalogue of work. The feud contributed to Anderson's name being disassociated from the artist she had profoundly inspired.

With the end of World War I and the growing influence of [Cubism](#) on American art, Greek inspired monuments fell out of favor. Anderson's career began to fade and she took a job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a classroom attendant. By this time, the museum had begun collecting works by many of the artists she had inspired. It is unclear whether Anderson shared her personal connection to these works with her museum colleagues.

Anderson remained in New York until her death in 1938 from heart failure. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the family plot near her birthplace in South Carolina.

Anderson remained largely unknown until the late 1990s when [Willow Hagans](#), a cousin and independent researcher, learned her story from an elderly grandmother. Hagans and her husband began researching and publishing scholarly articles about Anderson. In August, 2021, *The New York Times* [featured](#) Anderson in its series, *Overlooked No More*.

In April 2023, the City of Columbia and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History erected a [plaque](#) in her honor at the site of her birthplace.



Civic Fame, Adolph Alexander Weinman. Architectural Record.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

During her young adult life, Hettie Anderson was one of the most recognizable figures in America. More than 100 years later, she is only now being rediscovered.

Ask a Friend: Why do you think that is?

Ask Yourself: How do we keep stories like Anderson's alive?

Sneak Peak: Women Make History Merch!

[Check out](#) our collection of six coffee mugs and colorful book bag that celebrate just a few of the remarkable women I've written about. Your purchase helps keep their stories alive. During Women's History Month in March, \$1 from the sale of each item will be donated to fund research for women's health.





[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve 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 essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She 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. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

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