



# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school

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**"Southern is a hot summer day that brings on a violent thunderstorm, cooling the air and bringing up smells of the earth that tempt us to eat the soil."**

***Edna Lewis,  
Grande Dame of Southern Cooking***



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### **Chef Edna Lewis: Celebrating Southern & African-American Heritage One Meal at a Time**

The granddaughter of emancipated slaves, [Edna Regina Lewis](#) was born in 1916 in a small farming community in Virginia. Later known as the Grande Dame of Southern cooking, Lewis inspired generations to return to farm-to-table cooking, and was among the first Black women to author a cookbook without concealing her race or gender.

One of [eight](#) children, Lewis helped her family grow, forage, and harvest food on a small family farm. It instilled in her a love of fresh, seasonal ingredients. In an [interview](#) with the Washington Post, she later remarked, "My mother died when I was 18. Up until then, I never saw a tin can in my house."

From an early age, Lewis learned her craft helping her mother and extended family

prepare three meals a day. Using a wood-fired stove, Lewis could tell when a cake was done by simply [listening](#) to the sound it made. Too poor to purchase utensils such as measuring spoons, they used a system of coins to determine the correct amounts for ingredients: baking powder was measured on pennies, salt on dimes, and baking soda on nickels. Inspired by the joy and sense of community centered around cooking, Lewis' early memories fueled her dream of being a chef.

At age 16 Lewis struck out alone to join the [Great Migration](#) north. She moved first to Washington, D.C., and then to New York City. Along the way, she married Steven Kingston, a retired Merchant Marine cook.

Arriving in New York, Lewis took a job in a [Brooklyn](#) laundry, but was quickly [dismissed](#) because she didn't know how to iron. However, she knew how to sew. Her skill as a seamstress soon led to a job copying designer clothing for many of New York's celebrities including [Marilyn Monroe](#). For a time, Lewis found a creative outlet in making African-inspired dresses. But it didn't replace her passion for food.

Lewis hosted dinner parties and a seat at her table became a coveted invitation. In 1949, she teamed up with a friend, John Nicholson, to open [Café Nicholson](#) on the East side. As head chef, Lewis served up her own Southern dishes which became wildly popular with their clientele. Celebrities such as Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams, Greta Garbo, Salvador Dali, and Eleanor Roosevelt all enjoyed her meals.

Lewis' husband, however, grew uncomfortable with his wife's growing celebrity. In 1954, she [resigned](#) as chef but remained a business partner. Soon, she began building her brand as a private caterer. She taught cooking classes, and took a few jobs cooking at various restaurants along the East Coast.

In the early 1970s when the demand for fresh, natural ingredients began to capture the public's imagination, Lewis wrote her first cookbook. Although women chefs were rare, and Black, female chefs were almost non-existent, Lewis used her own name and photograph when she published [The Edna Lewis Cookbook](#) in 1972.



It was also in the 1970s that Lewis met Judith Jones, the renowned editor who had worked with Julia Child on her cookbooks. Teaming up with Jones, Lewis published her second cookbook, [The Taste of Country Cooking](#), in 1976. Part memoir, it is filled with Lewis' childhood [memories](#) and stories about Southern and African-American cultural traditions. The book includes recipes for celebrations such as Emancipation Day.

*The Taste of Country Cooking* launched a wave of cookbooks from both Black and White authors celebrating Southern cuisine. *The New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne [said](#) it "...may well be the most entertaining regional cookbook in America." In 1988, Lewis published her third cookbook, [In Pursuit of Flavor](#), with Mary Goodbody.

Lewis retired to Georgia in the early 1990s. She taught cooking and mentored Scott Peacock, then head chef at the Georgia governor's mansion. Together, they wrote [The](#)



[Gift of Southern Cooking: Recipes and Revelations from Two Great American Cooks](#) in 2003.

Lewis also [co-founded](#) the [Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food](#) in the mid-1990s to share, reproduce, and rekindle traditional methods of cooking Southern food.

In her later years Lewis received numerous [awards](#) and honors including a listing in “*Who’s Who in American Cooking*,” an honorary Ph.D. in Culinary Arts from Johnson & Wales University, and the James Beard Living Legend Award. Lewis was named “Grande Dame” by Les Dames d’Escoffier International in 1999. A documentary, [Fried Chicken and Sweet Potato Pie](#) (2006), traces her life and influence. In 2014, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in Lewis’ honor, recognizing her as a celebrity chef.

Lewis died from cancer in 2006 just shy of her 90th birthday.

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## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

**Ask Yourself:** How have my childhood memories of food shaped who I am?

**Ask a Friend:** How do family recipes and foods honor traditions in your family?



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

Sharon is also a popular speaker at women’s and civic groups, book clubs, and was recently a moderator at the [San Francisco Writers Conference](#). 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.

She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

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