



May 2018 Her Story ENewsletter Sunday School Pioneers

Public education as we know it in the United States was not available prior to the middle of the 1800s. Women led education reform in many areas including in the establishment of Sunday Schools. In this month's enewsletter we feature two Sunday School Pioneers: Catherine Ferguson and Rebecca Gratz.

Catherine (Katy) Ferguson was an eight-year old slave, living in New York City, when her mother was sold. Determined to be free and to improve people's lives, Ferguson found someone to buy her freedom when she was 16 on the condition that the payment be repaid. Ferguson paid off half the \$200 debt in 11 months and a benefactor from her church paid the other \$100. Ferguson made wedding cakes to support herself; allegedly the best wedding cakes in town!



Catherine Ferguson

One of the ways in which she improved people's lives was to take children off the streets on Sunday morning and provide them with religious education. Because she was illiterate, others taught the Sunday School classes. The minister of her church heard of her efforts and, in approximately 1814, offered the basement of the church for the location of her "Sunday School." It was later known as the Murray Street Sabbath School. Ferguson also fostered 48 children, including twenty white children. When she died in 1854, the obituary printed in The New York Daily Tribune included: "Thousands in this community have heard of or known Katy Ferguson. . . the celebrated cake-maker for weddings and other social parties. But many . . . may be ignorant of the extraordinary good deeds which crowned her life." Ferguson not only was an education pioneer, she lived a mission of making the world a better place.



Rebecca Gratz

A philanthropist in Philadelphia, Rebecca Gratz's upbringing was quite different from that of Catherine Ferguson. Born to a wealthy family, Gratz was educated in women's academies and participated in elite Philadelphia society. In 1801, she, along with other members of her family and other prominent women in Philadelphia, founded the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. She served as its first secretary. Gratz helped found an orphan asylum in Philadelphia and advised her sister-in-law who established one in Kentucky. She founded the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (FHBS) in 1819 after watching the actions of Philadelphia's charitable Christian women.

Gratz was interested in religious education and in 1838 established the Hebrew Sunday School in association with FHBS. She served as superintendent, 50 students were enrolled, and Jewish education was delivered through the Sunday School format. In 1993, the successor organization to the Hebrew Sunday School was merged with another organization in Philadelphia to form the Community Hebrew Schools of Greater Philadelphia. Gratz's model is said to "provide the basic structure of supplemental Jewish education in the United States."

Catherine Ferguson and Rebecca Gratz are among the more than 850 women profiled in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women's accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us. Help us to tell women's stories!

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