



A TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN  
WHO CHANGED AMERICA



## January 2026 Her Story ENewsletter Women and the Environment

We learned about another fascinating woman recently – naturalist, educator, activist, and author May Theilgaard Watts. Influenced by her landscape gardener Danish immigrant father, Watts studied botany and ecology at the University of Chicago and graduated in 1918. When she was hired full-time as a naturalist by The Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois in 1942, she developed science education programs. She also wrote books, poems, and articles. Watts led the effort to create the Illinois Prairie Path (1963), a network of trails converted from abandoned railways. Watts is credited as the founder of what is now called the Rails to Trails movement.



Another woman who strove to improve our environment was **Ruth Patrick** whose work was in the field of limnology, the study of freshwater ecosystems. Her ideas led to the methods by which the environmental health of rivers and streams is evaluated today. She studied diatoms: single-celled algae that are a basic food source for organisms living in fresh water. She invented the diatometer; measuring the diatoms revealed both the type and the extent of pollution in a body of water. Her methods have been used around the world to help determine water quality. Patrick's studies contributed significantly to the developing field of ecology and established for the first time a set of aquatic indices.

Patrick graduated from Coker College in 1929 and then attended the University of Virginia where she received her master's and Ph.D. Patrick was in the vanguard of scientists introducing the concept of biodiversity. Today, when scientists talk about biodiversity as a key indicator of ecosystem health, they call it the "Patrick Principle." Her many honors include induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame and receipt of the National Medal of Science from President Bill Clinton.



**Rachel Carson**, a marine biologist, presented the idea that is deeply embedded in all her writing: that we, as humans, are only one part of the nature chain and that as individuals we have the capacity to powerfully alter the environment. Carson began her career as an aquatic biologist for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries. She became a full-time writer in the 1950s, after the success of her bestseller *The Sea Around Us*.

In 1962, her book *Silent Spring* was published. This book, an exposé on the dangers of the pesticide DDT, is credited with launching environmental awareness, leading to the first Earth Day in 1970, and to the entire environmental movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The title was derived from Carson's dire view of the future when birds would no longer be living, due to the damage from DDT. Her many awards include her posthumous induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame, posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter, and a 1981 United States postage stamp.

Ruth Patrick and Rachel Carson 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. Continue to help us tell women's stories!

Charlotte Waisman and Jill Tietjen

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