



September 2026 Her Story ENewsletter The Legacy of Dolly Parton and other Advocates of Education



Entertainer and businesswoman Dolly Parton leaves behind an enduring legacy that has touched our lives. We can't imagine anyone who doesn't know about her brilliant entertainment career! What we want to highlight is her amazing outreach in the field of education. In 1988 Parton established the Dollywood Foundation to improve educational outcomes in Sevier County, Tennessee. The Foundation started Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in 1995 to honor her father who was illiterate; he never learned to read or write. The children enrolled in the Library program receive a book each month until they enter kindergarten. In 2018, Dolly Parton donated her 100 millionth book to the U.S. Library of Congress. More than 1600 communities participate in the program in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and Ireland.



Dolly Parton knew the value of education. So, too, did early education pioneers Catherine Ferguson and Myrtilla Miner. **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 they were the best wedding cakes in town!

One of the ways in which Ferguson 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 around 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 cakemaker for weddings and other social parties. But many . . . may be ignorant of the extraordinary good deeds which crowned her life."



Abolitionist and educator **Myrtilla Miner** viewed education as the key to ending slavery. After teaching in Rhode Island and Mississippi, she opened a school for African American girls in 1851 in Washington, DC. In 1853, she found a permanent home for the Normal School for Colored Girls. Before the Civil War, hers was the only school that offered education beyond the elementary level for African American girls. She was the subject of constant harassment, even from city leaders. One of her students said that Miner was "one of the bravest women I have ever known." The University of the District of Columbia traces its history back to Miner's Normal School. Today, an elementary school in the District of Columbia is named in her honor.

We profile more than 850 women 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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