

# Famous New Yorker Susan Elizabeth Frazier



Passport photo of Susan Elizabeth Frazier, taken September 1919

In 1892, Susan Elizabeth Frazier wrote, "Notwithstanding the obstacles that presented themselves to Afro-American women, some of them ... have removed obstacles, lived down oppression and fought their way nobly on to achieve the accomplishment of their aim." As an educator and activist, Frazier was one such woman.

Susan Elizabeth Frazier was born in New York City on May 29, 1864 to a family that had been free since at least the American Revolution. Susan wanted to teach and studied alongside white girls at the Normal College of the City of New York, later known as Hunter College. After graduating in 1888, she received a probationary license to work as a substitute teacher in New York's public schools.

In 1892, she helped found the Woman's Loyal Union, a civil-rights group, while her lecture at the Brooklyn Literary Union was one of the first to call attention to the

achievements of black women.

Frazier became the first black woman to make New York's eligible list for full-time teaching positions. In October 1894, the principal of P.S. 58 invited her to interview for a teaching position. He refused to hire her once he saw that she was black. When she protested, the school's board of trustees explained that having a black woman teach white students in a racially mixed school might cause trouble with white parents.

Frazier believed that she had been treated unjustly because of her race. As an activist, she resolved to fight for her right to teach. She petitioned the New York State Supreme Court for an order to compel the trustees to hire her. Her case received national attention.

In an October 1895 ruling, the presiding judge condemned racial prejudice, but rejected Frazier's claim. Under the law, the trustees could hire anyone from the eligible list; it was no violation of Frazier's rights if they chose someone else. Just as that ruling dashed her hopes, the Fourth Ward board of trustees hired Frazier in February 1896 to teach at School 34. She was the first black woman to teach an integrated student body in New York City. She continued to teach until 1923.

In 1917, when the U.S. entered World War I, Frazier was president of the Woman's Loyal Union. She saw black soldiers recruited into segregated units and assigned menial work instead of combat duty. To provide them material and emotional support, the Woman's Loyal Union became the official ladies' auxiliary for the 15th New York Infantry regiment. The auxiliary sent the troops books, comfort kits and other supplies the army didn't provide. The 15th became the 369th U.S. Infantry and was assigned to the French army. Better known as the "Harlem Hellfighters," they became one of the most-honored American fighting units of the war.

Susan Elizabeth Frazier continued to support the troops after the war ended in 1918. In 1919 she won a newspaper contest that enabled her to visit the 369th in France. She remained president of the 369th Regiment Auxiliary until she died on February 3, 1924. In death, Frazier continued to make history. In a tribute from the regiment, she was the first black woman to be buried with full military honors.

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To read a newspaper clipping about Frazier's court battle from the Dec. 28, 1895 edition of the *Cleveland Gazette* go to <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/detec68.html?ID=18460>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA News Media Literacy/NIE Program. All rights reserved 2018.

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