

Celebrating Women's History Month

Antoinette Brown Blackwell

(1825 — 1921)

When Antoinette Brown publicly declared her religious faith at the age of 9, the local church fathers were so impressed that they made her a full member of their congregation. When she grew up, however, she had to overcome the resistance of her elders to play a pioneering public role in American religion.

Brown was born in Henrietta, N.Y., on May 20, 1825 to parents who came from New England and practiced the Congregationalist faith of their Puritan ancestors. As she grew up, new ideas about religion swept through the Browns' neighborhood. Preachers of many denominations told large audiences that they should strive to achieve personal holiness and improve society through moral reform.

Brown's youthful religious devotion inspired her Congregationalist doctrine. After saving money she earned as an elementary school teacher, she persuaded her father to help pay her way through Oberlin College, a progressive school where men



A scan of an engraving of Antoinette Brown in *The History of Woman Suffrage: 1848-1861*

and women studied together.

The young woman enrolled at Oberlin to study literature, but theology was her real interest. However, when she enrolled in theology classes, Oberlin authorities objected. Some believed that women couldn't be ministers because the Bible instructed females to keep silent in church. Eventually, college officials allowed her to take the classes and occasionally preach in public, but they refused to award her a theology degree when she completed her studies.

Disappointed but determined, Brown became a public lecturer, speaking in favor of greater rights for women and against slavery and alcohol. She attended an anti-alcohol convention in the summer of 1853, but whenever she tried to speak, male delegates heckled her because they thought that women shouldn't speak publicly on social issues.

That same summer, Brown found the opportunity she'd been looking for when the First Congregational Church of South Butler, N.Y., invited her to become its pastor. On Sept. 15, 1853, the Rev. Antoinette Brown became the first ordained female minister in an American church.

In 1854, Brown left her church because she no longer accepted the Congregationalists' strict doctrines about predestined salvation and damnation. Instead, she joined the more tolerant Unitarian Church, but never attained another full-time ministry.

Brown took up social work and wrote scholarly books on religion and science. She gained a supportive family in 1856 by marrying Samuel Blackwell, whose sister Elizabeth was America's first female physician. They encouraged Brown to continue her intellectual career while raising daughters who became doctors and teachers.

In later life, Brown Blackwell became a respected author and public speaker. She preached in many churches, ordained new female ministers, and received honorary pastorates herself. In 1908, Oberlin College finally awarded her the degree in theology she had earned long ago.

Of her generation of female pioneers, only Brown Blackwell survived long enough to enjoy one right they had all struggled to attain. In November 1920, a year before her death at age 96, she cast her first ballot, marking a new phase of women's emergence into public life that she and others had fought so hard to achieve.

For more information about Antoinette Brown Blackwell, visit The Antoinette Brown Blackwell Society at <https://antoinettebrownblackwell.org/herstory/about-antoinette-brown-blackwell/>

This is one of a series of four Celebrating Women's History Month profiles, written by Kevin Gilbert for the New York Newspapers Foundation's News Media Literacy/Newspaper In Education Program.

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