

**Women Who Shaped America**

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**Quest Club  
January 9, 2026**



Women have always shaped America; indeed they've shaped the world. Sometimes in large ways. Sometimes in small. Some not recognized until much later. Some never. In elementary school most of us heard about Sacajawea, Harriet Tubman, Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Fort Wayne Hamilton sisters. Many know of our Foremothers fighting for women's suffrage and equality. Quest members most recently heard of Belle Green, Katherine Johnson, and Frances Perkins. There are more among the known. They have been celebrated in our books, our history, and our statues. And deservedly so.

But, and yes, there's a but. There is a conspicuous difference when placed alongside what we know about men's history. Talking with people in Quest about this paper I'd often hear "*you have to write about "X"*" and then I'd have to admit I'd never heard of "X". The Quester's response, whether male or female, was invariably "well, who writes the history?"

And yes - research backs the significant underrepresentation of women in US history texts – an important source of our collective learning. A study of those texts over three decades showed substantially fewer mentions of women (Clark et al., 2004). Even a glance at the listings of past Quest papers showed men were in the vast majority.

The good news – and yes there's some, is that as mentioned there has been a steady increase over the decades. In the 1960's it was 11 women for every 100 men. By 2000 it had increased up to 16 to 100 (Clark et al., 2004). Quest topics reflect this as well. We can talk later about whether this will hold or not, but for now let's celebrate some of the ones we know – they deserve credit. And let's shine a light on some that we may not know, who also deserve it.

## **The rights of the individual should be the primary object of all governments**

An early American revolutionary writer. One who had great influence. No, not Thomas Jefferson or John Adams. It was written by Mercy Otis Warren.

Born in 1728 into a prosperous Massachusetts family she plead for and received a classical education. In 1754 she married a politician. Both her activist family and husband gave proximity to leaders of the American Revolution. Over time she too became an activist.

Writing was her weapon of choice allowing access to places she was denied as a woman (White House). She often published anonymously. This allowed her work to be taken seriously since women often weren't. She used plays to satirize crown officials particularly targeting the Massachusetts royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson. She also corresponded with other revolutionaries. Founding fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson encouraged her. Adams praised her judgment as well as saying to others: "God Almighty... has entrusted her with Powers ... which... he bestows on very few of the human race."

After the Revolution she vehemently opposed the federalist nature of the proposed constitution. She was particularly concerned about the potential corruption of rulers and unchecked authority. Obviously she wasn't successful in blocking its ratification. However her widely circulated pamphlet "Observations on the new Constitution" in which she noted "*The*

*rights of the individual should be the primary object of all governments*" was critical to the successful addition of our bill of rights.

In the early 1800's she wrote one of the first histories of the American Revolution entitled "History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution. She faded from view until women's studies "discovered" her in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Clearly a founding mother. One that I think many of us have not known about. Well, until now.

### **Redefined Legacy**

Some women's work gets re-interpreted or even hijacked. As a result their legacy is unfairly tainted. Here are two women that unexpectedly shared that fate.

First, Phillis Wheatley. While Mercy Warren was writing political observations, Phillis Wheatley, was writing beautiful poetry. Unexpected as she was only 12 and had arrived in Boston in 1761 when a 7 year old girl. As a slave.

Purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston, they realized she was extraordinarily intelligent. They educated her in history, literature, Greek and Latin. When some of her poems were published, however, skeptics were sure an enslaved black girl could never write them. So her owner convened a panel of 18 influential Bostonian men to verify she had actually written them. Led by Thomas Hutchinson – yes, the one skewered that very same year by Mercy Otis Warren; they examined her poems and interrogated her. All 18 men signed a certificate attesting she was "qualified to write them". Eventually her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, with that attestation certificate at the front, got published in London in 1773. Well received it brought her fame both sides of the Atlantic, even receiving praise from Voltaire and George

Washington. In 1773 she was emancipated by the Wheatley family. And hit hard times. Sadly the first African American published author died at 30 in 1784.

Abolitionists used her as an example of the equal capacity of black people. But by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century her work was criticized for not firmly denouncing slavery. She was especially censured for her most famous poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” which begins “‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land” as seeming to show thankfulness for her theft from Africa (Wheatley, n.d.). This view of her work continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, in 1966, Northwestern professor Seymour Gross famously stated “This Negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome. Pious, grateful retiring and civil.”(Gates, 2010).

### **Reclaiming Her Legacy**

In the early 2000’s her work was revisited by the director of W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, Henry Louis Gates Jr. Among other things, he notes she did write poems that speak about the evils of slavery but given her historical context as an enslaved person, she absolutely could not be strident and direct, writing instead “... I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” (Wheatley, n.d.). Gates does not see her as a race traitor, but as a legitimate poet and worthy of reclaiming by Black Americans (Gates, Jr., 2002).

### **Harriet Beecher Stowe**

Unexpectedly there is a similarity between the legacies of the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Phillis Wheatley. Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom’s Cabin in 1852 to show the horrors of slavery. It certainly did. An instant best seller this emotional story sparked emotional

response. In it Uncle Tom is a moral character who dies as a Christ like martyr, refusing to divulge the location of two runaways. It was extraordinarily effective at galvanizing support for abolition.

Not surprisingly there was a reaction, mainly in the South. Anti-Tom novels sprang up refuting her portrayal of slavery. Instead they showed black characters as submissive and satisfied with their lot. Minstrel shows revising the storyline did the same and added racist caricatures. Calling someone an “Uncle Tom” became, and to a great extent still is, considered a pejorative label indicating someone is a race traitor.

### ***Reclaiming Her Legacy***

Similar to his work on Phillis Wheatley, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. takes a new look at Uncle Tom’s Cabin. He urges a consideration of the context of her time and asks us to note the hijacked and shifting view of Uncle Tom. He asks how African Americans judge what is “black enough” (Gates Jr. & Jefferson, n.d.). Clearly this is a nuanced topic and worthy of further exploration – perhaps in a future Quest paper? Suffice it to say both Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Beecher Stowe might be unpleasantly surprised to see what has happened to their beloved work.

### **Suffragettes and More**

1840. The World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. A pivotal moment for the women’s rights movement in America. If that sounds a little strange, wait.

Two American women attended. Entering the hall, they found women were required to sit in the back in a curtained segregated area. They were denied the right to speak or vote. Ironic considering this was a rights convention. Walking back to the hotel the two, who had not known

each other prior, discussed the events of the day. I suspect with a lot of energy. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton then resolved to hold a convention when back home.

Eight years later the Seneca Falls Convention was held. Over 300 people attended. A national women's movement grew and included many other familiar names among them Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Alice Paul. One name however we might not know. Matilda Gage. Let's look at her.

Matilda Gage, was born in 1826 and raised by a progressive and abolitionist family. She was a major leader in the women's movement. In addition to suffrage, she promoted indigenous rights, the separation of church and state and the right to abortion. She became seen as too radical, leading to her eviction from the movement.

She wasn't done. She was also a writer. Of interest for us is her writing on women and inventions. Noting throughout history it had been thought that women did not have the intellect to contribute to science and invention, she disagreed. In her 1870 volume "Women as Inventor" Gage pointed out numerous cases proving the opposite. Among them were Emily Goss Davenport, inventor of the deep sea telescope and Sara Mather co-inventor of the early electric motor. Others held patents such as Margaret Knight, flat bottom bag, and Mary Walton, a smoke-burner. Gage also claimed the horseshoe machine and the origin of the cotton gin came from women but were credited to men (Gage, 1883).

She had questions. Why don't we know about these women? Why aren't there more patents held by women?

Her answer? Women's education was limited, lives were dominated by domestic labor, being inventive was seen unfeminine, and often the laws gave husbands control over their wives work and pay.

- Her conclusion? Women's inventions were often taken, hidden, or credited to men. They profited from it. She was one of the first to note and document this. Sadly Matilda Gage experienced this herself and today there are few that know who she is. Although that is changing.

## **Naming the Pattern**

Let's skip to almost one hundred years later. 1969. Margaret Rossiter was a history of science student at Yale University. During an informal gathering she asked professors present if there had ever been women scientists. Their answers? No. None. Never (Rossiter, 1993). Even a mention of Nobel Prize winner, Madame Curie, cast her as a helpmate to her husband. This troubled her but like all good PhD students she focused on completing her degree and her dissertation -- on agricultural chemists. It was only later, during postdoctoral work at Harvard, she decided to investigate this claim further.

Upon perusal of the American Men of Science – an early reference book – she discovered there were hundreds of women listed within. Often noting they were “tucked” in or initials were used instead of first names perhaps to disguise they were a woman.

This did it. This set her life mission. For the next five decades she went on an excavation to bring women's contributions to light. Along the way she uncovered a multitude of instances of

not just inadvertent loss, but deliberate theft. Not just stuck in the shadows, but deliberately hidden.

Remember Matilda Gage? During her journey, Rossiter discovered Gage's 1870 Women as Inventor pamphlet and coined the invisibility of women's accomplishments in science as the Matilda Effect. This gave a name to the pattern. Although Rossiter initially was focused on science, it is clear it applies to all manner of endeavors. Let's see it in action.

### **Valor Denied, Delayed, Restored**

There are many ways lose credit. Fortunately these women's stories finally did see the light – some delayed, restored and some too late for them to see.

By the end of the Civil War the Union Army had had an estimated 6 to 8,000 surgeons in service. Women were not allowed to be formally commissioned but they could serve as "contract" surgeons. Dr. Mary E. Walker did so unpaid. She experienced all war has to offer which included service in the battlefield, hospitals and a stint as a prisoner of war.

In 1865 President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Medal of Honor. He acknowledged she was technically not allowed to receive it as she was not commissioned. Nonetheless as President he said she earned it. In 1917 her medal was revoked since she wasn't commissioned (which again, women could not be). She refused to surrender it and henceforth until her death in 1919 she always wore it when in public. In 1977 President Carter restored it (U.S. National Park Service, 2025).

### **DNA's Discovery – A Murky Past**

Cambridge England. 1953. Two scientists rushed to the Eagle pub across the street proclaiming “We have discovered the secret of life”. Revealing the structure of DNA was a major discovery, providing the foundation for modern genetics, and, as it turns out, worthy of the Nobel prize. One that was later awarded to James Watson, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins. Not included was Rosalind Franklin.

Let’s back up a bit. It’s a complicated story and called one of the most “egregious rip-offs in the history of science” (Berger, 2025).

Born in London in 1920, Rosalind Franklin was a Cambridge trained scientist. She was initially involved in research on coal. There she gained expertise in X-ray crystallography which is used to figure out the structure of very small objects. That expertise led to a position at King’s College in 1951 to work on the challenge of DNA imaging. At that time it wasn’t at all clear what DNA really looked like or how it stored and replicated genetic information.

Her arrival at King’s college was marred by unclear communication over authority and resulted in a stressful relationship between her and lab colleague, Maurice Wilkins. The poor relationship would prove to her detriment in the future. Regardless, within weeks she transformed the research there.

Over at Cambridge two scientists, British James Watson, and an American, Francis Crick, were racing to be first to build a DNA model. Lack of good data rendered early efforts flawed. This was sharply pointed out by Franklin, during a presentation, winning her no friends

She continued at King’s, creating new techniques, adapting a camera and was able at last obtain the now famous PHOTO 51 - the clearest image of DNA ever taken. She then wrote a report summarizing her data, and conclusions.

Remember the poor relationship between her and her lab colleague, Wilkins? He took PHOTO 51 without Franklin's knowledge or permission and showed it to Watson and Crick. The two also gained access to her written report, again without knowledge or permission.

Watson later described it as an Ah Ha! moment. With the picture and the report data they deduced the double-helix structure of DNA. They published this finding in 1953 in Nature Magazine. A *very slight* nod was given to her in a foot note: *We have also been stimulated by a knowledge of the general nature of the unpublished experimental results and ideas of Dr. Wilkins, Dr. Franklin and their coworkers...*") That knowledge was not general. It was specific.

Franklin congratulated them on the discovery which has affected all the world, including America. She went on to other research. She actually interacted with both Watson and Crick later. In 1958 she died of ovarian cancer never knowing their discovery relied on seeing her work. Nor did others. Watson and Crick, when awarded the NOBEL prize in 1962 did not acknowledge her critical contribution (Jackson, n.d.).

As often happens, truth was eventually revealed. In his book, The Double Helix, Watson while portraying Franklin in various insulting and misogynistic ways, also acknowledged the unofficial acquisition of information saying "Rosy of course did not directly give us her data. For that matter, no one at King's realized they were in our hands" (Watson, 1968). Indignation from other researchers motivated Watson to give some credit but sadly too later for her (Markel, 2021).

**Charles Darrow (what's a man doing here?)**

Like so many during the Great Depression, Charles Darrow, was searching ways to support his family. He remembered playing a popular game with friends. He copied their home made version, and adapted it. In 1935 he sold it to Parker Brothers. This is the now famous Monopoly.

The story of a desperate father lent a mythology to its creation. The only problem? It actually wasn't his to sell ("Ever cheat at monopoly?", 2015).

Years earlier during the gilded age, a young inventor in Washington DC, Elizabeth Magie, became concerned about land monopolies. She saw them contributing to a growing divide between rich and poor. In 1904 she invented and patented The Landlord's Game as a teaching tool about the evils of monopolies (Gandhi, 2025). She wrote two sets of rules. One where the game was cooperative and all could win, and one where it was capitalistic and there was one winner. It became popular and people often played homemade versions. Several universities used it in economics classes. A glance at the two shows the similarities to each other.

Unlike Rosalind Franklin, who died before she could discover the theft of her work, Magie was alive when Parker Brothers produced Monopoly. She protested. Newspaper accounts carried her story. Parker Brothers then gave \$500 for her creation. She accepted thinking at least it would keep the education going. I think we can all agree that didn't happen.

Meanwhile Darrow made enough money to retire at age 46 a millionaire (Pilon, 2015).

To go on. Parker essentially buried Magie's invention and kept Darrow's heartwarming story as their legend. Plot Twist here! Ironically she was re-discovered when more recently a San Francisco State professor attempted to patent an "Anti-Monopoly" game and entered a fight with Parker Brothers. In the ensuing battle Magie's story was brought to life. Although monetary award is beyond her grasp she should now get the credit she deserves (Pilon, 2015).

And Monopoly continues to this day. Both the game and in the real word.

## **Emerging Visibility**

Some women lived long enough and are so visible that they are hard to ignore! Lillian and Frank Gilbreth were an unusual couple for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was a psychologist emphasizing physical and mental well being of workers. He was an expert in time-motion study and using film to analyze work processes. Their joint goal was efficiency by eliminating unnecessary movements and fatigue in human motion work. They believed systems could be adapted for workers and thus were early pioneers of ergonomics and inclusion of the disabled. They worked to ensure jobs were designed with workers abilities in mind by using specialized tools, equipment, workstations and breaking down tasks. In their business they were true partners but not necessarily seen this way by others. He was more famous due to his public appearances – and his sex. Publications together usually had his name first and hers without a PhD and often with initials.

In 1924 Frank died suddenly. She was 46. Shortly afterwards most corporate clients cancelled their contract because she was a woman. She worked quickly to re-build the company by giving lectures, and teaching classes. Still not regaining enough business her son later said she decided “If the only way to enter a man’s field was through the kitchen door, that’s the way she’d enter” (Gilbreth and Gilbreth, 1951).

Working with GE and others she consulted on how to improve kitchen layouts and appliance designs. She is responsible for the design of work triangles in kitchens to ease the flow. She also gave us refrigerators drawers, invented the foot pedal trash can and designed many other

improvements. Her reputation spread and expertise was sought by companies, government, universities and even the White House. She could now leave the kitchen when she wanted.

In 1935 she became the first woman engineering professor at Purdue. In 1965, at age 87, she became the first woman elected to the National Academy of Engineering. Along the way she received over 20 honorary doctorate degrees among numerous other awards. She is considered one of the pioneers of a new field – Industrial Organizational Psychology (Purdue University, n.d.).

She did this all while raising her sizeable family and applying efficiency principles with them as well. I may have forgotten to mention that. But maybe you knew it. Two of her children immortalized it in the book and later the movie “Cheaper by the Dozen” (Gilbreth & Gilbreth Carey, 2011).

## **Out of the Shadows**

"Get the girl to check the numbers." The 44 year old girl, Katherine Johnson, a "human computer" working for NASA flight research did so and affirmed they were good. Upon being told, John Glen, knowing she had the Right Stuff, responded - "If she says they're good, then I am ready to go."

And yes this really happened. Johnson confirming by hand the computer calculations for the Mercury orbit. Essentially she checked the computer systems work. Although known within NASA she and other human computers, – Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan were hidden in

the shadows until 2016. You may remember them from the book and movie “Hidden Figures” or Sister Elise’s 2022 Quest paper “Katherine Goble Johnson”.

Johnson received numerous awards and at age 97 was given Presidential Medal of Freedom, by our first African American president. Perhaps this is fitting because she was not only a woman, but an African American (NASA, 2016).

### **A *Brief* Interlude (my apologies. I had to.)**

No writing on Women who Shaped America would be complete with mentioning Sara Blakely. With no fashion background, she fashioned her own prototype of an undergarment by cutting the feet off of panty hose. She was rejected by investors and hundreds of businesses. After persistence efforts she persuaded one mill to take a chance. She handled all marketing, patents and packaging herself. After Neiman Marcus bought her project, Oprah listed it on her annual list of “Favorite things. Sales skyrocketed, she built a billion dollar company, and changed the shape of America. Literally. What was it?

SPANX.

### **. Recognized in their Time**

In 1930 Mr. Frances Oldham was offered a pharmacology assistantship at the University of Chicago. Knowing the University preferred men, Miss Frances Oldham’s advisor urged her to accept without correcting the honorific. America may be glad she did.

Years later, in 1960, and married by then, the now Dr. Frances Oldham Kelsey, at the Food and Drug Administration, was tasked with a safety review of a new drug, Kevadon. It had

already been approved and distributed in 46 other countries. Despite high pressure from the company and from doctors she refused approval, citing inadequate evidence.

A year later German and Australian researchers found Kevadon, generic name of Thalidomide, linked to a series of rare birth deformities such as shortened or missing limbs. America was spared the impact of Thalidomide due to one woman who could've missed the whole event. She deserved recognition and she did get it. in 1962 President John F. Kennedy awarded Kelsey the President's Medal of Service.

### **Some Save Lives**

It's 2012 and an NYPD Cop is on patrol in a stairwell. The suspect comes with a silver gun and fires. The cop is hit at point blank range but continues down four more floors before eventually collapsing. "I think I've been hit", he says. Turns out that's a bit of an understatement. He should've been dead. Instead he left the hospital the next day. Why? Much credit goes to Stephanie Kwolek (Kleiman, Celona, & Kowsh, 2020).

Stephanie Kwolek originally wanted to be a doctor. Cost of medical school motivated a shift in career. After receiving a BS in Chemistry from what is now Carnegie Mellon, she began researching with DuPont. There she stayed for her career.

In the 1960's she was assigned to find the next-generation high-performance fibers. To do this she had to create polymers and find a liquid solvent that would dissolve them. Kwolek found a solution that was "unlike anything we had previously seen in the laboratory" describing it as "cloudy, opalescent when stirred and of low viscosity" (Labrecque, 2017). Usually these would be discarded but she used, as she later described it, intuition and the scientific process. She had

several “discussions” with the spinner until she finally convinced him to spin it into threads.

When she stood by the spinning equipment she found it was really difficult to break the produced threads. She knew then it was an unusual fiber.

It sure was. The testing department found it five times stronger than steel. Kwolek gave some of the fiber to one of DuPont’s scientists who was working on bullet proof vests. They used it to weave material and tested it by firing into it. Thus was the first generation of Kevlar vests born. Today it’s widely used in many applications such as brake pads for cars. We know it mostly from vests like the one that saved our police officer. A Kevlar survivor group estimates 3,000 lives to date have been saved.

And that’s not including the saved dogs. Yes, there are Kevlar vests for dogs. As there should be (Labrecque, 2017).

## **Are We Home Free?**

Women have shaped America in many ways helping to create better lives for all. Recognition of this has thankfully increased, particularly over the last decades. We see women contributing and celebrated in all manner of realms. This includes recent Nobel prize winners including”

- Jennifer Doudna – a “scientific descendent” of Franklin, Crick & Watson, with CRISPR gene editing,
- Katalin Kariko with mRNA Therapeutics,
- Claudia Goldin in Economics,
- Louise Gluck in Literature.

Other accomplished women include

- Fei Fei Li – AI,
- Mary Barra, GM CEO ,
- Amanda Gorman, poet,
- Marin Alsop, Orchestral conductor,
- High Ranking Military Officers,
- Supreme Court justices, Senators, Representatives

The list goes on..... Or it did.

Progress can be fragile. The lights may be dimming again. In 2025 we saw women erased or removed from positions of power and authority. This was especially so in the military where most top female ranking officers were cleared out of their posts— their advancement there ascribed to “DEI” and not merit or being too involved in DEI (Wu, 2025). Other governmental women employees have also been removed including the head of the Library of Congress, Archivists, and Inspector Generals. Arlington National Cemetery eliminated links to pages dedicated to women’s military history. Historical content and photos documenting women’s achievements have been removed from armed forces websites.

Visibility matters. Seeing yourself in history, in leaders, in any working field can be the first step in saying “I can do that”.

Presence matters. *Every time a girl opens a book and finds a womanless history, she learns she is worth less* - Myra Pollack Sadker (Indexing, 2019).

Let us hope that women retain opportunity and remain free to shape America.

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