Notable Women of Plainfield

Eliza Elvira Kenyon (1835-1915)

Born in 1835, Eliza Elvira Kenyon arrived in Plainfield in 1866. Her influence on the intellectual life of Plainfield was considerable over the years until her death in 1915. She was the principal of the respected Plainfield Seminary from about 1870 until her retirement in 1906 and the founder, in 1888, and a two-term president of the Monday Afternoon Club, an organization for women with an interest in literary study, which continued until its cessation in 2007. She also served as the first president of the Women’s Auxiliary of Muhlenberg Hospital. Her obituary in the Plainfield Courier-News stated that Miss Kenyon “stood for everything that is sound and good in education, and she will be remembered with admiration and love.”

Lillian (Ford) Feickert (1877-1945)

Lillian (Ford) Feickert moved to Plainfield as a married woman at the age of twenty-five and a few years later moved to North Plainfield in 1908. As enrollment chairman of the New Jersey Woman Suffrage Association, she had great success in increasing the membership of that society and then later served as its president from 1912 to 1920. Among her extensive work in policy and politics was an unsuccessful run for a Senate seat in 1928 on a pro-Prohibition platform. She died in 1945.

Florence Howe Hall (1845-1922)

In 1895, after living in Scotch Plains for several years, the Hall Family moved into their new Plainfield home at 910 Madison Avenue. She resided in this home until the death of her husband in 1907. Howe Hall was the daughter of the notable suffragist Julia Ward Howe of Boston, a leader of the American Woman’s Suffrage Association and author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” In 1893, Howe Hall was elected president of the New Jersey Woman’s Suffrage Association. Her administration (1893-1900) was considered the most influential. Of the six local suffrage societies established under her watch, three were based in Union County: Elizabeth, Plainfield and Westfield. Howe Hall headed the Union County and Plainfield Women’s Suffrage Associations. Additionally, she was DAR regent of the Continental Chapter and President of the Equal Suffrage League of Plainfield and North Plainfield. She wrote several books including, Woman’s Progress, an account of the suffrage movement in New Jersey, and Memories Grave and Gray. (Text in part, courtesy of Ethel M. Washington.)

Anna Brodnax (1887-1958)

Named valedictorian of the 1904 Plainfield High School class, Anna Brodnax (whose name is often found as Brodax), dedicated her life to academic pursuits. She was born in Virginia and the first record of her presence in Plainfield is in 1900. After becoming Plainfield’s first Black valedictorian, she continued her education at Oberlin College, which had been personally recommended to her by Booker T. Washington. She was awarded Phi Beta Kappa honors, ultimately earning her master’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

Miss Brodnax’s career was spent as a Latin teacher at Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware, from 1910 until her retirement in 1947, fulfilling a pledge she had made in 1906 to “prepare herself for teaching among her own people in the South.” During those years she made many visits to Plainfield to visit friends and to speak on topics “of racial interest and importance” to local organizations.

Hazel Fields (1898-1986)

Hazel Fields was born in New York City in 1898 and died in Plainfield in 1986. Over the years of her life, she was a teacher, a hospital dietician, a corset saleswoman, a housekeeper, and a friend to many. As a member of the Women’s Achievement Club, she worked to bring prominent African Americans to Plainfield to speak of their accomplishments. One of her greatest contributions to Plainfield was her participation in the New Jersey Historical Commission’s Multi-Ethnic Oral History Project. A transcription of the interview given by her in 1980 is available online. It presents an invaluable window into the Plainfield that she knew, from her years in the PHS class of 1919 to the time she met Matthew Henson, explorer of the North Pole.

Ann (Harned) Manning (c. 1793-1878)

Ann Harned Manning has become a woman of mystery because of the early time of her birth and the timeframe in which she made accomplishments in what was then a typically male field. Sources today believe that Ann Harned was born in Plainfield in about 1793. She married William Henry Manning, from another Plainfield family, in about 1811. It is under his name that patents for agricultural equipment are filed but later sources credit Ann (Harned) Manning for these inventions. She is believed to have been the Ann Manning who died in New York City in 1878, at the age of 85.
Lillian Gilbreth (1878-1972)
Best known to most people as the mother written about in Cheaper by the Dozen and its sequel, Belles on their Toes, Lillian Gilbreth is also known as the First Lady of Engineering. Her work with husband, Frank Gilbreth, and after his death, dealt with time management, motion study, and efficiency. She earned many degrees and honors. During the few years that the Gilbreths lived on Ravine Road in Plainfield, their son, Frank, Jr., co-author of the two popular titles, was born and their daughter, Mary Elizabeth, died.

Mary E. Norment, M.D. (1910-1974)
Mary E. Norment was born in Plainfield in 1910. She attended the Evergreen Grammar School and Plainfield High School class of 1935, and completed her undergraduate degree at New York University. In 1934, she received her medical degree from Howard University Medical College, where she was a scholarship student. She went on to work at the Homer G. Phillips Hospital in Missouri, the largest African-American hospital at that time.

Clemence Sophia (Harned) Lozier, M.D. (1813-1888)
Clemence Sophia (Harned) Lozier was born in Plainfield in 1813. Orphaned at an early age, she was educated at the Plainfield Academy until she left to marry and moved to New York City. There she became the second woman in the state to obtain a medical degree. Because of the difficulties she’d faced in her own medical education, she went on to open the New York Medical College and Hospital for Women in 1863, and, amongst others, educated the first African-American woman doctor in New York. In addition to her work in education and medicine, she was the editor of the Moral Reform Gazette and worked prominently in the areas of women’s suffrage, temperance, and abolition of slavery. She died in 1888.

Ann (Baumgartner) Carl (1918-2008)
Born in 1918, Ann Baumgartner spent her early childhood in Plainfield, attending the Evergreen School and Miss Hartridge’s School for Girls. Although she later left Plainfield and ultimately went on to military success as a WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots), she credited her experience at Miss Ransome’s School of Dance for helping her acquire the coordination that would be so useful in her flying. She was the only woman to test-fly experimental planes during World War II and the first American woman ever to fly a jet. She was the author of two books and many newspaper columns and magazine articles on scientific and environmental topics and died on March 20, 2008.

Jessie D. Munger (1886-1957)
It was estimated that at the time of her death at age 91 in 1957, Jessie Munger had helped to financially support over one thousand institutions and organizations. Named a “true humanitarian” by the Plainfield Courier-News, she donated a dormitory to her alma mater, Wellesley College, and supported Margaret Bourke-White through her college education. She was aYWCA and a Munhelen Hospital board member and organized a Red Cross workroom in Plainfield during World War II, among her many contributions to the Plainfield community.

Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971)
During her years at Plainfield High School (Class of 1921) she was known as Peggy White, but as a photo-journalist she became known to the world as Margaret Bourke-White. She was noted for her coverage of World War II, particularly the invasion of Russia, and the liberation of Italy and the German concentration camps. She was the first female war correspondent to be allowed to work in combat zones and was the first woman photographer to receive U.S. Armed Forces accreditation. Henry Luce hired her first at Fortune magazine and then gave her the cover of the inaugural issue of Life magazine in 1936. She pioneered the photographic essay; her series on the rural South during the Depression, mining in South Africa, Korean guerrilla warfare, American industry, and her portraits of world leaders are especially celebrated. She died in Connecticut in 1971.

Adele M. Brown (1893-1974)
Born in Hampden Sydney, VA, in 1893, Adele Brown was the owner and operator of Brown’s Funeral Home for 42 years. She was a member of Calvary Baptist Church, Mohawk Temple 191 IBPOE of the World, Terrell Tent No. 34, and Rebecca Chapter No. 1 Order of the Eastern Star, Prince Hall Affiliate. She was Advisor of the Young Women’s Civic Organization of Plainfield, and a member of the executive board of the National North Jersey Unit of the Negro Business and Professional Women’s Club. In addition, she was an organizer of the Garden State Funeral Directors Association and the East Fifth StreetYWCA of Plainfield, where she was also chairwoman of the board of governors, and a life member of the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association. As a nominal director of the NAACP-Plainfield Chapter, she championed the rebuilding of the Moorland Y after it was destroyed by fire in 1955.

As one of four candidates for the Republican councilman nomination in Plainfield’s Fourth Ward in 1946, her slogan was, “Clean Cut Government for the Fourth Ward.” Although she did not win the bid, she did not come in last. Adele and husband Andrew started the funeral home in Orange, NJ, in 1918. In 1922, the couple moved to Plainfield and brought Brown’s Funeral Home here. When Andrew passed away in 1931, Adele continued as owner, and went on to pass her State Board examinations in 1935. When she passed many years later in 1974, her daughter Louise maintained the family business.

Dorothy Harper, Lt. Col. (1907-1983)
A graduate of Plainfield High School (class of 1926) and Munhelen Hospita! School of Nursing, Dorothy Krog Harper was the first nurse from Plainfield to enter the armed forces just before the start of World War II. She began as a volunteer in the Nurse Corps and then was called to duty in 1941. Before she retired from the Army Nurse Corps in 1961, she had served in Africa, Italy, France, the Philippines, and Iran, was made the chief of nursing services at the U.S. Army Hospital, and was awarded a Bronze Star.

Maud E. Mitchell Murray (1872-1945)
Born in 1872 in Canada, Maudie Mitchell was the first black graduate of Plainfield High School in 1889. Daughter of Mary and Rev. James Mitchell, pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church, she became a soprano in the choirs at Dunellen Presbyterian Church and Church of the Heavenly Rest at Enova in Plainfield. Maudie became a school teacher at the Bangs Avenue South and Springwood Avenue schools in Asbury Park. She was married to Thomas Murray in 1909, principal of the Bangs Avenue School. She was the founder of the Mother's Club at the Bangs school, and was an organizer of the West Side Red Cross unit during WWI.

Rev. Dr. Shirley B. Seabrook Cathie (1926-2018)
In the 1960s, Shirley Cathie and her two daughters, Carolyn and Shirley, formed the Cathie Trio to provide music for the Community Church of God congregation in Plainfield, where her husband was minister and founder. They recorded albums, performed nationally and internationally, and made radio and television appearances, all while helping to build up the Church.

Shirley Cathie had a calling to become a minister as well. After completing her high school equivalency, Shirley went on to earn a Bachelor’s degree and then a Master’s degree in theological studies. At the same time, she served as co-pastor with her husband, who was battling a prolonged illness. When she became ordained in 1994, Shirley took over as Pastor of the Community Church of God.

Reverend Dr. Shirley Cathie and her husband, Rev. Burton Cathie, have received numerous awards and honors from various organizations, institutions, and the city of Plainfield itself. They were both civil rights and community activists as well as religious mentors.

In 2017, Mayor Adrian O. Mapp and the Plainfield City Council dedicated and re-named Church Street in her honor.