

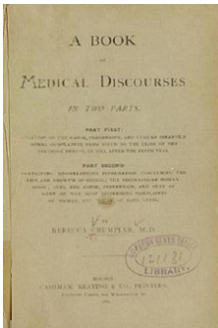


A TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN
WHO CHANGED AMERICA



March 2025 Her Story ENewsletter Celebrating Pioneers in Medicine

Major Nancy Leftenant-Colon, the U.S. Army's first Black nurse, died in early 2025. The granddaughter of slaves, she wanted to enlist in the U.S. army in 1941 but was denied that opportunity due to her race. At the end of World War II, she was able to join the US Army Reserves and, finally, in 1948, she became the first Black nurse to join the regular armed forces. Major Leftenant-Colon was a trailblazer like others before her, including Rebecca Crumpler and Ida Gray Nelson.



Rebecca Lee Crumpler broke race and gender barriers when she received her medical degree in 1864. The first Black woman to achieve that milestone, she worked as a nurse for eight years before gaining admission to the New England Female Medical College. Crumpler authored the first medical text by an African American woman, *A Book of Medical Discourses*, which was published in 1883. Despite suffering from relentless racism and sexism, she continued to treat freed enslaved people after the Civil War. She moved to Richmond, Virginia to provide services in 1865 and then returned to Massachusetts where she finished her career. Most of what is known about her comes from the summary she provides of her life in her book.

... having been reared by a kind aunt in Pennsylvania, whose usefulness with the sick was continually sought, I early conceived a liking for, and sought every opportunity to relieve the sufferings of others. Later in life I devoted my time, when best I could, to nursing as a business, serving under different doctors for a period of eight years (from 1852 to 1860); most of the time at my adopted home in Charlestown, Middlesex County, Massachusetts. From these doctors I received letters commending me to the faculty of the New England Female Medical College, whence, four years afterward, I received the degree of doctress of medicine."



Ida Gray Nelson was the first Black female dentist in the U.S. She graduated from the University of Michigan School of Dentistry in 1890. Born in Tennessee, Nelson had been orphaned as a teenager. She moved in with an aunt in Cincinnati, Ohio and worked as a seamstress and dressmaker before assisting in a dental office while she was still in high school. That dentist, Jonathan Taft, became the dean of the University of Michigan dental college and he helped her prepare for the entrance exam.

After she graduated, Nelson opened a practice first in Ohio and later in Chicago. She was active in community organizations there and served as Vice President of the Professional Women's Club of Chicago. Her alma mater honors her in perpetuity through the Ida Gray Awards presented annually to students, staff and faculty who create a welcoming, inclusive environment throughout the school.

Rebecca Crumpler and Ida Gray Nelson are among the more than 850 women profiled 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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