

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

JOSEPHINE ST. PIERRE RUFFIN

suffragist, activist

"If laws are unjust, they must be continually broken until they are altered."



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Background Information

Born: August 31, 1842; Died: March 13, 1924

St. Pierre was born the youngest of six children and raised in Boston, Massachusetts.¹ Her father was the founder of the Boston Zion Church, and her family was one of Boston's leading families at the time.² Despite living in Boston, she attended public school in Salem, as Boston's schools remained segregated through 1855.¹ After appearing as an abolitionist orator in New York City, she married George Lewis Ruffin at age 15.¹ She then graduated from a Boston finishing school before continuing on to be tutored privately in New York.²

Ruffin's Resistance

Ruffin was particularly passionate about tackling issues concerning women's rights and African American civil rights. She advocated for women's voting rights in school board elections by organizing the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association. She later went on to establish the Boston Kansas Relief Association, which provided financial aid for Black southerners fleeing violence and economic deprivation.¹

Ruffin's most significant contribution was founding the Women's Era club. This was a local African American women's club that fought to promote racial justice and civil rights. The club also combatted the brutality of lynching. This club eventually published a magazine, which published early anti-lynching works by Ida B. Wells. Women's Era also acted as a vehicle to raise money for women and girls who migrated north during the era of Reconstruction. The magazine grew in popularity and, at its height, challenged racism and sexism in the National Women's Press Association. It supported Black women's club work a nationwide level.¹

Achievements

In 1995, Ruffin was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. She was also honored in 1999, with five other women, through a series of six tall marble panels with bronze busts in the Massachusetts State House. Additionally, her former home is now a site on the Boston Women's Heritage Trail.³

Essential Questions

1. How did Ruffin use her platform as a magazine owner and Club woman to advance African American civil/gender rights?
2. Think about the social media platforms you have access to.
 - a. How can you use your voice on those platforms to advocate for change/act as an activist?
3. ***“If laws are unjust, they must be continually broken until they are altered.”***
 - a. What did she mean by this?
 - b. What laws would this statement apply to today?

¹Boston Literary District. (n.d.). Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <http://bostonlitdistrict.org/venue/josephine-st-pierre-ruffin/>

²Abernathy-McKnight, M. L. (n.d.). Craft, Juanita Jewel Shanks. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/craft-juanita-jewel-shanks>

³Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. (2020, August 20). Retrieved September 29, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_St._Pierre_Ruffin