

Women “Firsts” at the University of Toledo

Sarah R. L. Williams—In 1872, she was the first woman to serve on the board of directors of the Toledo University of Arts and Trades, the year the university was founded. She was married to Joseph R. Williams, the first president of Michigan State University. Later he became editor of the *Toledo Blade*. She was described as “a brilliant conversationalist with a magnetism that attracted and retained the affection of a large circle of friends.” (Tower Builders, p. 11) She was active in the Toledo Women’s Suffrage Association, and she counted Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt among her close friends. She became interested in the women’s rights movement during a visit by Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Toledo in 1869. She edited a women suffrage newsletter called *The Ballot Box*.

After the Toledo University of Arts and Trades closed and its assets were given over to the city of Toledo, the school re-opened in 1884 at the Toledo Manual Training School. Williams and a group of local suffragettes were concerned that there was no provision for women to be admitted to the school. They decided to investigate because it appeared to them that women were being denied the benefits of the Jesup W. Scott trust that stated the school was to be open to “pupils of both sexes alike.” Mrs. Williams chaired the group that went to confront the directors with a charge of discrimination. On October 23, 1884, it was decided that women should be admitted to the school, and that a course of study appropriate for them should be developed. The Board of Directors of the Manual Training School drew up a statement that read, “It was earnestly and unanimously declared to be the sense of the meeting that no dividing line should be drawn in the teaching of boys and girls, that they should be allowed to gravitate without hindrance to those things for which they individually have a taste, whether it seemed to be the natural work of the sex or not, and share equally in the work of the department.” Mrs. Williams and the Toledo Women’s Suffrage Association resented the use of the terms “boys and girls,” and asked that the word “pupil” be substituted instead.

The association under Williams’s leadership continued to oppose the obvious direction of women at the Manual Training School into the domestic economy classes. Instead, they recommended that courses like training in tools, sawing, and nailing also be open to women.

The first women were admitted to the Toledo Manual Training School, predecessor to the University of Toledo, on September 6, 1886. Miss Nellie Rawson was hired to teach Domestic Economy. The classes were open to both sexes, and 22 men enrolled in cooking and 32 women in carpentry.

Mary J. Lanier—First Dean of Women at the University of Toledo, appointed in 1910. She was also Professor of Geography. She was hired at the salary of \$1000 per year, the same amount paid to male professors hired that year. She was a graduate of the University of Chicago. No other information on her is available.

Lucille E. Mack—Hired as secretary to the president and the Board of Directors in 1913. She served in that capacity under 11 administrations until her retirement in 1952. She was a president of the Toledo Business and Professional Women's organization, and active in the Community Chest and the Red Cross. She lived in Toledo her entire life. When she retired, she was called "the confidante to trustees and presidents," and was given the nickname "Miss University." She was honored at commencement with a special citation as Distinguished Secretary and Colleague. She died in 1976 at the age of 94.

Josephine Leach—Appointed as director of teacher education in 1915, she was the highest paid faculty member at the time. No other information is available on Ms. Leach.

Emma L. Woodward—Was appointed as the university treasurer in 1918, and held the position for 30 years. She was active in local civic and women's organizations, and cooking was said to be her favorite hobby. "She kept a tight reign on university expenditures and was likely to refuse a faculty member's request for funds or supplies unless she felt a need for them." (The Tower Builders, pp. 158)

Mary M. Gillham—Appointed as university librarian in 1921 while still a student at the university. She held the position for 48 years, the longest tenure of any woman at UT to that time. In 1933, she founded the Library Science Department. She helped to organize the Friends of the UT Libraries in 1936, and served as its executive secretary for 30 years. She was active in numerous civic and women's organizations. In August 1971, the Board of Trustees voted to name the building that then housed the library in her honor. The resolution stated, "It is particularly fitting that this building be named for her honor because she was influential in its planning, kept a daily watch on its progress during construction, and administered the library under its roof for the last 16 years of her career as University librarian." Upon her retirement, her colleagues established a fund to purchase books in her honor for the library. She died in 1986.

Katharine M. Easley—Served as dean of women at UT for 28 years. While her obituary stated she was the first woman faculty member at UT, this was not correct. Clearly, others came before her. But her service as dean of women from 1919 until her retirement in 1947 was notable, and she was often controversial. A social conservative, she often rankled female students by her decisions on what was appropriate behavior and dress for coeds. In the last 1940s, she opposed female members wearing slacks in the UT band. She did manage to keep females from wearing slacks to class.

But she did much to help students as well. During the Depression, she helped female students who needed financial assistance to find jobs. During World War II, she helped recruit women for the Navy. She sponsored the creation of a UT branch of the League of Women Voters. Her involvement in this group included a study of the problem of juvenile delinquency, and she chaired a committee that eventually led to the creation of the Lucas County Court of Domestic Relations. She was active in many other civic and women's organizations.

In April 1936, she became the butt many student jokes when she was arrested at the entrance of the university for speeding. In addition to paying a fine, she was required to attend traffic school. The student newspaper commented many times on the event. She retired from the university 1947, and her retirement party included a performance by Bob Hope. At the end of his act, Hope gave Ms. Easley a kiss. After her retirement, she married William Wemmer. She died at the age of 91 in 1969.

Lucille Emch—A librarian, she had the longest tenure of any UT employee with 50 years of service. Ms. Emch started working for the university as an assistant to Mary Gillham, head librarian, in 1929, even before she graduated. In 1970, she was appointed associate director for rare books, special collections, and archives, and served in this position until her retirement in 1979.

She has a great love of books, and traveled the world visiting many of the major libraries including the Vatican and the Bodleian. She was likely the first woman ever admitted to the St. Benedict monastery library in Montecassino, Italy. Prior to her retirement, she helped to create the Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections in UT's Carlson Library. Ms. Emch currently resides at the Sunset House.

Shirley Meyers Plessner—She was the first person to receive a doctorate degree from the University of Toledo (1962). She also received her bachelor's and master's degree from the university. After teaching in public schools, she worked as a teaching fellow in the College of Education for a brief time.

Doris Fennenberg—She started at UT in 1925 as director of athletics and physical education for women. After receiving her law degree from the University of Michigan, she worked as a lawyer in private practice and for the Child and Family Agency. In 1946 was appointed law librarian and instructor in the College of Law, becoming the first woman on the law college faculty. She was one of the founders of the Ohio Association of Law Librarians in 1950, an organization that is still active today. She was very active in the Bar Association for locally and nationally. Ms. Fennenberg retired in 1969, and she died in 1978.

1. Sarah Williams

Sarah R. L. Williams, signer of the Articles of Incorporation of the Toledo University, was a talented and influential leader in women's circles of Toledo. She had been a teacher in Buffalo, New York. Her husband had been editor of the Toledo Blade and after his death, she became editor of the women's department of the Sunday Blade. In her later years she became a strong advocate of women's suffrage.

2. Center for Women

Purpose to cooperate with women in the community to establish communications between them and the University and to coordinate programs and seminars from the University for use by women.

3. University Women's Club

The group was formalized in 1921. It carried the name of Faculty Dames until 1956 when it was changed to the University Women's Club. It has exerted considerable influence through projects for scholarships, involvement in campaigns for the support of the University and sponsorship of social and cultural programs.

4. A.A.U.W.

Purpose is to promote college spirit in the community, to foster a feeling of fellowship among college alumnae, to maintain a scholarship fund, and to cooperate with the state and national programs of the A.A.U.W.

5. Theses and Dissertations

The Ward M. Canaday Center houses various theses and dissertations involving women.

6. University Women's Commission

Established in the interest of providing a support system for professional women at the University of Toledo.

7. W.I.T.

Purpose is to encourage, affirm, support and be an advocate for Toledo area women as they move to achieve their full equality in every aspect of their lives.