

Women in YMCA History

Ellen Brown



MISS ELLEN BROWN,
Secretary Boys' Department.

Photo: Miss Ellen Brown, Secretary Boys' Department,
Kautz Family YMCA Archives <http://purl.umn.edu/77318>

In the late 1870s, as Boys' Work was beginning to take hold in the YMCA, city YMCAs began to develop Boys' Work departments. These were typically outgrowths of other programs. A notable example was the YMCA in Buffalo, N.Y., where Ellen Brown, an instructor in the State Normal School, taught a class of boys at the YMCA night school. The class grew so rapidly that in 1886, it became a department of the YMCA with Brown as the first employed Boys' Work secretary in the YMCA movement. She continued in that job until 1903. In addition, Brown has the distinction of being the first female professional employee of a YMCA.

Text: [National YMCA Hall of Fame](#)

Women in YMCA History

Addie Hunton



Photo: Addie Hunton, YMCA worker for American soldiers in World War I in France, ca. 1917-1918, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, P41, <http://purl.umn.edu/77757>

As part of the YMCA's massive World War I support effort, Addie Hunton was one of only three African American women assigned to serve over 200,000 segregated black troops stationed in France. After returning home in 1919, she and one of the other two women, Kathryn Johnson, co-wrote an influential account of their experience, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces*, including reports of the discrimination they encountered.

Hunton was also YWCA secretary for black student work and vice president of the NAACP. She served as an organizer and officer of the National Association of Colored Women and on the executive board of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Women in YMCA History

Marguerite Standish Cockett



Photo: Marguerite Standish Cockett, Kautz Family YMCA Archives <http://purl.umn.edu/7730>

Marguerite Cockett (1879–1959) graduated from Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1905. From 1906 to 1914 she practiced medicine in Boston. She went to Philadelphia in 1914 and studied sculpture for two years. In 1916 she bought a car and brought it to France where she worked as an ambulance driver under the American Fund for French Wounded.

She spent three months in Serbia establishing a French-Serbian hospital and also served on a hospital ship in the Mediterranean. In 1917 she established the first canteen under the YMCA American Expeditionary Forces. In 1918–1919 she was back in the United States giving speeches on war work.

Women in YMCA History

Winifred Colton



Photo: Winifred Colton, circa 1960–1975. Kautz Family
YMCA Archives, P189. <http://purl.umn.edu/77566>

Fighting to improve the status of women in the YMCA, Winifred Colton began her extensive YMCA career as women's and girls' work secretary in three YMCA of Metro Chicago branches over the course of twelve years. In 1957, the YMCA's National Council's statement of purpose no longer applied to "males only," and Colton became the first woman professional on the national staff. She served over a million constituents enrolled in organized groups and activities as secretary for women's and girls' work.

From 1970 to 1979, Colton was director of the Family Communications Skills Center. She aimed to better communication in families by utilizing human relations, health and physical education, early childhood and family life education, recreation, group work, and religious education. Colton's work reinforced the importance of communication, human development, and international understanding.

Women in YMCA History

Xinia Brenes Jenkins



Photo: Kautz Family YMCA Archives

One of the founding members of the San Jose YMCA, Xinia Brenes Jenkins was deeply involved in the Costa Rican Catholic youth movement. The Latin American Confederation of YMCAs reached out to Jenkins for her assistance in instituting a national Costa Rican YMCA.

Following its implementation in 1975, she became director of leadership development at the San Jose YMCA in 1977. In 1983, she became national general secretary, and, in 1990, executive for refugees, development, and extension for the Latin American Confederation of YMCAs.

Jenkins's work for the Costa Rican YMCA focused on providing programs for refugees, relief for those affected by housing shortages, and offering vocational skills training for women and agricultural skills training for Costa Rican Indians.

Women in YMCA History

Violet P. Henry



Photo: Kautz Family YMCA Archives,
<http://purl.umn.edu/77689>

Born in Alberta, Canada, Violet Henry earned her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Alberta and a graduate degree in urban studies from Roosevelt University. She was the first African-American woman to be admitted to the practice of law in Canada.

In 1963, she became executive director of the Community Branch of the Newark (N.J.) YMCA. Seven years later, she was appointed the director of planning for the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago (Ill.), and later became the director of manpower, planning, and staff development. In 1976, Henry became the first woman to be named to a top management position on the national staff as executive director of the Organizational Development Group. She was responsible for personnel management, corporate planning, and development projects.

Henry served as president of the YMCA Association of Professional Directors (APD) and vice president of the World Association of Secretaries. She provided leadership for numerous national and international commissions and committees that worked effectively for the rights of women and minorities.

Women in YMCA History

Willie Aveling



Photo: Wilhelmina Aveling, from Perspective,
January 1984.

Following her involvement as the physical director at the Atlantic City YWCA, Wilhelmina “Willie” Aveling was the first woman on the metropolitan staff at the YMCA of Chicago, tasked to study work with women and girls and institute a Women’s Program. Over the course of almost three decades, Aveling improved programs for women and girls, such as introducing Danish gymnastics and summer day camps, and implementing proper standards for women’s and girl’s programs, which were to be led by women and under the jurisdiction of a women’s committee. She also created manuals on leadership and management and personally evaluated every Chicago YMCA girls’ resident camp.

Aveling was the first chairman of the Association of Secretaries Women and Girls Section and, likely, the first Women and Girls Secretary. On June 5, 1987, shortly after her death, Aveling was the first woman inducted into the YMCA National Hall of Fame.

In 1985, Harold L. Gibbs, former financial development vice president of the YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee, said, “Wilhelmina Aveling’s pioneering spirit, her thoroughness in researching and formulating policy, her energy and creativity in programming, her understanding of YMCA purpose, and her many years of success with the untried, are worth the plaudits of all of us, and especially of the millions of women and girls who now enjoy YMCA membership. She is the most unforgettable YMCA director I ever met.”