

Ontario Women: Vanguarders of Science

Emily Stowe, doctor, teacher, suffragette

Emily Howard Jennings Stowe (1831-1903) was a teacher, a doctor, and a suffragette. She was one of the first women in Canada to graduate from medical school, the first female principal of a primary school, and one of the founders of the campaign for women's right to vote.

Born in rural Ontario south of London, Emily Jennings was raised as a Quaker. Her parents sent her to Rhode Island to be educated in a Quaker school for boys and girls when she was young, and she returned to her home to teach for several years. In 1852, when she was 21, Emily decided she wanted to further her own education. She applied to Victoria College and was denied for being a woman, as the college was for men only at the time.

She instead went to school in Toronto, at the Normal School for Upper Canada, founded by Egerton Ryerson. She graduated with honours in 1854 and was then hired to be a principal of a public school in Brantford, the first woman to take such a job.

In 1856 she got married; she and her husband had three children. In the 1860s her husband contracted tuberculosis, which sparked Emily's interest in medicine. She continued to teach and bring home the only income her family had, but after the birth of her third child her mind was made up.

She decided to apply to medical school, but in 1865 was told by the Toronto School of Medicine: "The doors of the University are not open to women and I trust they never will be."

She attended the New York Medical College for Women instead and graduated in 1867. While she was there, Stowe met members of the women's suffrage movement in the United States, including Susan B. Anthony.

Stowe came back to Toronto to practice medicine without a license, which she did openly for 13 years, placing advertisements for her services in the newspaper. She gave public lectures on women's health and made a name for herself as a doctor who specialized in treating women with care and respect.

In 1870 she and Jennie Kidd Trout were granted permission by the president of the Toronto School of Medicine to take classes. They both enrolled but Stowe found the classmates and teachers hostile and left shortly afterwards. The two women had to put up with pranks and abuse from the men around them, including body parts being left on their seats in lecture halls.

Trout continued on, but also found the environment difficult. She transferred to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania and got her license to practice medicine in 1875.

In 1877 Emily Stowe organized Canada's first suffrage organization, initially called the Toronto Women's Literary Club, which later became the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association. The group advocated



for schools to accept women as students, and worked on awareness campaigns about female workers and their rights and conditions. Around this time Emily also stopped being a Quaker and started identifying as a Unitarian.

Stowe had to wait until 1880 to get her medical license, when the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario finally acknowledged her many years of training and practice.

The first woman to complete her medical education in Canada would do so three years later - her own daughter, Augusta, in 1883, was allowed to graduate from Faculty of Medicine at Victoria University in Toronto.

Emily retired from work in 1893 after she broke her hip, at the age of 62. She died ten years later at 72, still working for women's suffrage and president of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association. It would be another 14 years before some Canadian women were granted the right to vote. From her obituary in *The Globe* in 1903:

The death of Dr. Emily Stowe brings to recollection the inevitable hardships of the pioneer on any path of human progress. Now that the rights for which she contended are accorded and enjoyed as a matter of course, it is hard to realize the unreasoning prejudice she encountered, the obstacles which were thrown in her way and the opposition she had to face. Women who now choose the medical profession in Canada and find every facility provided for their various courses of study can never know how deeply they are indebted to the pioneer who opened the path they so easily follow. Intellectual courage, clear conviction, steady, unswerving purpose, a composed philosophic mind, were the qualities that won success in a long struggle against the mental inertia and reaction that would deny to women the right to study and practise medicine.

- A History of Women's Suffrage

Augusta Stowe-Gullen followed in her mother's footsteps and pursued many of the same goals, achieving some things Emily could only have dreamed of in her own youth.

Augusta was a founding member of Women's College Hospital in Toronto (later the Ontario Medical College for Women), which was created in 1883 due to her passionate petitioning of several doctors and medical administrators. Immediately after graduating she was appointed Demonstrator in Anatomy at the Women's College Hospital in Toronto. In 1890 she was appointed Lecturer on Diseases of Children, and subsequently Professor of Diseases of Children.

From 1893 to 1907, Augusta was a member of the Toronto Women's Suffrage Club founded by her mother Emily Stowe, and, when the Club evolved into the Canadian Suffrage Association in 1907, Stowe-Gullen was elected honorary President. She served as the first woman member of the Toronto Public School Board, starting in 1892, and in 1910 was appointed to the Senate of the University of Toronto where she represented women in the medical profession until 1924. In 1935 Augusta was awarded the Order of the British Empire.

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