

Ontario Women: Vanguarders of Science

Emily Stowe, doctor, teacher, suffragette



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

Born in rural Ontario south of London, Emily Jennings was raised and educated as a Quaker. She taught in a local school for several years. When she was 21, Emily decided she wanted to further her own education. She applied to Victoria College and was denied, as the college was for men only at the time. She instead went to school in Toronto and graduated with honours in 1854. She 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 got sick with 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. 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.

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.

In 1877 Emily Stowe organized Canada's first suffrage organization. The group advocated for schools to accept women as students, and worked on awareness campaigns about female workers and their rights and conditions.

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. It would be another 14 years before some Canadian women were granted the right to vote. From her obituary in *The Globe* in 1903:

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.

