

# The Clerk's Black History Series



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Clerk of Superior Court  
DeKalb County



## Mary Eliza Mahoney

May 7, 1845 - January 4, 1926

First African-American Woman Professional Nurse

First African-American Woman Registered to Vote in Boston



**Mary Eliza Mahoney** was born on May 7, 1845, in the Dorchester area of Boston, Massachusetts. Her parents, Charles and Mary Jane Mahoney, were freed slaves who moved to Boston from North Carolina prior to the Civil War, seeking a safer and less discriminatory environment. The eldest of three siblings (a fourth sibling died as a small child), Mary was admitted to the Phillips Street School in Boston at the age of 10. The Phillips School was one of the first integrated schools in Boston. Around the age of 18, Mary began working odd jobs at the New England Hospital for Women and Children, as a cook, a janitor, a washerwoman and an unofficial nurse's aide. After working for 15 years, at the age of 33, Mary was accepted into a 16-month nursing program at the Hospital. The rigorous program required long, 16 hour days of lectures, lessons and hands-on patient care with little relief in between. The program was so intense that out of 42 students, Mary graduated as a registered nurse with only 3 other colleagues and became the first black woman graduate from a nursing program in the United States. After earning her nursing diploma in 1879, Mary worked for many years as a private care nurse, earning a distinguished reputation. She worked for predominantly white, wealthy families with a majority of her work focusing on new mothers and newborns.



Mary continued working as a nurse, while advocating for racial equality, especially in the field of nursing. In 1896 she became a member of the predominately white 'Nurses Associated Alumnae of the United States and Canada' (NAAUSC) which normally did not allow black members. NAAUSC later became the 'American Nurses Association' (ANA). And in response to the continued discrimination, Mary founded the 'National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses' (NACGN) in 1908 which welcomed nurses as members from all communities. The NACGN later merged with the ANA. She gave the welcoming address at the NACGN's first convention in 1911 where she was made a life member and elected chaplain.

After retirement, Mary participated in the women's suffrage movement and is credited as the first black women to register to vote in Boston following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.



The 'Mary Mahoney Award' for outstanding nurses was established in 1936 by NACGN which was continued even after NACGN merged with ANA. Today it is bestowed upon nurses from the minority groups biennially and "recognizes significant contributions, by an individual nurse or a group of nurses, to integration within the nursing profession."

Admitted to New England Hospital for care on December 7, 1925, Mahoney succumbed to breast cancer on January 4, 1926 at the age of eighty-one.



Mary Mahoney continues to be honored for her contributions by those who preserve her memory. In the 1970s Helen S. Miller, author of the biography, Mary Eliza Mahoney 1845-1926—America's First Black Professional Nurse, led a drive to restore Mahoney's grave monument in Everett, Massachusetts. In 1976, the first year that the ANA established their Nursing Hall of Fame, Mary Mahoney was inducted.