An innovative educator, Maria Louise Baldwin advocated woman's suffrage, beginning with participation in school committee elections.

“A very cultivated woman” who could speak on “almost any subject except herself.” –Boston Globe description of Maria Louise Baldwin, August 1897

Educational Pioneer

Born in Cambridge, Maria Louise Baldwin faced prejudice as an aspiring teacher. A school committee member advised her to go south “where she was more needed.” After teaching in Maryland she returned to teach at the Agassiz School. In a forty year career she became principal, the only black women in that role in New England. She was appointed master when the school’s facilities and programs were upgraded. An innovator, she improved mathematics education, established parent-teacher groups, and introduced the position of school nurse.

A First Step

In 1879 the Massachusetts legislature voted to allow women’s suffrage in school committee elections. Baldwin noted that school suffrage “so meager a share of voting power” had improved the lot of Boston area teachers and argued that expanded women’s suffrage would improve society.

A Lifetime of Reform

Often described as a “clubwoman,” she was active in the community and a member of many service organizations. With Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin she established the Woman’s Era Club with black and white women members. Among many causes the club advocated recognition of African American achievement, an anti-lynching campaign, and woman’s suffrage. Baldwin spoke at the 25th annual banquet of the New England and Massachusetts Woman’s Suffrage Association at Faneuil Hall on May 22, 1900.

Maria Louise Baldwin’s Cambridge home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It remains a private residence. Library of Congress

In 1897 she attended weekly readings in her home for black students at Harvard including future sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois. Later he wrote, “Her poise commanded greater and greater respect. Her courage—her splendid, quiet courage astonished us, and so she came to larger life and accomplishment.” Library of Congress


Much in demand as a speaker, Baldwin lectured on education, historical topics, and the work of African American authors. She died suddenly at the Copley Plaza Hotel on January 9, 1922 shortly after making a presentation.

Image of women voting for school committee in Boston, Harper’s Weekly December 15, 1888. Alamy

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