

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin

1842–1924



Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin W.E.B. DuBois described her as “an aristocratic lady,” others praised her dignity and “stately” demeanor. MASSACHUSETTS HALL OF BLACK ACHIEVEMENT

Educated for Leadership

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s father was born on Martinique of French, Native American, and African descent. Her mother was a white English woman. The family’s Boston clothing business provided a middle class standard of living. For a time, the Ruffin’s sent Josephine to school in Salem to avoid segregated schools in Boston. (She returned after schools were integrated in 1855.) She completed her education with finishing school and private tutoring.

Early Activism

During the Civil War the Ruffins recruited soldiers for Massachusetts’ African American regiments, including the famous 54th. They also worked with the Sanitation Commission to provide medical care and supplies for Union troops.



Study detail of 54th Regiment soldiers by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. POSTDLF

Suffragist

Ruffin joined former abolitionists Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe at the founding of the Boston-based American Woman Suffrage Association. After Massachusetts women received voting rights in School Committee elections she was a founder of the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association advocating not only voting by women but also candidacy for office. She became President of the West End League of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association.

“We are justified in believing that the success of this movement for equality of the sexes means more progress toward equality of the races.”

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin

An activist, journalist, and publisher, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin is best known for establishing clubs for black women that advocated civil rights and suffrage.



As a teenager Josephine married George Lewis Ruffin. He would become the first African American to graduate from Harvard Law School and the first to become a judge in the Northern states. Today the George Lewis Ruffin Society at Northeastern University encourages people of color in the fields of criminal justice and law.

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin founded the *Woman’s Era*, the first newspaper written by and published for African American women. It emphasized civil rights and suffrage and became the official organ of the *Women’s Era Club*.



The Woman’s Era Club

After the death of her husband Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin became very active in Women’s Clubs. With her friend, Maria Louise Baldwin, she founded the Woman’s Era Club in 1893. Although not limited to black women, the predominantly African American membership emphasized improvement in the life of black citizens, anti-lynching efforts, and suffrage.

The Ruffin Incident

At a national convention of women’s clubs in Milwaukee, another delegate ripped the membership badge from her dress. She was told that she could attend as a member of predominantly white women’s clubs, but not representing an African American club. She withdrew totally. The “Ruffin Incident” was reported nationally with most papers supporting her right to participate.



JOSEPHINE ST. PIERRE RUFFIN

Ruffin organized the first national conference of black women in Boston in 1895. The closing session was held at the former AME Church on Charles Street. In 1910 she was a founding member of the Boston branch of the NAACP.



In 1999 Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was one of six women honored with a bust at the Massachusetts State House. PROJECT BY MASS HUMANITIES. PHOTO BY BOSTON BY FOOT