

## Elizabeth Piper Ensley

### Who Was She?

- Elizabeth Piper Ensley was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1847 to Jane Gibson and Phillip Piper. Her mother, Jane Gibson was born a slave in Georgia and her father Phillip was a former slave born in Virginia and worked aboard a whaling ship. At the time, many African Americans living in New Bedford were involved in the early abolition movement including Elizabeth's own family. Many of them even established their own schools ensuring that their children had the opportunity to be educated. It was in one of these schools that Elizabeth herself began her education.
- Later on in her twenties, Elizabeth went to Europe touring the continent and continuing her studies in Switzerland and Germany. In 1871, she returned to the US to teach in New Jersey and in Boston. When she taught in Boston, she established a circulating library from 1875-1878. When she wasn't teaching, Elizabeth took classes at the Boston Art School where she would meet her husband, Newell H. Ensley.
- Newell was born into slavery and owned by his own grandfather, but at a young age was taught how to read and write. From there, he pursued education. Newell married Elizabeth in 1882, and for a short period of time, both of them taught at Howard University in Washington, D.C.
- In 1887, the couple moved out to Denver, Colorado and settled in a state that was home to many African Americans. During the next year, her husband and their third child died within a few months of each other. Despite the loss, Elizabeth continued to raise her children on her own and became even more involved in civil rights.
- At this time, she began working for the Colorado Equal Suffrage Association, an organization that fought for women's suffrage. She also served as a correspondent to the Women's Era journal (started by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, our suffragist last week) and wrote articles about the struggle for progress in the state of Colorado.
- In 1893, Colorado became the first state to recognize the right for women to vote. In 1894, it became the second state to grant women the right to vote. Although women in this state were granted the right to vote, the 19th amendment granting national women's suffrage would not be passed until 1920.
- Although Colorado had granted her and many other women living there the right to vote, Elizabeth continued to fight for women's suffrage. In 1904, she founded the Colored Women's Republic Club (also known as the Association of Colored

Women's Clubs) and made its focus on educating women of color on how to vote and why they should vote.

- She also used the club to unite various organizations across the state, pushed for greater equality and provided educational opportunities to many. This group had also helped in getting Colorado's first Black legislator, Joseph Stuart elected.
- As she continued to work for what she believed in, Elizabeth earned a lot of recognition and respect by many around the state. This eventually led to her becoming treasurer of the Colorado Federation, a mostly white organization where it was very rare for a position to be held by a woman of color.
- For the remaining years of her life, Elizabeth continued to serve her community including serving as secretary of the Lincoln-Douglass Sanitarium Association. Here, she participated in administering care and treatment to the numerous individuals experiencing tuberculosis. Elizabeth passed on February 23, 1919, while living in Arvada, Colorado. Although her body now rests at Riverside Cemetery, her work and her memory proceed in the public eye's steady battle for equity and correspondence.

#### For Further Reading

<https://www.historycolorado.org/story/womens-history/2020/02/18/elizabeth-piper-ensley-and-100th-anniversary-19th-amendment>

<https://www.newsbreak.com/people/elizabeth-piper-ensley>

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/black-women-and-the-fight-for-voting-rights.htm>

<https://catalog.denverlibrary.org/search/title.aspx?ctx=1.1033.0.0.6&pos=1&cn=675765>

#### Sources Used

<https://www.intermountainhistories.org/items/show/257>

<https://www.coloradovirtuallibrary.org/digital-colorado/colorado-histories/boom-years/elizabeth-piper-ensley-activist/>

<https://historicwomensouthcoast.org/elizabeth-piper-ensley/>

<https://history.denverlibrary.org/colorado-biographies/elizabeth-piper-ensley-1847-1919>