

## **Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin - Overview**

With a powerful spirit and a dedication to all of the causes she believed in, Josephine St. Pierre was an unstoppable force during her time. She was heavily involved in clubs and organizations not only on the local level but also the national level. Throughout her entire journey of fighting for women's suffrage and civil rights, Josephine truly believed that African American women were fundamental to fighting for equality between sexes which would eventually lead to equality for all.

### **Who Was She?**

- In 1842, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was born in the small Black community of Beacon Hill to John and Eliza St. Pierre. Her mother Eliza was an English-born white woman, a native of Cornwall, England. Her father John, who was a successful Boston clothing dealer, was of mixed ancestry.
- Because schools in Boston were not yet integrated until 1855, Josephine attended school in Salem, Massachusetts, where the schools were not segregated. When Boston had integrated their schools, she then attended Bowdoin School located in the West End of the city. Josephine then finished her education with two years of finishing schools and private tutoring in the city of New York.
- In 1858, Josephine married George Lewis Ruffin. Ruffin was born in Virginia but moved to Boston with his family in 1853 after Virginia passed a law prohibiting African Americans from learning to read. As a protest to the U.S. Supreme's Court decision in the Dred Scott case that ruled the validity of making slavery legal, the couple moved to Liverpool, England.
- Six months later, they returned to Boston. During the period of the Civil War, the Ruffins helped the war effort by recruiting African American men for the Union Army and also by serving on the city's Sanitation Committee.
- After the war, George Ruffin went on to become the very first African American to graduate from Harvard Law School and became the North's very first African American judge. Josephine, on the other hand, participated in several charities that helped Southern Blacks including those who were just migrating into Kansas. She also worked in a variety of clubs and

organizations.

- At this time, Josephine had also joined the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association where she became acquaintances with Julia Ward Howe, the association's founder and fellow reformer.
- In the mid 1890s, along with suffragist Lucy Stone, Howe invited Josephine to join the New England Women's Club which the two women founded in 1868. Ruffin accepted the invite and became the club's first African American member.
- In 1893, Josephine founded the Woman's Era Club. This was a club that focused on offering its members opportunities for self-improvement and promoted racial uplift, anti-lynching and civil rights.
- The club's motto was "Make the World Better" and expressed Josephine's strong belief that African American women were a major component of the fight for equal rights for all men and women living in America.
- The club also had a corresponding newspaper publication called "The Woman's Era." Created years before in 1886, this was the country's first newspaper that was published by and for African American women. The newspaper was published monthly and encouraged its readers to become more informed and involved in public issues like the fight for women's suffrage and civil rights.
- In 1895, Josephine hosted the first national conference for black women's club nationwide. Twenty clubs in ten different states attended the conference. Here with the numerous number of clubs, an organization was created called the National Federation of Afro-American Women.
- In 1896, the association merged with the Colored Women's League and became the National Association of Colored Women. Josephine served as the organization's vice president.

- In 1900, Josephine attended the General Federation of Women’s Clubs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. When she was not allowed to sit on behalf of one of the clubs (The Women’s Era Club) she hoped to represent, she refused to sit for the other two clubs she came for and therefore was banned from the conference. This event was widely publicized around the nation and became known as the “Ruffin Incident”.
- Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin remained an active member of the Boston community and continued to be involved in order to fight for the causes she believed in. In 1902, she served as vice president of the American Mount Coffee School Association that helped raise funds for the school located in Liberia. She was a founding member of the Association for the Promotion of Child Training and also became one of the charter members of the Boston Chapter of the NAACP in 1910. In the same year, Josephine also founded the League of Women for Community Service, an organization that continues to exist today.

#### For Further Reading

<https://amysmartgirls.com/josephine-st-be9e6d88718a>

<https://mountauburn.org/aaht-ruffin-j-f/>

<https://sites.uw.edu/twomn347/2019/12/03/josephine-st-pierre-ruffin/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/dred-scott-case>

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#### Sources Used

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<https://mountauburn.org/josephine-st-pierre-ruffin-1842-1924/>

<https://www.nps.gov/people/josephine-st-pierre-ruffin.htm>

<http://bostonlitdistrict.org/venue/josephine-st-pierre-ruffin/>