

Fanny Jackson Coppin Information for School Name Change

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Philadelphia is a diverse City but we do not honor that diversity when we name our schools. Only 27 of 339 schools in the district are named for people of color and only six are named after women, which amounts to roughly 5%. Overall only about 5% of all of the schools in the district are named for women.

In 2017, a Jackson parent wondered if we could change the name of Andrew Jackson School to a name that more closely represented the types of values we would like to see in our community. He made a change.org petition to test the waters. On that survey someone suggested the name Fanny Jackson Coppin as a name for our school. The school district vetted this option and agreed she meets the stated criteria for a school name.

Fanny Jackson was born into slavery in 1837. When she was 12 years old her aunt purchased her freedom and brought her to New England.

In 1860 (during the Civil War) Fanny enrolled in Oberlin College in Ohio. She followed what was called that time the “gentleman's course” and received the type of education that men were receiving at the time- Latin and Greek and a lot of mathematics.

During her junior year she was asked, along with forty other students to teach college prep courses. She was the first African-American to teach these prep classes. The faculty at Oberlin thought the students would rebel against her but her class was so popular that it had to be split into two classes and then three classes.

She established a night class in reading and writing for newly freed black men that were moving to Ohio during and after the war.

She graduated in 1865, and was the second black woman to receive her bachelor's degree in the country.

She then moved to Philadelphia to teach at Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) which later became Cheyney University which is the first historically black college in the country.

The Institute building still remains on Bainbridge between 9th and 10th.

Within 5 years of teaching at the ICY she was appointed Principal making her the first woman, black or white, to head a coeducational school in the United States.

Within a few years she was promoted to Superintendent making her the first African American Superintendent of a school district in the United States.

As principal she decided to democratize the curriculum of the school. She wanted the students to receive the same education that white students received and changed the curriculum to match what white students were learning. She added vocational education. At that time the only place for a person of color to learn a trade was in juvenile detention or the penitentiary. She felt the children should have an option for both a classical education on par with white students and a good trade education for both boys and girls. Philadelphia was in a building boom at the time but blacks were left out of good paying construction and engineering jobs because of the lack of vocational education. At that time vocational education also included the arts, like painting and music.

“My deep interest centers in elementary education for several reasons; first, because it is at this period of the child’s life that habits are formed and tastes cultivated which may guide him in the pursuit of knowledge and happiness in after life... change the elements of what he has learned into wisdom All higher learning is but a combination of a few simple elements, and when these are well taught, it clears away the difficulty of future acquisitions”

Her career at the school spanned 37 years. But she wasn't just teaching during this time.

She was an influential columnist who defended the rights of women and blacks in local Philadelphia newspapers and advocated for poor women.

- Promoting the suffrage movement. To give women the right to vote
- Jackson founded homes for working and poor women.
- Jackson was an influential newspaper columnist. Where she encouraged women by broadcasting women’s achievements, both black and white, and protesting racial and gender discrimination. She believed women equal to men in every respect and that they could become doctors, lawyers, and business professionals.
- In 1897, she became vice-president of the National Association of Colored Women.

When Jackson was in her 40s she married prominent AME pastor Levi Coppin. Together they were a driving force in Black America. Fanny with her work in education and rights for women and people of color. Much of Levi Coppin’s work in the church was to travel the US to preach against segregationist laws that were passing in the post war Jim Crow south. In 1902 Coppin was appointed a missionary to South Africa, and Fanny went with him. As African American missionaries they traveled to British Colonial ruled South Africa to assist indigenous Africans

under brutal the rule of the White settlers. Fanny Jackson Coppin and her husband risked their lives going to South Africa and educating Africans under the cover of the Christian church. As Blacks they would not have been allowed to pursue any political or civil rights work with indigenous Africans. The church added the cover of legitimacy to their civil rights work. Even then they were spied upon by the government for fear that they would cause “a native problem” sewing dissatisfaction in the indigenous population. It was not until 90 years later that native South African's were allowed self-rule in their own land.

While in South Africa, Fanny finished writing her book on education *Reminiscences of School Life*. She met with indigenous women and children and set up schools. She was also involved in the South African temperance movement because oppressed farm workers were paid in wine. The temperance movement was the seed of what later became the anti-apartheid movement.

While in Africa, her health began to fail so after five years she returned to the US. Her husband continued his work traveling through the US preaching against segregationist laws.

In 1913 Fanny Jackson Coppin died in Philadelphia at age 76, and she was laid to rest in Merion Memorial Park, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

Fanny Jackson Coppin legacy of work in education during slavery in America, into the reconstruction era, and under Jim Crow statutes, set the tone for African Americans in education both locally in Philadelphia and nationwide. Her educational philosophy continues today. As Sharif El-Mekki, Center for Black Educator Development, said about Fanny's example of “lifting as you climb, continuing the legacy of revolutionary acts.” She has inspired educators to apply her “black pedagogy to current educational practices.” and continue work in “social, racial, and educational justice.”

There is substantial evidence that Nelson Mandela's mother was educated at one of her schools, in fact she chose Fanny as her English name. And researchers suspect that many of Nelson Mandela's elementary teachers may have been educated at Fanny Jackson Coppin's schools in South Africa.

Fanny Jackson Coppin is not well known now but we see her influence in education. She has touched lives all over the world

She was a contemporary of William Still and Frederick Douglass. Octavio Catto was a teacher under her supervision although he balked about working under a woman.

In a letter to Frederick Douglass in 1876, she explained her commitment:

“I feel sometimes like a person to whom in childhood was entrusted some sacred flame...This is the desire to see my race lifted out of the mire of ignorance, weakness and degradation; no longer to sit in obscure corners and devour the scraps of knowledge which his superiors flung at him. I want to see him crowned with strength and dignity; adorned with the enduring grace of intellectual attainments.”

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