

Celestia Susannah Parrish (1853 - 1918)

Pioneering Psychologist, Native Virginian, and "Georgia's Greatest Woman"

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Celestia Susannah Parrish was born September 12, 1853, daughter of a plantation owner in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. She was orphaned at age 10, along with her younger brother and sister, and when she was 15 her guardian uncle died. She then began teaching in a small rural school to support herself and her sister. Her early teaching experiences were utter failures, but she persevered with "... the

desperation of a drowning woman" (Parrish, 1925, p. 2). Fortunately, she read *Page's Theory and Practice of Teaching* which she described as being, "A baptism of the Holy Spirit, for from that time I devoted the best of my energies to my profession..." (Parrish, 1925, p. 2).

Education and Early Career

Parrish's life was dedicated to education, beginning with a struggle for her own, and ending in significant contributions in the states of Virginia and Georgia. Her teaching reputation grew quickly, and she accepted a position in Danville, Virginia, enabling both her and her sister to attend Roanoke Female College (Averett College today). In 1880, she attended Virginia's first "summer normal" - a six-week course for public school teachers. Later, Parrish became a student and, after six months, a teacher in the newly established State Normal School of Virginia (now Longwood University) where she was given charge of the mathematics department.

In 1893, Parrish accepted the chair in mathematics at Randolph-Macon Woman's College (hereafter R-MWC) in Lynchburg, Virginia, where she was also responsible for philosophy, pedagogy, and psychology. To learn psychology, she enrolled in the summer session at Cornell, remaining until the beginning of the fall session to study with Edward Bradford Titchener. Parrish asked Titchener for correspondence work, and after his initial refusal, she wrote him: "You must help me. A man who sits down to the rich feasts which are spread before you has no right to deny a few crumbs to a poor starveling like me" (Parrish, 1925, p. 3). Titchener relented, and she wrote that he gave her "... the most generous assistance then, and afterwards became my very kind friend" (Parrish, 1925, p. 3).

With a full semester and a summer at Cornell, a year at the University of Michigan, and other credits earned by examination at Cornell and elsewhere, two obstacles to earning a Cornell degree remained: a residency requirement and proficiency in Latin. In eight weeks, Parrish earned 80% on an examination used to assess six months of Latin at Cornell. Learning that the summer session would not apply towards her degree, she pleaded her case with the president of the university who was willing to accept her appeal provided she successfully petitioned each member of the Cornell faculty. A few weeks

later, back at R-MWC, she received a telegram. Her fingers trembled too much to open it. Finally, she read it, "Petition Granted" (Parrish, 1925).

Published accounts of Parrish's educational record are inconsistent. Furumoto and Scarborough (1986; Table 1) reported that Parrish "had no graduate study." However, in an *American Journal of Psychology* article (Parrish, 1896-97), "A.B., A.M." are listed after her name. Most sources show her Cornell degree as Ph.B. (not A.B.), including sources where Parrish likely provided the information (e.g., *American Men of Science*, 1906). Other sources show graduate study, (e.g., Bell, 1973) but Parrish (1896-97) appears to be the only source indicating an A.M. degree.

In 1902, Parrish resigned from R-MWC to accept a position as Director of the Practice School and Chair of Psychology and Pedagogy at the State Normal School of Georgia in Athens (Thomas, 2005). In 1911, she accepted a position as State Supervisor of Schools, giving her responsibility for 2,400 rural schools and more than 3,800 teachers in Georgia's 48 mountainous counties (Strickland, 1971).

Accomplishments in Psychology

Parrish's work with Titchener resulted in two publications (Parrish, 1895; 1896-97); among her research subjects were Dr. and Mrs. Titchener. Her association with Titchener also led her to establish a laboratory at R-MWC which has been designated the first psychology laboratory in the south (Rowe & Murray, 1979). In 1938, the "Parrish Laboratories of Psychology" were dedicated at R-MWC (Peak, 1939). Zeigler (1949) reported that Parrish established a well-equipped laboratory at the State Normal School in Athens in 1902. She also taught Child Psychology during the summer at the University of Georgia, and there is evidence that she helped establish the first psychological laboratory there (Thomas, 2005). Parrish was among the 22 women psychologists included in the first edition (1906) of *American Men of Science* (Furumoto & Scarborough, 1986), and she was a charter member of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology (Report of the Secretary, 1905).

Accomplishments as an Educator

In addition to accomplishments already noted, Strickland (1971, p. 19) reported that Parrish "impressed...George Foster Peabody, who provided \$10,000 dollars for a building to house experimental classrooms." This building - Muscogee Elementary School - came to be known informally as the "Practice School," the first in Georgia.



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After she became a State Supervisor of Schools in 1911, Parrish moved to Clayton, Georgia, and "...managed to visit every county [48 counties] annually, traveling by rail, buggy, and wagon" (Strickland, 1971, p. 19). The average teacher had a fourth grade education, and most of Parrish's efforts involved teaching the teachers. She also conducted a "...relentless, and sometimes unpopular campaign..." to persuade local politicians and leaders to provide better financial support for the schools (Strickland, 1971, p. 19).

Parrish died September 7, 1918, and is buried in Clayton, Georgia. The Georgia legislature adjourned in Atlanta to attend her funeral. Parrish's grave monument bears the epitaph "Georgia's Greatest Woman," a tribute bestowed upon her by Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, M. L. Britain (Glass, 1941).

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SPW Newsletter Editor Search

A search committee is now seeking nominations/applications for the position of editor of *The Feminist Psychologist*, the newsletter of the Society for the Psychology of Women. The newsletter is distributed four times per year to the SPW membership. The editorship is rotated on a 3-year cycle. The new editor will be selected in the spring of 2006 and will begin editing the newsletter in November 2006 for the Winter 2007 issue. Prospective applicants are welcome to contact the current editor, **Lynda Sagrestano**, if they have questions about the position, at sagresta@siu.edu or 618-453-3534.

Review of applications will begin on February 1, 2005 and continue until the position is filled. Self and other nominations are welcome. Please send a cover letter, curriculum vitae, and the names of two references familiar with the applicant's editorial work to the Co-chair of the Publications Committee, **Margaret Madden**, Office of the Provost, SUNY-Potsdam, Potsdam, NY 13676 or via e-mail to maddenme@potsgdam.edu.