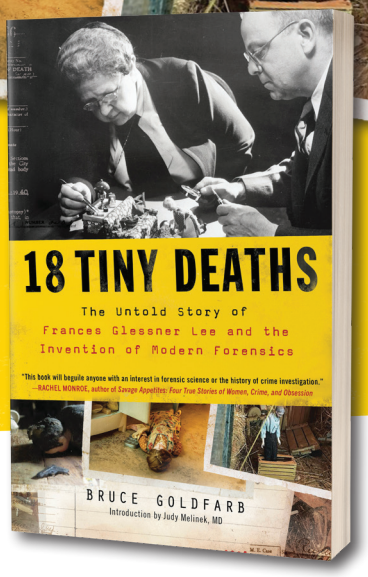
18 TINY DEATHS

Subject Guide: WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION



As a child raised in Gilded Age affluence, the professional prospects for Frances Glessner Lee were limited. Most women were not expected to work outside of the home, and the jobs that were available to women were primarily menial labor. Lee was unable to attend Harvard Medical School because women were not accepted as students.

Several prominent women's colleges existed by the end of the 1800s, mostly in the northeastern U.S. These colleges tended to provide a liberal arts education. Women who attended college often studied the humanities -- the arts, languages, literature, history, etc. Education in the sciences or vocational fields was less common.

Today, women make up about 58 percent of college and university students.(1)

Some important milestones for women in higher education include:

1836: Georgia Female College, now known as Wesleyan College, is chartered as the first school established as a women's college in the U.S.

1837: Oberlin College, a private school in Ohio, is first to admit women and African Americans as students. Some classes are integrated, but most remain all-male.

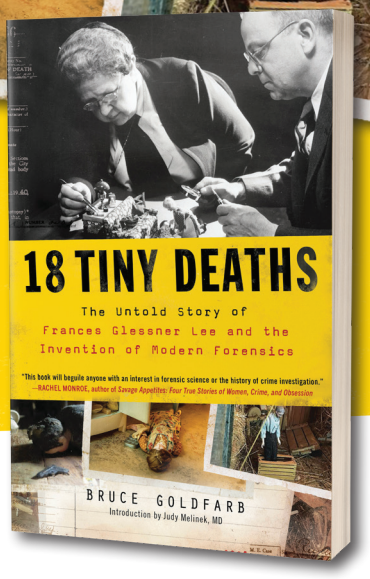
1837-1889: Seven historically private women's colleges are established in the northeastern U.S., considered the women's counterpart to the Ivy League. Known as the Seven Sisters, the schools include Mount Holyoke College, Vassar College, Wellesley College, Smith College, Radcliffe College, Bryn Mawr College, and Barnard College.

1840: Catherine Brewer Benson is the first woman to receive a college degree in the U.S., from Georgia Female College.

1849: Elizabeth Blackwell becomes the first woman to receive a medical degree in the U.S.

18 TINY DEATHS

Subject Guide: WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION



1850: Lucy Sessions is the first African American woman to receive a college degree in the U.S., in literature from Oberlin College.

1870: Ada Kepley is the first woman to graduate from law school, receiving her degree from the Union College of Law (now known as Northwestern School of Law).

1877: Helen Magill is the first woman to receive a Ph.D., in Greek, from Boston University.

1879: After persistent efforts to admit women to Harvard, the college establishes Radcliffe College as the "Harvard Annex" for women.

1893: Thanks to the fund-raising efforts of a group of Baltimore women, three of the 18 students in the first class of Johns Hopkins Medical School are women.

Further Information

College Women: Documenting the History of Women in Higher Education, https://www.collegewomen.org/

The Historical Role of Women in Higher Education by Patsy Parker, Administrative Issues Journal, Vol 5, No 1, Spring 2015, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1062478.pdf

In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women in Higher Education in America by Barbara Miller Solomon, 1986

Sources

1. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_303.10.asp

May be distributed under Creative Commons License
www.brucegoldfarb.com