



## **Newsmaker: Elizabeth Blackwell – by Misty S. Fairbanks**

In January 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman in the United States to earn a medical degree when she graduated at the head of her class from New York's Geneva College. Blackwell had been denied admission to other medical schools because of her gender. Indeed, she is reported to have been admitted to Geneva only after students – believing her application to be a joke or a hoax – voted to admit her. Once enrolled, she faced resistance but excelled academically.

Blackwell had been born in Bristol, England in 1821 to Samuel and Hannah Blackwell. Samuel, a Quaker and an abolitionist who believed in equal rights for women, extended the same educational benefits to his daughters that his sons enjoyed. No doubt in part a result of Samuel's reformist influence, Elizabeth's sister Emily would also become a doctor, while brother Samuel would marry Antoinette Brown, a trailblazer for women in the ministry, and brother Henry would marry Lucy Stone, a suffragist.

The Blackwell family moved from England to the United States in 1832, moving first to New York City and eventually to Cincinnati. Elizabeth Blackwell spent time teaching in Ohio, Kentucky and the Carolinas as a means to an income, but her focus was on medicine and she began privately studying until she was able to attend medical school.

After graduation from Geneva, Blackwell moved to Europe to continue her studies in England and in Paris. While in Paris, she contracted a disease from an infant patient, leading to the removal of one of her eyes and ending her goal of becoming a surgeon. While in England, she first met Florence Nightingale, with whom she apparently talked of opening a medical school for women.

Blackwell returned to New York City in 1851, but her gender was an obstacle to her career goals and she could not find a place to practice. In 1853 she opened a clinic for women and children, which grew into the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. Later, Blackwell would help establish the Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmary, which trained women to work as nurses and doctors – the first school to do so. There, she took a position as the Chair of Hygiene. (Blackwell was a strong advocate for the value of hygiene and sanitation in preventing illness.)

In 1869 Blackwell permanently returned to England, living there until her death in 1910. In England, among other things, Blackwell would co-found the London School of Medicine for Women, then go on to publish and lecture. During an earlier period in England, in 1859, Blackwell had become the first woman to have her name listed on the British medical register.

Apparently resistant to the idea, Blackwell never married. She did adopt a daughter, Katherine Barry.

In 1974 the United States honored Blackwell by placing her image on a postage stamp.

Sources: [history .com](http://history.com); [wikipedia](http://wikipedia); [womenshistory.about.com](http://womenshistory.about.com); [winningthevote.org](http://winningthevote.org).