



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Education pioneer Sarah A. Gray

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Sarah A. Gray was one of many educational pioneers who spent part or all of their careers in Alexandria. Born free in our city, she attended a Catholic school for girls near Baltimore in the 1850s. Readers should remember that at that time, education was not offered to the vast majority of African American children in Alexandria.

Gray and Jane Solomon Crouch, who were contemporaries of Julia Wilbur and Harriett Jacobs, founded a school on Alfred Street for formerly enslaved girls in Alexandria in October 1861 called the St. Rose School.

Gray's experience during the Civil War encouraged her to open another school in 1867, named the Excelsior School. Gray taught fundamentals such as reading, writing, math and geography. She also sought to enable her female students to make a living as seamstresses by teaching them needlework.

Virginia established its first public school system in 1870, and strictly segregated the system by race. Gray was appointed as a teacher at the school for African American girls in Alexandria. In 1883, she was appointed as the principal for the Hollowell School for girls. While many educators focused exclusively on primary grades for their new schools, Gray traveled north to observe how other schools taught high school students. She then added high school classes for her advanced students.

Sadly, Gray's health deteriorated between 1888 and 1893. The Feb. 3, 1893 edition of the Alexandria Gazette reported that Gray died on Jan. 8, 1893. The newspaper noted that she had appointed Maggie A. White to be her successor at Hollowell during her illness.

Gray's legacy lives on in Alexandria today. When the City of Alexandria combined the Snowden School for boys and the Hollowell School for girls in 1920, it named the new school after the original principals of the two schools, John F. Parker and Sarah A. Gray. Although Parker-Gray School is now gone, Alexandria preserves the historic district named after the school and the principals.

*Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout March. For information on events, social media posts, and new interpretive signs, visit [alexandriava.gov/historic](http://alexandriava.gov/historic).*

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

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