

# SARAH GARNET



MRS. SARAH J. S. GARNET

*Sarah J.S. Tompkins Garnet. c. 1860. Photographs and Print Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library / Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

Born in Brooklyn in 1831, Sarah Jane Smith Thompson Garnet was an educator and an activist who fought to secure the right to vote for women. Garnet was the first Black woman to become a principal in the New York City school system and she was the co-founder of the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn, which advocated for voting rights for women and racial equality for all Black Americans.

## EARLY LIFE

Garnet was the oldest of 11 children; her father Sylvanus Smith was a free Black farmer who was one of the earliest land investors in Weeksville, a free Black community in Brooklyn established in the 1830s. After graduating high school, Garnet decided to become a teacher—one of the few career paths available for educated Black women in 19th-century America. Garnet worked as an educator for nearly 50 years, and during her teaching career fought to end racial discrimination against Black teachers and to improve pay for women educators. In 1863, she became the first Black woman principal of a New York City public school, Manhattan Grammar School No. 4, an integrated school that taught both Black and white students.

## ACTIVISM

In the late 1880s, Garnet co-founded the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn, which hosted visits and speeches from American suffragists and British suffragettes and advocated for gender and racial equality as part of the League's advocacy for women's right to vote. Garnet advocated for women's suffrage at the national level, becoming the head of the suffrage division for the National Association of Colored Women, where she worked to educate fellow association members about the suffrage campaign, distributed literature, and traveled to give speeches at association conventions.

For Garnet and other Black suffragists, the fight to win the ballot was inseparable from the struggle for racial equality in all realms of life, from work to school to politics. The League's members included numerous prominent Black women New Yorkers, from



*Dr. Susan McKinney Steward. Date unknown. Photograph. In T.G. Steward, Fifty Years in the Gospel Ministry. Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1921.*

Garnet's sister Dr. Susan McKinney Steward (shown), the first Black woman in New York state to earn a medical degree, to Maritcha Remond Lyons, an educator and activist whose family operated a boardinghouse that doubled as a stop on the Underground Railroad in antebellum New York.



Sarah Garnet died at home in Brooklyn in 1911, just a few months after she and her sister Dr. McKinney Steward returned from attending the first Universal Races Congress in London. W.E.B. DuBois was among those who spoke at her memorial service, while Maritcha Lyons contributed a profile of Garnet to the book *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, a collection of sixty biographies of prominent African American women that was published in 1926. In 2019, Brooklyn's P.S. 9 in Prospect Heights was renamed the Sarah Smith Garnet School in honor of her legacy as an educator, suffragist, and advocate for racial equality.

## QUESTIONS

Why did Black suffragists believe it was important to fight for racial equality alongside the right to vote?

How might Sarah Garnet's work as an educator have impacted her activism for woman suffrage?

How did Garnet's career as an educator, suffragist, and activist contribute to the ongoing fight for full emancipation for Black Americans?

## LEARN MORE

Sarah Garnet was featured in the 2017-2018 exhibition [Beyond Suffrage: A Century of New York Women in Politics](#) at the Museum of the City of New York.

To learn more about Garnet's role in the New York fight for women's suffrage, check out the MCNY lesson plan "'Working Together, Working Apart:' How Identity Shaped Suffragists' Politics" at [mcny.org/lesson-plans/beyond-suffrage-working-together-working-apart-how-identity-shaped-suffragists](https://mcny.org/lesson-plans/beyond-suffrage-working-together-working-apart-how-identity-shaped-suffragists).

Information about the Museum's programs for teachers, students, and families, as well as online lesson plans and educational resources, can be found on the Museum's Digital Education Hub: [mcny.org/DigitalEd](https://mcny.org/DigitalEd).

## ACTIVIST NEW YORK

Visit the [Activist New York](#) exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York to learn more about the city's history of activism and the people who have propelled social change from the 1600s to today.

Explore the [Activist New York](#) online exhibition and discover classroom resources and [lesson plans](#) by visiting [activistnewyork.mcny.org](https://activistnewyork.mcny.org).

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## SUPPORTERS

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