

# BEYOND SUFFRAGE:

Giving Voice to Oregon's Unsung Women in Medicine

This exhibit was designed to increase awareness of the stories and voices of women who are not heard enough in our Oregon history of women's rights. Systemic white supremacy, racism, and sexism combine to render some women less visible than others in our history. These women might not have been written about in their own time; past historians, researchers, writers, and archivists may have overlooked them or de-prioritized them; or the information about them, whether plentiful or scarce, may have come from biased perspectives. By bringing the voices and stories of these women into the forefront of our history, it is possible to show that we, as a society, value the experiences of women like them, both in the past and in the present. While this exhibit is linked to the commemoration of the centennial of national women's suffrage, it is also important to recognize that not all women were able to vote following the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920.

The curation and the development of *Beyond Suffrage: Giving Voice to Oregon's Unsung Women in Medicine* has taken place almost exclusively remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was done using born digital or digitized archival materials. We recognize that

it's impossible to represent everyone within the scope of this exhibit and that the work of including traditionally underrepresented voices in Oregon's history is an ongoing collaborative effort.

We also acknowledge that Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR is located in the traditional territory of the Chepenefa ("Mary's River") band of the Kalapuya. After the Kalapuya Treaty (Treaty of Dayton) in 1855, Kalapuya people were forcibly removed to what are now the Grand Ronde and Siletz reservations, and are now members of the [Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon](#) and the [Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians](#).

We would like to acknowledge the work done by the [Oregon Historical Society](#) and the [Century of Action](#) - a project of the [Oregon Women's History Consortium](#), as well as the work done by our archivists Tiah Edmunson-Morton and Natalia Fernández, our graphic designers Kallie Hagel and Emma Pattee, and our intern who led the development, curation, and writing of this exhibit, Sujittra Avery Carr. This exhibit would not be possible without them.





# Dr. Sarah Chan

## Chinese Medicine Doctor

b. 1857–1924

Dr. Sarah Kate Chan (née. Chow) was born in Canton, Guangdong, China on December 5, 1857. She and her husband, Reverend Sing Kai Chan, were practitioners of Chinese Medicine and had seven children (six daughters and one son). During their time in Portland, Chan worked at the Chinese Medicine Company before moving to start her own practice in 1907. Later, Chan and her husband shared a practice, which is recorded in an advertisement in the April 21, 1912 issue of *The Oregon Journal*.

While in Portland, Chan was an avid suffragette who led Portland's Chinese American Equal Suffrage group. In April of 1912, both *The Oregonian* and *The Oregon Journal* printed articles about Chan's presence at a luncheon for La Reine Helen Baker, a notable suffragette and vocal advocate for Eugenics, which was hosted by Portland's College Women's Equal Suffrage Association. According to the *The Oregon Journal*,

**“History in the equal suffrage movement was made yesterday at a luncheon of the College Women’s Equal Suffrage association, for among the guests were seven Chinese women and two babies.”**

*The Oregonian* notes that “White suffragists yesterday learned for the first time of the existence of such an organization in the Chinese quarter,” just seven months before white Oregon women would gain full voting rights. Chan spoke at the luncheon, her daughter Bertie working as a translator, and criticized Oregon for its lack of equal suffrage for women.

Due to her status as a Chinese immigrant, Chan was never allowed to vote, even after women's suffrage was granted locally in 1912 and nationally in 1920. Only in 1943, 19 years after Chan died at age 66, were Chinese allowed to become naturalized citizens and gain voting rights.



## Notable Facts:

- Until 1927, the Oregon constitution specifically denied those who were black, mixed race black, and Chinese the right of suffrage (the right to vote).
- In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and Chinese were able to become naturalized citizens, thus allowing them to vote.

## Want to learn more?

- Herbs and Roots: A History of Chinese Doctors in the American Medical Marketplace* by Tamara Venit Shelton
- Century of Action's Chinese American Suffrage in Portland, Oregon*

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# Dr. Harriet Lawrence

## Pathologist

b. 1883–1974

Born on September 13, 1883 in Kingsbury, Maine, Dr. Harriet Jane Lawrence referred to herself as a “microbe hunter.” She was Oregon’s first known female Pathologist and one of the earliest female Pathologists in the U.S. She began teaching at age 15 and put herself through college and medical school with money she earned through teaching. She was one of six women who graduated in 1912 from the Boston University School of Medicine. According to census records, she was never married, although she had a daughter named Elizabeth.

She worked for a short time as a Resident Pathologist in Boston, and then moved to Oregon. According to her obituary in an Oregon newspaper:

**“She told friends that when she arrived here by train no one met her because they were not expecting a woman doctor.”**

Lawrence worked for a short time at the University of Oregon, before she moved to Portland and worked with Ralph Matson, a tuberculosis specialist. She opened her own laboratory in the Selling Building and continued her work there as a surgical and clinical pathologist for over 50 years.

Lawrence was active in the American Society of Clinical Pathologists and the Philanthropic Educational Organization (P.E.O.) Sisterhood. She was a member of the Medical Club of Portland, where she worked alongside other notable women physicians such as Jessie McGavin, Amelia Zeigler, and Mae Cardwell (see panel in this exhibit).

During the 1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic, Dr. Lawrence developed a serum therapy that was sent to physicians across Oregon to treat those infected; this work earned her recognition from President Woodrow Wilson. Along with recognition from Wilson, she received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the General Alumni Association of Boston University in 1963 in “recognition of her professional excellence, her contributions to medicine, and the example she set for women in the field.”

She died February 28, 1974 at age 91 in Portland, OR.



## Notable Fact:

- Dr. Lawrence supported Dr. Alan L. Hart in his transition from female to male in 1917. It was on her letter of recommendation that Dr. Hart was hired as a staff physician at the Albuquerque Sanatorium. Read about Dr. Alan Hart in [Oregon Health & Science University's project Queering OHSU: Honoring Our LGBTQ+ History](#).

## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Dr. Harriet Lawrence](#):
- “1918-1919 Spanish Influenza in Oregon, Corvallis, and OSU” Speaking of History blog post series by Anna Dvorak and Larry Landis:
  - **Part I:** [The 1918-19 Flu Pandemic: Dr. Wendell J. Phillips](#)
  - **Part II:** [The “Spanish” Flu Arrives in Oregon](#)
  - **Part III:** [The “Spanish” Flu in Corvallis](#)
  - **Part IV:** [The “Spanish” Flu On Campus](#)

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# Dr. Lena Kenin

## *OB/GYN and Psychiatrist*

b. 1897–1968

Dr. Lena Nemerovsky Kenin, born November 5, 1897, attended Reed College in Portland, OR and graduated from University of Washington in 1921 before marrying Harry Kenin later that year. Harry trained as a lawyer and served on the Oregon State Senate, Portland School Board, and the state's Welfare Commission. He was engaged with Jewish religious life, though she was less involved. She was a secular thinker and a lifelong Democrat, registering with the Americans for Democratic Action in 1947. The couple had no children.

Kenin spent three years as a school teacher before earning her M.D. from University of Oregon Medical School in 1929. She interned at Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland and in 1933 became the first female Resident Physician in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at John Hopkins University; she set up her own successful practice in Obstetrics and Gynecology.

**“Popular myth suggests that during the height of her practice, Dr. Lena Kenin delivered at least half of the Jewish babies in Portland, Oregon.”**

As an OB/GYN, Kenin felt unequipped to give emotional support to new mothers. After Harry died, she enrolled in a Psychiatric program at University of Pennsylvania Graduate School in 1958 at age 61. She was a Resident at John Hopkins and Philadelphia Hospital for Mental and Nerve Disorders before returning to Portland in the 1960s, where she established a practice in Psychiatry. Her interest in both Obstetrics and Psychiatry led to her co-authoring the article “Mental Illness Associated with the Postpartum State” in 1962 with Norman Blass.

Kenin died in 1968 at age 70 having become one of the first women in Oregon to distinguish herself in three medical fields: Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Psychiatry. Her work on postpartum depression placed Oregon at the forefront of that field of study.



## Notable Facts:

- Kenin was also an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Oregon Medical School, chief consultant for the school's health service, and a member of seven different professional organizations.
- To accommodate the privacy of expectant mothers of the mid-1950s, Kenin redesigned her offices to include a private second door that allowed for a less noticeable exit.

## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Dr. Lena Kenin](#)

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# Dr. Mae Cardwell

## Physician

b. 1853–1929

Born July 23, 1853 in Cherry Hill, Pennsylvania, Dr. Mae Harrington Whitney Cardwell was the first woman to hold a position on a hospital staff in Oregon. She became a teacher at age 14 and married Dr. H.W. Whitney at age 16; however, that marriage ended and she married Dr. James Robert Cardwell, a dentist, in Portland on April 13, 1895.

Cardwell moved to the West Coast in 1877, where she enrolled in Cooper Medical School in San Francisco in 1881 and graduated in 1883. She received an M.D. from the Willamette University Medical Department in 1885 and was hired as a physician specializing in children's diseases in a Portland hospital.

In 1891, Cardwell, Heena Price, Viola Coe, and Florence King established the Women's Medical Club (later the Medical Club of Portland). This was the first women's medical society in the West. She was also actively involved in the Portland's Woman Suffrage Movement as one of five vice presidents of the College Equal Suffrage Association in the 1912 campaign; this resulted in Oregon's white women having the right to vote.

Cardwell served as "an important bridge for the acceptance of other women in the profession." She joined the Oregon State Medical Society in 1885, was the first woman accepted into the Portland City and County Medical Society in 1902, was appointed to the Portland City Health Board in 1903, and served as a contributing editor for the *Medical Sentinel* in Portland. Cardwell returned to Pennsylvania and died in 1929.

**“As Dr. Cardwell truly said, when a woman takes up such a subject for investigation and reform she has started on a world-wide work, greater than she ever dreamed.”**  
– *Oregon Daily Journal*, December 5, 1902.



## Notable Facts:

- As a contributing editor for the *Medical Sentinel* in Portland, "she chronicled the early history of Oregon medical societies and women's role in the profession."
- Cardwell participated in a test case at the army base in Vancouver, Washington to claim officer status for medical women during WWI; although unsuccessful, this played an important part in the national movement for women physicians to be part of the Military Medical Corps.
- Among her many accomplishments, Cardwell also helped establish a Working Girl's Home and Industrial School with the Portland Woman's Club, served on the medical staff of the Boys' and Girls' Aid Society and the Florence Crittenton Home, was a member of the first Oregon Child Welfare Commission, was a physician for the Portland Juvenile Court, and served as the women's medical advisor at Reed College.

## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Mae Harrington Whitney Cardwell](#)

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# Dr. Joanna Cain

*Physician, Teacher, Researcher*

b. 1950–present

Joanna M. Cain, an internationally known physician, teacher, and researcher focusing on women's health and gynecologic oncology who has been named a "Local Legend" by the US Department of Health and Human Services, was born in Wapato, Washington in 1950. She attended University of Washington (UW) for her undergraduate education before receiving her M.D. from Creighton University School of Medicine in 1977. She went on to complete her residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology at UW School of Medicine and was the first woman to receive a fellowship in Gynecologic Oncology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Cain has actively engaged in discussions around the development of basic women's health curricula for U.S. medical schools and helped create the "Women's Health Care Competencies for Medical Students" endorsed by the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics (APGO). She was also the first woman president of the APGO and the Council of University Chairs of Obstetrics and Gynecology, as well as the first American and first woman to act as chair for the Committee for Ethics in Women's Health of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO). Additionally, she chaired the FIGO Committee for International Cervical Cancer Prevention.

**"In 2004, Cain was named a member of the Arnold P. Gold Foundation's Gold Humanism Honor Society, which recognizes physicians who embody the values of humanism and professionalism within the field of medicine and its constituent institutions."**

Cain is actively engaged in community outreach (such as free public health screenings) and supported the Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) Free Friday screening programs started by the Center for Women's Health. Additionally, she helped lead the first conference that focused on the delivery of women's healthcare in rural settings. She left OHSU in 2008 for a position at Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School.



## Notable Facts:

- Cain's research focuses on gender-based medicine, pain management, medical ethics, and health policy. She has authored or co-authored nearly 100 articles, over 40 book chapters, and has edited or co-edited five books.
- Having chaired OHSU and Brown's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, as well as served as the Dean of Women's Health programs at Brown's Warren Alpert Medical School, Cain also served on the faculty of the UW School of Medicine and the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Dr. Joanna Cain](#)

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# Mary Thompson

## *Pioneer Doctor*

b. 1825–1919

Mary Anna Cooke Thompson was born to Horatio and Anna Bennett Cooke on February 14, 1825 in New York. She married Rueben Thompson, a carpenter from Pennsylvania, on November 14, 1848 in Chicago. The couple lived in La Salle, Illinois for 18 years, where they had three sons and two daughters (both of whom died), as well as an adopted niece. They had another son, James R., who was born in Portland in 1871.

Thompson's medical career began in Illinois when she convinced local physicians Dr. Frances Bry and Dr. Lyman B Larkin to give her lessons and opportunities for practice. After the Thompson family moved to Oregon in 1866, Reuben's health began to fail and he died in 1885. During this time, Thompson continued to work as a physician but also supplemented her income by taking in boarders. She practiced medicine in Portland for over 40 years.

According to the Oregon Encyclopedia,

**“Although she held no degree, Thompson began advertising in Portland newspapers in 1867 and was eventually known as ‘Portland’s first woman physician.’”**

Along with her practice, Thompson was active in the women's suffrage movement and was committed, along with friends Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair and Frances Fuller Victor, to temperance and prohibition. Abigail Scott Duniway, women's rights advocate, disagreed with Thompson about connecting temperance, prohibition, and the women's suffrage movement to each other; however, she recognized Thompson's character and ability.

While on an extended speaking tour in 1877 and 1878 on the East Coast, Thompson participated in the National Woman Suffrage Association Convention in Washington, D.C.; spoke before the U.S. Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections; met with President Rutherford B. Hayes; and visited with Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone. Thompson continued to identify as a doctor throughout her life. She died on May 4, 1919 at age 94 after suffering a paralytic stroke 6 months prior.



## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Mary Anna Thompson](#)

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# Willie Mae Hart

## Nurse

b. 1915–2017

Willie Mae Young Hart was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi on April 4, 1915. She attended Catholic high school and trained informally as a nurse in Mississippi before moving to Oregon in 1939. She first lived in Coos Bay and then moved to Portland, where she worked in the shipyards on Swan Island before starting the Beacon Cab Company.

During the war, Hart joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) along with many others who were upset about Portland's segregation laws and the lack of housing and jobs. The work done by the NAACP, in conjunction with the Urban League of Portland and State Representative Mark O. Hatfield, led to the 1953 Public Accommodations Law (also known as the Oregon Civil Rights Bill), which helped limit discrimination in public places.

During the 1960 presidential race, Hart and her friend, Beatrice Mott-Reed, connected with John F. Kennedy at a picnic after noting that his Portland campaign did not include meetings in African American neighborhoods. Hart ate and spoke with Senator Kennedy and his sister about the needs of the African American community. As a result, she was contacted by the National Council of Negro Women and asked to start a Portland chapter.

Following the closure of her cab company, Hart enrolled at Oregon Health and Sciences University (OHSU), where she studied nursing. She became the first African American nurse to work at the Physicians and Surgeons Hospital.

In 2010, Hart was not only working as a nurse in North Portland, but was also an active member of her community. She continued her early social justice work through her involvement in Church Women United and the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church. She died at age 102 on June 24, 2017. In her words,

**“Everyone thinks that we’ve [Black Americans] arrived, but we haven’t.”**



## Notable Facts:

- Hart started Beacon Cab Company, Portland's first African American owned cab company, with her husband, Theodore R. Hart, and their friend, Carlos D. Martin after World War II. Even though they only had a few cars, Beacon Cab Company offered free service to anyone in need during the Vanport Flood of 1948.

## Want to learn more?

- [Oregon Encyclopedia article on Willie Mae Young Hart](#)
- In 2010, Willie Mae Young Hart shared her oral history as part of the [Portland State University Black United Front Oral History Project](#)

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