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Iowa’s “First Lady”: Principal, Superintendent, Professor, and ISTA President

Veronika Cummings

*“I cannot understand why equal attainment, equal culture,
and equal strength of purpose and will should not have
equal influence whether in man or woman.”*

— *Phebe Sudlow*

Phebe W. Sudlow was born in Poughkeepsie, New York on July 11, 1831. She was one of six children born to Richard and Hannah Sudlow (Barnhart, 1947, & Christian, 1989). Phebe was the granddaughter of a man who came to America from England in 1776 (Christian, 1989). When she was four, her family moved to Ohio and settled near Nelsonville where she received her elementary education. She later attended Athens Academy in Athens, Ohio (Christian, 1989). At the age of fifteen she began her teaching career at the same schoolhouse in Athens where she once attended (Barnhart, 1947). After Phebe’s father died in 1851, she moved to Rockford, Illinois to live with her brother, John. A year later, the siblings

moved and settled in Round Grove, Iowa where Phebe began working in a schoolhouse (Christian, 1989).

Phebe's work at the Round Grove School caught the attention of Abram Kissel, the Scott County superintendent and superintendent of Davenport city schools. Abram asked Phebe to move to Davenport, Iowa in 1858 to take the position of assistant principal in sub-district No.5, which she agreed to. The following year she was promoted to principal of Grammar School No.2 and District School No.3 with an annual salary of \$350, which was less than the wage paid to men in the same position (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.). A year later she became principal of both of those schools, which reputedly made her the first female principal of any public school in the United States. Her annual salary was then increased to \$400. She remained principal of both schools until 1866 when she turned her full attention to serving as principal of Grammar School No.3. She then became principal of the Davenport Training School for Teachers in 1872 and principal of Grammar School No.8 in 1873. By this time her annual salary had increased to "the fabulous sum of \$1200" (Barnhart, 1947, p.27).

In 1874 Phebe was unanimously chosen as the city superintendent of schools by the Davenport board of education (Barnhart, 1947, p.25). The board offered her a salary considerably less than that of her male predecessor; and, she rejected the offer until they agreed to a pay increase (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.). She purportedly told the board members, "If it was lower because of my qualifications, I will understand. If it is because I am a woman, however, I cannot accept it" (Christian, 1989, p.6). Phebe served as superintendent for Davenport Public Schools from 1874-1878. The rise of Phebe Sudlow from first female principal to first female superintendent gave the Women's Suffrage Movement in Iowa a boost and garnered national attention for the city of Davenport (Peterson, 1970, p.35).

In 1878 Phebe accepted the appointment of Lady Professor of English Language and Literature in the State University (present-day University of Iowa) at the full salary of \$1,700. In 1878, *The Educational Weekly* published an article on Phebe's promotion to Lady Professor of English Language; and, its editors had the following to say about her: "Miss Sudlow carries with her to her new field of labor the respect, friendship, and

good will of an entire corps of teachers. Davenport's loss is Iowa's gain" (Vaile & Winchell, 1878, p.346). Phebe was the first female professor of the University, earning a salary equal to that of her male colleagues (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.). After Phebe accepted her position at the University, the *Buchanan County Bulletin* published the following opinion:

The University can put down a new mark in favor of the co-education of the sexes, for the Regents have elected a woman professor, who has accepted the position. She will be the first woman who has ever had a similar honor bestowed upon her. The fortunate lady is the cultured Miss P.W. Sudlow, principal of the Davenport public schools.

(Library of Congress, 1878, para. 4).

Without any assistance, Phebe taught English literature, composition, rhetoric, oratory, and elocution (Gerber, 1989, p.44). However, just three years later in 1881 she was forced to resign due to her failing health (Barnhart, 1947, p.29).

Phebe was an active and outspoken member of the Iowa State Teachers Association. Prior to being elected as president of the Iowa State Teachers Association, Phebe was the chairman of the Committee of Ladies who demanded that women be allowed to pay dues in order to be granted full membership to the ISTA (Hart, 1954). Then in 1876, Phebe was elected as the first female president of the ISTA when she beat out two highly respectable male candidates. In her inaugural address she discussed novel ideas such as the importance of kindergartens, the value of industrial and technical education, and the role of women in the education system (Barnhart, 1947).

In 1888 Phebe returned to Davenport Public Schools as principal of School No.1 but taught for only one year, after which she retired from education (Barnhart, 1947). Although Phebe was no longer professionally active, she continued to participate in philanthropy projects and community engagement. In 1889 she organized The Club of '89, which was one of the first women's organizations to be formed in Davenport (Barnhart, 1947). The Club of '89 was a ladies' literary society organized to "facilitate the exchange of books and ideas" among a select group of

Davenport's women (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.). Phebe served as the Club's president for a number of years (Barnhart, 1947).

Phebe was also active in the Ladies' Industrial Relief Society, personally directing the organization and serving as its president for fifteen consecutive years. The Ladies' Industrial Relief Society was an organization dedicated to assisting poor families and working mothers by providing day care and laundry services as well as cooking and sewing lessons (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.; Phebe W. Sudlow, n.d.). During that same time, she was also an active member of the Methodist Episcopal Church and devoted much of her time to the Women's Missionary Society and to the church's Sunday school (Barnhart, 1947, p.30). When construction began on the new St. John's Methodist Episcopal Church, she was the one who prepared the congregational history that was placed on the cornerstone. In what little spare time she had, she enjoyed designing tombstones and was also a co-owner of a bookstore (Christian, 1989). She also assisted in the funding and the development of Davenport's first public library (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.; Bates, 2008).

Although Phebe never received a formal education, her immense contributions to education earned her an honorary Master of Arts degree from Cornell College in Iowa in 1878 (see Appendix A). When asked where she received her education, her response was, "All along the way" (Barnhart, 1947, p.31). Phebe collaborated on a textbook on language and composition titled *Language Before Grammar: Language Lessons* (Gerber, 1989). According to Gena Schantz, a member of the Questers International Inc., both the Library of Congress and the University of Indiana have an original copy of the original publication and a reproduction of it is still available today online (Personal communication, October 31, 2019).

On June 8, 1922 Phebe Sudlow died at her home in Davenport (Barnhart, 1947). She is buried in Oakdale Cemetery where some of the tombstones she designed may still be found (Christian, 1989). She was the nation's first female principal, first female superintendent, first female college professor at the University of Iowa, and first female president of the ISTA. She set the precedent for equal pay for women in the Davenport school district as well as the state of Iowa (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.).

On June 14, 1921, the Davenport board of education voted to change

the name of "East Intermediate School" to "Phoebe W. Sudlow Intermediate School" in Phebe's honor. During the renaming of the Phebe W. Sudlow Intermediate School, the Davenport Board of Education proclaimed this gesture served as "a memorial befitting [Phebe's] superior character, her ennobling influence and her dignified example" (Barnhart, 1947, p.30). The bronze plaque posted in Phebe's honor at Sudlow Intermediate School bears the inscription: "PHEBE W. SUDLOW... 1874-1878 FIRST WOMAN CITY SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES" (see Appendix B). In 1993 Phebe was inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame, acknowledging all of her invaluable contributions to the field of education and to the city of Davenport (Phebe W. Sudlow, n.d.). Although various sources have credited either Ella Flagg Young or Onalee Baker as being the nation's first female superintendents, Phebe Sudlow had Young beat by decades and Baker by an entire century (Christian, 1989).

Phebe Sudlow's first name is constantly misspelled. According to a service contract signed with Phebe's full signature, her name is spelled as Phebe, not Phoebe (see Appendix C). Because Phebe Sudlow often signed her name as "P.W. Sudlow" with just her first initial, many people apparently assumed the more familiar spelling (Phebe Sudlow, n.d.).

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Appendix A

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CORNELL COLLEGE

Master of Arts

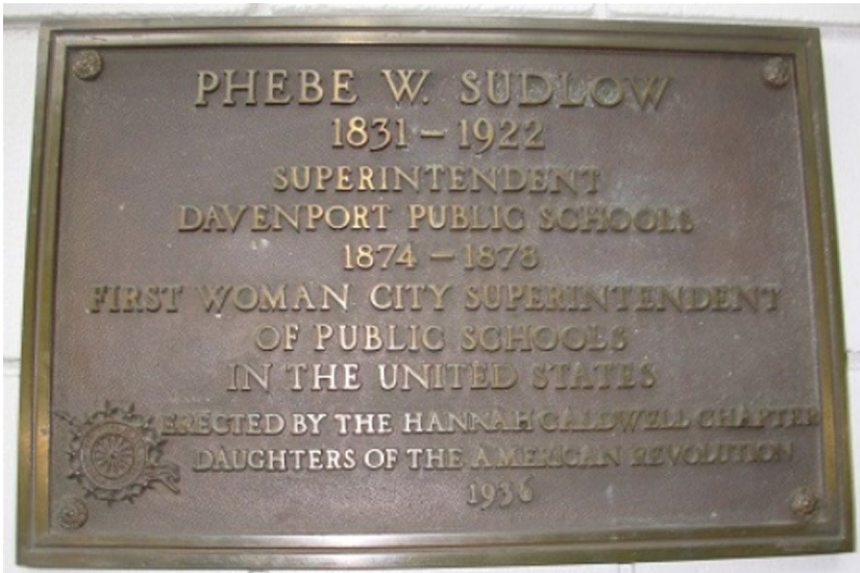
- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| * Albrook, Charles E., '04. | Lockard, Luther Lorenzo, '03. |
| * Armstrong, Frank H., '04. | Loveland, Frank L., '04. |
| * Barrett, R. C., '95. | Markley, J. E. E., '04. |
| * Boggs, Amy, '04. | * Martin, Charles Landon, '08. |
| * Bunn, Isaac, H., '73. | McKaig, Wilbur, '60. |
| * Calvin, Samuel, '75. | Mershon, Nelson Asel, '05. |
| Cessna, Orange H., '01. | * Meyer, Lucy Rider, '04. |
| Chapple, Joe Mitchell, '04. | * Page, Charles A., '66. |
| Churchill, C. H., '95. | Parsons, James M., '02. |
| Clark, Joseph, '07. | Price, Joseph, '89. |
| Coleman, F. W., '91. | * Rood, Henry Harrison, '00. |
| * Cooke, Harriette, J., '59. | Ross, A. C., '90. |
| Cory, Benjamin C., '02. | Ross, William Frederick, '96. |
| * Cressy, W. W., '96. | * Secor, Eugene, '04. |
| Dickman, William John, '04. | Sells, Cato, '98. |
| * Eighmey, Charles Henry, '16. | * Sessions, F. J., '95. |
| Farrar, Albert J., '06. | Shaffer, Frank P., '04. |
| Forward, Ophelia, '79. | * Shankland, Edward C., '04. |
| * Foster, John O., '81. | Sia, Ruby, '18. |
| * Gault, Frank Benjamin, '97. | Stuckslager, Willard Coldren, '04. |
| * Hale, Susan E., '59. | Sudlow, Phoebe W., '78. |
| Handy, Elias, '04. | Tanneyhill, George W., '91. |
| Hanna, Belle, '04. | Tobin, Thomas, '79. |
| Hanna, Harry Howard, '05. | Trimble, Lydia A., '04. |
| Holm, Adam, '78. | VanAnda, James A., '83. |
| Irwin, George M., '73. | * Wheeler, David H., '58. |
| * Johnson, Alfred K., '79. | Wong, Gang Huo, '19. |
| * Johnston, William F., '04. | |

Master of Science

- * Webster, Isaac T., '76.

Cornell College 1853-1925 Register of Graduates, Non-Graduates Trustees and Faculty (1925, November 30). *The Cornell College Bulletin*, 27(7). p.124.

Appendix B



Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR): Hannah Caldwell Chapter DAR Davenport, Iowa. (n.d.). http://www.isdar.org/chapters/hannahcaldwell/Historic_Markers.html#Phoebe_W_Sudlow

Appendix C

