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Sarah A. Gray: a legacy of equity in education

BY CHLOE MAZARIEGOS

On Jan. 9, 1893, the Alexandria Gazette published the unfortunate announcement of the death of Sarah A. Gray, an Alexandria-born educator who dedicated her life to providing an education to a racially segregated Virginian population. According to the Library of Virginia and Jae Jones’s article, she began her own education in a Catholic all-girls school in Baltimore during the 1850s, at an institution called St. Francis School.

This made her stand out from other children of African American ancestry, as it was not an opportunity often afforded to African American

children during the period of slavery in the United States. Gray began her career in teaching at the young age of 14.

Throughout the Civil War, Gray and her colleague, Jane A. Crouch, co-founded the St. Rose Institute, to continue education through the war, and in 1867 she created the Excelsior School, after which she became an educator in the first African American girls’ school in Alexandria in 1870.

Gray taught an average of 70 African American students each year, which certainly made a significant impact, as this was during a time when anti-Unionist white Alexandrians were loudly protesting the potential mixing of African

American students with white students in the school system.

The Excelsior School taught young African American women reading, writing, math and geography, as well as training them in needlework so that they could potentially use this skill in the future to help with their livelihoods.

Today, not many people know how significant Gray’s contributions to the Alexandria African American community were, and few are familiar with the people behind the honorific name of the “Parker-Gray” schools and neighborhood adjacent to Old Town.

Although research is still being done about the life of this prominent figure in the

history of Alexandria, one thing is for certain: Sarah A. Gray’s contributions to education over the course of her lifetime are not to be overlooked. Like many educators who came after her, we can appreciate the success of Gray’s dedication to education in the many students’ lives she touched over the years.

Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Women’s History Month in March. For more on Women’s History in Alexandria, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic-alexandria/womens-history-in-alexandria.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.