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## Alexandria women and D.C.'s Central High School

BY CHLOE MAZARIEGOS

The Alexandria Gazette's June 10, 1912, edition included an article announcing the graduating class of the Central High School of Washington, D.C. Of the many graduating students that year, five students were Alexandria natives. Four of those five students were women: Julia Whiting Davis, Helen Virginia Heishley, Catherine Virginia Johnson and Bessie Arthur Marks.

The high school's yearbook, *The Brecky*, was published that same year, with short biographies for each student. The yearbook described Davis as having a "very pretty Southern accent." The publication noted Heishley as a dedicated student, particularly in American history.

The student biographies included Johnson and Marks as a cheerful basketball player and a sweet-mannered Alexandrian maiden, respectively. These four young Alexandria women were among the first generations of women allowed to have a formal education in the United States and among the first generations able to pursue a higher education.

By the late 18th century, it was common practice for children to receive education in so-called "dame schools." These "schools" were small groups of home-instructed students

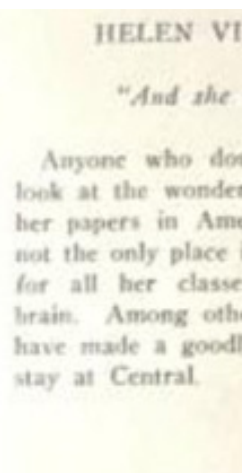
and intended to prepare children, mainly boys, for more organized schooling.

Once they were old enough, they moved on and attended "town schools," where they could advance their education. This private education, even then, was considered the domain of privileged families. After the 19th century, girls were finally allowed to attend these "town schools" to further their education, although conditions were not the same for them as their male counterparts.

Particularly after World War II, people were more accustomed to women, specifically white women, having access to higher education. During the 1960s, the rise of second-wave feminism helped fuel a major surge in the number of women pursuing higher education.

By 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act protected students from discrimination on the basis of sex that could prevent them from getting access to an education. For African American and Indigenous young girls, it took longer to get the same access, with schools being fully desegregated in 1973 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act being enacted in 1975.

Since the 1980s, women have been more likely to pursue a college education. In



PHOTOS/INTERNET ARCHIVE

Images from the 1912 Central High School yearbook.

1993, 42% of American women enrolled in college, compared to a lower 36% for men. There has undoubtedly been progress in increasing access to education for women in the United States, and this serves as an incredible reminder that change is always possible.

*Historic Alexandria is*

*proud to celebrate Women's History Month in March. Find out more on Women's History Month events in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/WomensHistoryMonth.*

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