

# Women's History Month Spotlight

## *Did You Know?*

### **Elizabeth Buffum Chace (1806 - 1899)**

Elizabeth Buffum Chace, a 19th-century abolitionist, women's rights advocate, and prison reformer, often called "The Conscience of Rhode Island," devoted her life to fighting for justice, equality, and human dignity.

Elizabeth Buffum was born on December 9, 1806, in Providence, Rhode Island, into a Quaker family who opposed slavery. Her father, Arnold Buffum, was a founding member and first president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Growing up in a household committed to justice, she developed a sense of moral responsibility, which drove her activism throughout her life.

In 1828, she married Samuel Buffington Chace, a fellow Quaker and textile manufacturer. Together, they had ten children, though only five survived to adulthood. Undeterred, she dedicated herself to causes greater than herself, transforming her home into a hub for activism. For example, her home in Valley Fall, Rhode Island, became an important station on the Underground Railroad, offering refuge and resources to enslaved individuals seeking freedom in Canada. Her home also became a space where she met regularly with other abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and William Wells Brown.

Furthermore, in 1835, Chace co-founded the Fall River Female Anti-Slavery Society after the original group split over whether to allow Black women to join. She and her sisters ensured that the society would be open to all women – a radical move at the time. Further, they worked toward abolition and to end systemic racism. Her commitment to both racial and gender equality was ahead of its time, setting a precedent for intersectional activism.

In her later life, beyond her abolitionist work, Chace advocated for women's rights. She recognized that justice could not be achieved without gender equality. Therefore, she lobbied for women's suffrage and played a pivotal role in advancing women's legal and political rights in Rhode Island. Moreover, her advocacy was instrumental in securing married women's property rights, allowing women to retain ownership of property independent of their husbands.

Additionally, Chace also fought for the humane treatment of incarcerated individuals, particularly women. Specifically, she campaigned for rehabilitation programs and better prison conditions, leading to significant reforms. Her efforts help establish the Rhode Island State Home and School for Dependent and Neglected Children in 1885, which provided care and education for children who would have otherwise faced deplorable conditions in state-run almshouses or prisons.

Chace's pursuit of justice earned her widespread recognition. In 2002, she was posthumously inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame, solidifying her place as one of the state's most influential figures. Moreover, she was the first woman to be memorialized with a statue in the Rhode Island State House. Today, the Elizabeth Buffum Chace Center in Warwick, Rhode Island, provides support to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, embodying the same spirit of advocacy that she championed in her lifetime.

#### *Sources*

Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. N.d. "Elizabeth Buffum Chace." Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. Retrieved March 1, 2025 (<https://riheritagehalloffame.com/elizabeth-chace/>).

New England Historical Society. N.d. "Elizabeth Buffum Chace, Conductor on the Underground Railroad and Shunned Because Of It." New England Historical Society. Retrieved March 1, 2025 (<https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/elizabeth-buffum-chace-conductor-on-the-underground-railroad/>).

#### ***Women's History is American History!***

A Women's History Month spotlight will be published every other week during Women's History Month in March. Dr. Julian Culver ([julian\\_culver@brown.edu](mailto:julian_culver@brown.edu)) wrote the above spotlight. Have a spotlight to share? Newsletter submissions are due to Casey Wahl ([casey\\_wahl@brown.edu](mailto:casey_wahl@brown.edu)) Wednesdays by 11:00 am.