BLACK HISTORY MONTH FEATURE

Firsts for Black Women

By Ann Williams-Roblow

Mary Eliza Mahoney, an energetic, serious young woman, scrubbed floors, washed and ironed clothes and did other cleaning work 16 hours a day, seven days a week for 16 months until she realized her goal of becoming a graduate nurse.

Ms. Mahoney's name does not conjure images of well known black women in the past such as Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune and Sojourner Truth, but she does have her place in history as do many other unheralded, but important black women.

Mary Eliza Mahoney was a first in the nursing field — the first black graduate nurse.

Black women in the late 19th century often had a difficult time becoming trained and licensed nurses. Nursing schools in the South were closed to them. Those in the North, that accepted black women, were few in number.

Ms. Mahoney was one of a few lucky black women. She was accepted and entered Boston's New England Hospital for Women and Children in 1878 at the age of 33.

Sixteen months later, this small bundle of energy, who barely tipped the scales at 90 pounds, received her diploma.

Ms. Mahoney's accomplishment becomes more impressive when one realizes her determination to get through a demanding course of menial labor and study.

Of a class of 40, she and two white women were the only student nurses to receive their diplomas on Aug. 1, 1879. Twenty years later, Ms. Mahoney was among only six black women in the country who were graduate nurses.

Another first was a woman of African and native American heritage. Edmonia Lewis was born in 1845 in New York. She is credited as the first black sculptress of note.

An orphan, she managed to obtain her education at Oberlin College in Ohio. At the school, Ms. Lewis met people active in the abolishment of slavery movement.

A leading abolitionist of the day, William Lloyd Garrison, learned of Ms. Lewis' ambition to study art. He introduced the young woman to a Boston sculptor, who taught her the basics of the art.

Mary Eliza Mahoney

Ms. Lewis' first work was a bust of abolitionist John Brown.

Anothr early work was a likeness of Robert Gould Shaw, a colonel in the first black Civil War regiment.

These busts caught the attention of a Boston family by the name of Story.

The family helped Ms. Lewis to sell her works and also encouraged her to study in Europe.

Ms. Lewis later moved to Rome. She never returned to live in th United States, though she did come back on occasion for exhibits of her work.

Caterina Jarbora

In the Italian city, Ms. Lewis worked in marble and created such works as "Death of Cleopatra," "The Marriage of Hiawatha," "Madonna with the Infant," and "Forever Free."

One of her important exhibitions in the United States came in 1867 at the Philadelphia Centennial.

Like Ms. Lewis, **Caterina Jarbora** lived in the United States for a time and studied in Italy. Born Catherine Yarborough in Wilmington, N.C. in 1903, she was the first black woman to star with an all-white opera company.

Ms. Jarbora was educated in Wilmington Catholic schools. She moved to Brooklyn, N.Y. to live with an aunt and to study music when she was a girl of 13.

To earn money for further study in Europe, she participated in musicals such as "Shuffle Along" and "Runnin' Wild."

In Europe, she studied under singing masters in Paris and Milan, of Aida at the Pucinni Theatre in Milan.

Three years later, the manager of the Chicago Opera company hired Ms. Jarbora for a 20-week season of grand opera. Her role, Selika in Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine," won her priase for her fine interpretation both as an actress and as a singer.

Popular and successful for awhile in America after her return from Europe, Ms. Jarbora saw her appearances dwindle in this country after whites learned she was a black American and not an Italian.

She continued to make concert appearances across the nation and once appeared before an audience of 6,000 with the Chicago Opera Company.

Such performances, however, apparently were not enough to convince the New York Metropolitan Opera Association to accept Ms. Jarbora as a member of its newly formed grand opera company.

Her efforts to join did benefit other blacks in opera who came after her.

Ella Nora Phillips Stewart is another black woman to graduate from the University of Pittsburgh's College of Pharmacy.

Active in her field, she also has served as president of the National Association of Colored Women and has been appointed to many public posts in recognition of her fight for human dignity and world peace.

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