

# African American Women Medical Professionals Conversation Kit



Tintype of a woman carrying a medical bag, from around the 1890s. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

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## African American Women Medical Professionals

African American women have served as nurses, midwives, and caretakers in the United States since the nation's inception. They have done this for the enslaved and free Africans/African Americans and whites, yet as of the late 19th century (the 1890s), there were approximately 115 African American women doctors in the nation, although the U.S. Census of 1920 has a record of only 65 active physicians. The few African American women doctors were in a unique and challenging position to blend the traditional medical practices of West African countries with that of modern medicine. Even as modern medical treatments became the primary source of healthcare for many in the United States, midwifery continued to be commonly practiced in the southern states through the mid-20th century.

Sarah Loguen Fraser was born on January 29, 1863, in Syracuse, New York. She was one of the few African American women doctors in the U.S. during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sarah's father escaped from slavery before Sarah's birth and was a recognized abolitionist. He and his wife often housed escaped enslaved persons as part of the Underground Railroad. Sarah gained medical experience assisting African Americans who had escaped from enslavement and by shadowing a local doctor for several months. She used her experience and passion for medicine to attend and graduate from Syracuse University Medical College, becoming the 4th African American woman doctor in the United States in 1876. After completing medical school, she lived in New England and Washington DC where she had a private medical practice.

After meeting her husband, Charles Fraser, she moved to the Dominican Republic where he was a pharmacist and plantation owner. She was able to practice medicine by treating women and children and was recognized as the first female physician in the Dominican Republic. While living in the Dominican Republic, Charles and Sarah had their first and only child, a daughter named Gregoria. After her husband's death in 1894, she moved back to Washington DC with her daughter. They spent time traveling internationally, but eventually returned to the U.S. where she practiced pediatric medicine and mentored African American midwives. Sarah Loguen Fraser died in Washington DC on April 9, 1933. Since her death, she has been honored by SUNY Upstate Medical University in 2000 and created a scholarship and annual lecture in her name. She had also been honored in the city of Syracuse with a street named after her along with a historical marker placed in downtown.

## Driving Questions

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Why is it important to have an adequate number of healthcare professionals to serve every community in the United States?

What were the prominent factors that impacted the health of the African American community in the United States?  
How have these factors changed over time?

## Supporting Questions

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- How has the participation of African American women in the medical field as doctors, nurses, and midwives:
  - changed over the course of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries?
  - impacted African American communities and their health and wellness?
- What challenges did African American women healthcare workers face as they integrated modern medicine with traditional medical knowledge/routines from West Africa?
- Why was/is it important that African American women be allowed to practice medicine?
- As the number of African American women medical professionals increased, how did that impact African American communities around the nation?

## Civic Learning Themes

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- **Rights and Responsibilities:** The freedoms, duties, and responsibilities that all Americans should exercise and respect as participants in our shared democracy.
- **Democratic Principles:** Principles such as equality, freedom, liberty, respect for individual rights, and deliberation that make up the founding ideals of our democracy. These principles, along with civic virtues including honesty, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives apply to both official institutions and informal interactions among citizens.
- **Community Participation:** Meaningful engagement in community life, including volunteering with local organizations, attending neighborhood meetings, joining community groups, and so on. This is differentiated from civic action in that it is not necessarily tied to governing or political initiatives.

## Learning Objectives and Aligned Standards

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**This conversation kit follows the learning arc outlined in the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#).**

### Middle School Standards

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**D1.5.6-8.** Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of views represented in the sources.

**D2.Civ.2.6-8.** Explain specific roles played by citizens (such as voters, jurors, taxpayers, members of the armed forces, petitioners, protesters, and office-holders).

**D2.Civ.6.6-8.** Describe the roles of political, civil, and economic organizations in shaping people's lives.

**D2.Civ.10.6-8.** Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

**D2.Civ.11.6-8.** Differentiate among procedures for making decisions in the classroom, school, civil society, and local, state, and national government in terms of how civic purposes are intended.

**D2.Civ.12.6-8.** Assess specific rules and laws (both actual and proposed) as means of addressing public problems.

**D2.Civ.13.6-8.** Analyze the purposes, implementation, and consequences of public policies in multiple settings.

**D2.His.3.6-8.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

**D2.His.10.6-8.** Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.

**D2.His.13.6-8.** Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

**D3.1.6-8.** Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

**D3.2.6-8.** Evaluate the credibility of a source by determining its relevance and intended use.

## High School Standards

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**D1.5.9-12.** Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources

**D2.Civ.2.9-12.** Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system, with attention to various theories of democracy, changes in Americans' participation over time, and alternative models from other countries, past and present.

**D2.Civ.5.9-12.** Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

**D2.Civ.10.9-12.** Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

**D2.Civ.13.9-12.** Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes and related consequences.

**D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

**D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

**D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

**D2.His.10.9-12.** Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

**D2.His.13.9-12.** Critique the appropriateness of the historical sources used in a secondary interpretation.

**D3.1.9-12.** Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

**D3.2.9-12.** Evaluate the credibility of a source by examining how experts value the source

## Primary & Secondary Sources

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All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#). Individual links to resources are also included below for your convenience.

### Primary Resources

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- Artifacts:

- [Tintype of a woman carrying a medical bag](#)

Unidentified photographer, *Untitled*, c.1890s, Tintype, Collodion, and silver on iron with lacquer. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

- 5 untitled images of nurse-midwife Maude E. Callen (*supplemental images to provide visual context*)

W. Eugene Smith, *Untitled*, c.1951, Gelatin silver print. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, purchased with funds provided by The Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation. © W. Eugene Smith - Time and Life Pictures/Getty Images. Permission required for use.

- [Untitled image 1](#)

- **Caption from “Nurse Midwife: Maude Callens Eases Pain of Birth, Life and Death” in *Life*:** Healthy twins, who were delivered a day apart last year by Maude, get a quick one-over when she stops in to see them and to pump herself a drink of water. Only about 2% of her patients are white.

- [Untitled image 2](#)

- [Untitled image 3](#)

- **Caption from “Nurse Midwife: Maude Callens Eases Pain of Birth, Life and Death” in *Life*:** Accident case is brought to Maude's door one night. Annabelle Fuller was seriously cut in an auto accident and Maude had given her first aid. Now the girl returns to have her dressing changed.

- [Untitled image 4](#)

- [Untitled image 5](#)



## Secondary Resources

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- Articles:
  - [Luff, Eric v.d. "Sarah Loguen Fraser, MD \(1850 to 1933\): The Fourth African-American Woman Physician." \*Journal of the National Medical Association\* 92, no. 2 \(March 2000\): 149–53. \[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0027-9684\\(15\\)30622-2\]\(https://doi.org/10.1016/s0027-9684\(15\)30622-2\).](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0027-9684(15)30622-2)
  - [Staten, Candace. "Sarah Loguen Fraser \(1850-1933\)." \*Welcome to Blackpast\*, March 14, 2014. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/fraser-sarah-1850-1933/>.](https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/fraser-sarah-1850-1933/)
  - ["Sara Loguen Fraser." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, May 12, 2020. <https://www.wikipedia.org/>.](https://www.wikipedia.org/)
  - ["Sarah Loguen Fraser, MD: College of Medicine, Class of 1876." \*Sarah Loguen Fraser, MD: College of Medicine, Class of 1876\*. Syracuse, NY. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://medalumni.upstate.edu/file/pdf/person-bios/SLF-Bio.pdf>.](https://medalumni.upstate.edu/file/pdf/person-bios/SLF-Bio.pdf)
  - ["Monday Ms. Stories: Dr. Sarah Loguen Fraser." \*Onondaga Historical Association\*, November 18, 2016. <https://www.cnyhistory.org/2015/11/sarah-loguen-fraser/>.](https://www.cnyhistory.org/2015/11/sarah-loguen-fraser/)

## Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

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### Object Analysis

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Without providing additional information, have students examine the tintype of Sarah Loguen Fraser and respond to the prompts below.

- What is her job?
- Where was this photograph taken?
- When was this photograph taken?
- What do her clothes reveal about her?
- What is in the bag she is carrying?
- Describe her facial expression and what she is feeling?

After the students answer the questions, provide supporting information on Sarah Loguen Fraser found in the introduction and secondary sources.

## Debate

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Split the students into groups and have them argue for the practice of midwifery vs modern medicine, relying on research, data, and personal stories (if available) to support their arguments as if they were contemporaries of Sarah Loguen Fraser.

## Socratic Circle Topics

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- Considering that she was an African American woman doctor in the late 1890s what does this tintype share about her life (education, family status, socioeconomic status, etc.)?
- Compare how you think African Americans would feel if she were the doctor treating them versus having a white doctor treating them? Consider if the patient were an African American woman. Why does the representation of women in all careers matter?
- How does/could the existence and story of Sarah Loguen Fraser impact people today?

## Group Research and Presentation

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- As medical professionals, what contributions/differences have African American women made to the world and their patients? (Consider effective ideas such as feelings, emotions, beliefs as well as physical creations such as patents, inventions, and novel processes and methods).
- There were approximately 115 African American women doctors as of the 1890s. What does this say about American society? Compare that with the number of African American women doctors today and what those numbers say about modern American society.
- What have been some of the major hurdles faced by African American women in medicine and how have they moved beyond some of these roadblocks? What roadblock and inequities remain?

## Extension Ideas

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Have your students follow up on the activities above by investigating one or more of the following questions and ideas listed below.

- What type of support network would an African American woman need to receive medical training to become a doctor/physician in the 19th century versus today? How did this differ from an African American man, white woman, or white man?
- What contributions have African American women made to the medical field? Use this information to develop an argument for encouraging and supporting women to pursue careers in healthcare at any level.
- What does the presence of an African American woman/doctor mean to communities of color?
- Using different types of media (books, magazines, newspapers, TV, the internet, etc.), examine photographs of African American women in healthcare and describe/speculate what they feel personally based on the photographs of Sarah Loguen Fraser.

- Create a timeline of important events, actions, and government bills and laws that gave African American women like Sarah Loguen Fraser the rights and freedoms to participate and contribute to healthcare fields as midwives, nurses, and doctors.
- Why did the white medical establishment campaign to end midwifery? What authority did they possess? Was their authority valid? Explain.
- How do you think the campaign to end the practice of midwifery affected different African American communities around the nation?
- What is the relationship between doctors and midwives/doulas today?
- Compare the historical mortality rates for mothers and newborns working with midwives/doulas versus doctors/hospitals.
- What other benefits/skills did midwives possess beyond just carrying for mothers and newborns? How else might have the African American community benefited from having midwives present in the community?

## Additional Resources

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- [Feldhusen, Adrian E. "The History of Midwifery and Childbirth in America: A Time Line." \*Midwifery Today\*, 2000. https://midwiferytoday.com/web-article/history-midwifery-childbirth-america-time-line.](https://midwiferytoday.com/web-article/history-midwifery-childbirth-america-time-line)
- [Kristal Brent Zook, interviewed by Farai Chideya. "Lessons from African-American Midwife Traditions." \*News & Notes, NPR-WAMU\*, December 19, 2005. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5061075.](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5061075)
- [Brodsky, Phyllis L. "Where Have All the Midwives Gone?" \*The Journal of Perinatal Education\* 17, no. 4 \(2008\): 48–51. https://doi.org/10.1624/105812408X324912.](https://doi.org/10.1624/105812408X324912)
- [Ellerby-Brown, Anita, Tricker Sims, and Mavis Schorn. "African American Nurse-Midwives: Continuing the Legacy." \*Minority Nurse\*, 2008. https://nursing.vanderbilt.edu/msn/pdf/nmw\\_midwiferyforAA.pdf.](https://nursing.vanderbilt.edu/msn/pdf/nmw_midwiferyforAA.pdf)
- [Chuck, Elizabeth. "How Training Doctors in Implicit Bias Could Save the Lives of Black Mothers." \*NBCNews.com\*. \*NBCUniversal News Group\*, May 11, 2018. https://www.nbcnews.com/health/obstetrics/gynecology/how-training-doctors-implicit-bias-could-save-lives-black-mothers-ncna10112018.](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/obstetrics/gynecology/how-training-doctors-implicit-bias-could-save-lives-black-mothers-ncna10112018)

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-training-doctors-implicit-bias-could-save-lives-black-mothers-n873036>.

- [Stallings, Erika. "This Is How the American Healthcare System Is Failing Black Women." \*The Oprah Magazine\*, October 1, 2018.](https://www.oprahmag.com/life/health/a23100351/racial-bias-in-healthcare-black-women/)  
<https://www.oprahmag.com/life/health/a23100351/racial-bias-in-healthcare-black-women/>.

*This conversation kit was authored by Christopher Williams at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Learn more at [womenshistory.si.edu](http://womenshistory.si.edu) and [nmaahc.si.edu](http://nmaahc.si.edu).*

## Supplementary Materials: Object Analysis

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Tintype of a woman carrying a medical bag, from around the 1890s. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

- What is her job?
- Where was this photograph taken?
- When was this photograph taken?
- What do her clothes reveal about her?
- What is in the bag she is carrying?
- Describe her facial expression and what she is feeling?