

Black History, Leaving a Legacy: Charlotte E. Ray

By Rachid Parker

Charlotte E. Ray was born in New York City on January 13, 1850. Born to Charlotte Augusta Burroughs and Reverend Charles Bennett Ray, Charlotte was one of seven children (one sibling being poet Henrietta Cordelia Ray). Reverend Charles Bennett Ray, who was known for his work during the abolitionist movement, was the editor of a newspaper called *The Colored American*.

Engendered with the importance of education by her father, Charlotte attended the Institution for Education of Colored Youth in Washington, DC. Graduating in 1869, Charlotte became a teacher at Howard University's Prep School. It was then that Charlotte decided to register in the Law Department, where she graduated on February 27, 1872. Charlotte became the first woman to graduate from the Howard University School of Law. It was believed that Charlotte was only admitted to the Howard University School of Law because she applied under the name C.E. Ray, masking her identity as a woman by not using her full name.

Nevertheless, not only was Charlotte the first woman to graduate from the Howard University School of Law, she was in fact the first black American female lawyer in the United States. Charlotte became the first woman admitted to the District of Columbia Bar, and the first woman admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. In the District of Columbia Supreme Court, Charlotte argued her case of *Gadley v. Gadley* (vt. *Godling v. Godling*), advocating for a woman divorcing her abusive husband. Her appointment was even noted in the *Woman's Journal* and earned her the honor of becoming a *Women of the Century*. Of course, even with her accomplishments came some pushback.

Charlotte was known to be a great lawyer focusing her independent practice on commercial law. But she had difficulty maintaining clientele, as it became evident that not enough people were willing to put their trust in a black woman attorney.

She moved back to New York where she became a teacher. Charlotte married in the late 1880s (becoming Charlotte E. Fraim). Charlotte and her family moved to Woodside, Long Island in 1897, where she died of bronchitis on January 4, 1911. She was 60.

Today, Charlotte E. Ray continues to be praised for her many accomplishments. In 2006, Charlotte was honored by the Northeastern University School of Law chapter of Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity International, naming their newly chartered chapter after her. Charlotte paved the way for many modern black and women attorneys, and she continues to influence women to break through barriers.