

# A pioneer in mathematics: First woman math Ph.D. in America

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Winifred Edgerton Merrill (1862-1951) was the first woman to receive a PhD in mathematics in the United States. Throughout her life, she worked to advance women in a male-dominated society. She helped to found Barnard College, the renowned women's college affiliated with Columbia University, and she founded a college preparatory school for girls.

As March is National Women's History Month, it is a fitting moment to look back on the life of this outstanding pioneer. Merrill's compelling story is told in an article appearing in the April 2012 issue of the *Notices of the [American Mathematical Society](#)*, "Winifred Edgerton Merrill: 'She Opened the Door'", by Susan E. Kelly and Sarah A. Rozner.

Nowadays it is difficult to imagine a time when women were not permitted to attend university lectures. And yet this is the stricture Merrill faced as a [doctoral student](#) at Columbia University. Therefore, most women studied from course textbooks. The men in one of the courses Merrill wanted to take persuaded the instructor to adopt an especially difficult text, with the hope that Merrill would then fail. Unbeknownst to them, she had already studied the text as an undergraduate at Wellesley. When she received her PhD from Columbia in 1886, the event was so extraordinary it was covered in the New York Times.

**More information:** [www.ams.org/notices](http://www.ams.org/notices)

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