

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Meg Campbell, Vice President of the Boston Women's Heritage Trail, to talk about the importance of local history and connecting geographically with history. So first, can you tell us about the trail and its origins and what it is?

MC: Back in 1987 or '88, I was working as the research director for the Senate Healthcare Committee at the State House in Boston, Massachusetts. Boston is a city that, we treasure our history. And there's been long standing something called the Freedom Trail, which is very popular with tourists. At the time, there really weren't women on the Freedom Trail. The story of the freedom, of the building of democracy, overlooked the women. A couple of years before, when I was relatively recently in the '80s, a state rep named Byron Rushing, who was also a historian, had started something called the African-American History Trail. And I had that idea lodged in my mind and I just always want to give credit to Byron for thinking that up. So I was at work and I invited, for some reason, one of my daughters, my older daughter, came to work with me that day and I didn't really know what to do with her, so I sent her on a tour of the State House. We have a very beautiful State House in Boston, right across from the public garden and right across from the wonderful monument to the 54th Regiment, which was the all-Black regiment in the Civil War. Anyway, she was taking the tour. She came back to my office, quite indignant. Her name's Mariah. Mariah was like, "where are the women?" And it really stopped me in my tracks, that question of where are the women? At the time, there was Nurses Hall with a statue of a Civil War nurse, but kind of a generic nurse, of course a white nurse. And other than that, there weren't any other representations of women inside the Massachusetts State House. There was a statue, and still is, of Mary Dyer who was hung for her religious beliefs, but that was the only particular woman memorialized and none inside.

So a couple years later, I had left healthcare to go into education and I was working for a woman named Diana Lam, who was a district superintendent in Boston, and I did a lot of things for her. I had a checkered work history from community organizing to fundraising to this research stuff, and now in education. And there was a grant from the Department of Education to do something around women. It was a Title IX grant. And she said to me, "Meg, do you have any ideas?" And I said, "well, actually I do have an idea. I've been wondering how to implement this idea, which is don't you think we ought to have a women's heritage trail?" And specifically, we wanted it to be a *heritage*, not a *history* trail. So we got funding for two years to work with teachers and students and historians to create the first ever, in the United States at least, first ever trail marking the contributions of women. And it was centered around the State House on Beacon Hill and Back Bay, and on that first trail was something I'm going to reference later in the conversation, the Boston Home for Aged Colored Women, which was at the corner of Joy and Myrtle Street. And this was an instance of, we've heard about it, we knew about it, but we didn't know very much about it. And I think that is a theme with women's history of, maybe someone can bubble to the surface and we can get her name or we can get a building, but there's really a lot of deep sea diving to really get the whole story.

So anyway, the organization continued after the funding ran out for many years, over 35 years, through the sheer love and devotion of a group of teachers and librarians mainly. So when I went on to do some other things, running some different organizations, and Diana did as well, and in our retirement, we kind of circled back and we said, "we really want this organization to go to the next level, have an executive director, get our 501c3, our tax-exempt status, and just go deeper into these stories because we've identified the women." But again, it's just scratching the surface and we really want to have those resources, of course, for teachers and students, K to 12, but also so that when people who are coming to Boston because of our historic nature, that we really, when you step off that plane at Logan Airport, you really get a big splash of, "did you know about so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so and that they're women?" Because right now it's all about, it's about the men. About 22 years ago, we worked with others in the Women's Commission to have the first statues of women on what's called the Commonwealth Mall in Boston. It's a beautiful, stately street that comes right off of the public garden, had, not surprisingly, all men, all up on pedestals. And they came to this group, us and others, this was kind of a coalition, and said, "okay, you can have one woman." And we countered back and

pushed back and said, "if you study women's history, it's not about individual women, in a way." Our trail has individual women, but there's always someone else that was, Louisa May Alcott wouldn't be Louisa May Alcott without her mother, who was very much for women's rights. You can always trace, there's always a buddy or a friend or a sister or mom. And so we said, "we just think it should be a group of women." So we put an RFP out. Meredith Bergmann, the sculptor, was selected, she was very young at the time, and it was her first major commission, to do three women, we selected Abigail Adams, Lucy Stone and Phillis Wheatley. And so that statue got created. And none of them, by design, we said, "okay, you can have pedestals, but we don't want the women *on* the pedestal. We want this to be much more immersive and connecting." And that group of three women, Abigail Adams is leaning against her pedestal with her arms folded, Phillis Wheatley is using it as a desk, and Lucy Stone, the great women's right and abolitionist, is using it as a lectern. That statue has become just a beloved memorial in Boston. When the COVID hit, somebody put masks on them. In the springtime, people put daffodils in their hands, and it's just very beloved. But the city had never put Meredith Bergmann's name on the statue. They promised to, but they had never done it. So I think you can hear a theme here. And again, overlooked, *Uncredited*, as your wonderful book says, my husband and I, right before COVID had gone down to Charleston, South Carolina, a city that has really wrestled with its very fraught history, which is really its wealth based on slavery, the wealth created by slavery. But they have these little kiosks with QR codes with actors telling about, like Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who came to Boston, and we have a bridge now named for them, these abolitionist sisters who were not allowed to come back to Charleston and visit their families ever again. So it's a wonderful, inspiring story. But anyway, I took that idea and I said, "these talking statues, why don't we do this for these three women?" So this is something that your listeners can go to our website, it's Boston Women's Heritage Trail, so it's bwht.org, and actually find the QR code. And hear the women in that and their voices channeling them. Now, we actually at this moment in time have an abundance of riches of women elected leaders. It's new, it's taken us years and years of work. So rather than do actresses, as the people in Charleston did, we thought, "well, this is an opportunity to enlist our elected officials," and we really had more than we could use. So for our wonderful Attorney General, Andrea Campbell, who is somebody, you in Australia, you're going to hear, she's a rising star. She reads for Abigail Adams, and as the Attorney General, it was quite moving. There's some pictures on the site of the recording of this, because she said, "her husband, John Adams, wrote the Massachusetts State Constitution, which was the precursor to the United States Constitution. And of course, her very, very famous admonition to him as he was writing it was 'remember the ladies.'" So Andrea Campbell, spoke about that. Our congresswoman, Ayanna Pressley, reads for Phillis Wheatley, who was really the mother of African-American literature, the poet, and Lucy Stone, who I referenced before, who was read by our mayor, Michelle Wu.

So that's how we started. And we've continued on really the incredible dedication of the volunteer work by the teachers, second grade teachers, local librarians and historians. So after we had that first trail, we kept going over the years, creating more neighborhood trails. And we are very focused on discovering, uncovering, lifting up the rich, rich history in Boston. We have certainly helped other trails get started. And I would say, there's no reason you can't have a trail anywhere celebrating women's contributions. So whether it's in New Bedford, Mass, or even one, it's either Norway or Sweden, I don't remember which one. But we've consulted over the years helping people. We've always done them, really, you have to be dead to be on the trail. That was a criteria. But it's quite a range of women. And of course, many of them are not known. And that's why we wanted them on the trails that they should be known.

A couple years ago, a graduate student in public history, Mia McMorris, came to us and said, "Love your trail. Love it so much. I want to do my master's thesis. I want to create a trail that's thematic." And she is from Jamaica. And she's on our board, but she's back working in Jamaica and public history. Women feeding Boston to highlight the rich history of immigrant women who might not be one famous person, but a group might be would congregate around a particular chef or a feeding program or whatever. So a completely brilliant idea has unlocked for us the idea of well, maybe we could do other thematic ones. And of course, once you open that door, it goes on forever science, sports, math, whatever, politics.

So that's one thing that's been going. And we've been really focused, in addition to the talking statues, we've also started piloting a new program called Sidewalk Stories. And these are stickers that we commissioned an artist to come up with a look for us and a QR code. And it just has the person, if we have a photo or if not, because we don't have photos of all these people and something about the woman and to link it physically to where she lived or worked or some physical connection. So we've been just beta testing that and it's wildly successful. This morning, I was at the National Organization of Women's International Day breakfast here in Boston. I was just doing a table for Boston Women's Heritage Trail. And a woman came up to me and said, "wait a minute, I was getting off the subway at Park Street" and Park Street for us is right across from the State House. "I saw a sticker on the ground about the Women's Heritage Trail. Is that you guys?"

Really, I think, certainly in our country, there's really exciting developments around public history and memorializing and not just having everything be a statue and thinking about things, reconceptualizing them. Certainly great leader in this field is Bryan Stevenson in Montgomery, Alabama with the Legacy Museum around lynching. But just how do we get people to face and embrace history, which is complicated and not, people aren't pure human beings and they make mistakes and they do bad things and they still can do good things. So the more the nuanced things of that.

So during the pandemic, so I think I mentioned at the beginning, one of the first stops on our first trail was the Boston Home for Aged Colored Women. That was started in 1860 by Black and white abolitionists. Now this is before the war and women who had escaped slavery now were getting older and had no family because they'd been runaways and also free women who may have been born free, but just didn't have anybody to support them. That was started and that's what we knew and that's what we put on the site. During the pandemic, a woman named Joyce Linehan was walking her dog in a cemetery called the Cedar Grove Cemetery. It's a privately owned cemetery in Dorchester, which is a very large neighborhood in Boston and very, very racially diverse neighborhood, probably the most racially diverse neighborhood in the city. She's walking her dog and she notices on the ground, a little plaque about four inches by maybe eight that says "The Boston Home for Aged Colored Women." She's like, well, what the heck is that? Then she keeps walking and then she finds another one. And then she really scours the cemetery and there's only two of them. And she starts asking around and nobody really knows anything about it. So she reaches out to a friend of hers, Dr. Karilyn Crockett, who teaches at MIT. She is African-American and teaches African-American history as well. And Joyce asked her, "can you help me figure what this, what the heck would this thing be?" Well, it turns out that there's two mass graves of Black women in Boston, sometimes self-righteous Boston. Dr. Crockett challenged her students to find out who these women were. And so they'd got to work. And it turned out that when they closed the Boston Home for Aged Colored Women in the 1940s, all the boxes were given to the Mass Historic Commission, never to be touched since. Until these wonderful MIT students went as detectives and they have identified over 130 individual women. They know their names. They kept notes on committee meetings. There's correspondence. And it's really jaw-dropping really that this story is right here in our midst. And I think it's actually a really good metaphor for women's history in general. It's under our feet. And these women are just waiting to be honored.

So where we are in the project is that we've just hired a new executive director who wrote a book that came out in December called *Hidden Legacies*. And it's the University of Illinois Press, the first book to document all of the public sites in the United States honoring African-American women. She has some international as well. She pointed out to me, I didn't know this, that there is a plaque at the printers, what was the printers, for the Phillis Wheatley first edition book in London. So, kind of shame on us that London has something up and we have our statue, but we can do a lot more. And that's why we wanted to do that talking statues with Phillis Wheatley talking. So this project is a great opportunity for our organization to engage the public in thinking about what are their stories, doing further research on their stories. Apparently, we've made contact with the descendants because some of the women would write after the war and they were trying to find their families and there were some correspondence south. And so, reaching out to those papers. And again, those librarians, God bless librarians, none of us could do anything without the librarians. And we are just in the midst

now of, you know, starting to hold some community meetings and get ideas for how do we honor this unbelievable story. And I don't think anybody wants to put up a statue, you know, 132 statues. But we definitely at the end of the day, those names of those remarkable women are going to be in that cemetery. But we really want to do more and use the arts. We have all kinds of ideas. We're working with artists and stuff.

So what is the Women's Heritage Trail? It's a series of trails all over the city of Boston that are honoring particular women. It's also a thematic trail and I think in the years to come there will be more thematic trails. It's a resource for teachers and students to learn more about these remarkable women. And it's something for visitors and residents from all over the world to come and be a part of and frankly be inspired. It's a very, very hard time at this moment in our country for women as our rights are being revoked. And I think it's even more important, the Women's Heritage Trail is even more important than ever.

I have to tell you about one other woman. So we just got a grant from the Boston Women's Foundation to lift up the story of Ellen Swallows Richard. And she is somebody that most people don't know about, but has had international impact. This is a children's book, *The Girl Who Tested the Waters*, about her and then this is her biography, Ellen Swallow Richards. She was the first woman student at MIT and she went on to be really one of the founders of the ecology movement. She tested the waters, first when she was at MIT. At first, they let her come and they didn't charge her tuition because it was called the Swallow Experiment. What would it be like to teach a woman? Like she was a guinea pig. Her classroom was in the basement, no windows. And by herself, because she might, I don't know, have a pox on the men. And the professors would put the lesson plans under the door and she would do them. And she was so brilliant that finally they were like, okay, you can come up and you can come up for air now and take classes with the men.

At the time, there was a big influx of immigrants into Boston and really nobody knew what the water supply was, but there was a lot of death, illness and diphtheria and all that kind of bad stuff. And she was given the task, as so often happens, that this is a little side thing. It's so interesting in science. The really mundane, meticulous, really boring tasks, like the women astronomers at Harvard, they were called computers in the turn of the last century. It was the work that no men wanted to do. So anyway, so Ellen gets this assignment from the city of Boston to test the waters: 20,000 samples and took each one under the microscope. What is it? And as a result of that work, the very first water quality regulations in the United States were promulgated because of her work. And then they were like, "oh, you know what we need? A water treatment plant." So that just saved lives and influenced internationally this idea that, when they were doing an honor to her, the president of MIT was saying, "what Ellen did was she understood that technology could backfire on us and that we had to look at it through that lens." So she's considered, and she was really the founder of the whole field of home economics, which came out of really trying to save lives because food was contaminated. We didn't have refrigerators. People are living in very overcrowded conditions. How can we have some food quality standards? This was all in the Gilded Age that my president now wants to return to. But anyway, she's a water chemical scientist. Anyway, so this is the project of the Women's Heritage Trail right now is to figure out, "okay, we're with you. We want to lift up her story too. We're going to do sidewalk stickers, but not just in front of her house." MIT was originally in Boston, not Cambridge. So we'll do it where that building was. We'll do it where she went to church, at Trinity Church. So we're kind of figuring out that, and then we'll do some events around it. And just again, we want it to be that everybody knows who she is.

I was today at this breakfast, I was sitting next to a young woman, starting a company called Periodic, which is for sanitary products. And I was like, "God, how did you think of this?" And she said, "well, I was a graduate student in biotechnology and I was in the lab and I went to the bathroom. My period started and there was nothing there that I could use. And I thought, this is just, like what century am I in?" And so she started this company. So I said, "okay, you're a science student. Do you know who Ellen Swallows Richards is?" And she had never heard of her. So it's the never heard of, I think is what we're devoted our time to, because we think that when you've heard and you've listened and you learned about it, and I'm really impressed that MIT has started a kids' press. This book, this children's book is by MIT kids' press. I don't know. Life is hard enough if you don't know who your foremothers are.

AT: It's interesting that you bring up both Ellen Swallow Richards and you also mentioned the Harvard College Observatory because I actually have other episodes, one on women's history at MIT. So I've actually talked about Ellen. (MC: Oh, great. Oh, thank you.) And I've also got an episode on Henrietta Leavitt.

[Listen to Thera Webb on the women of MIT](#) or [read the transcript](#).

[Listen to Anna Von Mertens on Henrietta Swan Leavitt](#) or [read the transcript](#).

MC: Oh, God, I love her. My younger daughter, who's a theater director, she and I tried so hard for years. It didn't take, but we tried to write a play about her. I'm a big Henrietta Leavitt fan and Cecilia Gaposchkin, who was the first woman to get tenure at Harvard and the astronomer who figured out what the universe was made of. And then as you point out in your book, her thesis advisor took the credit for it. (AT: Oh yeah, she's in there.) So that's so cool. That's so cool. You're so far away, but you're so close.

AT: But these themes that you're talking about this idea that women don't exist in a vacuum - during the Henrietta Leavitt conversation, that was one of the things that came up was it was this group of women.

MC: Annie Cannon. Well, first of all, was so interesting about that group and interesting. (AT: e're not going down this rabbit hole.) No, no, I just want to tell you about, but it's the Vassar connection. The astronomers came out of the Vassar because of Maria Mitchell, but anyway, Ellen Swallows Richards went to Vassar too. So it's also these educational institutions that spawn and support women. That's all. That was my point.

AT: But also we were talking about how exactly what you were saying is, women get assigned these tedious, boring jobs that the men don't want to do on some pretext that, "oh, you're better at detail work." (MC: Right. You have more patience.) But science is made of the boring stuff. That's how you make these discoveries. So with Henrietta Leavitt, it was, yeah, she was doing the boring, tedious stuff and that's how she made these incredible discoveries. (MC: Yes.) So in addition to, I want to say surprising people with history. So like you were saying, someone comes out of the subway and they see one of your stickers and they're like, "huh, okay." And just having it where it's visible, that is so important. But I think there's also something about what I phrased earlier as connecting geographically with history. By which I mean there's this almost visceral feeling when you're standing in a place and you're told "this happened here, these people lived or worked or did incredible things right here."

MC: I couldn't agree more with you. And I think we are corporal creatures. We are mammals. We don't just think, and even thinking is not just words. It's just all different kinds of thinking. And we think with our senses, we talk about muscle memory. So I think if we're trying to connect with history and we live in a society, at least American society is very ahistorical in terms of its popular culture or mis-historical, wrong. So accurate history, which is complicated and nuanced, I'd say, but to make that visceral is very important to make it your own. And it also helps you connect it to not only to your history, but your family history. So knowing where Phillis Wheatley landed in Boston and down on the docks, and the Wheatley family purchased her when she was nine years old, and if you're just standing there and trying to imagine that, that's really different than sitting in the library and reading it. It's just really different. It's a different experience. And I would say it's a more indelible experience if that connection is made. So multiplying that over the many times. It also, by making it a physical connection, a geographic connection, you think, "oh, well, that's a house. So-and-so lived in that house. That house is kind of like my house. If she did that, I can do that." And I think especially for students, girls and boys, it's important for them to understand that in many cases, these instances of courage are because the women felt they didn't really have a choice. It was just the right thing to do. And that as they grow up, they will have those moments when they'll have an opportunity to choose what's the right thing to do, and just being grounded in it. For a number of years, I was very, very privileged to live in the house that was the house of William Monroe and Minnie Pindell Trotter in Boston. And these are big figures in African-American history in

Boston. He was one of the founders of the precursor to the NAACP. But he was very much of a radical. And a lot of the attention has gone to him, which he deserves. But she was pretty amazing, too. We now have a sticker in front of the house for her. But he published *The Guardian*, one of the first, and at the time, very important, influential Black newspapers. But she was really the businessperson, the publisher behind it, making it go. And when she died in the 1917 flu worldwide epidemic, and she was so young, the paper really had a hard time going on without her. So anyway, for me, I lived there for about 15 years. And they were so present to me in that house. And I'd walk down the steps, and I would be like, "wow, Minnie Pindell Trotter was here. I'm walking in her steps. That puts a responsibility on me. I got to do something to live up to this opportunity of having been able to live where she lived."

AT: Something that struck me when I was looking through the website is how many of these women's stories just don't exist anywhere else that I'm aware of on the internet. A few of these people are quite famous. But I've found that local history sites are really great because they tell stories about people who impacted their communities, but often don't get that broader recognition. And I think this is particularly gendered as well. (MC: I couldn't agree with you more.) Particularly like, this immigrant opened a restaurant, and they were a staple of their community.

MC: Right, right, right. I think first one has to be oriented to value in community. Before you get to history, you have to value the living people in community. And you have to break through and shatter the delusion of individualism that we really live, we're in an ecosystem, and as humans, we are in an ecosystem, and we influence each other and inspire each other or hold each other down. But I think that when a new trail is proposed, and it's often with a school, but let's take on, we're going to do a trail in Chinatown, for instance, and then we put the word out and have people make suggestions. In many cases, the women who aren't on the internet, they're in someone's family lore or oral history. And that's just really interesting because someone has kept it alive, and now we want to share, amplify the story. But that's how we find out about the women, is just putting out the word to the community. And I think that that's really true of any community could do this. It's not just looking up the history and making a trail. I mean, it's not very yeasty that way. It's actually going on, the physically walking through the trails. One of our most important women keeping this going all these years is a woman named Mary Smoyer, who was an elementary school teacher, she's retired now, and she's trying to step back, but we don't really let her step back. She's like, "I can't keep doing it all." But she has been, over the decades, so deliberate and conscientious and also had such high standards of what could be on the trail. And one of the women who was fantastic doing the trail, also Latherine Dibble, who was a librarian, she recently passed away. But it was this group of women, and I think of them in some ways almost like the women of the mid-19th century who were the reformers, the Lucy Stones, the Sojourner Truths, who, there was no glory in it. There's no recognition. They just knew it was the right thing to do, and they just did it and kept doing it. And just the women who had gone before were feeding them to keep doing this. And as I mentioned at the outset, this is a hard time for women in the country. This whole, technically, I guess we're not supposed to be teaching this according to these new presidential guidelines. But we're fortunately in Massachusetts, which has always kind of gone its own way, and we're going to keep growing and just get stronger and stronger. And to the degree we can help anybody, any other folks who are working on their trails and however they want to do it.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.