



Gratz Insider, March 2017 - Story Continuation

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Happy Birthday, Rebecca!

This woman was born in the 18th century - March 4, 1781, to be exact. She was Rebecca Gratz, a forward-thinking woman, whose brother Hyman provided the funding for Gratz College, and whose values are still reflected in the institution that bears her family's name.

Gratz dedicated her life to the betterment of society, both in and outside the Jewish community. Born into a prominent Jewish family that became part of privileged Philadelphia society, Gratz was committed to serving those less fortunate. At the age of 20, she was part of a group of women who created [the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances](#). As a pluralistic women's charity, the association, founded in 1801, was the first of its kind in Philadelphia. Gratz also helped establish the Philadelphia Orphan Society 14 years later.

Although she remained on the boards of these organizations for many years, Gratz recognized the need for creating their Jewish counterparts because of Christian proselytizing. In 1819, she helped found the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, [described](#) on its website as "the oldest Jewish charity in continuous existence in the United States," and as "the first independent organization established by Jews to serve Jews in the City of Philadelphia." Decades later, Gratz provided the impetus for the creation of America's first Jewish orphanage, the Jewish Foster Home.

In addition to establishing Jewish charitable organizations, Gratz was deeply committed to Jewish education - and it is this commitment that most closely connects her with Gratz College. [Jewish education in 19th century America](#) was still provided only by rabbis, only to male students and never in English. In direct contrast to this approach, Rebecca Gratz envisioned a more contemporary and inclusive model, similar to the Christian Sunday schools. In 1838, under her direction, the first [Hebrew Sunday school](#) was rolled out. As the school's longtime superintendent, she has been [described](#) as "personally grading each student's homework assignments."

Gratz's Hebrew Sunday school broke gender barriers in Jewish education for students and teachers. Open to boys and girls, classes were taught in English by female lay leaders. With graduates becoming future teachers, the school also served as a teacher training program. And, it was the prototype for similar schools opening up around the country for generations to come.

Today, Gratz Jewish Community High School students can earn the [Rebecca Gratz Teaching Certificate](#). This certificate qualifies them to teach in Jewish supplementary school programs, which are the contemporary descendants of Rebecca Gratz's Hebrew Sunday school.

Despite her long 88-year life, Rebecca Gratz did not live to see the founding of Gratz College, which was established 26 years after her death. However, she would have been proud to know that it was the first institution of advanced Jewish learning to accept women on a par with men. At the College today,

we continue to uphold Rebecca Gratz's legacy through our commitment to the Jewish community, our forward-thinking approach to education and our dedication to developing effective future leaders and educators.