

# Henrietta Edwards: Fanning the Flames of Equality and Justice

By Marcee Frost

In the heart of Alberta's history stands Henrietta Muir Edwards. A trailblazing figure whose passion for women's rights and social change shaped the landscape of her time. Join me in uncovering the remarkable story of this Alberta champion whose legacy continues to inspire and ignite change. Back in the 1800s, women were overlooked, their voices were not heard, their opinions were not acknowledged, and their rights were quite limited. This left women only to be seen providing for a family. A change was needed, and Henrietta Edwards was the woman who possessed the courage, insight, and leadership to make it happen. With a deep-seated commitment to justice and equality, Henrietta's passion for activism drove her to push boundaries and make a real difference. Experiencing firsthand the injustices faced by women in employment, education, and legal rights, she dedicated herself to challenging these systemic barriers.

Henrietta Edwards began her journey in an ever-changing world, her story one of progression and resilience. In Montreal, 1849, on a cold day in December, Henrietta Edwards was born into a Canadian family with solid roots, descendants of steadfast pioneers. Her family's legacy was intertwined with Canada's growing society. She was one of seven children of Jane and William Muir. The Muir family were prosperous merchant tailors who built St. Helen's Chapel and Montreal Baptist College. At a young age, Henrietta and her sister worked with the Working Girls Association, and they later joined the Working Women's Association (WWA). It was a philanthropic project that worked to help young women get a good start toward independence.

Henrietta became interested in art and applied for art school when she was older. Unfortunately, she faced the challenge of being denied that opportunity because she was a woman, so she taught herself to paint. Only years later did she become an accomplished artist herself. She continued to paint and exhibited her work from her studio, funneling the proceeds from her artwork into her various endeavors. Being denied entry into art school because of her status as a woman made her realize how unfair the government was toward women, and she was itching to make a difference. She aimed to fight for women's health, education, and work rights. This sparked the beginning of her long journey as a dedicated champion for women's rights, starting her lifelong mission of challenging injustices and paving the way for a more equitable future. Henrietta established movements, organizations, and societies dedicated to improving women's lives. She, along with Judge Emily Murphy and independent Member of the Legislative

Assembly (MLA) Louise McKinney, were critical in passing Alberta's Dower Act in 1917, a significant piece of legislation that helped protect married women's property rights.

Henrietta was among the famous five, which included herself, Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Irene Parlby, who tirelessly fought for women's rights and ultimately challenged the Canadian government in the historic Person's Case, which led to the legal ruling that recognized women as "persons" under Canadian Law. In 1962, years later, she was named a person of National Historic Significance and later named an Honorary Senator in 2009. Henrietta Edwards' groundbreaking achievements in Alberta were milestones, facilitated growth, and inspired future innovators. You can explore the story of these five brave, influential women through the replica of Nellie McClung's house at Heritage Park in Calgary, Alberta.

Henrietta Edwards' profound achievements greatly influenced Alberta, impacting today's society and politics. She was a women's rights activist, reformer, and author, and she believed, throughout her life, that anything could be done with great determination and unwavering focus. In 1893, Henrietta established the National Council of Women and was the convenor of laws for the women's council for over 35 years. This helped shape the future by achieving a national organization where people could work together to accomplish the common goal of social reform, regardless of their religion, political allegiance, class, or race. Henrietta wrote two books, *Legal Status of Canadian Women* (1908) and *Legal Status of Women in Alberta* (1921), inspired by the legal problems she and many other women were trying to overcome. She advocated for divorce on equal grounds, mother's allowances, improved working conditions for women, and prison reform while assisting her husband, Oliver Edwards, in establishing his medical practice. She often observed prairie women and children who struggled after divorce, when their husbands died, or when their husbands would sell the family house out from under their wives, even if the homes were bought with the wives' money. This struck Henrietta as unfair and unacceptable, so she advocated for divorce reform, advocating for "no-fault" divorce laws that would allow couples to divorce without assigning blame to one party.

When her husband became ill in 1890, the pair moved to Ottawa, where she started her work with the visionary Lady Ishbel Aberdeen. Together, they established several organizations, such as the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), the Ottawa Young Women's Christian Association, and finally, the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON), which provides essential healthcare services to communities in need. Henrietta's persistent advocacy for women's and children's rights, as demonstrated by her leadership in shaping laws, has had a lasting impact on Canadian society. Her pioneering efforts in women's rights, such as securing the vote for women in Alberta in 1916 and her role in the Persons Case, have left an enduring legacy in the province, promoting greater gender equality and inspiring ongoing activism. Her commitment to justice and education continues to serve as an inspiration and step forward for women in Alberta, leaving a significant mark on the province we call home today.

Henrietta Edwards embodies determination and compassion, inspiring me to become a better citizen within my community. Through diverse volunteering experiences, such as mentoring and teaching the younger children in my school to read, delivering milk to classrooms before lunch, aiding in church setup and takedown, creating thoughtful cards for the elderly in nursing homes, and lending a helping hand during school playdays. I've developed a deep appreciation for the power of service and empathy. These endeavors have taught me valuable skills and evoked a profound sense of fulfillment and connection to those around me. As a person with big dreams and goals, I am privileged to have had this opportunity to learn about Henrietta and write about her unwavering dedication to social justice and women's rights. Her dreams of fighting for women's rights, work, education, and health may have seemed impossible, but she repeatedly proved through her work that it was not. Henrietta has taught me that with incredible drive and hard work, no matter how big the challenge, you can conquer it. No matter how big or small your dreams are, you can achieve them. I hope to be as good of a woman as Henrietta. I am committed to continuing my journey of service and advocacy. I intend to make the world a better place by helping more people. I believe that to make a difference, true transformation needs to start with self-improvement. I would like to start within my school by becoming a tutor, and I am confident in my abilities to empower others in their educational journey. Next, I would like to extend my compassion to helping others by supporting my community through volunteering at the local food bank and contributing to fundraising efforts. I'm hoping to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those in need. Lastly, I care very much about the environment. I would like to be more involved in educating others about the importance of recycling and helping to keep our environment clean by participating in local clean-up initiatives. I aim to honor Henrietta Edwards' legacy and contribute positively to my school and community.

Henrietta Muir Edwards, a trailblazer for women's rights and the embodiment of perseverance and dedication shaped Alberta's history. With roots in a family devoted to social reform, her lifelong quest for justice and equality left an incredible mark. She molded a fairer society through her critical work in the Persons Case and her support for the Victorian Order of Nurses. She's an inspiration, showing how one person's beliefs can spark real change. Her legacy encourages activism and reminds us that meaningful change is possible. Henrietta Muir Edwards' impact ensured her place in Alberta's story, empowering others to fight for fairness and opportunity, remaining an integral part of our province's history.

## Sources:

<https://myhero.com/>

[Henrietta Muir Edwards | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

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