



Civil Rights Heroes

# Elizabeth Freeman

Around 1744 to Dec. 28, 1829

Elizabeth Freeman was the first slave woman to file and win a freedom suit in Massachusetts.

Mum Bett, as she was also known, took her case to the courts, who ruled that slavery was inconsistent with the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution.

Freeman was born a slave around 1744 on Pieter Hogeboom's farm in New York. She was given as a wedding present to Hogeboom's daughter, Hannah, and her husband, John Ashley, when she was still a child. Freeman moved with them to Sheffield, Massachusetts, where she had a daughter, Little Bet. She may have married, but her husband is said have never to have returned from service in the Revolutionary War.

Freeman was strong-willed and once prevented Hannah from striking another servant with a hot shovel. She sustained a wound on her arm in the act, but left it uncovered as evidence of poor treatment. When people would ask her about it, she was tell them to ask Hannah what happened.

In 1780, Freeman heard about the new state constitution either from it being read in public or in discussions at her master's house. John Ashely was a lawyer and leader of the

community, and his home was the probable location of the signing of the Sheffield Resolves, which predated the Declaration of Independence. Freeman was particularly interested in Article 1, which stated that "all men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness."

Freeman and Thomas Sedgwick sued for her freedom and to free Brom, another of the slaves in the home. Sedgwick, who later served as a U.S. senator, enlisted the help of Tapping Reeve, the founder of one of America's earliest law schools, and the case was heard in 1781. The County Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington ruled that the slavery wasn't legal and awarded Brom and Freeman damages of 30 shillings and compensation for their work.

Even though Ashley asked Freeman to return to his home to work for wages, she chose to work for Sedgwick's family as senior servant and governess to the Sedgwick children. She was recognized as a healer, midwife and nurse and eventually moved into her own home in Stockbridge. Freeman died in 1829 and was buried in the Sedgwick family plot.



# Abby Kelley Foster

Jan. 15, 1811 to Jan. 14, 1887

Abolitionist and social reformer Abby Kelley Foster was born Jan. 15, 1811, in Pelham, Massachusetts.

She was the seventh daughter of Quaker farmers Wing and Lydia Kelley and attended school, eventually landing at the New England Friends Boarding School in Providence, Rhode Island, where she finished her education. Foster then returned home to teach in local schools, moving with her family to Millbury, Massachusetts, in 1835.

In 1836, she taught in Lynn, Massachusetts, where she met fellow Quakers and developed an interest in antislavery after hearing a lecture from William Lloyd Garrison. Foster joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn and worked on a campaign to end slavery in the District of Columbia.

Foster became progressively more radical, calling for not only the end to slavery but full civil equality for Black Americans and for opposing all forms of government coercion. She refused to serve on juries, join the military or vote. Eventually, activist women in this vein were called Abby Kelleyites.

In 1838, Foster gave a speech to a mixed-gender audience at an anti-slavery convention in Philadelphia — a radical act in itself. She continued to speak out, moving to Connecticut and eventually falling out with the Quakers over disputes about not allowing abolitionist speakers in the meeting houses. She addressed the Liberty Party in 1843, becoming the first woman in America to speak at a political convention.

She married Stephen Symonds



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Foster in 1845 and they purchased a farm in Worcester, Massachusetts, where they raised their daughter. Their farm, called Liberty Farm, served as a stop on the Underground Railroad and a home for other reformers. Liberty Farm is now a National Historic Landmark.

Foster continued to lecture and fundraise on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society despite objections to her public activism. She shared her platform with former slaves and gradually became more radical, splitting with other groups of abolitionists. In 1854, she became the Anti-Slavery Society's

chief fundraiser and financial agent and later took charge of lecture and convention schedules in 1857.

Foster continued to work against slavery and for women's rights until 1850, when poor health forced her to cut down on travel. She died Jan. 14, 1887.

# Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin

Aug. 31, 1842 to March 13, 1924

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was a Black woman, journalist, suffragist and editor of *Woman's Era*, the first national newspaper published for and by Black women.

Ruffin was born in Boston to John St. Pierre, a native of Martinique who was of French and African descent, and Elizabeth Menhenick, from England. St. Pierre was a successful clothier and Ruffin attended schools in Charlestown, Salem and New York City. At 16, she married George Lewis Ruffin, the first Black graduate of Harvard Law School and the first Black man elected to the Boston City Council.

The Ruffins were active in the abolitionist movement. During the Civil War, they helped recruit the 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments of the Union Army and worked for the Sanitation Commission, providing care of soldiers in the field. Post-war, Ruffin organized for the Kansas Freedmen's Association, sending clothes and other aid to Blacks settling in Kansas. The Ruffins moved to Liverpool, Massachusetts, but returned to Boston and settled in the West End.

George Ruffin died in 1886, and Ruffin started the *Woman's Era*, serving as both editor and publisher from 1890-1897. The paper called for Black women to demand

more rights for their race. Josephine Ruffin also organized the Woman's Era Club to advocate for Black women, and the National Federation of Afro-American Women, which later merged with the Colored Women's League to form the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

In 1910, Ruffin's organizational skills helped form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She was one of its charter members. Ruffin also founded the League of Women for Community Service.

Ruffin died in 1924 after a battle with nephritis. She and George Ruffin had five children, Hubert Ruffin, an attorney; Florida Ridley, a school principal and co-founder of *Woman's Era*; Stanley Ruffin, an inventor; George Ruffin, a musician. One child, Robert, died in his first year of life.

Josephine Ruffin is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1995 and, in 1999, a bust of her was placed in the Massachusetts State House. Her home is part of the Boston Women's Heritage Trail.

## The Woman's Era.

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MRS. WM. E. MATTHEWS  
(VICTORIA EARLE.)

We read daily of the progress

earnestly yet modestly for their sex and the upbuilding of the race. Surely we cannot know too much of their genius and merits, for the inspiration of our girls.

Among our prominent progressive women is Mrs. William E. Matthews, known in the literary world as "Victoria Earle."

Mrs. Matthews, so desirous of doing what she can for her race, with a few others saw the practical need of banding together well-thinking women with the hope that they might in their generation pave the way for the success of the futurity of the race, and organized *The Woman's Loyal Union*. We are favored to exist in the seed planting time.

Mrs. Matthews has been the president of the *Woman's Loyal Union* since its organization.

Its members have found her loyal, unswerving, embracing every opportunity for the accomplishment of the aims of the *Union*.

Realizing the wrongs perpetrated upon our race in the South, the injury occasioned by opinions that have been freely expressed in several leading magazines and newspapers, as to the retrogression of the race morally, Mrs. Matthews has been exceedingly anxious to ascertain the truth of such statements.

With this idea in view she wrote a set of questions, submitted them to the executive board of the *Union* with the hope of their approval, and expressed the desire to have said questions sent to the ministers, school teachers and other representative men and

The idea is bright, progressive. We, co-workers, appreciate her efforts, her executive ability, and shall ever give her our hearty support.

Her great fondness for research and her splendid memory make her quite an authority on literature, art, history and philosophy. Her historical researches have led her to the determination to write a series of text books, historical primers for the youth of the race, which will trace the history of the African and show that he and his descendants have been prominently identified with every phase of this country's history including the landing of Columbus.

She has also a number of stories and a play which is yet unpublished.

When all these shall have been given to the public, race literature will be enriched and the name of Victoria Earle become a household word.

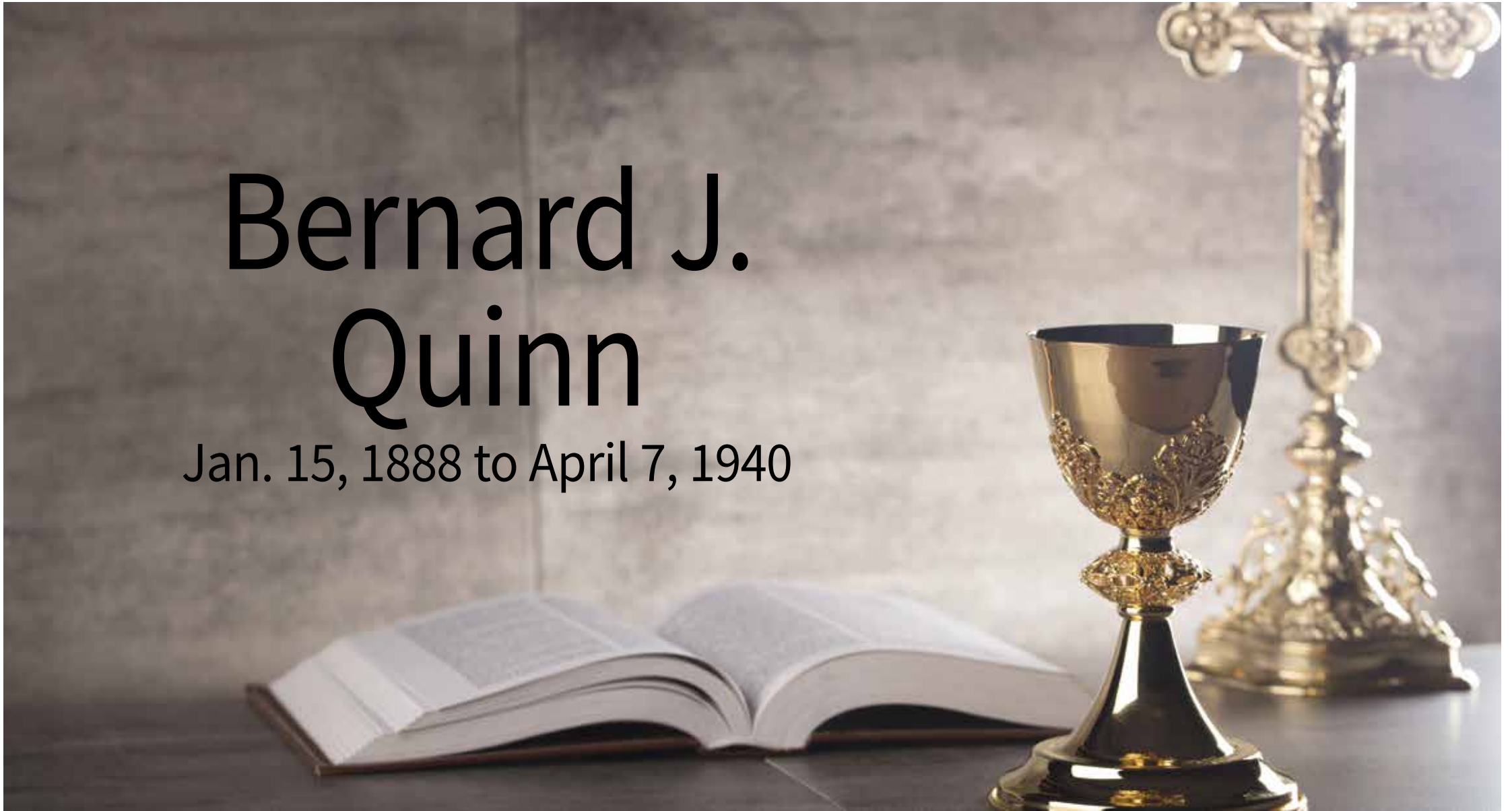
S. ELIZABETH FRAZIER,  
141 West 17th street,  
New York City.

This month our title page has a cut and sketch of Mrs. W. E. Matthews, (Victoria Earle) president of the *Women's Loyal Union* of New York and Brooklyn. As well know as is Mrs. Matthews, her face and history are comparatively new to people of this section who will be delighted with this opportunity to make a closer acquaintance with this distinguished lady.

Our readers who need to have any talking work done are urged

# Bernard J. Quinn

Jan. 15, 1888 to April 7, 1940



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**Monsignor Bernard J. Quinn was born in Newark, New Jersey, to Irish immigrants.**

Quinn was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1912, serving as a chaplain in World War I. He was gassed along with the rest of his squadron in Normandy and suffered the debilitating effects of mustard gas for the rest of his life.

After the war, he resumed his pastoral duties in Brooklyn, working among Black Catholics.

In 1922, Quinn established St. Peter Claver, the first church for Black Catholics in Brooklyn. Peter Claver had given his life in service to African

slaves in central and South America, defending their human rights. Lena Horne, activist and singer, is one of the church parochial school's graduates. He fought against opposition against Black participation in the church. "No church can exclude anyone and still keep its Christian ideals," Quinn said. In a pastoral letter to his church that same year, he wrote that he would "willingly shed to the last drop my life's blood for the least of you."

Later, amid a wave of homelessness in 1928, Quinn established a Black orphanage in Wading River, New York. The KKK and local residents opposed Quinn's orphanage and burned it down twice, but he rebuilt it, dedicating the Little Flower House of

Providence in 1930. It still exists, functioning as Little Flower Children and Family Services of New York.

A new parish institute in 1931 that included a gymnasium, bowling lanes, a health clinic and more. The parish attracted students for its high standards and excellence in sports. He had an open-door policy, admitting anyone to the parish regardless of race or religion.

Quinn founded the Third Order Congregation of Black Brothers, dedicated to the service of Black people, and also promoted vocations to the priesthood among Black youth. Francis Wade, one of his protégés, was among the first four Black priests to be ordained from a Mississippi seminary for Black men in 1934. Father

Wade offered a Mass of Thanksgiving at St. Peter Claver. As the parish grew, Quinn established missions throughout his parish. St. Benedict the Moore in Queens, founded in 1932, eventually became its own parish. Quinn also founded the Apostleship of the Sea for Black seamen, the Oblate Brothers of Mary, and a summer camp at Wading River.

Quinn died from carcinoma on April 7, 1940. In 1950, a chapel named for Quinn was dedicated on the grounds of the orphanage. The Brooklyn Diocese put forward Quinn for canonization by the Catholic Church in 2008. Later that year, he was declared a Servant of God by the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

# Edgar Daniel Nixon

July 12, 1899 to Feb. 25, 1987

Edgar Daniel Nixon, also known as E.D. Nixon, born in 1899 in rural Lowndes County, Alabama. His mother died when he was young and he and his seven siblings were raised by family in Montgomery.

Nixon received only 16 months of formal education in his childhood, and that in segregated public schools. He became a Pullman car porter, which was a good position with good pay. During his time as a porter, he joined a union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He worked as a porter until 1964.

In 1940, Nixon helped organize a

march to the Montgomery County court house in an attempt to register to vote. They were unsuccessful, but that didn't stop Nixon's organizing. He ran for the county Democratic Executive Committee in 1954, becoming the first Black man to do so. He also joined the NAACP and became the Montgomery chapter and eventually state chapter president.

After Rosa Parks' arrest for not moving to the back of a Montgomery city bus in 1955, Nixon called for local ministers, including Martin Luther King Jr., to organize support for a boycott. Nixon and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy and the Rev. E.N. French established the Montgomery Improvement Association, which nominated King as the president.

Nixon and supporters staged a successful one-day bus boycott on Dec. 5, 1955, followed by a longer, 381-day boycott. During that time, both Nixon's and

King's home were targeted by bombs. On Dec. 20, 1956, the Supreme Court in hearing the *Browder v. Gayle* suit on the segregation of Montgomery's buses, ordered the city to desegregate the buses and ending the MIA boycott.

After the boycott, Nixon had disagreements with MIA and its leadership. He resigned his post with the organization in 1957, even though King called Nixon "one of the chief voices of the Negro community in the area of civil rights."

Nixon retired from the railroad and then worked as the recreation director of a public housing project, continuing to work to improve housing and education for Blacks in Montgomery. He received the Walter White Award from the NAACP in 1985 and, the next year, his house in Montgomery was placed on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

He died Feb. 25, 1987.

# Harriette Vyda Simms Moore

June 19, 1902 to Jan. 3, 1952

Harriette Vyda Simms Moore was an educator and civil rights worker who was the wife of Harry T. Moore. The couple was murdered in the first assassination to happen during the Civil Rights movement.

Moore was born in West Palm Beach, Florida, to Dave Simms, a wood lathe worker, and Annie Simms. She had five siblings. The family moved to Mims, Florida, and Moore spent summers working in Massillon, Ohio, with her father. She graduated from Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona beach with a bachelor of science degree in 1950. Moore was an elementary school teacher around Florida.

She met Harry T. Moore while teaching in Brevard County, Florida. He was the principal of the Titusville Colored School. They married Dec. 25, 1926 and had two daughters. In 1934, the couple founded the Brevard County of the NAACP. Harry Moore later helped organize the Florida NAACP. The Moores' political activities landed them in hot water with the Brevard school system, who fired the couple and blacklisted them in 1946.



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Christmas night, 1951, the Moores were celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. A bomb went off beneath their house. Harry died on the way to the Sanford, Florida, hospital and Harriette died nine days later. The state and FBI investigated, but no one was indicted for the deadly bombing. In a 2006 investigation,

Florida concluded the bombing had been the work of a Ku Klux Klan group and named four chief suspects, all of whom had died. They are:

- Earl J. Brooklyn, who died Dec. 25, 1952, of natural causes.
- Tillman H. Belvin, a friend of Brooklyn who died Aug. 25, 1952, of natural causes.

- Joseph Neville Cox, secretary of the Orange County, Florida, chapter of the Klan. He is believed to have ordered the attack and committed suicide March 30, 1952, after being questioned by the FBI.

- Edward L. Spivey, who claimed to have been at the crime scene and implicated Cox in the killing as he lay on

his deathbed.

In 1999, Florida named the Moores' homesite as a Florida Heritage Landmark and Brevard County set about restoring it as a memorial park and interpretive center. The Brevard County Justice Center is named for the couple and includes information about their lives.

# Willa Beatrice Brown

Jan. 22, 1906 To July 18, 1992

Willa Beatrice Brown was an aviator, lobbyist, teacher and civil rights activist who was the first Black woman to earn a pilot's license in the U.S. and became the first Black woman to run for Congress.

Brown was born to Rev. and Mrs. Erice B. Brown on Jan. 22, 1906, in Glasgow, Kentucky. She earned a bachelor's degree from Indiana State Teacher's College and an MBA from Northwestern University. She taught school and did a variety of jobs, including secretarial work.

In 1934, she was introduced to the Challenger Air Pilots Association, a group of Black pilots, and began taking lessons at Chicago's Harlem Field. Brown was one of a few women who attended Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University, where she studied aircraft maintenance and earned a mechanic's license in 1935. She earned her private pilot's license in 1938 and was the first Black woman to earn either of those licenses.

Brown, along with Cornelius Coffey and Enoch P. Waters, worked together to form the National Negro Airmen Association of America, which later became the National Airmen's Association of America. She and Coffey also started the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Chicago to teach Black pilots and mechanics.

Brown also lobbied for racial equality. She lobbied the government as an advocate for the integration of Black pilots into the Army Air Corps and the federal

Civilian Pilot Training Program. In 1940, Brown was named coordinator of the Chicago units of the CPTP and the Army Air Corps selected the Coffey School was chosen to provide Black students to the pilot training program. More than 200 Coffey students went on to join the Tuskegee Airmen. Brown became a lieutenant in the Civil Air Patrol in 1942, the patrol's first Black officer, and was later named war training service coordinator for the Civil Aeronautics Authority.

After the war, Brown ran for Illinois' 1st congressional district, becoming the first Black woman to run in a congressional primary. Her 1946 campaign focused on improving opportunities for Black Americans, but she was defeated. She ran again in 1950, but was defeated a second time. She returned to teaching until 1971, then served on the Women's Advisory Committee of the Federal Aviation Administration from 1972-1975, again the first Black woman to serve on that committee.

Brown was married three times but had no children. She was inducted to the Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame in 2003 and was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award by the Indiana State University Alumni Association. She died July 18, 1992.

