

COMMENTARY

Kentucky women of purpose

250 years of breaking barriers, opening doors of opportunity

BOBBIE SMITH BRYANT MARCH 17, 2026 5:30 AM



📷 Civil rights activist and state Sen. Georgia Mae Powers (1923–2016) proved that one unwavering voice can bring change. (Jim Curtis photograph collection on Civil Rights in Kentucky, University of Kentucky Libraries, Special Collections Research Center)

During this Women’s History Month, in the United States’ 250th anniversary year, it’s worth remembering and celebrating some courageous women who changed Kentucky for the better.

Nonhelema Hokolesqua: A diplomat on the Kentucky frontier



📷 The monument to Nonhelema Hokolesquas in Logan Elm State Memorial Park in Circleville, Pickaway County, Ohio. (Wikimedia Commons)

Nonhelema Hokolesqua was a prominent Shawnee leader born around 1718. Her height and presence made her well known, but her legacy came from her diplomacy. Although she lived primarily north of the Ohio River, her decisions directly affected the Kentucky frontier during a time when Native nations were facing incoming settlers.

In the 1770s and 1780s, Nonhelema worked to limit violence in Kentucky and Ohio. She warned American military leaders of planned attacks on frontier settlements, including those connected to Kentucky. Her involvement saved lives and enabled conversations to take place during tense times.

Nonhelema cared for Shawnee families displaced by war, providing food, shelter and safety. She made a difference by helping translate and share advice during treaty talks, using her language skills to advocate for fair treatment of Native people.

Charlotte Dupuy: The fight for liberty

To the Honble the Judges of the circuit court of
 the District of Columbia for the county of Washington.

The several petitions of Charlott or letty
 Charles and Maryann respectfully and humbly sets
 forth to your honors that they are people of color who
 are entitled to their freedom and who are now held
 in a state of slavery by one Henry Clay (Secy of State)
 contrary to law and your petitioners just rights
 and that they are about to be taken out of this
 district and carried into the state of Kentucky, there
 to be held as slaves for life whereupon they sever-
 rally pray your honors to grant them such re-
 lief as they may be lawfully entitled to and such
 process of your honorable Court against the said
 Henry Clay as is usual in such cases to compel
 the attendance of the said Henry Clay in your honble
 court to answer this petition and to enter the usual
 security, and recognizance not to remove your
 petitioners or any of them beyond the Jurisdiction of
 your honorable Court and as in duty bound they
 will ever pray

Robt Beale pro
 petitioners

Letter written by Robert Beale on behalf of Charlotte Dupuy petitioning the judges to summon Henry Clay to court. (The White House Historical Association)

Charlotte Dupuy was born Charlotte Stanley around 1787 in Maryland. She grew up enslaved and was later brought to Lexington. After marrying Aaron Dupuy, also enslaved and owned by Henry Clay, she was purchased by Clay in 1806. She served as a domestic worker at Ashland and, following Clay's career, in Washington, D.C., where he held national office.

In 1829, Dupuy took the surprising step of suing Henry Clay for her freedom and that of her children. Her petition argued that her mother's free status and earlier promises of emancipation entitled her to liberty. Challenging one of the nation's most powerful politicians required remarkable courage. Although the court denied her claim, her case brought public scrutiny to slavery in Kentucky and the legal obstacles faced by enslaved families.

Dupuy was eventually emancipated in 1840. Her willingness to stand up for her freedom challenged Kentucky to confront the realities of slavery. Her efforts represent one of the earliest examples of Black legal resistance and resets how Kentucky recalls its past.



📷 Emma Guy Cromwell opened doors for women in public life. (Public domain)

Emma Guy Cromwell: The rise of women in public office

Emma Guy Cromwell's career signified a turning point in Kentucky politics. Born in 1869 in Simpson County and orphaned young, she earned a college degree with help from her local Masonic lodge. She became the first woman to hold a statewide office when she was elected state librarian in 1896, a time when few women held government positions.

Her major accomplishment came in the 1923 election when she became Kentucky's first female secretary of state. She briefly served as acting governor, the first woman in Kentucky to do so, and showed steady

leadership. Through the Democratic Woman's Club of Kentucky, Cromwell helped build support for women entering politics.

She encouraged women to, as she said, "blaze a trail for a new day for women when they can stand side by side with men in governing our great country." Though her views reflected the era's racial attitudes, she helped open doors for women in Kentucky's government and civic life.

Georgia Mae Powers: A woman who changed Kentucky politics



📷 Georgia Mae Powers marched alongside the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during the historic March on Frankfort in 1964. Powers is at right over King's shoulder. At left is baseball great Jackie Robinson. (Jim Curtis photograph collection on Civil Rights in Kentucky, University of Kentucky Libraries, Special Collections Research Center)

Georgia Mae Powers reshaped Kentucky's politics, shattered barriers and cleared pathways for generations to come. Born in 1923 in Louisville, she rose from modest beginnings to become, in 1968, the first Black woman elected to the Kentucky Senate. It was a milestone achievement during one of the most turbulent periods in the state's history.

Powers once reflected on her surprising path into public life, "I did not know my calling until I was 45." With maturity and determination, she fought for civil rights, fair housing and equal treatment in the workplace at a time when many opposed those ideas. When she introduced a fair housing bill, she skillfully secured support from fellow legislators by striking a deal beforehand – she'd back their proposals if they backed hers.

Powers worked to strengthen anti-discrimination laws, believing that the government should serve everyone. Her fearless advocacy transformed Kentucky's laws, proving that one unwavering voice can bring change.

Sherry Jelsma: Leading through the eye of the storm

Shery Keith Jelsma built her career by taking on tough challenges. She reflected, “Everything I took on was in crisis. I always said yes, then figured out what to do later.” That same instinct formed her leadership across Kentucky.

As the only woman on the Jefferson County Board of Education during desegregation battles, school closings and public unrest, she faced angry crowds, armed attendees and intense political pressure. Yet she insisted on fairness, transparency and looking out for the students’ well-being.

Her work continued in state government when Gov. Brereton Jones appointed her secretary of the Education, Arts and Humanities Cabinet. She restructured a struggling cabinet into a collaborative team, launching weekly “Kitchen Cabinet” meetings that united agencies and helped launch the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Beyond Frankfort, she strengthened Kentucky’s cultural institutions through leadership roles with the Kentucky Opera, the Speed Art Museum and the Kentucky Center for the Arts. She is remembered for tackling problems, leading by example and making things happen.

Minerva Virola: A trailblazer for Kentucky’s future leaders

Minerva Virola is a pioneering leader who, after serving 23 years in the U.S. Navy, moved into civilian law enforcement and became Kentucky’s first Latina sworn officer when she joined the Louisville Metro Police Department in 1993.

Virola greatly influenced Kentucky by helping close the gap between the police and the Hispanic community. She hosted a Spanish-language radio show for eight years to educate residents on safety and established the Latino Citizens Police Academy to build trust. Her trailblazing path continued as the first Latina at the Louisville FBI division.

Today, as LMPD’s equity and diversity manager, she leads initiatives such as Women Mentoring Circles and community leadership programs that encourage underrepresented Kentuckians to become involved. When asked if being “the first” was a challenge, she answered, “I see the world filled with opportunities... [I push] people to ask themselves, ‘Why not you?’”



📷 Shery Jelsma is remembered for making things happen. (Family photo courtesy of Shelby County Historical Society)



📷 Minerva Virola (Louisville Metro Police Department)