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WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Laney among most influential educators

Daughter of former slaves worked to ensure black students' success.

In 1883, Lucy Craft Laney, the daughter of former slaves, opened the first school for black students in the basement of Christ Presbyterian Church in Augusta.

The lifelong educator believed black children were as worthy of education as any other children. "I am as good as anybody else. God had no different dirt to make me out of than that used in making the first lady of the land," Laney once said.

The seventh of 10 children, Laney was born in Macon to parents who had purchased their own freedom decades earlier to give their children a better life. Despite laws that prohibited blacks from reading, Laney learned to read and write by age 4 and learned classical languages by age 12.

At 15, she joined the first class of students at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University), and she graduated in 1873 with a degree in teacher training. After teaching in Macon, Milledgeville and Savannah, Laney settled in Augusta and founded the school that would later become Haines Normal and Industrial Institution named for Mrs. Francine E. H. Haines, president of the Woman's Department of the Presbyterian Church, who had secured much needed funding to help Laney grow the school. Laney's students would go on to attend Howard University, Yale and other prestigious institutions.

Laney died in 1933 but her legacy as one of Georgia's most influential educators lives on in several schools nationwide named in her honor. Since 1974, her portrait has hung in the Georgia State Capitol, and in 1983, she was inducted into the Women of Achievement of Georgia. Her former home, purchased by Delta House Inc. in 1987 after it was damaged by fire, was restored as the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History.