

# ELIZABETH JENNINGS GRAHAM



Portrait of Elizabeth Jennings Graham in "The Story of an Old Wrong," *The American Woman's Journal*, July 1895. Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

Elizabeth Jennings Graham is most famously known as the "Nineteenth-Century Rosa Parks" for taking legal action against the Third Avenue Railroad Company for racial discrimination. She was born in 1827 in New York City to Elizabeth Cartwright and Thomas L. Jennings, a free Black man. She is sometimes referred to as just "Elizabeth Jennings" because at the time of her court case she was an unmarried woman. In 1860, she married Charles Graham, and became known as "Elizabeth Jennings Graham."

## EARLY LIFE

Elizabeth Jennings Graham's father, Thomas L. Jennings, was a successful tailor and the earliest known Black person to hold a patent in the United States, for a dry-cleaning process. Achieving entrepreneurial success allowed Thomas L. Jennings to support abolitionist organizations and build his reputation in New York City. In fact, he became a leading member of the National Colored Convention Movement. Jennings Graham's mother, Elizabeth Cartwright, was a writer and founding

member of the Ladies Literary Society of New York, a group founded by New York's elite Black women who promoted self-improvement through group readings, discussions, and community actions such as raising money to help escaping enslaved people and assisting the poor.

## ACTIVISM

On July 16, 1854, 27-year-old schoolteacher Elizabeth Jennings Graham boarded a segregated streetcar that did not accept African Americans as passengers. The conductor confronted her, but she refused to leave until she was forcibly removed by the police. After Jennings Graham's experience of racial discrimination, she wrote a letter telling her side of the account which was read out loud on her behalf at a meeting held in her family's church. Those assembled at the meeting were outraged on Jennings Graham's behalf and voted to form a committee, led by her father, in order to bring her story to legal authorities. Other publications, such as Horace Greeley's *The New York Daily Tribune* and Frederick Douglass' *Paper*—the result of Douglass merging *The North Star* paper with the *Liberty Party Paper of Syracuse* in 1851—also published stories about Jennings Graham's experience, which led to more national attention



Sarony, Major & Knap. *Old Storehouses cor. Pearl & Chatham St., 1861.* C. 1863. Print. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 420870.

and support. This strategy of using the media to bring attention to Jennings Graham's story was a success in sparking organized movements among Black New Yorkers to end racial discrimination on streetcars. Jennings Graham used her education and connections in New York's middle-class Black community to publish an account of the incident and to sue the Third Avenue Railroad Company, the conductor, and the driver. The family's activism led to a successful lawsuit filed in Brooklyn by Thomas Jennings on behalf of his daughter, with Chester A. Arthur, the future 21st President of the United States, acting as her lawyer. The court ruled in Jennings Graham's favor. She was awarded approximately \$250 in damages, and the Third Avenue Railroad Company was ordered to desegregate its streetcars.

Less than a decade later, the Jennings Graham family was forced to flee the city after the 1863 New York City Draft Riots and an increase in racially charged violence towards the city's Black community. With her husband, mother, and sister, Jennings Graham left Manhattan seeking safety in New Jersey, only moving back to Manhattan towards the end of the decade with her mother and sister after her husband died. In her later years, Jennings Graham continued to teach, helping to found the first kindergarten in the city for Black children out of her home on West 41st Street. She passed away in 1901.

Although Jennings Graham's case was a success, it did not force the desegregation of all streetcar lines in New York. Streetcar companies were privately owned before the establishment of a city-controlled public transit authority, and therefore, government desegregation policies did not apply to them. Black activism around Jennings Graham's case led to greater awareness, and further challenges were quickly brought to the courts against other rail lines. Jennings Graham's case led to the foundation of the Legal Rights Association in 1855, one of the first African American civil rights organization in New York that fought against racial segregation in New York City public transit. Although the organization backed subsequent court cases, they ceased operations around 1860 as New York City's public transit was fully desegregating, leaving a powerful example for future civil rights organizations in the United States.

In 2007, students from Manhattan's P.S. 361 learned of Elizabeth Jennings Graham's story. After a campaign led by the school, the city renamed a block on Park Row "Elizabeth Jennings Place" in her honor.

## QUESTIONS

Why is Elizabeth Jennings Graham known as the "Nineteenth-Century Rosa Parks?" What are some similarities between Jennings Graham and Rosa Parks?

Why was the use of media so important in Jennings Graham successfully taking legal action and winning her court case?

How did Jennings Graham's actions impact future Black activism for civil rights in New York City?

## LEARN MORE

Elizabeth Jennings Graham is featured in the [New York at its Core](#) exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York.

To learn more about Elizabeth Jennings Graham and discover primary sources that bring her story to life, check out the NYCDOE and MCNY curriculum supplement *Hidden Voices: Untold Stories of New York City History* at [weteachnyc.org/resources/resource/hidden-voices](http://weteachnyc.org/resources/resource/hidden-voices).

Information about the Museum's programs for teachers, students, and families, as well as online lesson plans and educational resources, can be found on the Museum's Digital Education Hub: [mcny.org/DigitalEd](http://mcny.org/DigitalEd).



## ACTIVIST NEW YORK

Visit the [Activist New York](#) exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York to learn more about the city's history of activism and the people who have propelled social change from the 1600s to today.

Explore the [Activist New York](#) online exhibition and discover classroom resources and [lesson plans](#) by visiting [activistnewyork.mcny.org](http://activistnewyork.mcny.org).

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