History: Ellen Richards was a pioneer for women at MIT

by Anthony Sammarco

My friend Helen Buchanan told me that she attended the Ellen H. Richards School on Beacon Street in Dorchester after I moved to Ashmont. The school, designed by William H. Besarick and built in 1913, commands a prominent view of the surrounding neighborhood, but I knew little of who Ellen H. Richards might have been.

A female pioneer at MIT

Researching the topic, I found that the school was named for Ellen H. Swallow (1842-1911), the daughter of Peter and Fanny Swallow of Dunstable, Massachusetts. She attended Vassar, and was graduated in 1870, a remarkable achievement for a woman of the nineteenth century; however, upon application for admission to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), she was barred entry. Though she had studied astronomy at Vassar with the famous Maria Mitchell, the first female astronomer in this country, no female was allowed to attend MIT. After further application, Swallow was allowed to attend MIT as a "special student" studying chemistry; she was awarded a Bachelor of Science in 1873 after three years of study.

The fact that advanced degrees were barred for female students was obvious; however, Swallow remained at MIT and assisted in the Science Department. Her tuition had been waived during her three years at school due to the fact that she was considered an "experimental" student; perhaps she remained to repay the gesture. Whatever the case may have been, she met her future husband, Professor Robert Richards, during this period, and they were married in 1875.

Successful experiment

Ellen H. Richards, as she styled herself, was a noted researcher and experimenter in matters of water supplies. In addition to teaching at MIT, she founded the Women's Lab in 1876 to improve the educational opportunities of women in general. For seven years, Richards taught chemistry and science courses for women, and often received no pay for her efforts. In 1883, the Women's Lab was merged with the general courses offered at MIT, and women students were allowed to be considered equals among the male students, no longer the "experimental" students of a decade earlier.

Ellen Richards served as chemist to the Board of Health from 1872 to 1875 and again from 1887 to 1897; her research on behalf of the Manufacturers Mutual Fire Insurance Company led to important work on the danger of spontaneous combustion and of various oils in commercial use. Her interests, and career, revolved around chemistry and its related field, but Richards was also concerned with the plight of less fortunate women.

Founded women's nutrition program

Ellen Richards was concerned with the living conditions of working women, and made a concerted effort to raise the consciousness of women in regard to nutrition. Her work in nutrition led her to found a soup kitchen in Boston, which was later to be known as the New England Kitchen. The inexpensive but highly nutritious meals served at the kitchen were a boon to its attendees, and it became a role model for other establishments.

Richards also wrote extensively on nutrition, and was a regular contributor to the cookbooks published by Walter Baker Chocolate Company in Dorchester; each cookbook had an article by Ellen Richards on the nutritional value of chocolate!

Throughout her life, Ellen H. Richards made great contributions to benefit the world around her. She served her community as a teacher, scientist, nutritionist, and advisor not just to students but to commercial enterprises throughout New England. The demolition of the Nathan Carruth House on Beacon Street, Dorchester in 1913 led to a large open space that was used in the design of the school in her honor by Besarick. What could have been more close to Ellen Richards' heart but a school that had nutritious lunches and an elevation for clean, healthy air during recess?