Hometown Heroes: Teaching with Historic Markers

FRANCES BARRIER WILLIAMS

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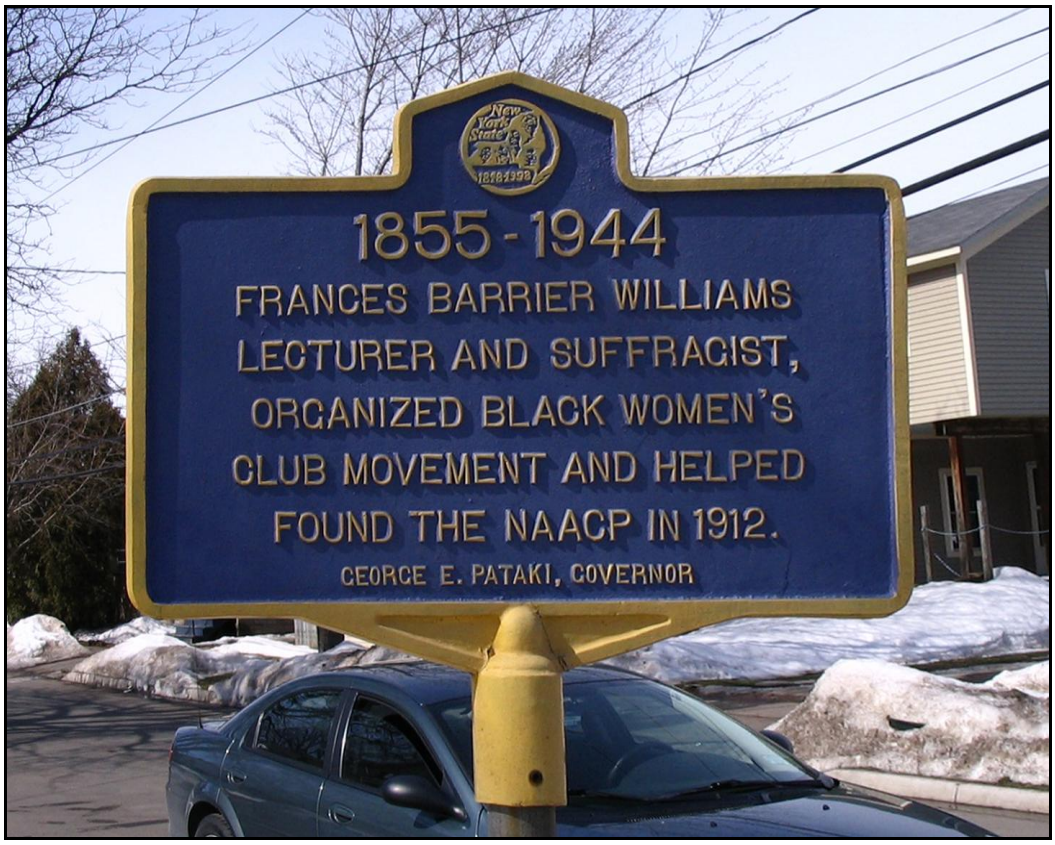
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Hometown Heroes: Teaching with Historic Markers

FRANCES BARRIER WILLIAMS



I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On the far end of Erie Street in the Village of Brockport stands the modest former home of Frances "Fannie" Barrier Williams. In 1998 a new historic marker was dedicated to commemorate her lifetime of achievement. Born in Brockport in 1855, she grew up in Brockport, attended school here and as a member of the Class of 1870, was the first African American graduate of the Brockport Normal School. She was a suffragist and civil rights worker, organizer of the Black Women's Club Movement, a colleague of W. E. B. DuBois, and one of the co-founders of the Niagara Movement that grew to become the NAACP.

In the mid 1990s "The [New York State] Governor's Commission Honoring the Achievements of Women expanded the New York State historical marker program, started in 1926, to more accurately reflect women's contributions to history. Each county was asked to participate by nominating three historic local women who contributed to the community and deserved recognition. From these nominations, the Commission sponsored the creation and installation of a historical marker for every participating county. The

markers are cast iron painted with the colors of the suffrage movement, purple and gold. The markers were dedicated and installed throughout the state during the fall of 1998."[1]



Recalling her childhood in Brockport in 1904 Williams (r) remarked, "Ours was the only colored family in the church, in fact, the only one in the town for many years, and certainly there could not have been a relationship more cordial, respectful and intimate than that of our family and the white people of this community."[1]

From her roots in Brockport Fannie Barrier Williams forged the strength to move beyond Brockport to become one of the foremost leaders of the civil rights efforts of the late 19th and early 20th century.

II. ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson is based on the format used by the National Park Service's "Teaching With Historic Places" using sources related to this topic, including *Early Brockport* by William G. Andrews, *The Collected Writings of Fannie Barrier Williams, 1893-1918* edited by Mary Jo Deegan, and materials from the Gilder Lehrman Institute and the New York State Archives.

III. CONNECTING TO THE NYS CURRICULUM STANDARDS

The teaching materials in this lesson are aligned with the New York State Curriculum and Learning Standards for Social Studies and the thematic matrices of the National Council for the Social Studies.

The lesson can be used to teach NYS Standard One: The History of the United States and New York to enrich units on local history, Reconstruction, The Niagara Movement, the black women's club movement, woman suffrage, and African American history. http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/ssls.html

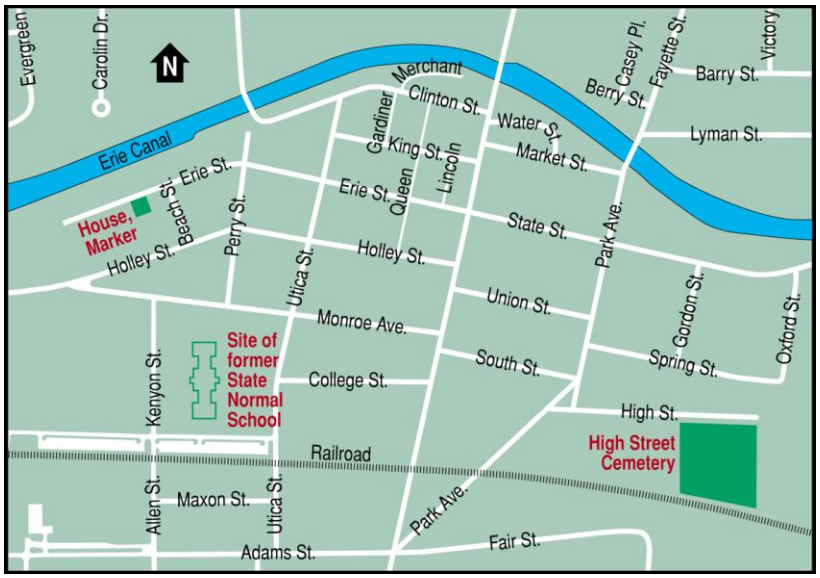
It also meets the National Council for the Social Studies Thematic Standards for Social Studies. Thematic standards addressed include: Standard 2, Time, Continuity and Change; Standard 3, Individuals, Groups, and Institutions, Standard 6, Power, Authority, and Governance, and Standard 10, Civic Ideals and Practices.

IV. OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS (Students will be able to:)

- Describe the routines of life in Brockport, New York during the second half of the 19th century.
- Recount the early life experience of Frances Barrier Williams and her family
- Compare and contrast the conditions experienced by Fannie Barrier Williams during her time teaching in the South with those she knew growing up in Brockport, New York and how they influenced her to become involved in working for social reforms and civil rights for African Americans.
- Describe, explain, and compare the strategies of social reform, woman suffrage, and civil rights leaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- Analyze and evaluate the role of Brockport and Western New York in social reforms, woman suffrage, and civil rights during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

V. VISITING THE SITE

The commemorative marker for Frances Barrier Williams stands outside of her former home at the far end of Erie Street in the Village of Brockport, NY. She is buried in the High Street Cemetery with her parents Anthony and Harriet Barrier and her sister Ella.



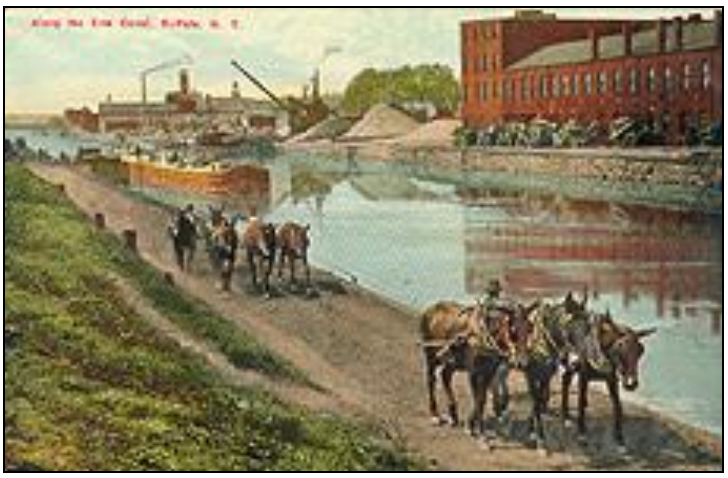
Supplementary readings: To learn more about Frances Barrier Williams teachers and students will find *Early Brockport* by William G. Andrews an excellent starting point. *The Collected Writings of Fannie Barrier Williams*, edited by Mary Jo Deegan offer a comprehensive compilation of her work. The website of the Rochester Regional Library Council, "Western New York Suffragists," www.winningthevote.org/FBWilliams.html gives a solid overview of her social reform work, suffrage work, and her advocacy on behalf of civil rights as does the website of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/fanniebarrierwilliams.html.

VI. SETTING THE STAGE

The lesson can be used to help students understand the issues facing African Americans during the years following the Civil War. The experiences of Fannie Barrier Williams work well for this type of case study. Because her early years were spent growing up in Brockport, her experiences and perspective on racial issues offer students an opportunity to compare and contrast her approach to activism with those of more familiar people, like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. They also offer insights into a woman's perspective.

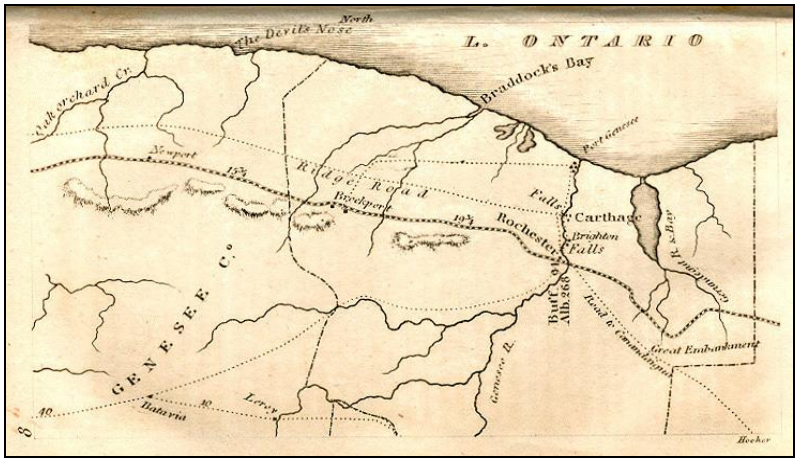
Western New York and Rochester were at the heart of the reform era of the 1850s and 1860s, home to both the woman suffrage movement and abolitionism.
With Brockport only 20 or so miles away and situated on the main east-west thoroughfares across New York State, the Erie Canal and Ridge Road, it is no surprise that William's life work in activism can be found at the crossroads of all of these issues. However, against this backdrop, the Williams family also found a community where their children could grow up free of the prejudices that marked the lives of the vast majority of African Americans at that time.

VII. FOR STUDENTS (Documents, Readings and Activities)



Left,
Early painting of Erie Canal and its towpath where they pass through Brockport.

Right,
Early map showing historic Ridge Road which runs East – West approximately one mile north of Brockport.



Part I. Frances Barrier William's Early Life in Brockport

As a result of reading three articles in *The Independent*, July 14, 1904, relating to the issue of race, then called "the Negro problem," by a "Southern colored woman, a Southern white woman and a Northern white woman." Williams responded with the essay below, excerpted:

From: *A Northern Negro's Autobiography*

> I am a Northern colored woman, a mulatto in complexion, and was born since the war in a village town of Western New York. My parents and grandparents were free people. My mother was born in New York State and my father in Pennsylvania. They both attended the common schools and were fairly educated. They had a taste for good books and the refinements of life, were public spirited and regarded as good citizens. My father moved to this village when he was a boy and was a resident of the town for over fifty years.
>
> . . . My parents were strictly religious people and were members of one of the largest white churches in the village. My father, during his membership in this church, held successively almost every important office open to a layman, having been clerk, trustee, treasurer, and deacon, which office he held at the time of his death, in 1890.
>
> . . . Ours was the only colored family in the church, in fact, the only one in the town for many years, and certainly there could not have been a relationship more cordial, respectful, and intimate than that of our family and the white people of this community.

1. Based on the excerpts from her autobiography, list three things she tells us about her parents.

2. Based on the above, how would you characterize the relationship between the Williams family and the Brockport community.

We three children were sent to school as soon as we were old enough, and remained there until we were graduated. During our school days our associates, schoolmates and companions were all white boys and girls. These relationships were natural, spontaneous, and free from all restraint. We went freely to each other houses, to parties, socials, and joined on equal terms in all school entertainments with perfect comradeship.

. . . We suffered no discriminations on account of color or "previous condition" and lived in blissful ignorance of the fact that we were practicing the unpardonable sin of "social equality." Indeed until I became a young woman and went South to teach I had never been reminded that I belong to an "inferior race."

In the first paragraph above Williams describes her school days. What evidence does she offer that shows she was liked and accepted by her classmates? Why do you think she stresses this aspect of her education?

In the second paragraph her tone changes. Click on each of the highlighted phrases to see what they meant to African Americans at the end of the 19th century. After seeing what each meant, explain why she sounds angry when she uses them.

Links: Previous condition refers to slavery
Social equality Many whites feared that freeing the slaves would mean that whites and blacks would have the same rights and freedoms.
Inferior race was a term many whites used to describe African Americans



Brockport Normal School

Williams graduated as a teacher from the Brockport Normal School, now SUNY College at Brockport, and moved south to teach the freedmen. As she recalled the experience,

Part II, Teaching in the South and Boston

> . . . I soon obtained a position in one of the ex-slave states. It was here and for the first time that I began life as a colored person, in all that that term implies. No one but a colored woman, reared and educated as I was, can ever know what it means to be brought face to face with conditions that fairly overwhelm you with the ugly reminder that a certain penalty must be suffered by those who, not being able to select their own parentage, must be born of a dark complexion. What a shattering of cherished ideals! Everything that I learned and experienced in my innocent social relationships in New York State had to be unlearned and readjusted to these lowered standards and changed conditions.
>
> . . . I found that down South life was divided into white and black lines, and that in every direction my ambitions and aspirations were to have no beginnings and no chance for development.
>
> . . . I went to Boston, but even here, white Southerners were there before me. I was told by the principal . . . that [hiring me] would imperil the interests of the school . . . as all his Southern pupils would leave. . .

- What was different for Williams when she moved to the South and then to Boston to teach?

- Follow this link http://www.nps.gov/boaf/historyculture/places.htm and then explain in a paragraph why it must have been especially upsetting to run into racial discrimination in Boston.

- Use the link to locate three places that are important to African American history and write a short paragraph explaining the importance of each.

Drawing conclusions:
Based on the readings above and the links you've explored, work with a partner and write a poem or draw a poster based on what it must have been like to be an African American girl growing up on Erie Street in Brockport at the end of the 19th century confronting racial discrimination for the first time.

Part III: Working for African American Rights



The neo-classic buildings surrounding the Grand Basin (reflecting pool) in the Court of Honor at the center of the "White City."

During her many years working to secure the rights of African Americans, one speech, "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation," delivered in Chicago at The Columbian Exposition in 1893 is best remembered among all of her speeches for the courage it took to make it. Congress had decided that women should organize their own events at the fair. A group of volunteers called The Lady Managers of the Woman's Congress were appointed and determined that no African American woman would be on their platform. They were a group of elite white women and began by first opposing the participation of African American women then arguing that if they were allowed to participate that they be segregated to another category of work and exhibit separately from the main arena.

This, of course, led to a protest from African American women, Williams included. The two years of wrangling over the issue is important for what it reveals about the state of race relations at the time. Ultimately a total of 22 African American women were able to speak and participate but William's outspoken address gained the most attention. Even today, some scholars consider her speech to be the most important speech given during the entire exposition. The short excerpt from the conclusion will give you a sense of the determination and passion for liberty that she brought to Chicago and to the Columbian Exposition.

We come before this assemblage of women feeling confident that our progress has been along high levels and rooted deeply in the essentials of intelligent humanity. We are so essentially American in speech, in instincts, in sentiments, and in destiny that the things that interest you equally interest us. We believe that social evils are dangerously contagious. The fixed policy of persecution and injustice against a class of women who are weak and defenseless will be necessarily hurtful to the case of all women. Women of the dominant race can not afford to be responsible for the wrongs we suffer, since those who do injustice can not escape a certain penalty.

The colored women, as well as all women, will realize that the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a maxim that will become more blessed in it significance when the hand of woman shall take it from its sepulture in books and make it the gospel of everyday life and the unerring guide in the relations of all men, women, and children.

1. What is she saying when she refers to African Americans as "essentially" American?

2. What is her point when she argues that "social evils are dangerously contagious"?

3. How does her reference to the Declaration of Independence strengthen her argument on behalf of women who are African American and by extension all African Americans?

4. From this short excerpt would you say she agrees with Booker T. Washington's advice to white southerners in his "Speech Before the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition"? If you're not sure, use the link below to read his speech.
   http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=69

If you are interested in more information about the Columbian Exposition of 1893 you can find a wealth of information at this site sponsored by The University of Delaware Library
http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/exhibits/fairs/colum.htm

Part IV: Paying Tribute to an Ally

As Mary Jo Deegan explains in *The New Woman of Color, The Collected Writings of Fannie Barrier Williams,* "During the Victorian and Progressive eras, eulogies were often a formal art form. . . Williams participated in this social tradition when she honored . . . Susan B. Anthony, for her commitment to blacks and women." Her tribute to Anthony was delivered at the annual meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association annual meeting in 1907.



Susan B. Anthony
Rochester, NY

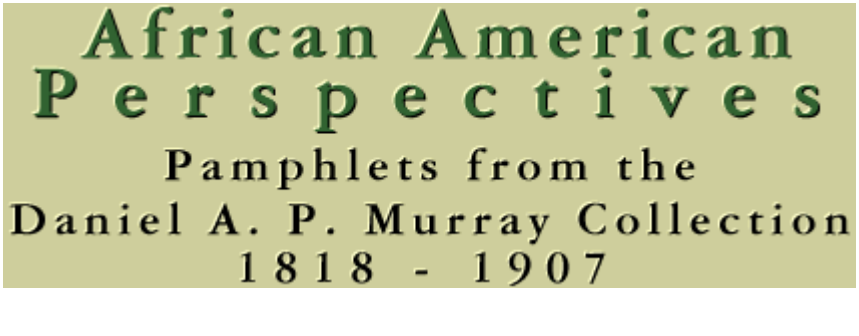
The following is the surviving portion of Williams speech as it appears in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 5, 1900-1-20, ed. Ida Husted Harper (1922; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969).

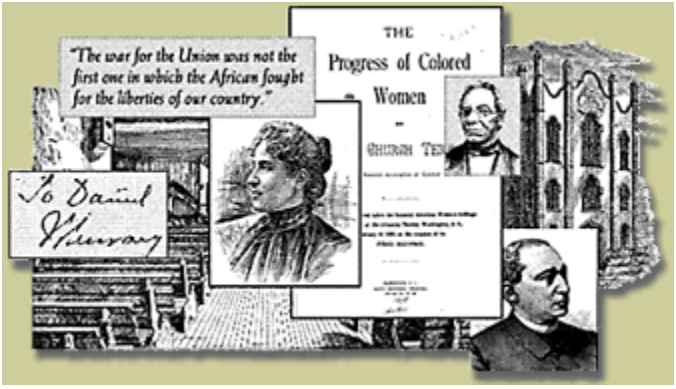
> My presence on this platform shows that the gracious spirit of Miss Anthony still survives in her followers . . . When Miss Anthony took up the cause of women she did not know them by their color, nationality, creed, or birth; she stood only for the emancipation of women from the thralldom of sex. She became an invincible champion of anti-slavery. In the half century of her unremitting struggle for liberty, more liberty, and complete liberty for negro men and women in chains and for white women in their helpless subjection to man's laws, she never wavered, never doubted, never compromised. She held it to be mockery to ask man or woman to be happy or contented if not free. She saw no substitute for liberty. When slavery was overthrown and the work of reconstruction began she was still unwearied and watchful. She had an intimate acquaintance with the leading statesmen of the times. Her judgment and advice were respected and heard in much of the legislation that gave a status of citizenship to the millions of slaves set free.

In this tribute to Susan B. Anthony, Williams refers to Anthony's work on behalf of African American men and women after slavery ended – the era of reconstruction. The link below will take you to the Library of Congress's, American Memory Collection and a timeline from "African American Perspectives" and help you identify some of the problems still faced by African Americans at the time of Anthony's death in 1907.

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aap/aaphome.html

As you review the timeline, list some of the important problems facing African Americans between 1881 and 1925. Which would you choose as the most important of these problems? Why?





Part V: The Frances Barrier Williams Scrapbook



The Francis Barrier Williams Scrapbook

This activity is a mini-research activity designed to help students begin to see African American's working together as friends and colleagues. Too often textbooks highlight their differences, when in fact, they were a closely-knit circle of activists all striving for the improvement of African Americans in the decades following Reconstruction. That they pursued a variety of means suggests more how intensely they chased the goal rather than competition among them.

Objectives:

Students will be able to visualize the circle of activists and their allies who struggled to improve the lives of African Americans at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century.

Students will be able to explain at least three different strategies that were advocated by this circle of activists.

Work with a partner and for each of the friends of Frances Barrier Williams shown below, locate the following information:

1. Where they worked
2. What kind of work they did
3. How they tried to improve the lives of African Americans


Ida B. Wells Barnett


Hallie Quinn Brown

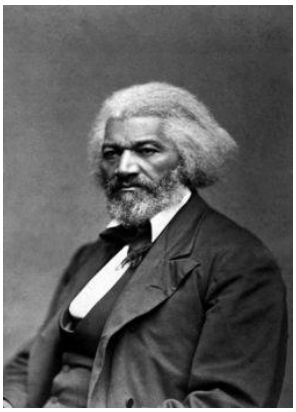

W. E. B. DuBois


Jane Addams


Booker T. Washington


Mary McDowell


Susan B. Anthony


Frederick C. Douglas


Celia Parker Woolley

Part VI: Brockport Remembers

College Alumni donate chair to Seymour Library

At the February meeting of the Seymour Library Board, George Rich, president of the Brockport Alumni Association, presented a Boston Rocker to the library in memory of Fannie Barrier Williams. The rocking chair was accepted by Sean Wilcox and the Library Board. John Izzo, chair of the Alumni Association's Recognition Committee, also participated in the presentation.

Williams was one of those honored at the July 2002 Alumni Reunion for having made significant contributions to the college, community or country. The Hall of Heritage Award, which is the Alumni's most distinguished award, consists of a citation and a Boston Rocker. Since Williams was given the award posthumously, it was determined that her chair be donated to the local library in recognition of her local and national activism and for her interest in education and libraries. She was the first black woman to hold a position on the Chicago Library Board.

In 1870, Frances "Fannie" Barrier became the first black woman to graduate from the State Normal School at Brockport, which is now known as The College at Brockport, State University of New York. She was born in Brockport but went on to become a leading associate in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Her many other accomplishments were enumerated by Village Historian Bill Andrews when a historical marker was placed outside her family's former home on Erie Street in November 1998. After her husband's death, Williams returned to this home where she resided until her own death in 1944.

http://westsidenewsonline.com/OldSite/westside/news/2003/0224/features/collegealumni.html



Shown (l to r) **George Rich** and **Sean Wilcox** with chair donated in memory of Frances Barrier Williams.

After reading the article above and reviewing other aspects of the life of Frances Barrier Williams, add your own paragraph that includes three more reasons why she deserved The Hall of Heritage Award.

Now, design your own award for your hometown hero, Frances Barrier Williams!