

# *The Life of West Virginia's Wild and Wonderful Serena Katherine Dandridge*

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## *Educational Objectives*

- Participants will learn who Serena Katherine Dandridge was and be introduced to her scientific contributions.
- Participants will become familiar with her involvement in the Women's Suffrage Movement.
- Participants will be encouraged to think about gender and racial inequality in the early 1900s.

Serena Katherine "Violet" Dandridge (1878-1956) was born in Shepherdstown, West Virginia to parents Danske and Adam Stephen Dandridge. She was always known as Violet to those in her personal life after being given the nickname as a young child. Violet had a younger brother and sister, Stephen and Dorothea, and they were raised on their family estate called Rose Brake. The Dandridge family had plentiful financial means and the children were encouraged to pursue their artistic and intellectual interests.

Violet's life afforded her endless privilege and opportunity, but she was no stranger to pain and loss. Her mother suffered from lifelong mental and physical health concerns and her father spent his time traveling for work, returning home only for brief visits after months-long trips. Tragically, both of her siblings died unexpectedly as teenagers when she was a young adult. Violet also suffered from mental health conditions that required her to be hospitalized many times throughout her life.



Serena Katherine "Violet" Dandridge

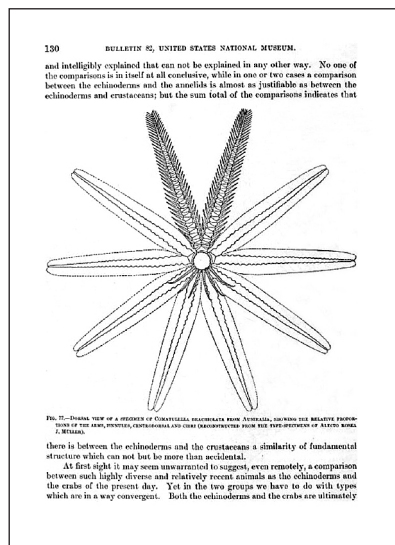
## **Scientific Illustrator**

Violet always had artistic inclinations and spent her time drawing, writing and painting from an early age. She moved to Washington D.C. when she was 18 to study under artist Howard Helmick. Violet studied with Helmick for seven years, developing her skills as a painter, etcher, designer and illustrator. She began work at the Smithsonian Institute in 1903, where she made history as one of the first women to be employed as a scientific illustrator.

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Known in her professional field as Serena Katherine Dandridge, her illustrations and paintings of marine animals were included in various scientific publications, and on display at the United States National Museum in the Smithsonian Institution, which is now known as the National Museum of Natural History.

She contributed illustrations to numerous scientific textbooks, and in 1915, she completely illustrated a textbook titled, "A Monograph of the Existing Crinoids," by Austin Hobart Clark. Added information may become available as the contributions

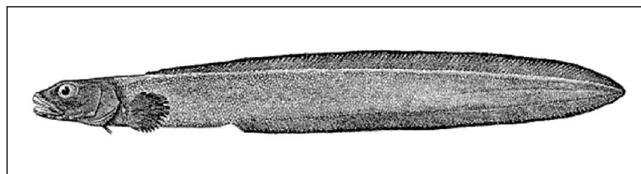


A Violet Dandridge scientific illustration.

women made to science continue to be discovered and properly archived, but as of now, she was the first woman to individually illustrate the entirety of a scientific textbook.

Violet traveled with zoologists Mary Jane Rathbun and Dr. Harriet Richardson Searle in 1911 to Casco Bay, Maine, where they collected specimens and studied the color and visible features of marine animals. Recent publications by the Smithsonian Institute have credited Mary Jane Rathbun as its first woman curator and referred to this trio, including Violet, as "three of the earliest women in science."

Violet cherished her career, and this is clear in a letter she wrote to her parents on Feb. 24, 1914, asking them to limit her stay in a hospital for "bouts of nervousness" to two weeks so that she could return to work. She wrote, "It is not wise from my business' point of view to keep me here more than the two weeks. You see, my chief



A Violet Dandridge illustration from the book "Fishes of Alaska" by Evermann, B.W. and E. L. Goldsborough, 1907.

business asset has got to be reliability, they must feel they can trust me and that I have good sense, or they won't continue to give me this new and original work. I know you and mother would be the last people to do anything that would interfere with my getting good work, particularly now that I've gotten them up to the point of sending fishes out of the museum to me."

## Suffragette

Violet was active in the women's suffrage movement and donated her time and money to advocate for votes for women. She subscribed to *The Suffragist*, a weekly newspaper dedicated to advancing the women's suffrage movement, and donated funds to the West Virginia Equal Suffrage Association.

On March 3, 1913, she joined thousands of other women in a demonstration organized by the National Woman Suffrage Association in Washington, D.C., and they marched along the path that was marked off for Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade scheduled for the next day.

During the same hospital stay when Violet wrote to her parents and asked them to limit her stay so that she could return to work, a hospital superintendent wrote to her parents to inform them that she refused to eat, saying, "she wished to die on account of man's injustice to women."

For years, she attended the Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, held in Baltimore, Maryland or Washington, D.C. Her participation even gained national attention after *The Washington Post* listed "Miss Violet Dandridge" as a registered delegate from West Virginia in a report after the 1915 convention.





*Violet Dandridge and suffragists parade in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.*

In 1916, Violet organized and led a suffragist parade in Shepherdstown, which included a public speech by a woman from the National American Woman Suffrage Association who traveled around the country to speak at national events. Her photo then appeared on the front page of her local newspaper while leading the parade and holding a sign that read “Votes for Women.”

She remained active in her advocacy efforts until Aug. 18, 1920, when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, granting women the right to vote.

## Service to Others

After her time at the Smithsonian Institute, both of Violet’s parents were deceased and she returned to live on the family estate she inherited in Shepherdstown. Both unmarried, Violet and her cousin Nina Mitchell lived the rest of their lives there, caring for the land and raising sheep and cows together. Violet was deeply committed to honoring the environment and serving others, especially those she viewed as underserved or oppressed. She was sometimes referred to as eccentric because of her selfless lifestyle.

Violet tended to the farm duties with the help of others, but she was also actively involved in all of the business and labor operations at Rose Brake. She could be seen riding through town, personally delivering milk to families who did

not have the means to buy it. She was practical in the way she dressed for her farm work, often seen wearing men’s pants and sweaters, which was highly unusual at the time. She was an environmental activist and in her 50s, she was arrested on two separate occasions for chaining herself to trees at Rose Brake in protest when the town informed her that they would be cut down.

Violet taught weekly Sunday school classes at her church, and afterward, privately offered Sunday school for African American children because she was devastated by the injustice of children not having access to equal learning opportunities because of their skin color. The African American children who would attend her Sunday school classes usually spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Rose Brake, learning about nature and animals, and playing with one another. The children she taught knew her as Miss Violet, and she would be seen in town running errands and tending to business with any number of children by her side. You might see her with children leading a cow down the main street, riding a horse, carrying supplies, or delivering milk.

## Sketches from Shepherdstown

Violet had a personal sketchbook with 25 pencil sketches that she titled, *Sketches of Shepherdstown, and Scarborough*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library at Shepherd University bought the sketchbook in 1988 from a national art dealer. The sketches depict people and animals, and many of the

people are African American. When the library showed the individually framed sketches for the first time in 2019, the library manager of special collections



*“Bust of Young Woman Looking Right” by Dandridge from “Sketches from Shepherdstown.”*



said in an article that when it purchased the collection, the Scarborough Library “considered the acquisition an important one because of the rarity of such African American items and the value they bring to the library’s collection.”

## Wild and Wonderful Woman

Serena Katherine “Violet” Dandridge was certainly wild and wonderful, and after a lifetime spent advocating for social justice and environmental causes, she died on Nov. 7, 1956, at age 78 while hospitalized for treatment related to mental illness. She contributed to the way we understand science and biology today, fought for every woman’s right to vote and drew some of the only known sketches of African American residents of Shepherdstown, the oldest town in West Virginia. She also ensured her mother’s legacy as a published author would be recognized and honored by donating books to local libraries and sending copies to the National Library of Congress. She gave copyright permissions to countless academic publications to use her mother’s poetry in republications and in academic contexts. She wanted her mother’s work to be not only preserved but also recognized and honored.

## Resources

### Duke University

<https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/2020/07/08/tracing-miss-violet/>

### Forbes

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/evaamsen/2022/02/28/science-illustrator-violet-dandridge-helped-zoologists-document-their-specimens/amp/>

### Jefferson County Historical Society Magazine (2019)

[https://books.google.com/books?id=QVfHDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=serena+violet+dandridge+obituary&source=bl&ots=sX7llrmKDf&sig=ACfU3U17aa\\_UGJlAqV05sihXDnecutZRwg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjt9\\_OsgNb3AhXknnIEHduUDkQQ6AF6BAGdEAM#v=onepage&q=serena%20violet%20dandridge%20obituary&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=QVfHDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=serena+violet+dandridge+obituary&source=bl&ots=sX7llrmKDf&sig=ACfU3U17aa_UGJlAqV05sihXDnecutZRwg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjt9_OsgNb3AhXknnIEHduUDkQQ6AF6BAGdEAM#v=onepage&q=serena%20violet%20dandridge%20obituary&f=false)

### National Park Service

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/woman-suffrage-procession1913.htm>

### Shepherd University

<https://media.suweb.site/2019/10/ScarboroughandCTLNewsletterFall2019.pdf?v=1609770827>

<https://www.shepherd.edu/news/library-exhibits-pencil-sketches-from-shepherdstown-through-september-2/>

### Smithsonian Institute

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/smithsonian-libraries-and-archives/2022/05/03/meet-serena-katherine-violet-dandridge-suffragist-and-scientific-illustrator/>

<https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/serena-katherine-%E2%80%9Cviolet%E2%80%9D-dandridge-suffragist-and-scientific-illustrator>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/recovering-american-women%E2%80%99s-history/-gVhXKF-p6IJfg?hl=en>

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