

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

Angela N. Lawrence, WVU Extension Agent – Berkeley and Jefferson Counties

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*Dandridge was a wild and wonderful West Virginia woman who became a successful scientific illustrator, activist and beloved member of her community.*

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.

## **Scientific Illustrator**

Violet moved to Washington D.C. when she was 18 to study under artist Howard Helmick. 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.

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. In 1915, she completely illustrated a textbook titled, “A Monograph of the Existing Crinoids,” by Austin Hobart Clark, becoming the first woman to individually illustrate the entirety of a scientific textbook.

Serena 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 have referred to them as “three of the earliest women in science.”

## **Suffragette**

On March 3, 1913, she joined thousands of other women in a demonstration organized by the National Woman Suffrage Association in Washington, D.C.,

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Serena Katherine “Violet” Dandridge

and they marched along the path that was marked off for Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade scheduled for the next day.

The Washington Post listed "Miss Violet Dandridge" as a registered delegate from West Virginia in a report after the Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention in 1915.

Violet was hospitalized in 1914, and a hospital superintendent wrote to her parents because she refused to eat as an act of protest. According to the superintendent, Violet said she "wished to die on account of man's injustice to women."

In 1916, Violet organized and led a suffragist parade in Shepherdstown and then appeared on the front page of her local newspaper while leading the parade and holding a sign that read, "Votes for Women."

## 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, raising sheep and cows with her cousin.

Violet was actively involved in all the business and labor operations at Rose Brake and would deliver milk to families who did not have the means to buy it. 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. Afterward, she offered private 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. She also taught children about nature and animals, and the children of

the town often spent time at Rose Brake. She was often seen in town running errands and tending to business, with any number of children by her side.

## Sketches from Shepherdstown

Violet Dandridge had a personal sketchbook with 25 pencil sketches that she titled, "Sketches of Shepherdstown," and Scarborough 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



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

the library showed the individually framed sketches for the first time in 2019, the library manager of special collections 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. 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.

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