

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Ida Gray Nelson Rollins

(March 4, 1867 – May 3, 1953)

“First African-American Woman Dentist”

Ida Gray Nelson Rollins was born on March 4, 1867 in Clarksville, Tennessee. Ida's mother died when she was just a teenager and her father, a white man, was not in her life. After her mother died, Ida went to live with a relative, Caroline, who was 35 years old and a mother of three. Around 1869, Caroline moved Ida along with her children to Cincinnati, Ohio. During high school, Ida worked part-time as a seamstress and dressmaker. She also worked as an office assistant in a dental office owned by brothers Jonathan and William Taft. Jonathan Taft was the cofounder and an early president of the American Dental Association. He was also a strong advocate of allowing women into the dental field. He had previously mentored Lucy Hobbs Taylor, a white woman, in the skills of dentistry and she became the first woman to earn a dental degree in the country in 1870. In 1875 Jonathan Taft became the first dean of the Dental College of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Ida worked for the dental office until she graduated from high school at the age of 20. Jonathan Taft encouraged Ida to continue her education in dentistry and her three years of experience in the dental office helped her pass the mandatory entrance exam to the University of Michigan dental school. In October of 1887, Ida entered the University of Michigan dental school. In June 1890, Ida Gray received her doctor of dental school making her the first African-American woman to earn a dental degree in the United States.

Ida returned to Cincinnati and opened a private practice on Ninth Street, where she stayed until 1895. In March of 1895, Ida married James Sanford Nelson, a Spanish-American War veteran. James Nelson lived in Chicago where he served as the captain and quartermaster for the National Guard Eighth Regiment.

Ida moved to Chicago with James in 1895 where she set up a private practice and he worked as an accountant and later earned a law degree from the Chicago College of Law. She was the first female African-American dentist to practice in the city of Chicago and had a very diverse clientele, serving men and women of all races and ages. She was especially liked by children and served as a role model for many of her young patients. Ida mentored one young patient, Olive M. Henderson, to become the second female African-American dentist in Chicago. Ida was also active in many women's organizations in Chicago and served as the vice president of the Professional Women's Club of Chicago.

James Nelson died on March 11, 1926. Three years later Ida married William A. Rollins, a waiter. Ida retired from dentistry in the 1930s and continued to live in Chicago, although she also maintained a summer home in Idlewild, Michigan, which was a popular resort area for black professionals. William Rollins died on June 20, 1944, in a car accident. Ida remained widowed for the rest of her life and never had any children. Ida Gray Nelson Rollins died on May 3, 1953 in Chicago. She was 86 years old.



NEWS FROM CHICAGO

Dr. Ida Gray Nelson, Dentist and Miss Blanche Wright, Court Reporter and stenographer have just returned from Waukesha, where they have been enjoying their vacation.

