

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

www.womeninwisconsin.org



FLORENCE BASCOM

1862-1945

City: Madison

County: Dane

Florence Bascom was a trailblazing geologist and the first woman to receive a degree from Johns Hopkins University.

Florence Bascom was born in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on July 14, 1862. Her parents were both educators: her mother was a school teacher, and her father was a professor at Williams College. In 1874, her father became the University of Wisconsin president, so her family moved to Madison. She graduated from Madison High School in 1877 when she was just 15 years old. Her parents encouraged her to pursue higher education, so she enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. She graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1882 and a bachelor of science in 1884. She went on to earn her master's degree in geology in 1887. She taught at Rockford College (now Rockford University) in Illinois for a few years before deciding to pursue her PhD. She applied to Johns Hopkins University even though they didn't formally accept female students. She was allowed to attend classes there on a semi-official basis, tuition-free, but the university did not guarantee they would grant her a PhD at all. In 1893, Bascom became the first woman to earn a degree at Johns Hopkins and the second woman in the country to receive a PhD in geology. Her work in petrology, the study of the origin and makeup of rocks, expanded our knowledge about the formation of the Appalachian Mountains.

From 1893 to 1895, she was an associate professor at Ohio State University. In 1895, she was recruited to work at Bryn Mawr College, a women's college in Pennsylvania. She founded the geology department at Bryn Mawr, incorporating classroom lectures, fieldwork gathering rock samples, and lab work analyzing rocks and minerals. The department quickly became one of the best geology programs in the world, producing the most female geologists of any school in the country. By 1906, she became a full professor.

In 1896, the U.S. Geological Survey hired Bascom – the first woman they ever hired – as an assistant geologist. In 1901, she became the first woman to present a paper at the Geological Society of Washington. She was an associate editor of American Geologist journal from 1896 to 1905. In 1906, Bascom was named one of the country's leading geologists by the book American Men of Science, which would change its name to American Men and Women of Science in 1971. In 1907, she went to Germany for a year to study advanced crystallography (the science of crystals). Bascom was the first woman elected to the council of the Geological Society of America in 1924, and in 1930, she became vice-president of the organization.

In 1928, in honor of her accomplishments and dedication to her students, Bascom was named professor emeritus, meaning she could keep the title of professor even after retiring. In 1932, she retired from Bryn Mawr and moved to Washington, D.C., to work on preparing geological survey results for publication. She died on June 18, 1945. Bascom wrote over 40 academic articles throughout her career, and her research is still used today.

To learn more, visit <https://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/florence-bascom/>