



THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO GRADUATE FROM ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

By Jessica Salow | The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education

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For many years, it was believed that Love Hatton Jordan was the first African American woman to graduate from Arizona State University in 1928. Now an earlier Black woman graduate has been discovered.

Searching through family scrapbooks several years ago, Michele Neptune McHenry and her husband, Joseph McHenry came upon a photo of Stella McHenry. The photograph appeared to be a graduation photo, but no school was listed. The couple decided to conduct some research to find out more information about their relative.

Estella Rochelle McHenry was born in 1904. Her father worked as a smelter operator in the copper mines in Clifton. Her younger brother Lawrence was Joseph McHenry's father.

Joseph McHenry died in 2019 but his wife Michelle continue the research. She searched Stella's name on the internet and found a reference to her in a book titled *The African American Experience in Tempe*. An excerpt from the book read:

"Among the students who leased cottages from the Thomas' was Stella McHenry of Clifton, Arizona. Reportedly the first African American woman to graduate from the Arizona State Teachers College in Tempe."

Michelle McHenry contacted the university and archivists found Stella's photograph in the 1925 yearbook. Further research found that Stella was listed in the *Arizona Educational Directory* of 1925–26 and 1926–27 as teaching seventh grade at the Douglas School for Colored Students. She died in 1928, at the age of 23 of complications from influenza and pneumonia.



Jessica Salow, assistant archivist and curator of Black collections at Arizona State University said that "Black history can be hidden. So many people that I have run across in Arizona who live in the Black community who have Black family members that have been here for generations, they know about the history of either their community, their family or their people. It's just that no institution was really interested in a lot of this history."

