

**Saratoga Library English Conversation Club:
Sarah Marshall Boone
June 18, 2026**

Today we continue to recognize "**Juneteenth**", the official U.S. holiday that marks the end of slavery in the United States. Last week, we learned about Dr. Patricia Bath. Today, we will learn about another African American woman who was an inventor but was born 110 years *before* Dr. Bath. Her name is Sarah Marshall Boone.

First, review the following words and answer the warmup questions.

Vocabulary: Review these words and match them to their meanings.

1. bodice (bod-is)	a. a long, flat, thick piece of wood; a long, thick board
2. conductor (kuhn-duhk-ter)	b. to stop from acting or doing something
3. corset (kor-sit)	c. to surpass in ability, achievement, excellence, splendor
4. to criminalize (krim-uh-nuhl-ahyz)	d. the upper part of a woman's dress, from the shoulder to the waist or a tight-fitting corset or woman's undergarment
5. to deter (dih-tur)	e. ability to read and write; having an education
6. literacy (lit-er-uh-see)	f. a secret network of travel routes and safe houses used by enslaved African Americans in the 19th century to escape into free states and Canada
7. plank (plangk)	g. to make punishable as a crime; to treat as a criminal
8. to outshine (out-shahyn)	h. to block, forbid, limit, not allow or impede
9. to restrict (ri-strikt)	i. not watched over, unmanaged
10. Underground Railroad (uhn-der-ground rayl-rohd)	j. a leader, guide, director, or manager. Underground Railroad conductors guided escaping enslaved people (often referred to as "passengers") to safe houses and freedom
11. unsupervised (uhn soo-per-vyzd)	k. a close-fitting undergarment, stiffened with whalebone or similar material worn, especially by women, to shape and support the body

Answer Key:

1-d; 2-j, 3-k; 4-g; 5-b; 6-e; 7-a; 8-c; 9-h; 10-f; 11-i

DIALOG: Practice the vocabulary words in this dialog with three people.

Kelly: We learned about the **Underground Railroad** today in history class.

Andy: My great grandfather was a **conductor** for the **Underground Railroad** when he was young.

Riley: Really?! He was very brave because anyone who helped freedom seekers were **criminalized** by the U.S. government.

Kelly: Didn't his parents try to **restrict** him from doing something so risky?

Andy: He was basically **unsupervised** and didn't tell them. The dangers didn't **deter** him.

Riley: That's amazing. He must have felt strongly it was the right thing to do. Your grandfather's work **outshines** anything I'll ever do.

Warm up Questions

1. Have you heard of the Underground Railroad before?

We will read a story about a woman who escaped a slave state with the help of an Underground Railroad conductor. She was a dressmaker.

2. Have you ever gone to a dressmaker to get a dress made for you?

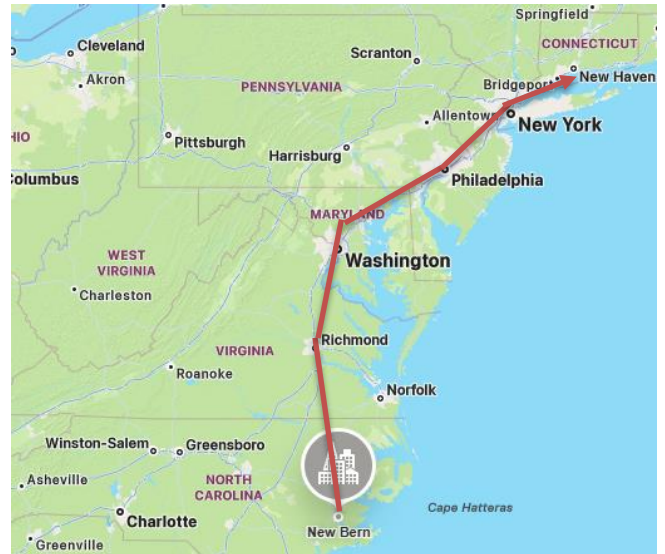
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SARAH MARSHALL BOONE

Sarah Marshall was born near the town of New Bern, North Carolina, in April 1832. She and her three siblings were all born into slavery. Because of this, they were not allowed to attend school for a formal education.

Sarah's grandfather educated them at home. However, he could not teach them how to read or write. Strict anti-**literacy** laws targeted all people of color. Both enslaved and legally free African Americans were **restricted** from learning how to read. Sarah was basically illiterate (il-lit-er-ah) until much later in life.

When she was only 15, she married James Boone, a free black man, in New Bern on November 25, 1847. As a result of marrying a freeman, she was granted her freedom. During the first nine years of their marriage, they had three children, William, James Jr., and Mary Elizabeth.



Even though James was born free and Sarah had gained her freedom after marrying James, laws in the pre-Civil War American South strictly **criminalized** and **restricted** the **unsupervised** movement of all Black people, regardless of their legal status.

So as the years passed, they no longer wanted to put up with the unfair conditions for black people in North Carolina. Sarah and James actively came to know **conductors** of the **Underground Railroad** in North Carolina to plan their escape.

By the mid-1850s, Sarah, James, their three children, and Sarah's widowed mother, journeyed about 700 miles north to New Haven, Connecticut. They made this move before the American Civil War which started on April 12, 1861.

They settled into a black neighborhood where Sarah worked as a dressmaker. James worked as a mason or bricklayer. They had five more children and eventually saved enough money to buy their own home. They became valued members of the neighborhood and regularly attended their local church.

Tragedy struck the family when James suddenly died in the mid-1870s. Sarah immediately had to support herself and the eight children on her own. This challenge did not **deter** her from trying to better her life by finally learning to read and write.

With the help of her church community, Sarah learned to read and write at the age of 40. The church supported adult education, specifically teaching its community members to read so they could study the Bible. These **literacy** skills proved to be crucial later in life.

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Once Sarah mastered basic **literacy** skills, she took her education a step further by teaching herself to read complex technical documents and engineering diagrams. Her goal was to understand how to create a complex document for an invention she had in mind.

Sarah's Invention

If you've ever tried to iron a shirt, you can appreciate how difficult it is to iron the sleeves. Now imagine trying to iron a fitted sleeve, skirt or **bodice** on a 19th century dress which is very different from modern clothes.

As a professional dressmaker, Sarah overcame this problem and invented an improvement to the ironing boards of her time. Sarah's dressmaking business directly inspired her invention because 19th-century clothes created difficult ironing problems. Here's a summary of the problem her invention helped solve.

The Problem with Traditional Ironing

- **The Method:** In the late 1800s, people ironed by placing a flat wooden plank across two chairs or boxes.
- **The Limitation:** This wide, straight board worked well for flat clothes like skirts or wide trousers but not for fitted or delicate clothes.
- **The Business Need:** To **outshine** local competitors, Sarah needed her custom-made dresses to look perfectly smooth, wrinkle free and beautiful for her customers.

The Challenge of 1890s Fashion

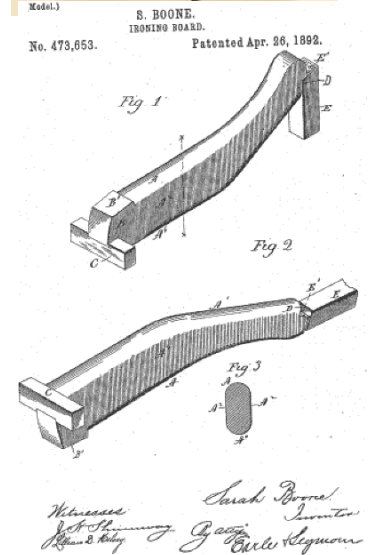
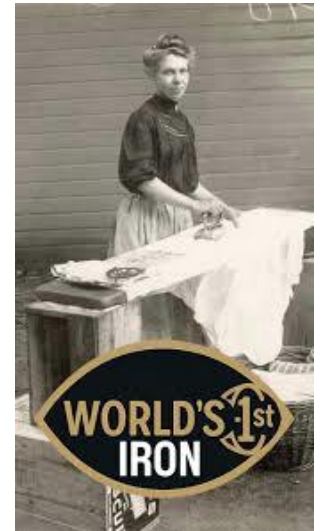
- **The Trends:** New Haven was a major center for the **corset** industry.
- **The Fit:** Women's dresses featured incredibly tight sleeves and tiny, heavily fitted waistlines.
- **The Struggle:** Forcing a wide wooden plank inside a narrow, tailored sleeve or a fitted waist without wrinkling the rest of the dress was nearly impossible.

Sarah's Ingenious Solution

To solve this daily workplace frustration, Sarah designed a custom tool specifically for her work as a dressmaker:

- **Narrow & Curved:** She built a narrow, specially curved board that could slip easily inside sleeves and waistlines without wrinkling the fabric.
- **Reversible Design:** Her board was designed to be turned over, allowing the user to iron both sides of a sleeve cleanly.
- **Added Padding:** She added built-in padding to protect delicate dress materials from burning.

Sarah's invention made it much easier to press sleeves without introducing unwanted wrinkles. She filed her patent on July 23, 1891. Her patent was granted on April 26, 1892. This was quite an achievement at the time.



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She could not have done this if she had not learned how to read and write. She was one of the few women to receive a patent in the United States and certainly one of the first Black women to achieve this. She was 60 years old. The picture above is part of her patent submission.

After Sarah got her patent, very little is known about whether she sold products based on her invention. Sarah died at home in 1904 at the age of 72 and was buried in the same New Haven cemetery as James and her mother. Other than her patent, she left no other papers, letters or pictures.



Discussion Questions

1. Do you think dressmaking and laundry businesses were common in the 19th century?
2. Do you know how your grandparents or great grandparents bought their clothes?
3. How did your grandparents or great grandparents wash their clothes?
4. How did they iron their clothes in their home country?
5. Do you think ironing clothes was more common than it is now? Why?
6. Did you know that making an everyday dress in the 1890s in the U.S. typically required about 10 to 14 yards of fabric? This high amount of fabric was due to the two-piece designs of the era, which consisted of a large gathered or pleated skirt and a separate, complex bodice that featured full sleeves.
7. How much fabric was used for the clothes in the 19th century of your home country? Describe what the clothes looked like.
8. Why do you think women's clothes changed so much over the years?
9. Has men's clothing changed a lot too?
10. Do you think 19th century fashion will ever come back? Why or why not?
11. Do you regularly iron your clothes or bed sheets, or do you use fabrics that do not require ironing?
12. Do you use an ironing board when you iron?

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