

**Saratoga Library English Conversation Club:
Dr. Patricia Bath
June 11, 2026**

June 19th is a federal holiday in the United States that is officially called the “Juneteenth National Independence Day”. It is celebrated annually on June 19th to commemorate (remember) the end of slavery in the United States.

The holiday's name, first used in the 1890s, is a combination of June and nineteenth. It refers to June 19, 1865, the day when Major General Gordon Granger ordered the final enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas at the end of the American Civil War.

This week and next, in honor of Juneteenth, we will read and talk about two African American women who were inventors. One was born into slavery. Another, Dr. Patricia Bath, was the descendant of slaves and **Cherokee** Native Americans. Today we will read about Dr. Bath and her achievements. First, review the following words.

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

1. cataract (kat-uh-rakt)	a. a nation of once-nomadic indigenous peoples of North America. Their territory covered parts of eight U.S. states: Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, West Virginia
2. Cherokee (cher-uh-kee)	b. a person who operates or drives an electrically operated vehicle such as a streetcar or subway train
3. clinic (klin-ik)	c. an abnormality of the eye, where the lens is “cloudy” or not clear and vision is impaired. This can be corrected with a lens replacement.
4. glaucoma (glaw-koh-muh)	d. the branch of medicine concerned with the eye and its diseases
5. motorman (moh-ter-man or moh-ter-muhn)	e. unidentified disease, illness, or condition even after a medical examination
6. nutrition (nyoo-trish-uhn)	f. relating to or situated near the eye
7. ophthalmic (ahp-THAL-mick)	g. an eye condition in which pressure within the eyeball damages the optic disc, impairing vision, sometimes leading to blindness
8. ophthalmology ('ahp-thuhl-mol-uh-jee)	h. a place, often connected to a medical school or hospital, for the treatment of people in the community, sometimes free or at low cost
9. patent (pat-nt or pat-tent)	i. the exclusive right granted by a government to an inventor to manufacture, use, or sell an invention for a certain number of years
10. prevalent (prev-uh-luhnt)	j. food and drink containing nutrients to keep your body functioning
11. undiagnosed (uhn-dy-uhg-nohsd)	k. widespread ; something that is commonly used or that occurs frequently; something in general use or widely accepted

Answer Key:

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

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

Kelly: My grandmother’s vision is getting worse. I have to take her to the **clinic** to see an **ophthalmologist**.

Andy: Sorry to hear that. Does she have **cataracts**?

Kelly: Her condition is **undiagnosed** right now. We think she may have **glaucoma**.

Andy: Oh no. I hope the **ophthalmologist** can **diagnose** whatever she has.

Riley: Yes, we want to treat the condition as soon as possible.

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Warm up Questions

1. Do you have perfect vision or do you have to wear glasses or contacts?
2. If your eyes need correction, how long have you had to wear glasses?
3. Do you know what the Emancipation Proclamation is? You can read more about it at the end of this handout.

DR. PATRICIA BATH



Dr. Patricia Bath, a doctor, researcher, and education. About 1980

Patricia Bath was born in 1942 in Harlem, New York, the daughter of Rupert and Gladys Bath. Her father was an immigrant from [Trinidad](#) and the first black man to work for the New York City Subway as a [motorman](#). Her father inspired and encouraged her to explore different cultures.

Her mother was a descendant of African slaves and **Cherokee** Native Americans. Throughout her childhood, Patricia was often told by her parents to never settle for less than best and was encouraged by their support of her education. Her mother bought Patricia's first chemistry set and encouraged her dreams and love of science.

By the time she reached high school, Patricia was inspired by the medical work of the French Nobel Peace Prize laureate, [Albert Schweitzer](#). In fact, Patricia applied for and won a [National Science Foundation](#) Scholarship while attending high school.

This led her to a summer research project studying connections between cancer, **nutrition**, and stress. In this summer program, she discovered a mathematical equation that could be used to predict cancer cell growth. The head of the research program realized the significance of her findings and published them in a scientific paper.



She went on to Hunter College in Manhattan to study chemistry and physics. She graduated in 1964 and then relocated to Washington, D.C., to attend [Howard University College of Medicine](#). Patricia graduated with honors from Howard University College of Medicine in 1968.



She then returned to her Harlem community and interned at Harlem Hospital Center. She also worked at an eye **clinic** at Columbia University. She began to notice differences in vision problems between the largely black patient population at Harlem and the largely white one at Columbia.

Her observations led her to document that blindness was twice as **prevalent** among black people compared to the white population. She reached the conclusion that the high **prevalence** of blindness among blacks was due to lack of access of **ophthalmic** or eye care.

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As a result, she proposed a new field of work, known as community **ophthalmology**, which is now practiced worldwide. Community **ophthalmology** combines work in public health, community medicine, and clinical **ophthalmology** to offer primary care to underserved populations.

Volunteers trained as eye workers visit senior centers and daycare programs to test vision and screen for **cataracts**, **glaucoma**, and other serious eye conditions. This outreach has saved the sight of thousands whose problems would otherwise have gone **undiagnosed** and untreated. By identifying children who need eyeglasses, the volunteers give these children a better chance for success in school.

Dr. Bath was also influential in bringing eye surgical services to Harlem Hospital's Eye Clinic, which did not perform eye surgery in 1968. She persuaded her professors at Columbia to operate on blind patients for free, and she volunteered as an assistant surgeon. The first major eye operation at Harlem Hospital was performed in 1970 as a result of her efforts.

In 1974, Dr. Bath joined the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Charles R. Drew University (CDU). CDU is a private, nonprofit research university near Los Angeles focused on health sciences. The following year she became the first woman faculty member in the Department of **Ophthalmology** at UCLA's Jules Stein Eye Institute.

When she became the first woman faculty in the department, she was offered an office "in the basement next to the lab animals." She refused the spot. "I didn't say it was racist or sexist. I said it was inappropriate and succeeded in getting acceptable office space. I decided I was just going to do my work."



Her greatest achievements came during the 1980s. By 1983 she was chair of the ophthalmology residency training program at Drew-UCLA, the first woman in the US to hold such a position.

In addition to being a medical doctor, Dr. Bath was also a laser scientist and inventor. Her interest, experience, and research on **cataracts** lead her to invent a new device and method to remove cataracts—the **laserphaco probe** (lay-zer faykoh proh). With the device, she became the first African-American woman doctor to receive a **patent** for a medical purpose.

When she first conceived of the device in 1981, her idea was more advanced than the technology available at the time. It took her nearly five years to complete the research and testing needed to make it work and apply for a **patent**.

Today the device is used worldwide. The laserphaco probe combines laser technology and ultrasound to vaporize and remove cloudy lenses. Dr. Bath's work and inventions have helped restore or improve vision to millions of patients worldwide.

Even after retirement, Dr. Bath continued to help people with blindness and serious eye conditions until her death in May 2019. "The ability to restore sight is the ultimate reward," she said.



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Discussion Questions

1. How important is for a child or young person to have someone encourage their interests to achieve their dreams?
2. Did anyone encourage you when you were young?
3. Have you encouraged a younger person to pursue their interests?
4. Do you know anyone who has applied for a **patent**?
5. Have you ever had to see an ophthalmologist?
6. How is your eyesight?
7. Do you know anyone who has had an eye operation?
8. Have you ever had cataract surgery?
9. Do you think your eyesight is your most important sense? If not, what do you think is more important?
10. How do you take care of your eyes? Do you wear sunglasses?
11. Do you think that the loss of eyesight is the most difficult sense to lose? Why?
12. How does your lifestyle affect your eye health?
13. Do you strain your eyes by looking at your phone late at night?
14. Do you know the difference between ophthalmologist, oculist, optometrist and optician? (See the answer below.)
15. Is it difficult to stand up for what you think is right?

What is the Emancipation Proclamation?

The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, during the American Civil War. It declared that all enslaved people living within the Confederacy (slave states) were legally free. The Confederate states included Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. They were fighting to separate from the United States.

Types of Health Professionals that Specialize in the Eye and Vision Care

1. Ophthalmologist

- **Role:** A medical doctor (MD) who specializes in comprehensive eye and vision care.
- **What they do:** They diagnose and treat all eye diseases, perform delicate eye surgery, and also prescribe corrective lenses.

2. Oculist

- **Role:** An older, traditional term for an **ophthalmologist**.
- **What they do:** The word originates from "oculus" (the Latin word for eye). Today, the term for medical professionals who perform eye surgery and treat diseases are called ophthalmologists.

3. Optometrist

- **Role:** Healthcare professionals who provide primary vision care but are not medical doctors. They earn a Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree.
- **What they do:** They perform comprehensive eye exams, test visual acuity, prescribe glasses and contact lenses, and detect eye abnormalities. They can also prescribe medications.

4. Optician

- **Role:** Technicians trained to design, verify, and fit eyeglass lenses and frames, as well as contact lenses. They are not eye doctors and cannot test vision or write prescriptions.
- **What they do:** They evaluate prescriptions provided by an optometrist or ophthalmologist and turn them into the final corrective lenses. They also adjust or repair glasses.

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References

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