

The Renfrow Story

Edith Renfrow Smith and
her family's deep roots in Grinnell, Iowa



Edith Renfrow Smith

*Grinnell High School Class of 1932, GHS Alumni Hall of Fame
Grinnell College Class of 1937, First Black Woman Graduate*



Namesake of Renfrow Hall, Opening Fall 2024

The Renfrow Story: Bridging campus and community



Edith Renfrow Smith, age 107. Photo
by Justin Hayworth, Grinnell College,
2021

Edith Renfrow Smith was born in Grinnell in 1914. She was raised in the community, attending Davis School through 6th grade and graduating from Grinnell High School in 1932. She became the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College in 1937.

In 2022, at age 108, she is the oldest living alumna of both Grinnell High School and Grinnell College. Throughout her life she has lived by her mother's motto: "Nobody is better than you." Her life is a testament to the power of positivity and kindness and is an example all Grinnellians can embrace.

In November 2022, two honors were announced regarding this remarkable woman:

1. She will become the newest inductee into the Grinnell High School Alumni Hall of Fame.
2. The new Grinnell College student residence hall on Broad Street will be named Renfrow Hall in her honor.

Given her significance as both a native Grinnell resident and Grinnell College graduate, this is the story of her and her family.

Deep Roots: The Craig, Lucas and Renfrow Families



The George and Eliza Craig family of Grinnell in 1902. George and Eliza were grandparents of Edith Renfrow Smith.

When Lee Augustus and Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow (parents of Edith Renfrow Smith) married in Grinnell in 1901, the roots of their families were already well established in Poweshiek County. They brought with them remarkable stories of escape from enslavement. Eva Pearl's parents, George and Eliza Jane Craig, had arrived in the community in the 1890s, having been in the Oskaloosa area since their marriage in 1862.

George Craig (grandfather of Edith) was born into slavery in Missouri. In order to save himself from being sold down South, he rubbed tobacco juice in his eyes to decrease his value on the auction block. At the age of 19, he escaped and was protected by abolitionists in Leavenworth, Kansas. Hidden there for nearly a year because of the large bounty for his capture, he finally made his way to Grinnell via the Underground Railroad network, traveling with John Brown in 1859. This story was told to the Leavenworth Times by Mr. Craig himself, and reprinted in the Grinnell Herald in March 1895.

Eliza Jane Craig (grandmother to Edith) was also born into slavery. Her mother was a slave named Jane. Her father was a French plantation owner, Antoine Gilbal, in South Carolina. Eliza was the third child from this relationship. Before his death, Gilbal sent the children north to freedom, making arrangements for them to be financially supported. Jane was to be freed at his death to follow the children, but his wishes were not honored and she remained enslaved, never to see her children again. This story was recounted in an article in *The Crisis*, an NAACP publication, in 1937, on the occasion of Edith Renfrow's graduation from Grinnell College.



The Craig sisters, circa 1900. From left, Anna Craig Goode, Theodora Craig Lucas, Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow. Eva Pearl was the mother of Edith Renfrow Smith.

George and Eliza Craig had three daughters – Anna, Theodora and Eva Pearl. Each of the daughters would marry and live in Grinnell for a significant part of their lives. Theodora married John Brown Lucas in 1885; Anna married Ed Goode in 1887; and Eva Pearl married Lee Augustus Renfrow in 1901.

When Theodora (Aunt to Edith) married John B. Lucas, she connected the family to the first Black man to own land in Poweshiek County. John's father, Henry Lucas, had purchased land near Ewart in 1859. He led an extraordinary life. Born a slave, he was taken to the front of the Mexican American War. With permission of his owner, he was allowed to earn money while doing work for other officers. By the end of the war he had earned enough to purchase his own freedom. He then spent three years as a gold prospector in California, where he partnered with a man named Robert Morrison, a resident of Poweshiek County. The two unlikely partners found great success and then parted ways, Morrison to Montezuma, Iowa and Henry Lucas to Arkansas, where he purchased the freedom of his wife and children and planned to start a life as a free family. When Act 151 was passed in Arkansas in 1859, making it illegal for free Blacks to live in the state, Henry reconnected with Morrison who encouraged him to bring his family to Iowa.

Henry Lucas' life story was written by his son, John Brown Lucas (Edith's Uncle). The story was printed in the Grinnell Herald in May 1932.

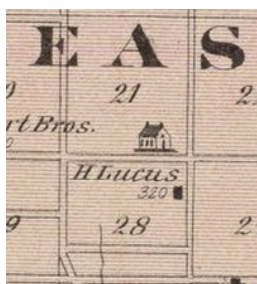
**John B. Lucas Writes a History of
the Lucas Family**

Henry Lucas was a slave and bought the freedom of his wife and children. This history is written by his son, John B. Lucas, for the writer of the Farm Column.

To give a correct history of the life of Henry Lucas and family would be to give a history of slavery, which neither space nor time will allow at this writing, but a brief history of the principal events of his life might be of interest to those who have a desire to know something of the first colored family who ever lived in Poweshiek county.

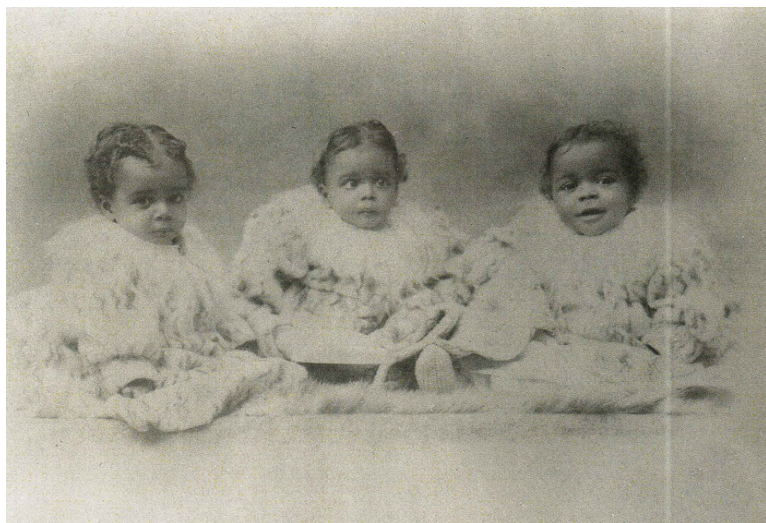
Grinnell Herald
May 20, 1932

According to that account, Henry Lucas and his wife each held \$1000 sewn into the lining of their travel clothes as they made their way to Poweshiek County. Within weeks of their arrival, they purchased the first of many acres of land. By the time the “History of Poweshiek County” was published in 1880, which includes a short biography of this early settler, Henry Lucas owned 320 acres in Pleasant Township, just south of Grinnell. As of 2022, 160 acres of his original farm is still owned by his great-great-grandson.



The 1875 Poweshiek County Plat Map shows Henry Lucas owned 320 acres in Pleasant Township southeast of Grinnell

Theodora and John Lucas (Edith's Aunt and Uncle) moved to 1517 West Street in Grinnell in 1890. They had 8 children in total, including triplet daughters born in 1895. This was the first recorded birth of triplets in the state of Iowa. In 1887, Theodora's sister Anna Craig had married a Grinnell man, Ed Goode, and settled in at 715 Spring Street with their son, William. With daughters and grandchildren in Grinnell, it made sense for George and Eliza Craig to move from Oskaloosa. They lived at 515 2nd Avenue. Their youngest daughter, Eva Pearl (Edith's mother), who was still single at the time, moved to Grinnell with her parents and was especially helpful in the care of the triplets during their early years. She would soon meet Lee Augustus Renfrow to whom she was married in Grinnell in 1901. The Renfrows would spend most of their lives in Grinnell, raising six children in the community.



The Lucas triplets, the first recorded triplet birth in Iowa, were born in Grinnell in 1896 to Theodora and John Craig. The triplets (Martha, Rebecca and Mary) were cousins to Edith Renfrow Smith.

The Renfrow Family of Grinnell



The four oldest Renfrow children in 1908.
From left: Rudy, Helen, Evanel and Alice.

After their marriage in 1901, Lee and Eva Pearl Renfrow (parents to Edith Renfrow Smith) lived for a short time in Grinnell, where their first child, Helen, was born in 1904. By 1905 they had moved to Red Wing, MN, where they lived for a few years and where their next three children were born: Alice in 1906; Rudolph in 1907; and Evanel in 1908. By 1910 they had found their way back to Grinnell. According to their daughter, Edith, their return was encouraged by Mumford Holland, an elderly Black neighbor who asked Eva Pearl to help care for him during his final years of life. As payment, his home would become hers after his death. So it was that they moved to 511 Second Avenue, the home they inherited from Mumford, which was also next door to Eva Pearl's parents, George and Eliza Craig.

Lee Renfrow (Edith's father) was primarily a cook, though he offered a variety of services according to available accounts. He was employed at different establishments over the years, most notably at the Monroe Hotel, the preeminent lodging facility in Grinnell during that period. Eva Pearl was active in the community and in a variety of women's organizations at the time. They were members of the Congregational Church and she kept active raising her children and doing a variety of small jobs to help provide income. The family would often attend concerts and events on the Grinnell College campus, taking advantage of all that was available. Education was a high priority in the Renfrow household. According to their youngest daughter Edith, missing school was never an option for the children. After a few years on Second Avenue, they moved to 411 First Avenue. The Renfrow children walked to and from home to Davis School, and later to the Junior and Senior High Schools at the corner of Fifth and Park, across from Central Park.



Paul and Edith Renfrow and two cousins in front of their home on First Avenue, circa 1925. From left: Paul, Edith, Mercedes Mays and, in front, Virginia Mays.

All of the Renfrow children knew it was expected that they would go to college. It was also a family understanding that they would work together to help support one another to achieve that goal. All of them worked in service jobs, there being few other positions open to Black people in Grinnell at the time. Their commitment to education and to one another enabled each of them to attend and complete college, and then have successful careers.



The Renfrow sisters in Grinnell in 1945.
From left, Evanel, Edith, Alice and Helen.

The eldest, Helen (1904-1968), attended Fisk University and then the University of Iowa, where she later worked as a research technician in the internal medicine lab. She married Allyn Lemme and they became civil rights leaders in Iowa City. They helped support Black students at the University of Iowa during the time when Blacks were not allowed to live on campus. The Helen Lemme Elementary School in Iowa City is named in her honor, commemorating the impact she had on the community. Helen Renfrow Lemme is in the Grinnell High School Alumni Hall of Fame.

The
Renfrow
children
in 1961



From left: Rudy,
Helen, Alice,
Edith, Paul and
Evanel.

Alice Renfrow (1906-1997) attended Hampton University. In 1935 she accepted a position at the Library of Congress, where she worked for the next 40 years. She is buried with her parents and brothers in Hazelwood Cemetery.

Rudolph, Rudy to his family, Renfrow (1907-1972) attended Hampton and graduated valedictorian of his class. He settled in the D.C. area where he worked in sales and was engaged in civil rights work, including as part of the New Negro Alliance in the 1930s. He is also buried in Hazelwood Cemetery with his parents and sister.

Evanel Renfrow Terrell (1909-1994) received both a Bachelors and Masters degree from the University of Iowa. She went on to a career as a Professor of Home Economics in African American universities across the south, culminating in a 27-year tenure at Savannah State University. She was married to Carl Terrell.

Paul Renfrow (1917-1974) attended school in Chicago. When WW II broke out, he enlisted in the US Army. He was a part of the D-Day invasion and reached the rank of Master Sergeant before his discharge. He became an optician and practiced in Washington, D.C. for most of his life. He is also buried at Hazelwood Cemetery.

Edith Renfrow Smith (1914-) was the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College. As of 2022, at the age of 108, she is the oldest living alumni of both Grinnell High School (1932) and Grinnell College (1937).

Edith Renfrow Smith



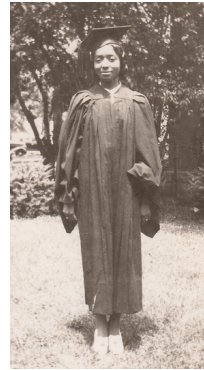
Age 2



Eight Grade



High School
Senior



Grinnell College
graduation

Edith Renfrow Smith was born on July 14, 1914 in Grinnell, Iowa. She was the fifth of six children born to Lee and Eva Pearl Renfrow, one of the few African American families in Grinnell at the time. The stories of her grandparents' survival and escape from the bonds of enslavement were familiar to the Renfrow children, especially to Edith given her close relationship with her mother.

It is the wisdom of her mother that she most often repeats. This has been the guiding principle of her life and the lesson she most wants to share with others:

"I don't care who it is. There is no one born any better than you are. They may have more money, and they may be more beautiful. They may have outward things. But there's no one any better."

Her childhood in Grinnell spanned the start of World War I to the depths of the Great Depression. Despite many challenges, the Renfrow children all knew that their education was a priority. Life had not allowed their mother to go to school beyond the 8th grade, but she was determined that all of her children would attend college. It was instilled in them that they would work together to attain that goal, each helping the other so that there was enough money for all to go to college. Mrs. Renfrow did all she could to ensure her family was exposed to the benefits that Grinnell had to offer. They often attended concerts and events at Grinnell College as well as in the community.

When Edith was around 5 years old, her mother invited the few Black students attending Grinnell College to their home on Sunday evenings. The students were Rosenwald Scholars, a partnership between Grinnell College and the Rosenwald Foundation to recruit Black men to the college. Edith fondly recalls these visits and how impressed she was by these young men. She had similar impactful experiences with Grinnell College students when she attended the Uncle Sam's Club. This was a youth club for Grinnell children with a wide variety of after school and weekend activities, mostly run by members of the college branches of the YWCA and YMCA. These students volunteered to spend their time with the children of Grinnell. She was also strongly influenced by Grinnell College professor, Dr. Laetitia Conard, who was instrumental to the Uncle Sam's Club and was Edith's Campfire Girls leader.

Grinnell Uncle Sam's Club Work Today Realizes Two Founders Ideals in 1901

**Says Unemployment Takes
Away Self-Respect,
Moral Standards**

By FRANK JOHNSON

What work the Uncle Sam's club is now doing with the young boys and girls of this community is a realization of the ideals of its founders, Samuel H. Crosby and Edward F. Denison who in 1901, as Grinnell college students, were influenced by an unusual spirit of social service work manifested throughout Grinnell.

Crosby and his friend, Denison, who is now field secretary of the

athletic contest. On Saturday mornings the college gym is open to them. Forty-eight boys and nearly 35 girls compose the present membership. Self-control, consideration for and tolerance of others, team-work, and cooperation are the qualities stressed in all of the Club's endeavors.

Regular Programs

Besides this work with boys and girls, a Worker's Cooperative college has been organized under the sponsorship of the Y. M. C. A. which meets regularly, twice a week, at the Uncle Sam's Club. Rev. Robert Inglis, together with the Unemployed league, arranges for the entertainment while Manuel Brown arranges the lectures.

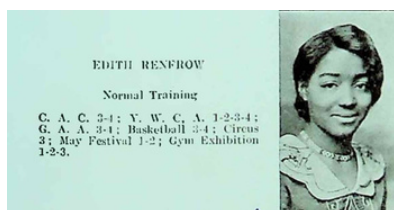
The Scarlet & Black

Dec 14, 1932

One of the many articles written about the Uncle Sam's Club and the involvement of Grinnell College students in helping children of the community. Interactions with students were instrumental in the life of Edith Renfrow Smith.

From a young age, Edith was determined to attend Grinnell College. Years later, when asked why, it is these interactions with students that she credits. The students opened her eyes to the world beyond Grinnell. They were interesting and engaging and they encouraged her to believe that she could become one of them.

Edith, like her siblings, would walk to school every day from their home on First Avenue. She attended Davis school, the newest school in town at the time, from Kindergarten through Sixth Grade. After that, she walked to school across from Central Park, attending the Junior and Senior High Schools, including the building that is now home to the Hotel Grinnell. During high school she was active in many activities and sports. Her senior yearbook lists involvement in basketball, volleyball, YWCA, among other things.



1932 *Grinnellian* yearbook

She graduated from Grinnell High School in 1932. Determined to attend Grinnell College, she knew that she needed to find a good job to help pay for school. Even if she lived at home, she had to pay tuition. For a year after high school she took classes to improve her secretarial skills, which allowed her to secure two office jobs on campus during the four years she was a student. She enrolled in Grinnell College in 1933. Although she lived off campus, she was considered a part of the Read Hall Women's group and fondly recalls playing sports and participating in dances and other activities. She was the only Black student on the campus during her entire undergraduate career. When she graduated in 1937, she became the first Black woman in history to graduate from Grinnell College.



Edith Renfrow Smith as mother (left) and teacher (right) outside of the Chicago Public School where she taught in the 1960s.



After college, she moved to Chicago and started a job at the YWCA branch for Black girls and women. Within a few years, she met and married Henry T. Smith and started a family. By 1954, she earned a teaching degree and began a 22-year career as a middle school teacher, becoming a master teacher along the way. When she retired from teaching in 1976, she followed her passion for giving back to the community. For over 40 years she was a regular volunteer at Goodwill and the Art Institute of Chicago, among other organizations. In 2009, she was recognized for her spirit of generosity and was inducted into the Chicago Senior Citizen Hall of Fame.



With Mayor Daley at her induction into the Chicago Senior Citizen Hall of Fame in 2009.

Visiting
with a
classmate
at a
Grinnell
College
reunion



Throughout her life, Mrs. Renfrow Smith continued to return to Grinnell regularly. She and her husband maintained ownership of the family home on First Avenue until 2004 and are remembered as wonderful landlords by April Van Ersvelde, who was raised in the house. They would regularly come to visit their close friends, Alma and Booker Kiner, who worked the Lucas farm near Ewart. Kay Jack and Heather Eilander of Montezuma, who lived across the road from the Kiners, have shared memories of their visits. Mrs. Renfrow Smith also regularly attended her Grinnell College class reunions.

At the age of 108, she will often state that she still considers Grinnell home. Another testament to this deep bond with the community is the fact that her own Smith family plot is at Hazelwood Cemetery. Her husband and older daughter are buried near where her parents and three of her siblings lie. Grinnell will be her final resting place.

"Grinnell is home"

The Renfrow ties to Grinnell are deep and strong. Edith Renfrow Smith stands proudly as a True Grinnellian, born and raised in this community, nurtured and inspired by her time at Grinnell College, and at the age of 108 still proudly claiming this place as her beloved home. She does not deny the presence of economic hardship or racial discrimination. But she does not let those things change her love for the community or the College. This, along with her life of service and accomplishment, make her the embodiment of the vision of the Grinnell College Civic Engagement Quad (CEQ), nestled along Broad Street, bridging the space between the campus and downtown.

In September 2022 the Grinnell College Board of Trustees voted unanimously to name the residence hall in the CEQ complex Renfrow Hall in honor of Edith Renfrow Smith. Designed by world renowned architect, Sir David Adjaye, the building will take a prominent place along Broad Street, a path frequented by Mrs. Renfrow Smith in her years as a Grinnell College student.





On December 2, 2022, Edith Renfrow Smith, Grinnell High School class of 1932, was inducted into the GHS Alumni Hall of Fame. In the letter nominating her, it states:

"She represents the best of Grinnell and Grinnellians. She overcame the obstacles of the depression, financial hardship and racial discrimination to make history when she became the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College. Her story can serve as inspiration to current students, especially students of color who may struggle against the racial discrimination that continues to linger in some sectors of our community. The wisdom she shares, including the message we have heard her repeat so often, that "no one is born better than you", is something that every student should know and experience as truth."

Her plaque will appear on the Hall of Fame wall next to her sister, Helen Renfrow Lemme, was one of the original inductees to receive this honor.

Want to learn more? These resources are linked to from the Drake Community Library website version of this story.

grinnell.lib.ia.us/renfrow-story

Article: John B. Lucas writes a History of the Lucas Family, *Grinnell Herald*, May 20, 1932

Article: Henry Lucas of Pleasant Township, *The History of Poweshiek County*, 1880

Article: Slavery Story: Some of George Craig's Experience as told by him to a Leavenworth Times reporter, *Grinnell Herald*, March 29, 1895

Article: Up from Slavery: The descendant of a slave mother and a French master gets her degree at a middle western college, *The Crisis*, August 1937

Video: Edith Renfrow Smith interview, program at Drake Community Library, October 7, 2015

Podcast: *All Things Grinnell* interview with Edith Renfrow Smith in 2019, on the occasion of her receiving an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Grinnell College.

Webpage: Through the Eyes of a Pioneer: Living History with Edith Renfrow Smith '37, Grinnell College's First Black Alumna

Wikipedia: Edith Renfrow Smith This entry also includes links to other interviews she has done, including an appearance on the *Today Show* and with the *Chicago Sun Times*.

Wikipedia: Helen (Renfrow) Lemme Learn about her work for civil rights and the school named in her memory.

Photos: Photos (48 in total) from the Renfrow family collection can be seen in Digital Grinnell by searching for "Renfrow".

Book: *Grinnell Stories: African Americans of Early Grinnell* by Dan Kaiser, published by the Grinnell Historical Museum, 2020. Available at Drake Community Library or from purchase from the Pioneer Bookstore.



grinnell.lib.ia.us/renfrow-story/

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