

**PEIRCE, Leona May.** August 4, 1863–September 27, 1954.

SMITH COLLEGE (BA 1886, MA 1893), YALE UNIVERSITY (PhD 1899).

Leona May Peirce was born in Norway, Maine, which was also the birthplace of her mother, Mary Hobbs (Foster), born in 1839. Her father, Levi Merriam Peirce (also “Pierce”), was born in West Boylston, Massachusetts, in 1833. He received a bachelor’s degree from Waterville College (now Colby College) in Maine in 1860 and married two years later. He was a teacher for nearly a dozen years before starting a music company specializing in the sale of pianos and organs in Springfield, Massachusetts; he was a music dealer for more than thirty years. Leona Peirce had one sibling, William Foster Peirce (1868–1967), who was born in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, graduated from Amherst College in 1888, and served as president of Kenyon College in Ohio from 1896 until 1937.

Leona Peirce attended Springfield High School and taught elementary subjects in a private school in Springfield for a year before entering Smith College in 1882. Her main subjects at Smith were rhetoric and history, with only the required mathematics courses. After her graduation from Smith in 1886, she taught mathematics, physics, and chemistry at the Springfield Collegiate Institute for three years, 1886–89. In the summer of 1887 she studied chemistry and French at Amherst College.

During the following decade, Peirce was primarily engaged in study, with the focus becoming mathematics. She enrolled at Cornell 1889–90 as a candidate for an advanced degree studying mathematics, physics, and philosophy and took courses in mathematics and history of philosophy. She spent the following year, 1890–91, teaching mathematics at the Mount Hermon School for boys in Mt. Hermon, Massachusetts, before returning to her studies. During 1891–92 she studied mathematics at Newnham College, Cambridge, and in 1892–93 she was at Smith College, where she completed work for a master’s degree in 1893. She returned to Cornell in 1893 and again studied mathematics and philosophy. She was there for a year before leaving because of illness in her family.

Following the suggestion of the Cornell mathematics department, Peirce arranged to study privately with William E. Story of Clark University, a school in Worcester, Massachusetts, that did not yet formally admit women to its doctoral programs. This arrangement was made with the understanding that Peirce would return to Cornell for her final examinations and present a thesis written under Story’s direction. After working with Story for three years, she submitted her thesis at Cornell in spring 1897 but did not receive a Cornell PhD owing to an apparently irresolvable disagreement concerning the requirements for the final examination in one of her minor subjects. The examining committee believed that the originally stated requirements for her minor in the theory of functions were not sufficient to demonstrate competence in the subject and recommended her retaking the examination in three or four months after studying additional material. On the other hand, Story believed that she possessed the knowledge required for a PhD in mathematics and should not have been asked to satisfy additional requirements. Following Story’s advice, Peirce did not retake the minor examination. Instead, she continued to work with him and then enrolled at Yale a year later. She received her PhD from Yale in 1899 after having taken a year of course work. Her dissertation, most likely

nearly the same as that deemed satisfactory by the Cornell examiners, was read and approved by Story and by Henry Seely White, then of Northwestern University.

Peirce did not return to teaching mathematics for almost thirty years. During most of the intervening years she was at her family home in Springfield. Upon the death of her father in 1908, she undertook the management, and was treasurer, of the L. M. Pierce Co., her father's music company.

Peirce was also involved in numerous civic and women's organizations. She served as trustee of the Wesson Memorial Hospital, as secretary of the Wesson Memorial Hospital Visitors' Aid Association, and as a member of the Springfield school board. She was an officer of many other organizations. She was recording secretary of the Springfield Women's Club, president of the Western Massachusetts Branch of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, delegate to the biennial convention of the General Federation of Women's Clubs (1904 in St. Louis), president of the Springfield College Club, director of the Springfield Civil Service Reform League, and president of the Western Branch of the Smith College Alumnae Association. She was a member of Kappa Alpha Theta, a social sorority; the Smith College Students' Aid Association; and the Congregational church.

In 1914 Peirce listed her hobbies as "driving and automobiling" (WomWWA). She also noted that she "was a contributor of articles to local newspapers on public matters." That year she traveled for several months with her brother in Italy.

In 1928 Peirce began teaching mathematics and physics at the Barrington School for Girls in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. During the summers of 1930 through 1932 she studied mathematics at Harvard. She left the Barrington school in 1932 and for the next two years taught mathematics and English at the Leominster, Massachusetts, high school.

Leona Peirce had retired by 1937. She died in 1954 at ninety-one in an old age home in Springfield after a short illness. She was survived by her brother.

**Organizational affiliations:** ACA (later AAUW), Phi Beta Kappa.

**Dissertation:**

**1899** On chain-differentiants of a ternary quantic. PhD dissertation, Yale University, directed by William Edward Story [Clark University].

**References to:** [BioWMath](#), WomWWA.

"Miss Leona M. Peirce." (Obituary) *New York Times*, 29 Sept 1954.

"Leona May Peirce." (Obituary) *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Fall 1964, 63.

**Other sources:** Owens questionnaire 1937; Williams Papers; Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; Smith College Archives; Yale University Archives; NatCAB 8 (Peirce, William Foster); William A. Koelsch, *Clark University 1887-1987: A Narrative History* (Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1987); US Census 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 MA.