

## WESTERN'S FIRST BLACK STUDENT, ALMA CLARK

February 21, 2019, *The Western Front*

<http://www.westernfrontonline.com/2019/02/21/westerns-first-black-student-alma-clark>

By Alisha Dixon,



Miss Alma J. Clark

### **FACULTY STANDS FIRM**

**Principal Mathes Insists That  
State School Knows  
Neither Race  
Nor Color.**

On January 29, 1906, Alma Clark, Western's first Black student, arrived on campus. Clark came to campus at what was then called the State Normal School, accompanied by her brother. The

Morning Olympian reported that Clark's appearance "caused no end of commotion among the young white women" upon her arrival.

Clark's life story, though mostly undocumented, is an intriguing one. On top of being the first Black student at Western, the Seattle Republican reported that she was also an assistant librarian in Seattle. Clark was a strict member of the baptist church, and was described as modest and intelligent.

Clark's enrollment at the State Normal School was controversial, with several Bellingham and Seattle newspapers covering her story, including The Bellingham Herald, The Seattle Republican and The Morning Olympian. This coverage sparked community engagement with journalists and readers alike, with people writing about standing up for their school and its values.

Kolby LaBree of Good Time Girls, a group that offers historical tours of Bellingham, has researched Clark's life. LaBree, a Western graduate with a degree in anthropology, compiled several articles and documents about Clark and her family.

In one of the articles from 1906 collected by LaBree, the Bellingham Herald reported that the banishment of Clark from the State Normal School was discussed, but the faculty of the school and Principle E.T. Mathes insisted Clark be allowed to study and that the state school knew "neither race nor color."

Notes from a 1906 Board of Trustees meeting discussed the "race question" at the school in response to Clark's arrival. Newspaper coverage of her arrival had sparked discussion of prejudice among students.

"The school is for the benefit of all the people of the state of Washington, regardless of color, race or politics, good work and good morals being the essentials required of students," read the meeting notes.

According to census documents from 1900, Clark was born in 1885 in Tennessee. She was a 4-year-old when her parents and siblings moved to Seattle, according to the Seattle Republican. She graduated from the Seattle High School before studying at the State Normal School.

Clark's father Robert A. Clark was credited with establishing the first parcel delivery system in Seattle, according to the Seattle Daily Times. Alma Clark later married Steven Glass, a mail clerk, becoming Alma Glass in 1908. The two had a son named after Glass' father, who attended Lincoln High School in Seattle in 1929. Alma Clark, her husband and their son Stephen lived in Fremont in Seattle.

Over the years, more students of color would arrive at Western. 111 years after Alma's arrival, 25.6 percent of Western's students were students of color, according to 2017 enrollment statistics, though 2018 enrollment statistics show only 2.6% of students being specifically Black or African American.