

Celebrating Ellen Swallow Richards – Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Day

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Since 2014, December 3rd has been known as “FCS or Dining In” day – recognizing the birthday of Ellen Swallow Richards, a “Pioneer in the home economics movement” and founder of AAFCS. While many people commit to “dining in” on this day, many are unaware of who Ellen Swallow Richards is and why she is honored.



Try to imagine life in the late 1800’s – food and water supplies, sanitation, clothing, money, child protection, industrial safety and women’s rights. Life expectancy is less than 50 years, there are no refrigerators, no indoor plumbing, a couple sets of clothing, no OSHA, women didn’t own property - you get the picture!

Home schooled Ellen Swallow, nurtured by parents who wanted a strong education for girls moved to a different town so that Ellen could attend a high school that accepted female students. She worked tirelessly to continue her education and work, often turned away because of her gender. Ultimately, Ellen became the first female graduate and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Her first book “The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning” embodied her education focus and teaching – connecting scientific research with the real world – practical applications to daily life.

The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences website, sponsor of “Dining In”/FCS Day captures the life and work of Ellen Swallows Richards with these words: “Ms. Richards was an activist for consumer education, nutrition, child protection, industrial safety, public health, career education, women’s rights; purity of air, food, and water, and the application of scientific and management principles to the family. Her professional experience and foresight led to the formalization of the family and consumer sciences profession.”

As Extension Educators, we continue Ellen’s work, bringing the best research-based information and practical knowledge and skills to bear on the issues facing families today. Hats off to Ellen for leading the way for our work!