

## Objective Lens: Cora Wilson as a pioneer in education in rural Kentucky & beyond

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During the first 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many scholars agree that Cora Wilson Stewart was the most widely known authority of adult literacy in the world. By establishing the Moonlight Schools in Rowan County Kentucky in 1911, she rose to prominence as a well-regarded advocate for promoting literacy and adult education. Stewart frequently held viewpoints which ran counter to the mindset of educators in the 1920s and 1930s. Wilson was ahead of her time in many aspects of promoting literacy in an era largely before adult education was widely recognized (Fig. 1).

Wilson is remembered for being an eloquent and colorful speaker, and grew up believing that furthering one's education would open opportunities beyond the traditional molds that shaped rural Appalachia over 100 years ago (1). Cora Wilson moved beyond a series of failed marriages and domestic abuse to devote most of her time to public affairs, eventually adopting adult

literacy as her primary mission. As the daughter of a physician and schoolteacher, Wilson would frequently go along on rounds with her father and help read or interpret medical advice, documents, and other communications to adult patients and families who could not read or write. Eventually earning her teaching credentials from Morehead (KY) Normal School (later Morehead State University), Wilson later was the first woman to be elected as President of the Kentucky Education Association, an advocacy group dedicated, then and now, to improved funding for schools, safety measures, smaller class sizes, and empowerment of employees and parents (2).

Shortly thereafter, Stewart, as a superintendent for Rowan County Schools, created the first Moonlight School in September 1911 (Figs. 2-4). Adults would attend Wilson's classes in the evenings, after children were home and chores were completed, and only on moonlit nights, to

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be guided to and from the school safely. Wilson asked teachers to volunteer to teach in the evenings as the program grew. In 1914, Stewart successfully urged the Kentucky Governor to create a state illiteracy commission, and expand the Moonlight Schools statewide, with the goal of eliminating illiteracy by 1920. Regional communities held competitions, and various women's groups became involved to further the cause. After a few years, Wilson established the Moonlight School Institute, the first of its kind in America. Eventually, over 1,600 students were enrolled, 350 of whom had learned to read and write. Wilson also saw that similar schools be established to serve Black students, and by 1915, fifteen Moonlight Schools served these adults (3). Along this progressive path, Stewart published numerous books specifically for adults who had limited or no literacy, to encourage them to read, as well as one entitled *The Soldier's First Book*, aimed at military recruits for World War I.

Alabama and Mississippi began Moonlight Schools shortly after the Wilson Schools in Kentucky became successful. By 1916, eighteen states had Moonlight Schools. Stewart went on to be Chairperson of the Illiteracy Commission of the National Education Association. Wilson was a pioneer and tireless advocate for education of underserved her entire adult life, and doubtless left a legacy which still remains underappreciated today. Another similar journey is included in this, our tenth anniversary issue of *Fine Focus*; that of Parisa (page 6), an international STEM scholar who writes about her first tenure-track faculty position at an HBCU, and the necessary cross-cultural literacy to be explored and appreciated when navigating challenges in a unique but also rewarding academic climate. In many ways, Parisa's journey draws many parallels to that of Cora Wilson Stewart – combining empathy and passion with determination and vision to achieve lifelong learning.

**Figure 1**

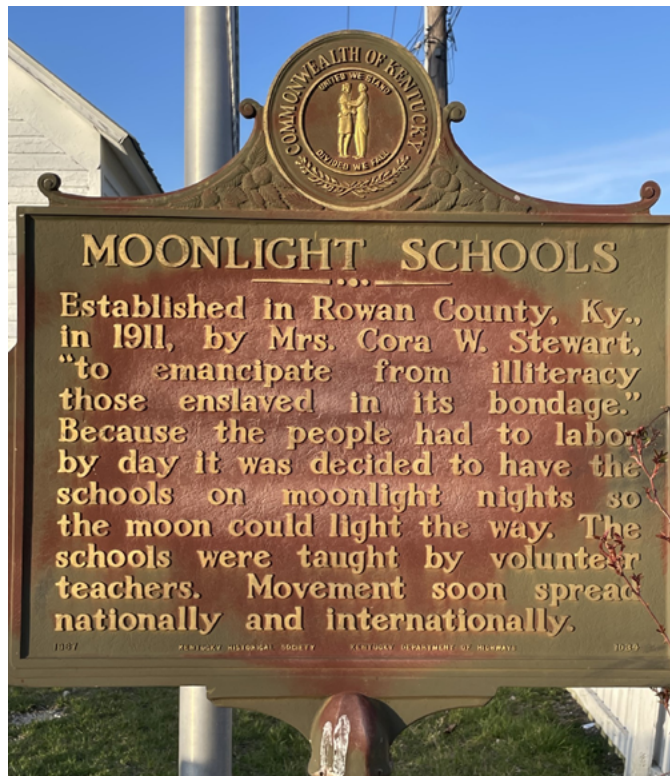
*Cora Stewart Wilson (1875-1958) in a photograph from January 1916, from Press Reference Book of Prominent Kentuckians, 1916, p. 224 (royalty-free image).*





Figures 2, 3, & 4

*The Original Cora Wilson Steward Moonlight School located near the campus of Morehead State University in Kentucky, USA. Photo credits: David Nickell, Hillsboro, KY.*



## References

1. Nelms, Willie. Cora Wilson Stewart: Crusader against Illiteracy. McFarland & Co, 1997. Print.
2. Kentucky Education Association: [https://www.kea.org/about\\_kea.uspx](https://www.kea.org/about_kea.uspx) accessed 3.4.2024
3. <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2669> accessed 3.3.2024