



Sally Donze Historical Women Essay Contest

* Essay Prompt has been revised for clarity (2026-2027).

1. Who is Sally Donze?
 - a. Sally Donze was a long time member of the Soroptimist International Club of Canton Stark County. She was the head librarian at the juvenile main branch of the Stark County District Library as well as librarian at the North Canton Library. She was actively involved in local history as a docent and oral historian. She loved reading, writing, and bringing stories and history to life for local children and students.
2. Stark County students in grades 6-8 (girls and boys) are eligible to participate.
3. Write an essay about a diverse historical woman.
 - a. 500 word limit
 - b. Typed Times size 12 font (double spaced)
 - c. Hard copy entries must be received by no later than **January 20, 2027**.
 - d. Entries may be mailed to club post office box
 - i. Soroptimist of Canton/Stark County, **PO Box 2171**, North Canton, OH 44720
 - ii. **OR** entries may be emailed to zutali.karen@bestforwomencanton.org (Please put Sally Donze in the subject line.)
 - e. Winner(s) will be notified in February 2027 and will receive their checks at the Awards Ceremony usually held in March.
 - i. First \$200
 - ii. Second \$150
 - iii. Third \$75
4. **Essay Prompt: Perseverance means continuing to work toward a goal, purpose, or belief even when faced with major challenges. Write an essay showing how one of the women demonstrated perseverance in her life. You may use the provided information alongside your own personal experiences, observations, or research to support your writing.**
 - a. *Please focus your essay on one of the three given women:*
 - i. *Greta Thunberg*
 - ii. *Haven Shepherd*
 - iii. *Elizabeth Jennings Graham*
5. Judge's Rubric is included for instructional reference.
6. 5. Ohio ELA Standards Addressed:
 - a. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
 - b. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
 - c. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



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Sally Donze Essay Contest Judging Rubric

Essay Number: _____

For each criterion listed, score the essay on the scale provided. Use a separate form for each essay.

Criteria	Above average	Average	Below average	Poor	Score
	16	12	8	4	
Understanding of the topic: To what extent did the writer demonstrate a clear understanding of the question and respond with details	Key ideas related to the question are adequately identified and defined; average use of literary techniques to describe viewpoints; includes bibliographic information	Key ideas are partially identified and defined; statement that viewpoints exist but little use of supporting details; includes incomplete bibliographic information	Some ideas are identified but not defined; lack of reference to any viewpoints	Complete lack of reference to the question; irrelevant information; unsupported statements, incomplete details	
	8	6	4	2	
Effectiveness in expressing a point-of-view: To what extent did the writer present his/her point of view?	The student connects personal feelings, experiences, hopes, fears, reflections or beliefs with the text. The personal response refers to the text, conveys a sense of understanding the text.	The student explores personal feelings, experiences, hopes fears, reflections or beliefs and makes a superficial or concrete connection to the text.	The student retells or paraphrases the text making only a superficial reference to personal feelings or experiences. Or the student writes about personal feelings, etc., without connecting to or referring to the text.	The student response shows little or no interaction with or understanding of the text.	
	8	6	4	2	
Original thinking relative to the topic: To what extent was the original thinking relative to the subject?	Mostly relative to the topic without errors	Partially relative with minor errors	Somewhat relative with significant errors	Not relative to the topic at all	
	4	3	2	1	
Literary style, grammar and spelling	Literary style clear and effective, good grammar & spelling. Sentence structure somewhat varied; essay well developed and cohesive. Citation of work(s) used is included.	Use of literary technique to convey main ideas but lacking clarity. Sentence structure lacks variety but essay mostly developed.	Lacks use of literary technique. Many errors in grammar and spelling.	Irrelevant and/or erroneous information, main ideas unclear, illegible, grammar and spelling errors consistent throughout essay.	
				Total Score:	

****Please assign a quality points score (100-25 pts.) which will be used to break any ties. Quality points _____****

Judge's Signature: _____

Standing Her Ground: The Courage and Perseverance of Elizabeth Jennings Graham

Elizabeth Jennings Graham (1827–1901) was a Black schoolteacher and church organist in New York City who took a brave stand against racial discrimination long before the modern Civil Rights Movement. Her story is a powerful example of refusing to give up when faced with unfair treatment and fighting for justice even when the odds were stacked against her.

Early Life and Inspiration

Elizabeth grew up in a family that deeply valued education, equality, and standing up for human rights.



- **Family Roots:** Her father, Thomas L. Jennings, was an inventor who used the money he earned from his patented dry-cleaning business to buy his family's freedom.
- **Speaking Out Early:** When Elizabeth was just 10 years old, she delivered a speech written by her mother called "*On the Improvement of the Mind*". The speech encouraged Black women to educate themselves and use their voices to help end slavery and prejudice.
- **Serving Her Community:** By 1854, Elizabeth had become a dedicated schoolteacher and a church organist, using her skills to give back to her community.

The Streetcar Incident: Showing Courage and Perseverance

In the 1850s, New York City streetcars were run by private companies that regularly banned or segregated Black passengers.

- **The Standoff (July 16, 1854):** While running late to play the organ at her church, Elizabeth boarded a Third Avenue Railroad streetcar. The conductor ordered her off. Knowing she had every right to ride, she showed extraordinary resolve by refusing to leave.

- **Refusing to Back Down:** When the conductor tried to physically push her off, Elizabeth fought back and held her ground. Even when her dress was torn and she was injured during the struggle, she refused to yield until the conductor called a police officer to forcibly remove her.
- **Taking It to Court:** Instead of letting the injustice slide, Elizabeth and her family took the streetcar company to court. She was represented by a young lawyer named Chester A. Arthur, who would later become President of the United States.

A Historic Victory and Lasting Impact

- **Winning the Lawsuit:** In 1855, the judge ruled in Elizabeth's favor, declaring that sober, well-behaved Black passengers had the exact same rights to public transportation as white passengers. Elizabeth was awarded \$250 in damages.
- **Changing the System:** The very next day, the Third Avenue Railroad Company officially desegregated its cars. Elizabeth's persistence inspired other activists to keep pushing, leading to the full desegregation of all New York City transit systems by 1865.

Overcoming Personal Tragedy and Continuing Her Mission

Elizabeth's tenacity extended far beyond her court case. She faced immense personal hardship, including the loss of her young son during the violent New York Draft Riots of 1863. Despite her grief and the danger around her, she kept moving forward.

In her later years, Elizabeth moved back to New York City and **started the city's first kindergarten for Black children**, running it right out of her home until she passed away in 1901.

The Importance of Her Story

Elizabeth Jennings Graham showed that a single person's decision to stand up against unfairness—and stick with the fight—can change history. Today, she is remembered with a street named in her honor ("Elizabeth Jennings Place") and a planned monument near Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

The Quiet Girl Who Refused to Give Up: How Greta Thunberg's Perseverance Changed the World

Greta Thunberg was born on January 3, 2003, in Sweden. Her mother was an opera singer and her father was an actor. When Greta was eight years old, she first learned about global warming in school. While watching educational films about plastic pollution and starving polar bears, she wept. Her classmates were sad too, but when the movies ended, they moved on. Greta couldn't. The images stayed stuck in her head, and she couldn't understand why world leaders weren't doing everything possible to stop it.

Overwhelmed by worry, Greta fell into severe depression. She stopped speaking almost entirely, a condition known as **selective mutism**. She was also diagnosed with **Asperger syndrome**, a form of autism that can make social situations difficult. For years, Greta was extremely quiet and shy at school. However, she grew to view her Asperger's as a super-strength: it allowed her to focus intensely on climate facts with complete clarity and determination, seeing the crisis in sharp "black and white."



Starting at Home

Greta realized that sitting in silence wouldn't fix the world. To overcome her turmoil, she decided to take action. She started right at home, relentlessly sharing facts, charts, and scientific data with her parents. Her father recalled running out of arguments because she was so persistent.

Eventually, Greta convinced her family to change their lifestyle. She persuaded them to become vegan and to stop traveling by airplane to lower their carbon footprint. Proving that she could change her parents' minds gave Greta her very first spark of confidence: she realized that her voice mattered and that she could make a real difference.

Sitting Alone on the Cobblestones

In May 2018, 15-year-old Greta won an environmental essay contest in a Swedish newspaper. This brought her into contact with local activists. Inspired by U.S. students who led protests after a Parkland, Florida school shooting, Greta decided to organize a school strike to demand climate action.

When she asked her friends to join her, **every single one declined**.

Instead of backing down, Greta went alone on August 20, 2018. That summer, Sweden had suffered intense heatwaves and wildfires, yet politicians were ignoring climate issues during an upcoming election. Greta sat on the cold cobblestones outside the Swedish Parliament with a hand-painted sign reading "*Skolstrejk för klimatet*" (School Strike for Climate). Passersby stared in confusion, and her parents urged her to come home, but she refused to leave. She pledged to strike every day until the election, demanding that Sweden cut carbon emissions to meet the 2016 Paris Agreement goals.

Balancing Homework and a Global Movement

After the election, Greta decided to strike every Friday which became known as *Fridays for Future*. Photos of her solo protest went viral on social media, sparking headlines worldwide.

Even as her activism exploded into a massive global movement, Greta's work ethic remained relentless. She worked 12 to 15 hours a day, writing complex speeches, meeting with groups like *Fossil Free Dalsland*, and planning protests. Despite missing school every Friday, she caught up on all her schoolwork during off hours and remained in the top 5 of her class.

As her fame grew, Greta refused to profit from her work. She declined payments for her speeches, and when a business tried to use her name to make money, she immediately cut ties with them. She constantly reminded people that she wasn't a climate scientist herself, but simply a messenger telling adults to listen to the science.

Facing Critics and Crossing Oceans

Greta's plainspoken truth-telling quickly provoked political pushback and online bullying. Opponents mocked her youth, her appearance, and her Asperger diagnosis. Greta didn't let the insults rattle her. She turned the negativity back on her critics, stating that when people resort to personal attacks, it means they have run out of logical arguments and view youth activists as a real threat to the status quo.

Greta also refused to compromise on her values. To attend major political summits without causing carbon emissions from airplanes, she took extreme travel measures:

- **Davos, Switzerland (2019):** While world leaders and CEOs arrived at the World Economic Forum in private jets, Greta took a long train ride. She bluntly told the wealthy crowd that they were sacrificing the planet for personal profit.
- **New York UN Summit (2019):** To cross the Atlantic Ocean without flying, she spent two weeks sailing aboard a high-speed racing yacht powered entirely by solar panels and underwater turbines. She then planned to travel by train across North and South America for another summit in Chile.

A Lasting Impact

Greta's courage ignited what observers call "**The Greta Effect.**" She went on to:

- Speak before the European Parliament, the UN, and the Austrian World Summit.
- Collaborate with rock band *The 1975* on the track "Time to Rebel," donating the proceeds to the protest group *Extinction Rebellion*.
- Meet fellow youth icons, including Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai.
- Inspire protests of over 25,000 people in cities like Bristol, England, and prompt millions of students worldwide to join school strikes.
- Earn nominations for the **Nobel Peace Prize** and be named *TIME* magazine's **Person of the Year** in 2019.

From a quiet, depressed girl sitting alone on a sidewalk with a painted sign, Greta Thunberg became one of the most powerful voices in modern history. Her journey proves her own famous motto: "**You are never too small to make a difference.**"

The Story of Haven Shepherd: A Journey of Unstoppable Perseverance

Overcoming the Impossible in Vietnam

Haven Shepherd's story is a powerful lesson in resilience—the ability to keep going no matter how hard life gets. Born Do Thi Thuy Phuong on March 10, 2003, in the Quảng Nam province of Vietnam, Haven faced unimaginable tragedy before she was even old enough to walk. When she was just 14 months old, a bomb explosion destroyed her home, claiming the lives of her birth parents. Miraculously, Haven survived after being blown 30 to 40 feet away.



Though her life was saved, the blast left her with severe burns and catastrophic injuries to her legs. Her grandmother refused to give up hope, holding onto Haven during a harrowing motorcycle ride through rough mountains and dense jungle to reach a hospital in Da Nang. To save her life and stop deadly infections, surgeons had to amputate both of Haven's legs below the knee. Even though her family had no money to pay for her medical care, surrounding families in the hospital rallied together to donate funds. Local community members began calling her the "miracle child," not just because she survived, but because her spirit was unbroken from the very start.

Choosing Hope and Family

Over 8,000 miles away in Carthage, Missouri, Shelly and Gary (Rob) Shepherd were raising six biological children—Chloe, Haley, Hannah, Ivy, Sawyer, and Zach. Driven by a desire to help children in need, Shelly and Rob traveled to Vietnam with a foundation called *Touch a Life*.

It was there that they met baby Haven. When a planned adoption with another family fell through, the Shepherds didn't hesitate. They knew Haven belonged in their family, officially bringing her home to Missouri at 20 months old on November 19, 2004. Haven affectionately calls this date her "Gotcha Day". Surrounded by a large, loving family that taught her that "love is always multiplied, never divided," Haven grew up with the unwavering support she needed to push past every barrier in her way.

Turning Obstacles Into Freedom

Growing up as a double amputee comes with daily physical hurdles. Wearing prosthetic legs all day can be physically exhausting and painful. Instead of letting that slow her down, Haven searched for an outlet where she could feel weightless and strong. She found that place in the water, learning to swim at just 3 years old.

Where others might see a handicap, Haven saw an opportunity to push her physical limits. As she put it: *"When I'm in the water I feel completely free, I get to feel completely myself."*

Her determination turned a daily challenge into an extraordinary gift. By age 10, she was competing in swim meets. Balancing her studies as a homeschooled student with grueling morning and evening training sessions, Haven showed a work ethic far beyond her years. By the time she was 13, her incredible times caught the attention of the U.S. Paralympic team.

Pushing to the Top of the World

Haven's relentless drive transforming her into a world-class athlete didn't happen overnight—it was built through years of discipline and grit:

- **2017 Can-Am Open:** Proved her versatility by sweeping 1st place in five different events (100m butterfly, 50m freestyle, 100m breaststroke, 200m individual medley, and 100m freestyle).
- **2018–2019 World Para Swimming World Series:** Consistently reached the podium in Indianapolis against elite international competition.
- **2019 Parapan American Games:** Battled her way to a silver medal in Lima, Peru.
- **2020 Tokyo Paralympics:** Represented Team USA on the ultimate global stage, earning a 5th-place finish in the 200m Individual Medley SM8 and 9th in the 100m Breaststroke.
- **2023 Parapan American Games:** After narrowly missing the podium in several events earlier in the week, Haven's patience and determination paid off when she captured her first **Gold Medal** in the 200m individual medley SM8.
- **2024 Paris Paralympics:** Reached the highest level of sport once again, competing in her second consecutive Paralympic Games.

Inspiring the Next Generation

Haven's ambition doesn't stop at the edge of the pool. She has expanded her passions to become a CrossFit athlete, a model, and a brand ambassador appearing in major national campaigns, including ads for Reese's. In 2018, the BBC named her to their prestigious **100 Women** list for her extraordinary strength of character.

Today, Haven uses her platform as a motivational speaker and advocate for people with disabilities. She uses her story to show young people everywhere that courage isn't about avoiding hardships—it's about choosing to stand tall, push forward, and redefine what is possible no matter what life throws your way.