



# Montgomery County *Commission for Women*

**Rachel Louise Carson  
(1907-1964)**



**Biologist, writer, scientist, ecologist**

**Considered the mother of the modern environmental movement**

Rachel Carson was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania, where she spent the first twenty-two years of her life on the family's small farm. After graduating from high school, she attended Pennsylvania College for Women (now [Chatham College](#)) where she combined writing with marine biology studies, graduating magna cum laude in 1929. She was awarded a full scholarship to continue her studies, receiving her M.A. in zoology from [Johns Hopkins University](#) in 1931. After teaching courses in marine biology at Johns Hopkins University and zoology at the [University of Maryland](#), Carson spent a long period of time conducting research in Chincoteague, Virginia.

Late, she took a position with the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) as a radio script writer. In 1936, the Bureau of Fisheries hired her as a full-time junior biologist. She was the first woman to take and pass the U.S. Civil Service Test. Carson worked in the federal government as a scientist and writer for fifteen years, writing brochures on conservation and natural resources, and editing scientific articles. She later became the Editor in Chief of all publications for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

During her free time, Carson began to write about her observations of life under the sea, a world totally unknown to the majority of the population. [Under the Sea Wind](#) was published in 1941, and in 1952, she published the prize-winning study of the ocean, [The Sea Around Us](#). That year, she resigned from her government position to devote herself to research and writing. Three years later, in 1955, Carson published [The Edge of the](#)

[Sea](#). Her work become more accessible and better known through the [New Yorker Magazine](#) which serialized all three of the Sea series ([Under the Sea Wind](#), [The Sea Around Us](#) and [The Edge of the Sea](#)).

In 1962, Carson published her most influential and controversial work, [Silent Spring](#), which denounced the indiscriminate use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture and the environment as a whole. Her work provoked a controversy among conservationists, the chemical industry, and the [United States Department of Agriculture](#), challenging officials from government and industry, as well as the scientific community. Carson was highly criticized for her research, and accused of being an alarmist. Despite severe criticism, [Silent Spring](#) remained on the bestseller list for a year. President Kennedy spoke of the book at a press conference and called for a committee to investigate its findings. The Science Advisory Committee sustained Carson's research and conclusions. After the Committee's findings and Carson's testimony before Congress calling for new policies to protect human health and the environment, state legislatures introduced pesticide-regulating legislation. In 1970, the [United States Environmental Protection Agency](#) was established, and Pesticide Regulation and the Food Safety Inspection Service were moved under its auspices. Since then, a number of pesticides have been outlawed, worldwide grassroots environmental organizations have been established, and [Silent Spring](#) has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

After [Silent Spring](#), Carson received many honors for her contributions to the scientific and literary communities. She was awarded the Cullum Medal of the [American Geographical Society](#), which had previously only been given to three other women. She also was inducted into the [American Academy of Arts and Letters](#) and into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame in 1985. Established that year by the Maryland Commission for Women and the [Women Legislators of Maryland](#), the purpose of the Hall of Fame is to honor Maryland women who have made unique and lasting contributions to the economic, political, cultural, and social life of the State, and to provide visible models of achievement for future women leaders.

Carson died in 1964 after a long struggle with breast cancer. Her exposure to toxic chemicals while doing research may have contributed to her contraction of the disease. While writing her book, she underwent a radical mastectomy and radiation treatment. She died at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland.