

# Ellen Churchill Semple

1863–1932

**HOW SHE AFFECTED THE WORLD**

Ellen Churchill Semple was one of the first women to make a living studying geography. Semple created a new kind of geography in the early 1900s called human geography. It changed how people viewed the world.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Semple's perseverance helped her to make advancements in geography.*



Imagine that you had to sit outside the classroom of your favorite teacher instead of inside with the rest of your class. This is how Ellen Churchill Semple often attended classes simply because she was a woman.

A very smart and hard-working student, Semple went to Vassar College when she was fifteen and graduated in 1882, at age 19. While on a graduation trip with her family, she read a book written by a German geographer named Friedrich Ratzel.

In 1891 Semple tried to enroll in Professor Ratzel's class at a university in Germany. However, the university only allowed men to take classes. Semple received special permission to attend Ratzel's class—as long as she sat outside the classroom and listened through an open door.

When she returned to the United States, Semple wrote articles about geography for many journals. Geography was a new field in the United States, and most scientists focused on **physical geography**. However, **human geography** fascinated Semple.

**VOCABULARY**

**physical geography** study of the world's physical features

**human geography** study of world's people, cultures, and landscapes

**fieldwork** collecting information through interviewing and observing people

In the mountains of Kentucky—her home state—she studied people and their way of life. It was an example of a geographer doing **fieldwork**, which was very unusual at the time.

Semple's first book was published in 1903. Many colleges used it as a textbook. In it, she described how the physical geography of the United States influenced its human geography. For example, she showed how the building of railroads influenced the building of cities. She continued writing while traveling 46,000 miles throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. When she returned to the United States, she taught geography at several colleges and universities.

In 1921 the Association of American Geographers elected Ellen Churchill Semple as its first woman president. Semple remains an important figure in the field of geography today.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Recall** How did Ellen Churchill Semple conduct fieldwork?

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- 2. Express and Support a Point of View** What do you think was Ellen Churchill Semple's greatest accomplishment? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

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### ACTIVITY

Conduct research to find out more about what geographers do. Write a paragraph describing a research project that a geographer could do in your community. Give details about the type of geography—human or physical—and the fieldwork that could support the research.