



Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs banner. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture



Frances E. W. Harper, Library of Congress

Speaking of Rights and Wrongs: Fighting for Black Women's Suffrage, Part One

By Jean Bemserfer, Assistant Curator

At the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention in 1866, Frances Harper spoke candidly to her audience:

You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs . . . I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dewdrops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their convictions and principles; the bad, as dictated by prejudice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the

strongest side of the question, with the winning party.

Harper, whom Lucretia Mott described as the "embodiment of the new generation of feminists," delivered her remarks one year after the Civil War's end. Rather than strengthen the bonds between the disenfranchised, the war deepened the existing rift between Black and white suffragists.

With emancipation came the fight for African American citizenship and voter rights, and many white women refused to take a backseat to Black men's enfranchisement. However, women like Frances Harper could not escape the *dual burden* of their sex and race. A vote for women meant little to those whose skin color was also used to

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disenfranchise them and their brothers, sons, fathers, and husbands. As America celebrates the centennial of the 19th Amendment, the burdens that Harper and other Black women faced should be brought into focus. Not simply because they were written out of the definitive history book (see Stanton and Anthony's *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1881), but because African American suffragists are still fighting for their unimpeded right to vote today.

One of the struggles when writing about African American women in history comes from the illusion that they weren't active or present during historical events, because they are often "silent" in the archive. But what does that silence mean? Why would a group of dually oppressed Americans not appear to fight for their rights? Does that make sense in the greater context of the rebellious American tradition? Where else could these women be?

In fact, much like today, 19th and early 20th century Black women actively influenced politics and their communities. Historians know through revisiting newspapers (especially the Black press), personal accounts, meeting minutes, and other documentary sources that African American women were central in the fight for abolition, Black suffrage, and women's suffrage. But the erasure of these women from the record, whether intentional or not, has distorted our perception of how these events transpired.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), a radical egalitarian and universal suffragist who argued for equal rights for all, including equal voting rights, in the mid-19th century, serves as one example. She was born free in Baltimore, Maryland. She cut her political teeth in the abolition movement alongside well-known figures like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Lucretia Mott. She helped organize and participate in the Free Produce Movement, the boycotting of businesses whose goods were tied to slave labor (a message

that resonates today). In 1858, a century before Rosa Parks and the Jim Crow South, Harper refused to give up her seat on a segregated train car in the northern city of Philadelphia. In 1869, she would go on to help found the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). And almost twenty years before the NAACP, in 1896, she helped found the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), whose motto, "lifting as we climb," still captures the role of Black women in American society. And Frances Harper was not alone. She was and still is representative of African American women whose stories her contemporaries and historians alike have disregarded, have overlooked, and as time has passed, have forgotten.

Until the 1860s, Black suffragists worked within white suffrage organizations. However, after abolition, infighting about the 15th Amendment (the prohibition of voter discrimination based on race) caused an irreparable schism in the women's suffrage movement. For Black women, the protection of their right to vote as a woman could not take precedence over their rights as an African American – one could not exist without the other. White suffragists did not share this dilemma. Many Black women wagered that the men in their lives, rather than white suffragists, would vote in the interests of their wives, mothers, and daughters. They, like Frances Harper, knew that relying on white women's voting preferences was at best precarious and at worst treacherous; thus, after the Civil War, most African American suffragists temporarily diverted their energy towards fighting for the 15th Amendment (passed in 1870).

African American women were highly organized political actors, even though they couldn't vote. They understood better than most that the personal is political. Voting was not merely a civic duty, it could be a matter of life-or-death. Further, suffrage was not the only means to a political end.

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Museum at Home

Records show that sisters, wives, and daughters carried guns to the polls to protect themselves and their families; they planned voter day celebrations with food, dancing, and singing to foster continued political engagement; they showed up at Republican meetings and took seats even when they weren't allowed to speak, and they voiced their political preferences to friends and family members who could vote. They also founded settlement houses and schools, sheltering and educating their communities when others would not. Despite their exclusion from historical records, Black women were anything but politically inert or invisible. And their early successes can be measured, in part, by the extreme backlash of the ensuing Jim Crow Era, which birthed a second wave of equally determined Black suffragists.

NCHGS YouTube



"Finding Family" (from Virtual Heritage Day)
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Destination: Northampton County Digital Archives

Panel discussion organized by Jean Bemesderfer and Claudia Volpe, funded by Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium with generous support provided by a grant to Lafayette College from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation



Tales from the Grapevine

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Speaking of Rights and Wrongs: Fighting for Black Women's Suffrage, Part Two

By Jean Bemserderfer, Acting Curator

The 1875 U.S. Supreme Court case *Minor v. Happersett* marked a watershed moment in suffrage history. After Missouri resident Virginia Minor sued her local registrar for not allowing her to register to vote in 1872, she pleaded her case to the Court, arguing that American citizenship guaranteed her the right to vote. The Court disagreed and rendered the opinion that “the Constitution of the United States does not confer the right of suffrage upon any one [sic],” regardless of state laws. In other words, the U.S. Constitution does not give or guarantee the right to vote to any American citizen.

The Supreme Court's opinion was catastrophic. Without a constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote, the battles against voter discrimination of any kind would remain unending. Constitutional amendments could therefore prevent voter discrimination based on race (Fifteenth) and eventually sex (Nineteenth) in places where state voting laws did not already protect the franchise of non-whites and women.

By the post-Reconstruction period, numerous states had already begun amending their constitutions and passing laws protecting a woman's right to vote (since 1788, state – not federal – law determined voter eligibility). Women, including African American women, even had the full franchise in some territories. By 1920, there were twenty-one states, including Pennsylvania, where women did not have a partial franchise.



Image from the Center for Black Research, Penn State University

Increased access to the vote was not due to a lack of gender and racial bias in these areas. Politicians in cities and states impacted by the Great Migration, industrialization, and westward expansion recognized the power of the women's vote, and especially the organizing and mobilization skills of Black women. In these places, protecting the female franchise became politically advantageous at the state and local level.

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The interim period between the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments (1870 – 1920) also left counties and states with ample time to implement restrictive voter laws like literacy tests and poll taxes to deny the franchise to the poor and to non-whites. Although these restrictions were commonly associated with the South and were more frequent there, similar restrictive voter laws existed throughout the United States. For example, Pennsylvania implemented a poll tax in the 1870s that was not repealed until 1933, thirteen years after North Carolina's poll tax repeal. And in many places, when the law did not successfully prevent voters from showing up at the polls, the Democratic Party, the KKK, and other organizations encouraged and participated in violence and intimidation campaigns against eligible voters.

These were only some of the complex conditions that the second wave of African American suffragists worked within: Ida B. Wells (who brought the horrors of lynching into public consciousness), Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, Nannie Burroughs, Julia Ann Cooper, and even Madam C.J. Walker organized alongside countless others. With slavery abolished, these women had fewer ties and obligations to earlier, predominantly white suffrage leaders and institutions. They had also inherited a new set of issues to contend with, including lynching and Jim Crow laws. Wells and her contemporaries openly critiqued those who had once condemned slavery but had since refused to speak out against lynching, as well as those who aligned themselves with outwardly racist people, politicians, and parties.

Second wave suffragists empowered themselves through their “dual burden.” Like Francis Harper, they refused to compromise the lives of their Black brethren to secure the vote for white women. However, they would not give up the fight for suffrage to focus squarely on racial inequality. The context of their disfranchisement and unequal rights was unique and thus required strategies

rooted in the reality of their day-to-day experiences as Black women.

With so many obstacles in place, these second-wave suffragists founded their own national and local organizations that addressed their myriad concerns, of which suffrage was only one. For nearly a century prior, African American women organized, learned, and transmitted intergenerational knowledge within the walls of the Black Church. Second generation African American suffragists brought these skills to the streets and to City Hall.

In 1869, the split between the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA, who supported Black suffrage) and the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA, who did not) paved the way for women like Harper, Wells, and Terrell to form their own organizations. In 1896, alongside Harriet Tubman and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, they founded the National Association of Colored Women (NACWC, incorporated as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs). This was a mere six years after AWSA and NWSA had again merged and again ignored Black women's concerns.

The NACWC, the largest African American organization of its time outside the Church, campaigned against Jim Crow, peonage, and lynching, and in favor of women's suffrage. They also provided education, job training, and other social services. The NACWC, as well as a growing number of regional suffrage clubs and social organizations, provided voter education services to African American women. These institutions also equipped them with the skills and support services necessary to survive in places where they couldn't vote or where they were denied social and government services. Black women consistently fought for access to the polls to secure a more equitable future, but they also needed to manage their daily lives to achieve that outcome. For many of these women, suffrage was only one facet of liberty.

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The centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment deserves proper observance. Its adoption meant that the ability to vote may no longer be denied on the basis of sex – a feat unto itself. For the millions of women whose franchise was blocked solely by this barrier, for their daughters and great-granddaughters, the Nineteenth Amendment mattered. But for a quarter million Native Americans, for example, it meant very little as their men and women were not even granted citizenship until 1924. It mattered less to 60 – 70,000 Chinese immigrants who were denied citizenship until 1943.

It mattered least, perhaps, to the millions of African American women and men who remained disenfranchised until President Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act. Contemporary Civil Rights activists like Rosa Parks and Angela Davis, although rarely referred to this way, were essentially third-wave suffragists. In fact, voting rights, civil rights, and equal rights can be bound so closely together that Civil Rights activists and leaders, including those today, are suffragists by default.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper remarked similarly when pleading to a room full of suffragists a century earlier. She believed that all Americans needed to fight together for universal suffrage and a “radically” egalitarian society. Anything less fundamentally harmed democracy. Harper said “we are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.” For those women currently without the full franchise (felons, the disabled, and many more), the Nineteenth Amendment still doesn’t matter at all. And so long as racism and sexism continue to trample on the most vulnerable members of society, African American suffragists will exist.



Image: Center for Digital Black Research, Penn State University

Text in cartoon speech bubble, above right:

“I don't believe in agitating and fighting. My policy is to pursue the line of least resistance. To h--- with Citizenship Rights. I want money. I think the white folk will let me stay on my land as long as I stay in my place. - (shades of WILMINGTON, N.C.)

The good whites ain't responsible for bad administration of the law and lynching and peonage - let me think awhile: er —“