

A Speech by Kathleen Thompson for the Chicago Women's History Center and the Chicago Public Library

We are here today to honor the queens of suffrage you've just been seeing on the screen up there. And, by the way, to honor four women who uncovered the story of those women and made it possible for us to talk about them here.

First, there's Rosalyn Terborg-Penn.



Before her, if most people thought about Black women in the suffrage movement, all we could come up with was Sojourner Truth. We just figured she was pretty much the only one. And when Rosalyn Terborg-Penn wanted to write her dissertation about Black women and the vote in the 1970s, she was told that it was “a Mickey Mouse topic.” Do something real, something important, they said. Fortunately for us, she persisted. And so, this speech is my memorial to a remarkable woman. I was privileged to work with her and I wish she could be the one up here speaking to you.

And then there are these three women: Elizabeth Barkley-Brown, Shirley Yee, and Darlene Clark Hine.



Elsa Barkley Brown

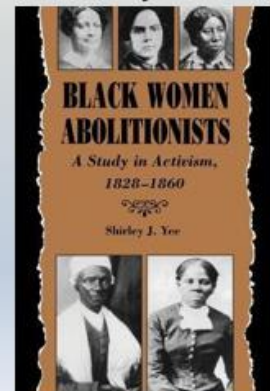
“To Catch the Vision of Freedom” in



Shirley Yee



Darlene Clark Hine



Barkley-Brown wrote a groundbreaking article about what the vote meant to most Black women in the nineteenth century. Shirley Yee

revealed the roots of the suffrage movement in the Black women's anti-slavery groups. And Darlene Clark Hine, along with Terborg-Penn and Barkley Brown, created the encyclopedia that launched the Black women's history movement. All honor and respect are due.



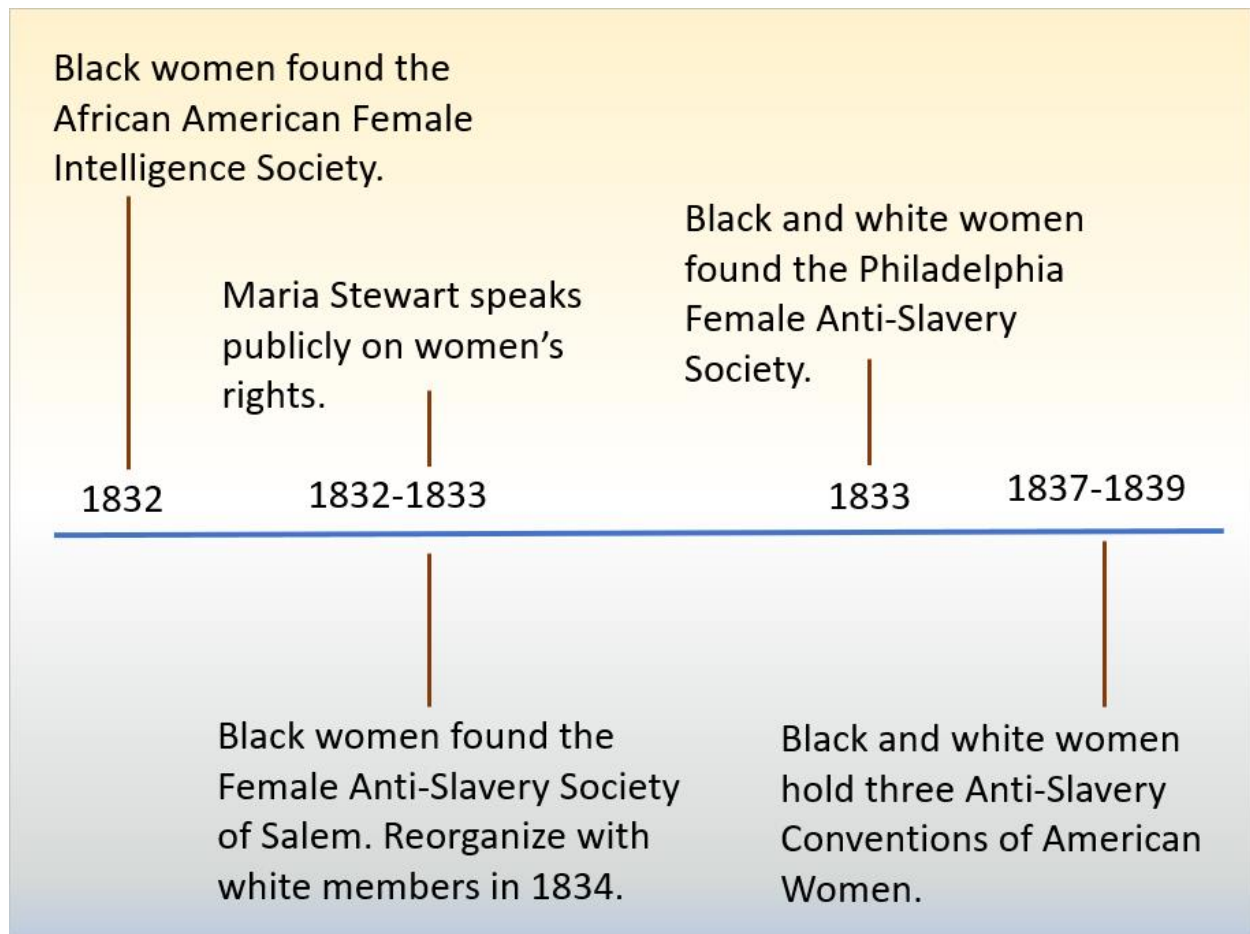
So, when and where did it all start? The suffrage movement. Was it Seneca Falls in 1848?

That's what the history books have told us for a long time. Look at this statement from the book *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement*, by Sally Gregory McMillen,

No women's rights movement existed before 1848, nor had there ever been much appetite to question women's status. While a handful of Americans such as Abigail Adams and Margaret Fuller expressed open dismay about women's submission and their lack of basic rights, such comments were rare and inchoate.

This book was published in 2008 by Oxford University Press.

And now take a look at this timeline, starting sixteen years before Seneca Falls, in 1832:



The African American Female Intelligence Society, located in Boston, was not a sewing circle. It was a group of women banding together to educate themselves and in every other way raise their status in society as women. And they sponsored the first gathering at which an American woman spoke publicly, to an audience of both men and women, on the subject of women's rights. The speaker, Maria Stewart, was a free-born woman from Hartford, Connecticut, who spoke forcefully about issues of race and gender and was fiercely criticized for doing so.

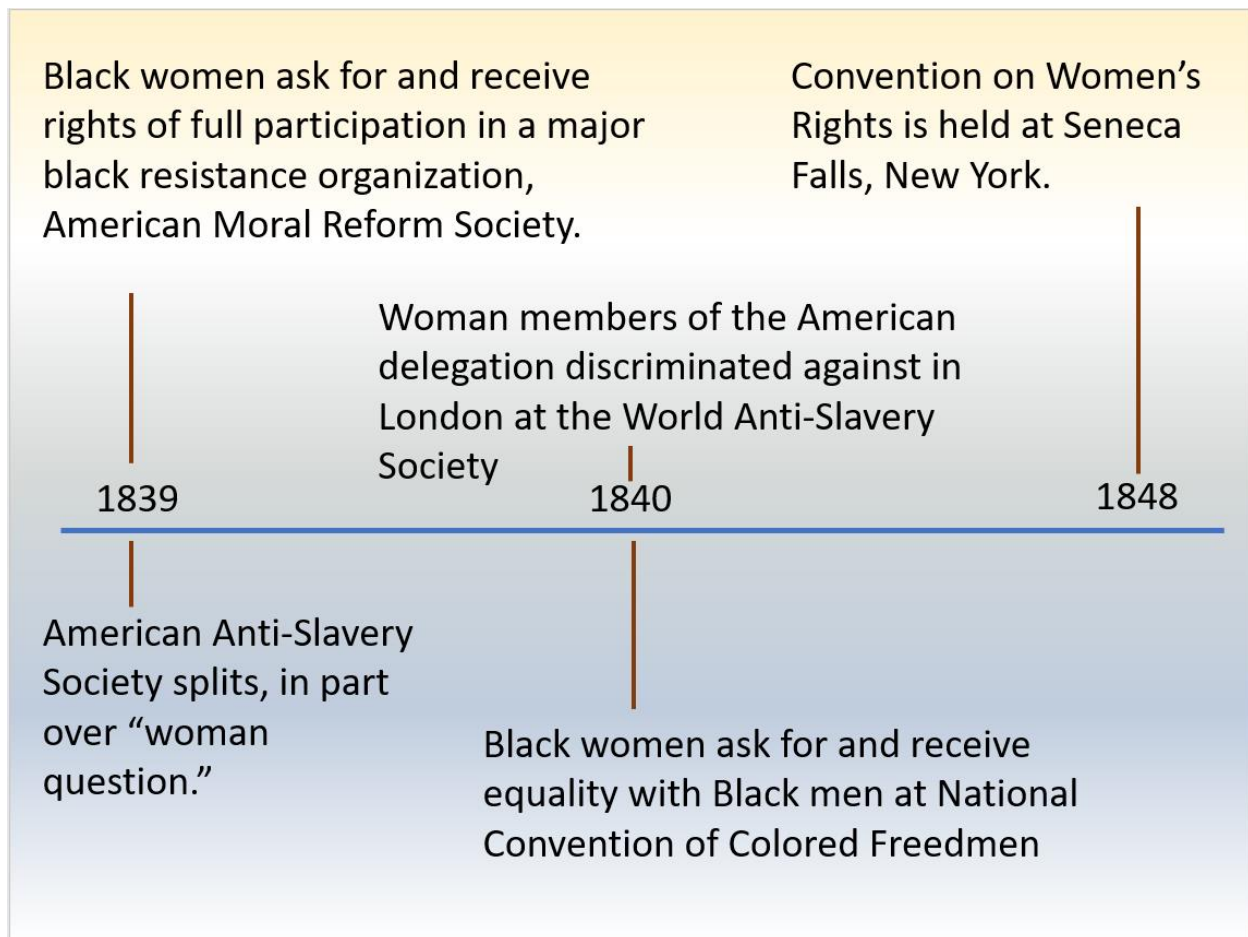
Next on the timeline is the founding of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, still 16 years before Seneca Falls. This was the first female anti-slavery society in the country, and it was founded by black women, including Sarah Parker Remond, who later left the United States and became a doctor in Italy. Two years later, the group began to admit white women.

What's important to realize here is that these all-woman groups were formed as a protest against and a way of resisting the oppression of women in the anti-slavery movement in general. We saw their parallel in the women's groups in the 1960s and 1970s that came out of the male-dominated civil rights and anti-war movements to form what we called the second wave of feminism.

In 1833, one of the most important of these groups was formed by eighteen women in Philadelphia, including the women of the Forten family—Charlotte Vandine Forten and her three daughters, Harriet Forten Purvis, Margaretta Forten, and Sarah Forten Purvis—sisters Grace Bustill Douglass and Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Hetty Reckless. The white women among the founders included Lucretia Mott and Angelina Grimke. It was out of this group in particular, historians suggest, that much of the impetus for the women's rights movement arose.

Momentum was moving among women in the anti-slavery movement and, in 1837, the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was held. The *History of Woman Suffrage* states that there were 71 delegates to the convention but does not mention that those delegates included black women, even though black women were clearly leaders in the women's anti-slavery movement. They even list the names of 12 of those delegates without including Grace Bustill Douglass, who was one of the vice-presidents of the convention.

But were women in the anti-slavery movement making any progress towards greater rights? They were.



In 1839, Black women asked for and received rights of full participation—including speaking and voting—in a major black resistance organization, the American Moral Reform Society. In 1840, they asked for and received equality with Black men at the National Convention of Colored Freedmen.

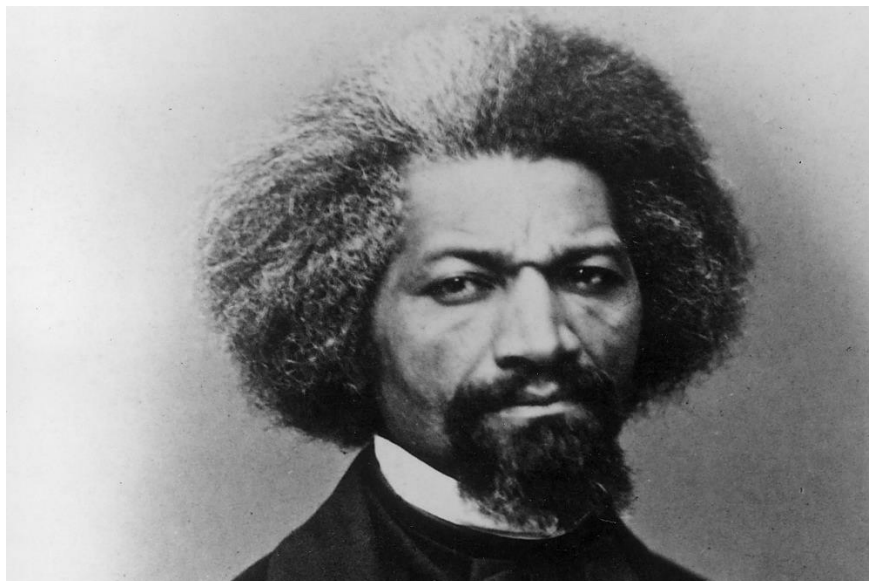
But in the meantime, in 1839, the American Anti-Slavery Society, the largest anti-slavery group, split, in large part over the “woman question.” Men who believed that women should not hold an equal position in the society left and formed the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. White anti-slavery leader William Lloyd Garrison and his followers, including most of the African American men, remained and accepted full participation by women.

So the issue of women and their rights was very much alive before Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton went to London as part of the American delegation to the World Anti-Slavery Convention. The organizers of the convention had made it clear ahead of time that women would not be allowed to participate. When Mott and Stanton were relegated to the balcony, they were joined by Charles Remond, Sarah Remond's brother, and by white anti-slavery leader William Lloyd Garrison, among others.

Most histories treat this convention in London as a singular, unprecedented event that shook Mott and Stanton to the core and ignited the woman suffrage movement, leading directly to the Seneca Falls Convention. Eight years later.

But as we've seen, the entire anti-slavery movement was already grappling with the issue of women's rights. Many black women, as well as white women, had already been stirred by the struggle for rights within the movement to work for their rights in the larger society years before Seneca Falls.

Now, in the history books and across the internet, we are told that there were no black women at Seneca Falls, that the only African American there was Frederick Douglass.



But the case of the first American Anti-Slavery Convention of Women shows us that the white writers of the *History of Woman Suffrage* were quite capable of ignoring the presence of Black women, even when one of the officers of the convention was Black. As for Seneca Falls, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn pointed out,

No African American women appear to have been present at that meeting if we rely on the records kept by the major players, who were elite white suffragists. I speculate that free Black women who lived in the upstate New York area—perhaps in cities like Rochester—attended the meeting along with abolitionists of color, but the chroniclers of the movement made no mention of them.

Of course, they mentioned Frederick Douglass. He was a rockstar.

Personally, I find it hard to believe that Lucretia Mott, who founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society with seven Black women who were close friends of hers, would not have made great efforts to see that Black women were represented, especially since that group was so clearly a center for women's rights issues.

And honestly, why did they have that convention in Seneca Falls in the first place, besides the fact that Elizabeth Cady Stanton lived there and apparently didn't like to travel. It's practically in Canada! The hot spots for women's activism were Boston, New York and Philadelphia. They would have drawn a much larger crowd in Scranton.

At any rate, at the Women's Rights Conventions that followed, there were certainly many Black women. At an Akron, Ohio, women's rights convention in 1851, Sojourner Truth's attempts to speak were opposed by white women and men in the audience, but she overcame the objections and delivered her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech. Just remember when you read that speech that it was given to a group of hostile white men *and* women.

In 1854, Harriet Forten Purvis and her sister Margaretta were major organizers of the Fifth Woman's Rights Convention, which was held in Philadelphia, and the writer Nancy Prince was a speaker. Incidentally, Harriet's husband, Robert Purvis, was chosen vice-president for Philadelphia, a fact that Terborg-Penn sees as evidence of white suffragists' preference for Black men over Black women.



And the simple fact was, two women's rights movements had begun to emerge from the anti-slavery movement. They overlapped a great deal more than the history written by white women would lead us to believe, but they were also quite different from each other in many ways.

To begin with, most of the white women in the anti-slavery movement opposed slavery but did not support what they called "social equality" for African Americans. And the woman suffrage movement that grew to be largely dominated by white women reflected that prejudice.

The woman suffrage movement that black women were creating, on the other hand, strongly emphasized full equality between the races, for obvious reasons. Before Black women could even begin to talk about the

vote, they had to fight to be treated with the respect that was automatically afforded to white women. They had to fight to get that respect from their white colleagues in the anti-slavery movement, and they had to fight get it in the suffrage movement.

At the same time, in the years just preceding the Civil War, Black women were just as engaged in the movement against slavery and for Black rights in both North and South as they were with woman suffrage. The Fugitive Slave Act placed tremendous pressure on Northern abolitionists and made life dangerous for all free African Americans.

When the Civil War began, it took two years before Black men were given the right to serve as soldiers. In their segregated units, 180,000 Black men fought for the Union, and more than 38,000 of them died.

Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.

Frederick Douglass

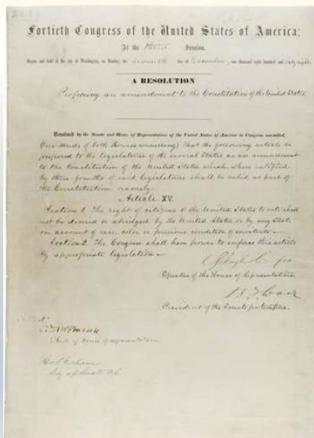


This is what African American men believed. They did not trust that their country would agree with them, but they hoped.

After the war, there was a mighty push among activists for universal suffrage, votes for Black men and all women. At the National Women's Rights Convention in 1866, the American Equal Rights Association was founded, with Harriet Forten Purvis as a member of the executive committee. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper spoke eloquently at that convention about her position as both an African American and a woman. (She is not mentioned as a speaker in the *History of Woman Suffrage*.)

However, two months after the formation of the AERA, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment. Two years later, it was ratified and adopted, guaranteeing citizenship and civil rights to Black men. But the South argued that citizenship did not guarantee the right to vote. So the Fifteenth Amendment was passed to make certain Black men got that right.

The Fifteenth Amendment



Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

It was short and sweet. But a critical question remains

Why did Congress pass the 15th Amendment?

- Tens of thousands of Black men had fought and died for the Union.
- The Republican party wanted Black male votes to counteract the votes of white male Democrats in the South.
- The North wanted to punish the South for its insurrection.

In other words, it was a unique moment in history, with a combination of elements that would never be repeated. If the opportunity was not grasped firmly and quickly, it might slip away and be lost forever, or at least for a very long time.

That is what African American men, and most women, and quite a lot of white supporters, believed. And so, when it went out to the states for ratification, they were not always willing to risk failure by tying ratification of the amendment to woman's suffrage.

This approach outraged another part of the suffrage movement, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who felt they were being betrayed and abandoned. And so a serious split in the Suffrage movement began to develop.

The American Equal Suffrage Association split into the National Woman Suffrage Association, which included Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which included Lucy Stone and most Black women. The

former turned away from suffrage for Black men, and the latter agreed to postpone suffrage for women until after the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified.

Why did most Black women support the American Woman Suffrage Association? To answer that, we bring in the brilliant historian Elsa Barkley Brown. In her essay “To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women’s Political History, 1865-1880,” she presents a lot of evidence that Black women had a very different idea from white women of what freedom meant.

For white women, freedom was a very individual thing, with the emphasis on personal rights and personal autonomy. For Black women in the South, and for the most part, in the North, freedom was communal. Survival during slavery had depended on working together as a community, protecting each other and helping each other whenever it was possible. In the years following emancipation, the primary goal of virtually every formerly enslaved person was to find family. Find the husband who had been sold away. Find the child who had been torn from the arms of the mother. Find sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles. Bring everyone together and make the family whole. And if there’s a young girl who doesn’t know where her family is, feed her and give her a pallet on your floor.

It wasn’t surprising then, what happened when, according to Barkley Brown,

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 required all former Confederate states, except Tennessee, to hold constitutional conventions. Black men were enfranchised for the delegate selection and ratification ballots. In Virginia, Republican ward clubs elected delegates to the party’s state convention, where a platform was to be adopted. On 1 August, the day the Republican state convention opened in Richmond, thousands of African American men, women, and children absented themselves from their employment and joined

the delegates at the convention site, the First African Baptist Church. Tobacco factories, lacking a major portion of their workers, were forced to close for the day. This pattern persisted whenever a major issue came before the state and city Republican conventions held during the summer and fall of 1867 or the state constitutional convention that convened in Richmond from December 1867 to March 1868. A New York Times reporter estimated that “the entire colored population of Richmond” attended the October 1867 local Republican convention, where delegates to the state constitutional convention were nominated.

Black men cast the ballots in these conventions, but the entire community turned out to talk and argue about how the men were going to vote.

That was one reason Black women tended to support the ratification of the 15th Amendment without campaigning for the addition of the word “sex” to the phrase “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Another reason was the attacks by white women on the character of Black men.

The phrase they frequently used to refer to Black men was “ignorant and degraded.” Here are a few examples:

“In fact, it is better to be the slave of an educated white man, than of a **degraded ignorant** Black man.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton in a letter to George Train

“Shall women, alone, be omitted in the reconstruction? Shall our mothers, wives and sisters be ranked politically below the most **ignorant and degraded men**?”

Lucy Stone, Call to first meeting of the State Woman’s Suffrage Association of New Jersey

The Reverend Olympia Brown “disclaimed against placing the **dirty, immoral, degraded negro** before a white woman . . .”

Speaking in Fort Scott, Kansas

“By the Fifteenth Amendment, the Republican Party has elevated the very last of the most **ignorant and degraded** classes of men to the position of master over the very first and most educated and elevated classes of women.”

Susan B. Anthony in a letter to the New York Times

As you can imagine, this didn’t go down well with Black women. Coralie Franklin Cook and Charlotte Forten Grimke both wrote open letters to Anthony, as old friends and colleagues. Here’s an excerpt from Grimke’s:

These expressions have for years prevented many of us from attending the conventions held in this city. They have disgusted us. I do not hesitate to say that they can only be characterized as contemptible; for their direct effect is to strengthen a most unjust and cruel prejudice; to increase the burdens which already weigh so heavily upon a deeply wronged people. Some of us certainly cannot believe that it would have been just to deny the right of citizenship to the great majority of the loyal men of the South--as the negroes certainly were, and are--and confer it upon the disloyal women, who not only did not conceal, but gloried in their disloyalty, however intellectual and refined they may have been.

She went on to say, “Miss Anthony is my friend of many years, and I honor and respect her for her many fine qualities; but I think that she, and some of her fellow-workers, gravely err in this matter. . . . Let them base their plea for woman's suffrage, as Mrs. Cook says, solely on right and justice. That is a plea that cannot fail.”

This was in 1898. By that time, Black women had formed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), known until 1904 as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Uniting the hundreds of organizations in the Black women's club movement gave a new force to their hugely important work providing virtually all social services to the Black community—schools, hospitals, orphanages, senior homes, etc. It also positioned them to work more effectively for the vote, not only for themselves, but for the Black men who were being disenfranchised all over the South.



The NACW had the very telling motto “Lifting as We Climb.” They believed that, so long as any member of the race could be scorned by the white community, all of them would be. A painfully accurate judgment.

Black women were unable to interest the white-dominated suffrage movement to take a similar view. Having no schools for your children was not a women's issue. Being unable to feed your family was not a women's issue. Living in fear of your husband or brother or father being

lynched was not a women's issue. And most especially, race was not a woman's issue.

By the time of the big Suffrage Parade in Washington, D. C., in 1913, the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, most Black women were supporting suffrage through their own suffrage clubs, such as the Alpha Suffrage Club founded by Ida B. Wells Barnett, or through the NACW or the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). But they were determined to participate in the parade.

The parade's organizers were almost as determined to keep them out. This political cartoon illustrates the kind of prejudice Black suffragists were up against at this point.



"WELL, MISSY! HEAH WE IS!"

In the end, parade organizer Alice Paul insisted that Black women march as a group at the end of the parade. And still, Black women persisted. This is a list of the Black suffragists we know marched in the 1913 Suffrage Parade.

Artist, one—Mrs. May Howard Jackson;
college women, six—Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, Mrs. Daniel Murray, Miss Georgia Simpson, Miss Charlotte Steward, Miss Harriet Shadd, Miss Bertha McNeil;
teacher, one—Miss Caddie Park;
musician, one— Mrs. Harriett G. Marshall;
professional women, two—Dr. Amanda V. Gray, Dr. Eva Ross.
Illinois delegation—Mrs. Ida Wells Barnett;
Michigan—Mrs. McCoy, of Detroit, who carried the banner;
Howard University— group of twenty-five girls in caps and gowns;
home makers—Mrs. Duffield, who carried New York banner, Mrs. M. D. Butler, Mrs. Carrie W. Clifford

One trained nurse, whose name could not be ascertained, marched and an old mammy was brought down by the Delaware delegation."

Six years later, Congress passed the 19th Amendment and in August of 1920, it became the law of the land. The right of women to the ballot was officially recognized.

However . . .

For Black women, the fight for the vote was not over. Just as Black men were disenfranchised in the South by literacy tests and poll taxes, violence and other forms of intimidation, so too were Black women. So the list of Black women who deserve to be called suffragists grew to include Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, Ella Baker, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Casey Hayden, the “Stolen Girls” of the Leesburg Stockade, and so many more.

And now, we can add Stacey Abrams, as she works against voter suppress.



Let's hear it for Black suffragists!