

The Challenge

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Standing Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities and the Law

Letter From the Editor: Remembering and Considering Voting Rights for Racial and Ethnic Minorities

BY KHARA COLEMAN

Whether one counts *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529, as a reason to fight or a reason to despair, it is undeniable proof that our country is still fighting over what it means to have the right to vote. It is also

undeniable that the right to vote has always been a key and valued right of citizens in a democracy. Perhaps America's founders never intended for working-class tenants

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There Is No Home for Me Here: The Erasure of African American Women and Their Role in the Suffrage Movement

BY SHARON L. EISEMAN

A Basic Truth Revealed

Recently, an assumption of mine as to the women who were most prominent in and instrumental to the success of the Suffrage Movement was 'upended' simply by my reading of a few articles I chanced upon. The revelation for me,

as a white woman, was discovering that some of the most ardent heroines of the movement, which eventually culminated in passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, were part of a strong contingent of African American women. These women sometimes acted on their own and sometimes in collaboration with others in

their community, but, it seems, rarely if ever in collaboration with the white women with whom so many of us are familiar. More significantly, if the information in these articles is reliable (it seems to have been carefully researched), those black women who advocated for women's right to vote

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and land workers—persons who owned no property and lived their whole lives debt—to vote in the same measure, and to have votes with the same weight, as property-owning white men. But, over time, the law granted all white men the right to vote, and everyone else came to realize that if they wanted to live in a real democracy, they needed that right, too.

One hundred years ago, on June 17, 1919, the state of Illinois ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, which would grant women the right to vote. In August 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment became law, after having been ratified in the southern state of Tennessee. On paper, men and women of all races had the right to vote. But as we know, what was done on paper was not always done in practice, and especially not in the

southern states. And what was done for white women was not done with black women in mind. Also excluded from the conversation on voting rights? Hispanic men and women. Asian American men and women. Native American men and women. Any legal verification that these minority communities or classes had a “right” to participate in the American democracy would have to come decades later.

We should never forget that there is a history of voting rights that is bigger than “black” and “white.”

In this moment, as we commemorate the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, let us also remember the African American women who contributed to the fight for universal suffrage. Though easily dismissed or forgotten, black women were part of the fight from the very beginning.

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during the various phases of the Movement were often stonewalled by the white suffragists.

An interesting circumstance of the era is that women of color, who faced greater and very different challenges than the white suffragists, received recognition from a few bold African-American men such as Frederick Douglas who lobbied earlier for passage of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a change which, when the amendment passed in 1870, ended racial status as a basis for denial of the right to vote. But, of course, that Amendment left African American women out of the picture, a strange but not unexpected anomaly. Moreover, it was 50 more years before our legislators passed the 19th Amendment.

Much of what I learned is from an

opinion piece authored by Brent Staples that appeared in the *New York Times*’ July 28, 2018 publication under the title “How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women,” and a series of seven essays called “Suffrage in America: The 15th and 19th Amendments” written by Megan Bailey and others and published in 2018 and 2019 by the National Park Service as part of its ongoing coverage of how social movements “get started.” Shortly following Staples’s first paragraph in his opinion, he notes the “toxic legacy” that “looms large” in cities across the U. S. (yes, today!) due to the complete dismissal of black women by the white suffragist leaders. Of most relevance in the NPS Series is “Essay #4: Between Two Worlds: Black Women and the Fight for Voting Rights.” Early in that essay, the author notes that: “Black men and white

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women usually led civil rights organizations and set the agenda” while “many people didn’t listen to [black women]” despite their hard work advocating for women’s right to vote. As you read further, you may better understand why repercussions flow even today from these intentional efforts to sideline the black women suffragists, a phenomenon that began more than a century ago and lasted for many decades. This division between these two groups of women fighting for their voices to be heard through their votes, including pertinent history before and following the passage of the 19th Amendment, is carefully documented in “Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black and White Women” by Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell, first published in 1995, which offers a means to better understand the factors that led to the racial division within the shared gender of these racially different women and that may still be influencing how their interracial relationships have fared.

How Faulty Impressions Take Root and Blur or Bury the Truth

Who comes to your mind when you hear the terms ‘suffragist’ or ‘suffragette’? For me it has been, until now, the very vocal Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and I recall stories found over the years, accompanied by photos, of the courageous, mostly white suffragists in prison after their arrests for acts of civil disobedience such as picketing during their campaign for equality in voting, along with accounts of their being tortured by prison guards and force-fed when they went on hunger strikes. Another one of the women activists in that group was Alice Paul. We are also familiar with Stanton and her colleague Lucretia Mott from their organizing of the much earlier effort to engage the public and government officials about women’s rights in general: the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in New York (sometimes referred to as the ‘Myth’ of Seneca Falls).

What isn’t well known is that the publicly visible leaders of the movement, a group of women who were educated, middle class white women with money, were the ones who set the national agenda for women’s rights advocacy. By virtue of their

demographic, the crafters of that agenda, including Stanton and Anthony, did not address experiences of working women or women of color, who faced race and class-based discrimination in addition to gender discrimination, prejudice, harassment, negative stereotypes, and unequal access to jobs, housing, and education—which affected almost every aspect of their lives. As Staples notes, and as is also recognized in the NPS Essay #4, Stanton and Anthony, in their six-volume work “History of Women’s Suffrage,” for which project there were other co-producers, stayed true to the particular white feminist narrative expressed in the national agenda and thus featured only white suffragists while ignoring women of color—both black and Native American—who were instrumental in advancing the movement toward its positive outcome.

Such exclusion seems somewhat of a mystery, given that Anthony and her family were active in the antislavery movement in the mid-nineteenth century, meeting at their farm with like-minded Quakers and, on occasion, with Frederick Douglass. Lucy Stone, the first woman known to have kept her maiden name following her marriage, was another white abolitionist and fervent advocate for women’s equality across racial lines, despite facing criticism for undermining support for African American rights by “linking them” to women’s rights. Yet her work didn’t instigate collaboration between white and black women. And although Stanton advocated publicly for women’s suffrage regardless of race, her actions spoke louder when one considers both the impact of the history of women’s suffrage and that there appears to have been little to no effort by the white suffragists to reach across the racial divide to embrace or collaborate with their black counterparts.

Although the exclusion of women of color from the equation as observed and understood by the majority white public was a product of the complicity of many white women, Staples relies upon a group of respected historians of the suffrage era in concluding that Stanton bears the most responsibility for denying black women a seat at the table with those white women who were advocating for a constitutional amendment that would grant and protect

women’s right to vote. After all, she was identified as the principal philosopher of the voting rights campaign early in its existence. Of significance is that, per Staples, you would learn almost nothing about the black women voting rights advocates by reading Stanton’s book despite the generalized nature of its title, which is one of the factors that leads him to his assessment of Stanton’s set of assumptions and principles as an ‘acquiescence’ to a form of white supremacy. This observation, in conjunction with the knowledge that Stanton characterized African-American men as ‘Sambos’ and incipient rapists in the period following the war, may help explain why Stanton and her colleagues have in more recent times been exposed as racists by serious researchers in ‘search’ of the truth about those historic figures we tend to admire or, alternatively, ignore—until the light is shed on the truth, as was done in the recent film “Hidden Figures.”

So Where Were the African American Women During the Suffrage Movement?

As you read this, surely you have questions, but here is the most pressing question that came to my mind while doing this research: Where were the black women and what were they doing in the mid to late nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries that would have paralleled, complemented, or enhanced the advocacy of the white women suffragists? Before we explore that arena as it existed in the nineteenth century, the reader should have a fuller context in which to assess the role of African American women in this segment of our history as a nation. To be sure, those women had a double hurdle to overcome that arose from their double burden as they experienced it then. Think about it: At what table did they belong or would they have had the most effective presence even assuming they would be welcome **and** want to sit there: the table where one would find

African American men who were fighting against the kind of racial injustice that kept them, as blacks and recently enslaved, from entering the voting booths, or the table where the white women were planning their speeches and marches, and fasting during

their imprisonment for engaging in acts of civil disobedience? Thus, it appears that black women advocates for voting rights had to contend with resistance from both men of color and white women—who themselves were struggling to assert their independence from male dominance that was the cultural norm (as its reinterpreted influence remains today).

THEY DEFINITELY WERE THERE,
MAKING THEIR OWN KIND OF
DIFFERENCE!

As it turned out, a number of very strong and vocal black women, barred from access to the suffragist's elite club, formed their own unions and planned their own actions that had an intended and valuable effect. And don't we all know how that works: If you are denied access to a special place or group and you have something relevant to offer and great ideas to explore and implement, what is your best option? START YOUR OWN D*MN CLUB and prove them all WRONG! Thanks to historic accounts, we know about the work of the following black women among many who lobbied fervently for the cause.

Many of you are familiar with the name Ida B. Wells, if for no other reason than a few iconic Chicago sites carry her name, one being a long ago demolished public housing development of which we aren't especially proud, and the other 'Congress Parkway' in the south loop which was just re-named as Ida B. Wells Drive in recognition of her civil rights advocacy—supposedly Chicago's first ever naming of a downtown public street for a woman of color. Why do we/should we know and also honor her? First, in 1913 she founded the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago which was the first of its kind focusing specifically on suffrage and related issues of concern to African American women—and men. A journalist by vocation, Wells was also a persistent activist and abolitionist who embarked on a life-long crusade against lynching which continued into the 1890s long after the emancipation of African Americans. Although Wells's activism in that area and her reporting on those horrific crimes exposed her to constant danger, she persisted nonetheless.

As another example of a black woman

activist, I offer you Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin who became the leader of the Club Movement Among Colored Women. For most of her adult life, Ruffin was an activist, creating her own newspaper, *Women's Era*, to spread more broadly the message about women's rights; joining forces with Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone to form the American Woman Suffrage Association; organizing the National Federation of Afro-American Women in 1895; and convening the First National Conference of Colored Women of America in Boston which later merged with another 'colored' women's league and became a national association to which Mary Church Terrell was elected president. This path Ruffin pursued to engage and empower her community of women was, perhaps, motivated or at least reinforced by the refusal of the General Federation of Women's Clubs—whose membership was predominantly southern white women—to accept her credentials when she showed up at its meeting in Milwaukee in 1900 because the membership of one of the three organizations she represented was black. Instead, they offered to allow her to attend, but only as a representative of the two white groups. When she refused that condition, she was excluded from the meeting—the final insult in a set of actions that became known as "The Ruffin Incident". Ruffin also helped form the NAACP in 1896. Through that organization, and in collaboration with other groups of black women, she focused on the broader issue of civil rights equal to those granted to white men. Ruffin embraced and dedicated her life to NAACP's motto of "Lifting As We Climb."

Not only was Mary Terrell the president of the group Ruffin co-founded, but around that time, Terrell founded the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs which focused on achieving women's suffrage and improving education. The NACWC also fought to end Jim Crow laws which had become so entrenched throughout the South—and which many whites in the northern U.S. relied upon as justification for maintaining racial discrimination. Terrell, and her colleague Harriet Tubman, were known then and are now remembered for their clear understanding that any rights

and opportunities black women desired to claim were affected, complicated, and even restrained by the circumstance of their being both WOMEN and BLACK. Despite such a challenge, they kept the wheels turning because they recognized that the educating of black women would enhance their credibility.

Sadly, even after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, many states, incensed about African Americans having access to the polls, enacted and assiduously enforced laws restricting rights of individuals in that demographic. It wasn't until passage in 1965 of the Voting Rights Act that true racial and gender equality were legally achieved. Even so, in 2019 we still must worry about and take action to prevent insidious efforts in states across the country to disenfranchise minorities. Yet without the courage and persistence of all the women—and men like Frederick Douglas—the right to vote might be in even greater danger.

YES, this is the LAST PARAGRAPH!

Nearing the end of my article, I submit the following: As we approach the centennial of the 19th Amendment, let's take time to finally pay homage to the unsung heroines of the suffrage movement: African American women like abolitionist **Ida B. Wells**, civil rights leaders **Mary Church Terrell** and **Harriet Tubman**, **Josephine Ruffin** who demanded equality of treatment with her white counterparts, the indefatigable **Sojourner Truth** who bravely sought freedom for herself and her children and lobbied for needs of African Americans, including for land grants from the federal government for former enslaved people (which effort failed), and **many other black women** who fought fervently though in different ways to obtain the right for women to have access to the polls. They did so together and on their own, in the face of unique challenges, without forming alliances either with white women along gender lines or black men based upon race, although, as noted earlier, some black men recognized two essentials among their female counterparts that we must acknowledge and also urge the Centennial organizers to do so as well: **these women deserved a voice, and their voices would—and did—contribute**

something necessary and meaningful to the cause. And so, with a better understanding of how we got to this stage in our relationships with black women and men, we must double down on our efforts to promote greater diversity and inclusion among all of us in our profession and in our communities, as well as the elimination of racial and gender biases wherever they occur. Maybe one day, the “divided sisters” can become true sisters. ■

With gratitude to Melissa Burkholder for the gift of this TITLE for my piece!!

1. It seems that the preferred name is “suffragists” as the word “suffragettes,” which likely originated in England, was also intended, with its “ette” ending which suggests the diminutive, to belittle and demean women who advocated for their gender’s right to vote.
2. It appears that the series of essays (also called chapters) continues to be updated on the NPS website (www.nps.gov/articles/series) and additional authors are participating in writing them. To find additional material on the suffrage movement, once you’re on the website, click on Menu, then Learn & Explore, then Explore by Topic, then find American People and Government

and click on Women’s History and have a fine time in your exploration! One well-researched feature is: ‘20 Suffragists To Know’ for 2020.

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