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Opinion

When the Suffrage Movement Sold Out to White Supremacy

African-American women were written out of the history of the woman suffrage movement. As the centennial of the 19th Amendment approaches, it's time for a new look at the past.

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Americans are being forced to choose between a cherished lie and a disconcerting truth as they prepare to celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment in 2020. The lie holds that the amendment ended a century-long struggle by guaranteeing women the right to vote. The truth is that it barred states from denying voting rights based on gender but "guaranteed" nothing. More than a dozen states had already granted millions of women voting rights before ratification, and millions of other women — particularly African-Americans in the Jim Crow South — remained shut out of the polls for decades afterward.

While middle-class white women celebrated with ticker tape parades, black women in the former Confederacy were being defrauded by voting registrars or were driven away from registration offices under threat of violence. When the black suffragist and civil rights leader Mary Church Terrell petitioned her white sisters for help, they responded that the disenfranchisement of black women was a race problem — not a gender problem — and beyond the movement's writ.

Mary Church TerrellCreditIllustrations by Lauren Nassef

This counterfeit distinction was familiar to black suffragists, who had argued for more than 50 years that they could no more separate gender from race in themselves than

shed their skins. The movement, however, had tended toward a definition of "women" that was implicitly limited to people of the gender who were white and middle class. Its most prominent advocates — Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony — drove home that notion by rendering black women nearly invisible in their hugely influential "History of Woman Suffrage." As the push for white women's rights neared its goal — a constitutional amendment — the movement hedged its bets by compromising with white supremacy.

Historians like Glenda Gilmore, Martha Jones, Nell Irvin Painter and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn have recently revised the whitewashed depiction of the women's rights campaign by rescuing black suffragists from anonymity. This new, more inclusive portrait of the movement grows richer by the year and shows African-American women at the forefront of a struggle for universal rights that was far from over when white suffragists declared victory in 1920.

'We Are All Bound Up Together'

The official suffrage history reduces the poet and novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to a bit player, even though she was central to the struggles for both African-American and women's rights and delivered what has come to be recognized as a visionary speech on the relationship between the two at the founding meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in 1866.

A formidable intellectual, Harper had forged her ideas about universal rights in the abolitionist movement, where she earned acclaim as a speaker sharing the platform with luminaries like Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott.

Harper believed deeply in interracial collaboration but committed to it on the condition that white women treat black women as equals. As the historian Alison M. Parker has written, Harper vexed white women reformers by accusing them "of being directly complicit in the oppression of blacks," and by demanding that they rid themselves of racism.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

A committed egalitarian, she balked when suffragists embraced a definition of "women" that included only the educated and the affluent. In a now famous speech given in New York, Harper told the audience that fates of black and

white, rich and poor were “all bound up together.” She refused to decouple race from gender, arguing that the day-to-day racism she and other black women experienced was in fact a “women’s issue” that suffragists were obligated to confront.

“You white women speak here of rights,” Harper said that day in 1866.“I speak of wrongs.” Reciting the litany of humiliations that black women had to endure on public conveyances — not because they were women but because they were black — she asked, “Are there no wrongs to be righted?”

Harper’s speech anticipated by more than a century the “intersectional” legal analysis of the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who showed how policies that treat race and gender as mutually exclusive deprive black women of redress in discrimination cases while also obscuring the fact that they struggle under the dual burdens of racism and sexism.

“History of Woman Suffrage” draws heavily on the proceedings of the 1866 meeting but tellingly leaves out Harper’s momentous speech. The historian Nell Irvin Painter argues that her words were “too strong” for white suffrage leaders who saw her polished, self-assured style as antithetical to what they viewed as blackness. They preferred the uneducated version of black womanhood embodied by the formerly enslaved suffragist Sojourner Truth, who entertained her audiences as she imparted her ideas.

Yet Harper’s poise and self-possession were the norm among the affluent freeborn black women who had time to engage with the suffrage movement. For example, the sisters Harriett Forten Purvis and Margaretta Forten — daughters of the wealthy Philadelphia sailmaker and abolitionist James Forten and his wife, Charlotte — were central players in the staging of the Fifth National Woman’s Rights Convention in their hometown in 1854. The Boston journalist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, who played a leadership role in the Massachusetts suffrage movement in the late 1800s, was the wife of the pro-suffrage state legislator George L. Ruffin.

Another respected suffragist and abolitionist — but again, whose voice is missing from the suffragist narrative — is Sarah Parker Remond, who grew up in a prominent New England family. Remond, like Harper, was a member of the American Equal Rights Association. She was popular on the abolitionist speaking circuit and also toured the Northeast with her brother, Charles, in the late 1860s in support of women’s voting rights.

Chroniclers of the suffrage struggle tended not to record their black peers. Fortunately, the 1853 lawsuit Remond filed against two men who ejected her from an opera in Boston for reasons of race provides a window into what she believed. The archivist Dorothy Porter Wesley writes in her study of the Remond family that the judge issued a forceful decision, “fully sustaining the equal rights of our Colored citizens.” We also know that Remond grew sufficiently tired of racism in the United States and fled to Europe.

While Remond stumped for suffrage in the North, Charlotte Rollin of Charleston, S.C., pursued the same mission in the Reconstruction-era South. The historian Rosalyn

Terborg-Penn lists Rollin as the first South Carolinian to serve as a delegate at a national suffrage convention. In an 1870 speech — a rare occasion in which a black suffragist's comments were set down — she argued for women's rights under the universalist principle that denying rights to anyone endangers the rights of everyone:

"We ask suffrage not as a favor, not as a privilege, but as a right based on the ground that we are human beings, and as such entitled to all human rights. While we concede that woman's ennobling influence should be confined chiefly to home and society, we claim that public opinion has had a tendency to limit woman's sphere to too small a circle, and until woman has the right of representation this will last and other rights will be held by an insecure tenure."

White Suffragist Racism

Last year, Chicago renamed a prominent downtown street for the celebrated newspaper editor and anti-lynching campaigner Ida B. Wells, who also played a starring role in the earlier 20th-century suffrage movement. Less well known in the city today is the estimable Wells contemporary Fannie Barrier Williams, a member of the black elite who had a profound impact on Chicago during more than three decades of civic and political activism.

As her biographer, Wanda Hendricks, points out, Barrier Williams broadened her influence by crossing racial lines, becoming the first black woman admitted to the Chicago Women's Club, one of the most powerful white women's groups in the country. She led the charge to get black women politically engaged and worked tirelessly to open the business world to them as well.

As Harper did, she dissented from the white suffrage movement's gender-centric view of voting rights, arguing that "black women had unique needs that were defined as much by race as they were by gender and region," making clear that she was less interested in a political candidate's gender than in what he or she had to say about the plight of African-Americans. Beyond that, she bluntly reminded white women that racism in their ranks represented a prime obstacle for black women, writing "that the exclusion of colored women and girls from nearly all places of employment is due mostly to the meanness of American women."

Mary Ann Shadd Cary

The New York Times last year published a belated obituary of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, another pathbreaking African-American suffragist, who died in 1893. Shadd Cary is thought to be the first black woman in North America to edit and publish a newspaper and was also one of the first African-American female lawyers in the United States.

The newspaper — founded in Canada in 1853 and called The Provincial Freeman — reveled in the accomplishments of black women in particular and provided a rich forum for its readership to express itself in ways that would have been unthinkable a short time earlier. The Freeman set out what the historian Martha Jones describes as "an ambitious array of rights to which women were entitled." These included the right to speak and write in public, to own and control property, to hold elective office and to enter the professions.

Shadd Cary galvanized black women in Washington when she tried unsuccessfully to register to vote in 1871 — a year before Anthony was arrested in Rochester for voting illegally in the presidential election.

Shadd Cary's biographer, Jane Rhodes, writes that she was attracted to ideas put forward by Stanton and Anthony's National Woman Suffrage Association and stayed close to the organization even though its leaders "spurned any association with the cause of black suffrage" and adopted the stance that "educated white women were better suited to vote than illiterate black males." Shadd Cary was typical; black women often stayed with white organizations that were hostile to African-American interests to raise issues that would otherwise be ignored.

'Turned Their Backs on Women of Color'

The ratification of the 19th Amendment set off celebratory parades all across the country. But confetti was still rustling in the streets when black women across the South learned that the segregationist electoral systems would override the promise of voting rights by obstructing their attempts to register.

Some black women succeeded in adding their names to the rolls. But as the historian Liette Gidlow shows in her revelatory study of the period, the files of the Justice Department, the N.A.A.C.P. and African-American newspapers were soon bursting with letters, investigations and affidavits documenting the disenfranchisement of black women, especially in but not limited to former Confederate states.

In Virginia, Gidlow writes, a college-educated mother of four named Susie W. Fountain was required to take "a "literacy test" that consisted of a blank sheet of paper; the registrar subsequently determined that she had failed. She later told an N.A.A.C.P. investigator she was "too humiliated and angry to try again." A Birmingham, Ala., teacher, Indiana Little, was arrested and sexually assaulted after leading a large crowd to the registrar's office. As Little said in a sworn affidavit, she was "beat over the head unmercifully and ... forced upon the officer's demand to yield to him in an unbecoming manner."

In what became known as “The Election Day Massacre,” a white mob burned to the ground a prosperous black community in the Central Florida town of Ocoee after African-Americans tried to vote.

By this time, white suffragists had declared the battle for women’s voting rights won and embarked on a campaign to prove the amendment successful. They had no interest in signing on to a cause that would undercut that story line.

Coralie Franklin Cook

This betrayal was especially painful for the black suffragists like Coralie Franklin Cook, who had once said of her idol, Susan B. Anthony, who died 14 years before the ratification of the 19th Amendment, that “thousands of torches lighted by her hand will yet blaze the way to freedom for women.” By 1921, however, Cook lamented that, even though she had been “born a suffragist,” she had no choice but to retire from the field. The movement, she said, had “turned its back on women of color.” Organizations that are gearing up to commemorate next year’s centennial of the 19th Amendment are at risk of repeating that insult.