

HISTORY OF THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT FROM A BLACK WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

The month of March is National Women's History Month and this year marks the 100th anniversary of the passage of the **19th Amendment** giving women the right to vote.

While most of us have heard stories and have seen images of white suffragettes, there's usually not much mention of the contributions of people of color. I'd like to acknowledge the work of Native Americans, Asian, Hispanic, and other people of color in this endeavor. In this short time frame, I'm going to explore the women's suffrage movement from a black woman's perspective.

In 1848, the first woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, NY led by such notables as **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, Lucretia Mott, and **Susan B. Anthony**. No black women were in attendance.

Let's put this in historical context. In 1848, slavery was a booming business and most black women were otherwise occupied being enslaved or focused on pure survival. However, there were black women who spoke out for women's suffrage, such as well-known former slave **Sojourner Truth**.

The Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865. In 1865 the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. But it was the **15th Amendment** giving black men the right to vote that shook up the women's suffrage movement.

Prior to the 15th Amendment, black and white suffragettes worked together. The proposed 15th Amendment split the movement into two camps.

One group, led by Stanton and Anthony, opposed black men getting the vote BEFORE white women. To gain support of southern white women they downplayed the involvement and hid the visibility of black women in their group.

The other camp, led by Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe — both Unitarians — supported BOTH black suffrage and women's suffrage. They

were joined by founding member **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper**, also a Unitarian, who was outspoken in stating that race was a factor in denying women's rights.

Black women were put in a tenuous position having to choose between supporting rights for their race OR rights for their sex. This intersectionality of race, sex, and class continues today.

Black women saw voting not just as a woman's right, but also as a pathway to racial equality, social justice, and a way to uplift their community as a whole. Since these were NOT the objectives of white suffragists, black women formed their own clubs — about 400 — across the nation.

One such club, the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, was formed by **Ida B. Wells Barnett** — who is best known for her anti-lynching journalism. In 1913, this club *successfully* achieved passage of a bill giving women the right to vote in presidential and municipal elections, but not state elections. The club published a newsletter to educate the Black community about ballot issues and candidates and was influential in electing Black politician, Oscar DePriest, to Congress.

It was **Mary Church Terrell** who united these black women's clubs into the **National Association of Colored Women's Clubs** in 1896. She created their motto of "**Lifting as we Climb**" and was the first president. She received her masters from Oberlin College and was the only one to speak at the women's conference in Berlin in English, French, and German languages. She was the first black member of the American Association of University Women (our recipient of this month's Sharing Our Gifts), and picketed the White House with Alice Paul.

When the 19th Amendment passed in 1920, 80% of black Americans lived in southern states. Each state controlled the election process. Southern states suppressed black voters with literacy tests and poll taxes, while exempting white voters.

Southern black women sought, but received, no help from the League of Women Voters. In 1921, Alice Paul, the leader of the National Women's Party declared that Black women's disfranchisement was a "race issue,"

not a "woman's issue," and thus not their business; while — ironically — seeking passage of the Equal Rights Amendment *for Women*.

As bell hooks describes in her book, *Ain't I a Woman?*: *quote*

"No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. . . . When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women."

Still, the fight for the right to vote for all black people continued. One woman's story that exemplifies the multi-faceted struggle of black women suffragettes is **Fannie Lou Hamer**.

In 1961, Fannie Lou was given a hysterectomy without her knowledge or consent, a common form of forced sterilization. Then in retaliation for registering to vote, she was fired from her job and kicked out of her home of 20 years. These injustices set her on an unstoppable path of voting rights activism. In 1963, she was **arrested** for sitting at a whites-only lunch counter. In jail, she was severely beaten and suffered permanent damage to her eyes, kidneys, and legs — forcing her to walk with a cane thereafter. Still, she persisted and in 1964, **she ran for Congress!**

The next year, in 1965 the Voting Rights Act gave full exercise of black voting rights. It outlawed literacy tests and shifted voting control to federal levels instead of state levels, especially in southern states.

Over the years, the number of black voters in the south began to outnumber white voters. In response, in 2017, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act and returned voting control to most southern states.

This ruling emboldened voter suppression tactics such as Voter ID cards, changing hours or outright closing of vote centers in communities of color, and the mysterious dropping of names from voter registration rolls.

Today, black women are considered to be consistent voters and collectively can be the **deciding block of voters** in an election as shown in the 2017 defeat of racist and accused child molester Roy Moore for Alabama senator.

So, as we celebrate National Women's History Month and Women's Right to Vote, let's not forget the dedicated **black female suffragettes**, the many dimensions of their struggle, and the battle that still continues.