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A Fundamental Component

Suffrage for African American Women

Sarah J.S. Garnet, representing the Colored Women's Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn, and Irene L. Moorman, the president of the Negro Women's Business League, met with the wealthy and fervent white suffragist Alva Vanderbilt Belmont in January 1910 at the office of Belmont's Political Equality Association. They arranged a February 6 meeting to be held at Mount Olivet Baptist Church on West Fifty-Third Street. Belmont, like Ella Hawley Crossett and the civil rights activist Fanny Garrison Villard, wanted to expand the base of support for woman suffrage and sought ways to include black women in a "colored" branch of her association.¹ At the invitation of Garnet and Moorman, two hundred women and men gathered to hear Belmont "endorse the idea of racial equality and the expansion of suffrage to all American citizens."² She promised to fund a meeting place for the black women's branch of her Political Equality Association when it enrolled one hundred members.

Black women had already established a strong coalition of suffrage activism; they did not need white women to organize them. As a consequence, they responded only halfheartedly to Belmont's call.³ According to the report of the meeting in the influential black newspaper the *New York Age*, the pro-suffrage speeches by the white women "did not evoke much applause," and some of the women who joined the African American branch of the Political Equality Association planned to support the branch financially but

not to participate regularly in its activities.⁴ Crossett, then in her final year as the president of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association, invited African American suffragists to send a delegation to Albany on March 9, 1910, to appear before a state legislative committee at the hearing on the woman suffrage bill.⁵ She also invited them to affiliate with the state suffrage organization, which some individual women did.⁶

True to their commitment to “uplift” the race, black women wove agitation for the vote into their activism for civil rights, moral reform, and community improvement. Because black women typically had more power within their own communities than did white women in theirs, black women saw the need for suffrage differently than white women did. Issues that occupied the energies of white women, such as the need for “equality within their families, political rights, and access to paid work,” did not mean as much to black women.⁷ Some black women did not feel the necessity to press for the vote as much as they felt the need to agitate to “emancipate their race from the oppressive conditions under which they lived.”⁸ However, core groups of black women certainly agitated for the vote throughout the movement, with or without a connection to white women’s suffrage organizations. They saw the vote as a way to solve the problems the black race—and especially women—faced, including segregation, lynching, and other forms of systematic racism.⁹

Generally more financially stable and educated than blacks who migrated from the south after the turn of century, many activist women came from families long established in the north. Most of these middle- and upper-class women and men supported woman suffrage.¹⁰ The network of elite African Americans in the major cities of the coastal northeastern states included



This group portrait of young black women originally graced the first page of an article in support of woman suffrage that appeared in the NAACP’s *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, August 1915. Image courtesy of the Herman B. Wells Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

dynamic women reformers. Mary Burnett Talbert of Buffalo and Hester Jeffrey of Rochester focused their efforts in upstate New York. Sarah Garnet, the first African American female school principal in New York City; her sister, Susan McKinney Steward, the first African American woman to practice medicine in New York State; Victoria Earle Matthews, founder in 1897 of the White Rose Mission; Maritcha Lyons, the first black school principal to supervise both black and white teachers; Verina Morton-Jones, another doctor and a founder of the Lincoln Settlement House in 1908; and businesswoman Irene Moorman all worked in the New York metropolitan area.

These and many other black women actively sought the right to vote at the same time that white women agitated for voting rights. Black women had organized for woman suffrage decades before, although most often within organizations devoted to broader social activist agendas. Belmont tried to take advantage of both the strong suffrage sentiment black women already harbored and their firmly-established networks to enfold them into the New York State suffrage coalition. Though the history of black women's suffrage has been rendered nearly invisible by the paucity of archival materials, it is still possible to reconstruct a compelling portrait of the commitment and sacrifice of these dedicated reformers.¹¹ They did not rely on white women to tell them they needed the right to vote; they began organizing for the franchise in New York State as early as the 1880s and, in spite of the racism they faced, they would actively seek their enfranchisement throughout the entire struggle.

African American women rarely separated the quest for the vote from the other activism in which they engaged. Many black women came to fear that white women would "devise something akin to an exclusionary 'grandmother's clause'" to keep black women from voting once they won the vote.¹² Some scholars argue that, in fact, "racist attitudes provided additional impetus" for black women's struggle.¹³ Much of their activism and work for woman suffrage and women's rights occurred as a fundamental component of their activities in clubs such as the Negro Women's Business League or in the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs or its affiliates, such as Phyllis Wheatley Clubs, the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs, or the Northeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.¹⁴ Most women who supported enfranchisement did so as part of their goal to improve the status of black women in addition to that of black men and children.

The early twentieth century was "characterized by racial segregation, defamation of the character of Black women, and lynching of black Americans, both men and women," making it a dangerous period to have been a person

of color in the United States.¹⁵ The very years when “racial prejudice became acceptable, even fashionable, in America” marked greater respectability and broad acceptance of the woman suffrage movement.¹⁶ Not radical in their thinking, these women reformers believed that the vote would give them the power to change what was wrong with the social and political systems in the United States.¹⁷ Their first task was to obtain racial equality; obtaining women’s rights would come next.¹⁸ Black women also formed a fundamental component of the woman suffrage movement, adding their voices to the coalition working for women’s right to vote.

Activist Limits and Support

Black women had a deep-rooted reform tradition and had long supported woman suffrage in spite of numerous challenges.¹⁹ Fannie Barrier Williams blamed slavery for the problems faced by black women of the time, arguing that “slavery left her in social darkness, and freedom has been slow in leading her into the daylight of the virtues, the refinements and the blessed influences that center in and radiate from the life of American free women.”²⁰ During the debates following the Civil War, all too many of the reformers “fell into the trap of assuming black to be male and women to be white.” Black women struggled to keep their enfranchisement goals in the minds of other reformers.²¹ However, as Jane Dabel points out regarding the nineteenth century, the activism of black women “was not explicitly feminist.” They focused on the needs of their communities rather than on women’s needs exclusively.²²

Enfranchisement simply made perfect sense to black women. Louisa Jacobs, the daughter of Harriet Jacobs, who escaped slavery in the 1850s, served as a speaker for the American Equal Rights Association in the next decade. She helped to spread a message of universal suffrage and equal rights for women and men, black and white. Later she attended meetings of the New York-based National Woman Suffrage Association.²³ A few other black activists supported the national association and attended white women’s suffrage meetings.²⁴ Before and after the Civil War, Sojourner Truth, also a member of the American Equal Rights Association between 1866 and 1869, passionately called for the right of black women to vote, along with equality and justice.²⁵ In what became her last appearance at a women’s rights meeting, Truth attended the 1878 National Woman Suffrage Association convention in Rochester.²⁶ Attendees commemorated the thirty years since the first Woman’s Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls, but by that point many members felt discouraged because women still did not have the right to vote.

Few black women attended, but Truth, who did attend, entreated her audience to “take their rights” rather than beg for them.²⁷

Truth’s long-time friend, the venerable activist Harriet Tubman, had supported votes for women since at least the Civil War, “faithfully” attending suffrage meetings in upstate New York.²⁸ According to one of her biographers, Catherine Clinton, whenever Tubman heard about a woman suffrage meeting, she would “grab her shawl and hat and head for the Auburn train station” and board the next train going in the direction she wanted to go.²⁹ At the twenty-eighth annual New York State Woman Suffrage Association convention, held in Rochester in 1905, Susan B. Anthony, holding Tubman’s hand, introduced her to the delegates as a “living legend.”³⁰ A year later, Tubman rode the train with the white suffragist and philanthropist Emily Howland to attend another suffrage meeting in Rochester. Tubman sat up all that night in the train station, knowing that no hotel in the city would give her a room. The next day, when a “horrified” Howland found out what Tubman had endured, she insisted that conference organizers provide lodgings for women of color who attended suffrage meetings.³¹ Other white suffragists also made connections with Tubman. For example, Elizabeth Smith Miller sponsored her as a life member of the Geneva suffrage club.³²

Another early black suffrage supporter, Charlotte E. Ray, also attended National Woman Suffrage Association meetings, as did her sister, the poet H. Cordelia Ray. The daughter of a pastor well known for his work on the Underground Railroad and his editorship of the New York newspaper, the *Colored American*, Charlotte was the first woman to graduate from Howard Law School in 1872.³³ She engaged in the discussions about resolutions at the 1876 ninth annual convention of the association held at the Masonic Hall in New York City.³⁴ When the National and American Woman Suffrage Associations merged in 1890, many black women supported the National American Woman Suffrage Association, although the alliance remained fraught with racial tension.³⁵ While there are instances of black and white suffragists working together in the wake of the Civil War, for the most part they and their organizations remained segregated. For black women, racism and classism discouraged their involvement in white women’s suffrage organizations. The *New York Times* reported in 1911 that when Harriet Alice Dewey, wife of the Columbia University professor John Dewey, tried to host an interracial suffrage meeting in her uptown apartment, the landlord insisted that she cancel it. He emphasized that the attendance of black women was the reason.³⁶ Most women preferred to work through separate organizations even into the twentieth century.

Any study of women of color confounds our understanding of class. The suffrage activist Addie Jackson, for example, took in washing and ironing, “day’s work,” or housecleaning, in the Brooklyn area during the 1880s.³⁷ Her class status improved significantly over the decades, as illustrated by her mobility and volunteerism. As soon as her life stabilized, Jackson found more time to devote to activist causes. By the 1910s she lived in Tarrytown, and the *New York Age* noted her as a participant in a number of activities related to suffrage and other activism. She also attended the fifth annual meeting of the Empire State Federation of Women’s Clubs in Buffalo for a two-day session in July 1913. Members of the club made sure that the *New York Age* announced its support for woman suffrage.³⁸ Alice Wiley Seay founded the federation in 1908 to coordinate the influence of the black women’s clubs in the state and to help support Harriet Tubman and her home for the aged in Auburn.³⁹ Jackson served as its financial secretary, an office she held for several years.⁴⁰

While many New York activist women joined clubs between the 1860s and the 1910s, not all African American women agreed on how to improve their status or bolster their “collective prospects,” of course.⁴¹ However, most black women believed that they made more progress through their own organizations because white women’s clubs not only barred them from participation, they sometimes interfered with their efforts.⁴² Although some black women’s clubs and organizations that concentrated solely on woman suffrage existed, out of necessity most clubs focused on far more than just getting the right to vote for black women. Virtually all of the women who agitated for woman suffrage deeply committed themselves to a range of progressive causes such as establishing homes for orphans and the elderly, trying to guarantee the protection of Fourteenth Amendment rights, racial uplift, education, settlement house work, and public health. Ending the lynching of black women and men, anti-miscegenation, and Jim Crow legislation also expended the energies of these civil rights activists.⁴³ The multitude of problems and challenges that black women and the black community faced was such that to concentrate exclusively on woman suffrage was a luxury few could afford.

Church membership also proved integral to black women’s organizing and activism during this period.⁴⁴ As the historian Evelyn Higginbotham points out, “clubwomen themselves readily admitted to the precedent of church work in fostering both a ‘woman’s consciousness’ and a racial understanding of the ‘common good.’”⁴⁵ Most women learned leadership and organizational skills in the churches, which gave them “the collective strength and

determination to continue their struggle for the rights of blacks and the rights of women.⁴⁶ The churches, especially the Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal denominations, proved particularly welcoming to the speeches and debates of women advocating for enfranchisement. Women turned to church membership in order to carry on their work for woman suffrage. For example, when Mabel E. Brown began canvassing for support for woman suffrage in Rochester in early 1917, she asked W. E. B. Du Bois to write letters of introduction to ministers.⁴⁷ Church newspapers and publications also offered black women opportunities to articulate and promote their views regarding women's rights.

Some black men, like some white men, opposed woman suffrage. A prevailing attitude dictated that black men take on the responsibility of financially supporting their women, implying that black women ought not need to work—contrary to the reality for many black households.⁴⁸ Countering these attitudes, Nannie Burroughs, the principal of the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in Washington, DC, argued along with others that black women needed the vote because black men did not understand its value.⁴⁹ Many black men also tried to block female membership in their organizations, especially in the most intellectual of them. Only after Anna Julia Cooper, the educator and author, protested women's exclusion from the American Negro Academy in Washington, DC, the society for intellectual and educational achievement founded in 1897, did the Reverend Alexander Crummell, a prominent minister and scholar, invite the New York educator Maritcha Lyons to speak at the academy.⁵⁰ A resolution passed at the 1910 National Association of Colored Women convention called men to account, stating, "we urge our men to show greater respect to the women of our race."⁵¹

Still, many black men joined the women who met in the churches, clubs, and other places to debate the topic of woman suffrage. W. E. B. Du Bois, taking "Frederick Douglass's place as the leading male feminist of his time," observed that "votes for women means votes for black women."⁵² He, like most activists, realized that women's enfranchisement benefited everyone. Black women believed in the power of the vote to "acquire advantages and protection of their rights," particularly their rights to be free from sexual exploitation, to increase their access to education, and to protect their labor.⁵³ The ballot had come to signify "private self-respect and public dignity for women," a dramatic change in attitude since the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ The meaning of citizenship had, by the 1910s, expanded to include aspects of social justice.

New York Women in the Broad Networks of Female Activism

Black women began collaborating in local self-help groups to achieve common goals after the end of the Civil War.⁵⁵ Just prior to the 1876 national centennial celebration in Philadelphia, the American-Canadian activist and journalist Mary Ann Shadd Cary, writing on behalf of ninety-four black women in the District of Columbia, appealed to the leaders of the New York-based National Woman Suffrage Association. They wanted their names added to the list of signers of the Declaration of Rights of the Woman, to be presented by Matilda Joslyn Gage and Susan B. Anthony at the celebration.⁵⁶ Cary applied the “universal-rights arguments developed by white suffragists to address the specific needs of black women,” with the result that many more black women began to support woman suffrage.⁵⁷ Just four years later, Cary founded the first organization of black women with a broader reach, the Colored Women’s Progressive Franchise Association, which had as one of its goals the promotion of equal rights and woman suffrage. Cary argued that the vote would “empower” women to make needed reforms in education, professionalize them in a wider array of occupations, and enable more independent thought.⁵⁸

The need to vote pervaded virtually all of black women’s club work. In 1892, Ida B. Wells, the guest of honor at a rally in New York to raise funds for her work in anti-lynching, brought together the suffrage advocates Victoria Earle Matthews, Maritcha Lyons, Sarah Smith Garnet, and Susan Smith McKinney of Brooklyn, among others.⁵⁹ They organized the Women’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn with Matthews as president. Drawing at least 150 members by 1894, the union sought to educate African Americans about their ability to support issues important to all black people, to encourage the “intelligent assertion of their rights,” and to use every means possible to “retain the unmolested exercise” of those rights.⁶⁰ Those rights included a right to the ballot.

By the 1890s, New York women also served on the executive boards and committees of newly founded national-level associations for black women. At one meeting, Victoria Earle Matthews presented “The Value of Race Literature,” contending that black women could dispel negative stereotypes through their own writing.⁶¹ Sarah Garnet and others representing the Woman’s Loyal Union also attended national meetings.⁶² In Buffalo, Mary Burnett Talbert, Susan Evans, Mrs. Charles Davis, and several other women established the Phyllis Wheatley Club, as an affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women, to develop strategies and programs to uplift black communities and encourage suffrage support.⁶³ But negative images of black women as “promiscuous” or “immoral” hampered their work.⁶⁴ To counter this attitude, the

national association celebrated the contributions of African American women and supported women's rights activism.⁶⁵ Members considered political activism and securing voting rights for women important focus issues.

In July 1904, at the fourth convention of the National Association of Colored Women, held in St. Louis, Missouri, Sarah Garnet gave "an excellent talk" on the suffrage question. At that same meeting a Mrs. Thurman made a motion that a suffrage department be organized under the supervision of the association for the "purpose of teaching our women the principles of civil government, political economy, etc., that they may thus be prepared to become intelligent voters and responsible citizens of this republic."⁶⁶ The motion, seconded by Rochester resident Hester Jeffrey, carried. Eventually, Sarah Garnet served as the superintendent of the suffrage department of the National Association of Colored Women, which had merged with the National Council of Women by 1905.⁶⁷ The umbrella organization "provided the infrastructure for local clubs to organize for the social, economic, and political improvement of black communities." The national association helped to nurture networks of women who, in turn, influenced the membership of their local organizations.

In May 1908, to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the first Woman's Rights convention in Seneca Falls, organizers invited Mary Church Terrell, the president of the National Association of Colored Women, to commemorate Frederick Douglass's work on behalf of the women's rights movement. Harriot Stanton Blatch represented her mother, Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Eliza Wright Osborne represented her mother, Martha Coffin Wright; and Fanny Garrison Villard represented Lucretia Mott. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Lillie Devereux Blake, Annis Ford Eastman, Maud Nathan, and Anna Garlin Spencer also attended the ceremony. The women installed a large bronze tablet dedicated to the first convention. Suffragists began the summer campaign with a trolley trip through the Mohawk Valley, traveled by automobile to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, held open-air meetings for working class women across New York State, and ended with an Erie Canal boat trip from Albany to Buffalo before returning to New York City. Having found the U.S. women's movement "boring" and "repelling," Blatch had arranged the ceremony as part of this summer-long effort to infuse energy into the movement.⁶⁸

Energy at the State Level

Sarah Garnet founded the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn in the late 1880s, and she eventually affiliated her organization with the National Association



The educator Sarah Jane Smith Thompson Garnet founded the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn in the late 1880s, continuing her work for woman suffrage until her death in 1911. The organization continued after her death. Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

of Colored Women's Clubs.⁶⁹ In the early years of the league members met in the back of her seamstress shop. Garnet argued that women had the "same human intellectual and spiritual capabilities as men," and that it opposed the tenets of democracy to deny women the right to vote.⁷⁰

Initially many black women had reservations about supporting woman suffrage, fearing that “involvement in public, political activities would compromise their femininity.”⁷¹ But over time, women became convinced that the vote would protect them as workers, allow them to improve education for their children and themselves, and challenge black men’s disenfranchisement. Increasing numbers of women found suffrage arguments convincing.⁷² Eventually, the growing membership required that meetings be held in a larger space at the Young Men’s Christian Association on Carlton Avenue.⁷³ Usually attendees enjoyed a musical performance, a report recounting the group’s accomplishments since the previous meeting, and suffrage speeches by members or special guests.

Because the Equal Suffrage League remained active for at least thirty years, it drew a number of eminent activists into its fold. Sarah Garnet’s social justice work ranged from her efforts to abolish race-based discrimination against black teachers to a commitment to equal rights for African American women relative to pay and suffrage.⁷⁴ Her younger sister, Dr. Susan Maria Smith McKinney Steward, helped to found the Equal Suffrage League and remained active in the suffrage and temperance movements.⁷⁵ In 1870, she had graduated as valedictorian from the New York Medical College for Women, founded by the staunch suffragist Dr. Clemence S. Lozier, a woman Steward considered a friend.⁷⁶ Addie Waites Hunton, better known for her anti-lynching work and her support of the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Young Women’s Christian Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association of Colored Women, and the Empire Federation of Women’s Clubs, regularly participated in league activities.⁷⁷ Alice Wiley Seay, the president of the Northeastern Federation of Women’s Clubs, also maintained her membership in the league.

Another prominent member of the Equal Suffrage League, Verina Harris Morton-Jones, practiced as a physician in addition to her suffrage activism and volunteer social work.⁷⁸ A member of the board of the NAACP, Morton-Jones also helped to found organizations such as the National Urban League, the Association for the Protection of Colored Women, and the Cosmopolitan Society of America, which sought to end discrimination in New York City public facilities.⁷⁹ In 1908, Morton-Jones founded the Lincoln Settlement House in Brooklyn, providing both social services and moral uplift.⁸⁰ Like Garnet, Morton-Jones joined the National Association of Colored Women, eventually serving as the director of its Mothers’ Club in Brooklyn. She also held membership in the Empire State Federation and the Northeastern Federation of Women’s Clubs.⁸¹

Under Morton-Jones, who assumed the presidency of the Equal Suffrage League by 1906, the organization continued its suffrage activism.

Morton-Jones presided over the meeting when the league honored Susan B. Anthony following her death that year.⁸² She invited Congressman William H. Calder, a native of Brooklyn, to speak at a meeting of the Equal Suffrage League at the Carlton Avenue Branch of the Young Men's Christian Association on March 28, 1908. As Morton-Jones presided, Garnet, then serving as suffrage superintendent of the National Association of Colored Women, presented an Equal Suffrage League petition "asking for the enactment of such legislation by Congress as will enforce the Fourteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution" to Calder, who "assured the assemblage" that he would do "all he could for justice to all citizens."⁸³ In the fall of 1908, Morton-Jones took up residency at Clark University in Atlanta.⁸⁴ She remained president of the Equal Suffrage League nevertheless and returned to Brooklyn for a reception given in her honor in June 1909. Sarah Garnet, who remained active in the league after her tenure ended, took over the league in the absence of its president.⁸⁵

Equal Suffrage League members continued to expand their activities to educate and recruit members. By February 1910, the league vice-president, Mary E. Eato, a teaching colleague of Sarah Garnet, presided over most of the Equal Suffrage League meetings and events.⁸⁶ The club hosted a celebration in honor of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass on February 16. According to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Attorney D. Macon Webster gave an "excellent" speech on suffrage for women before he gave his speech on Douglass, a man he had known personally. Some members read papers or poems. Alice Davis accompanied attendees singing woman suffrage songs. They also voted to accept the invitation of the Interurban Association, a New York City umbrella organization coordinating the efforts of twenty-three local clubs, to cooperate in its suffrage work. The league then elected Lydia C. Smith and Maria C. Lawton as delegates to attend state legislative proceedings in Albany on March 9.⁸⁷ During the March meeting, members sang suffrage songs before they heard an address given by Ida Craft, the president of the Kings County Organization of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association.⁸⁸ The league also celebrated the ninety-ninth anniversary of the birth of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at a public meeting in June 1910.⁸⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois spoke on the advancement of the race at another meeting of the Equal Suffrage League in April 1911.⁹⁰ These examples of suffrage activities highlight black women's commitment to woman suffrage.

Other prominent league members included Maritcha Rémond Lyons and Victoria Earle Matthews. Lyons, who grew up in a home that served as a station on the Underground Railroad, supported organizations such as the New York African Society for Mutual Relief and held membership in St. Philip's

Protestant Episcopal Church.⁹¹ Deeply involved in social reform, Lyons supported the Howard Colored Orphanage Asylum in Brooklyn as well as woman suffrage.⁹² Matthews, in spite of marriage and motherhood, found time to be active as a journalist and as a clubwoman.⁹³ Her writing, often in dialect in her early body of work, prompted the predominately white Women's National Press Association to invite her to join its ranks.⁹⁴ In addition to her leadership in the Woman's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn, Matthews cofounded the National Federation of Afro-American Women, serving as its first chairperson, and the National Association of Colored Women, where she acted as chair of the Executive Board and a national organizer.

Because of her activism at the national level, Matthews rose to become one of the most prominent and well-regarded black activists in the country.⁹⁵ When her sixteen-year-old son died, the tragedy impelled her to become more deeply involved in helping less fortunate people in New York City.⁹⁶ She founded the White Rose Mission to counter the dominance of the so-called employment agencies that forced naive young women into debt and "depravity."⁹⁷ Although many women, including Maritcha Lyons, supported Matthews's White Rose Mission, the activist and educator Frances Reynolds Keyser served the mission as Matthews's foremost assistant. Keyser's devotion to the mission freed Matthews to travel and speak extensively. As a result, Matthews played an important role in the "national African American women's club movement and interracial social reform efforts."⁹⁸ The networks of reform that she and other women built strengthened black women's suffrage activism and attracted new members.

Having worked with Sarah Garnet and Verina Morton-Jones, Irene L. Moorman, a businesswoman, eventually took over as a prominent leader for suffrage. Moorman represented the Metropolitan Business Women's Club in the Northeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.⁹⁹ At about the same time, she became more deeply involved in activism and reform, joining the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn in December 1907, when she spoke at a meeting held in tribute to the radical abolitionist John Brown.¹⁰⁰ Notable activist women such as Margaret Murray Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Mary Church Terrell visited Moorman in her Brooklyn office, signifying her increasingly respected role as a social activist.¹⁰¹ By 1908, members of the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs had elected her as treasurer. She rubbed elbows with Lyons as well as Keyser and spoke at fundraisers for Verina Morton-Jones's Lincoln Settlement House.¹⁰² In October 1910, she represented the Negro Men's and Women's Branch of the Political Equality Association at the forty-second annual New York State Woman Suffrage Association convention in Niagara Falls. There, Moorman

and representatives of the Harlem Club and the Wage Earners' League spoke about the ways that settlement house workers promoted suffrage and political equality in the city.¹⁰³

Other clubs supporting woman suffrage existed in the Greater New York area. For example, Maria C. Lawton, one of the presidents of the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs, also served as president of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Equality League of Kings County, founded in July 1910. In addition to the goal of securing the ballot, members expected to promote the advancement of the race and to give women a voice in government decision making. To help meet their objectives, members intended to reach out to young laborers in department stores to enlist their aid in the campaign.¹⁰⁴ New Rochelle hosted a Colored Women Suffrage League by 1915, offering events such as musicals to the public.¹⁰⁵ These organizational and membership efforts helped to increase the visibility of black women's suffrage involvement.

African American women and men often debated woman suffrage in their churches, lyceums, and elsewhere. Typically, a prominent leader like Frances Reynolds Keyser would read a paper about her views on woman suffrage, followed by presentations by other suffrage proponents.¹⁰⁶ The Brooklyn Literary Union, an "anchor for intellectual discussion and social reform," hosted lectures on a variety of topics, including woman suffrage.¹⁰⁷ Maritcha Lyons had once served the organization as vice-president, and the membership included several women who worked for woman suffrage.¹⁰⁸ Occasionally women and men would give their views on the opposing side of the issue, as happened in Brooklyn in April 1909. Anti-suffragists Sarah Brown, Miss A. A. Sampson, John D. Jones, and Mrs. Stuart articulated their views in opposition to women's enfranchisement at a meeting of the Equal Suffrage League at St. Mark's Lyceum.¹⁰⁹ The league sponsored mock conventions at the lyceum on two consecutive Thursdays that same month. Those who took part in the general discussion included Keyser, Lyons, Moorman, Wiley, Garnet, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.¹¹⁰ Several weeks later, people again discussed woman suffrage at the lyceum of the Metropolitan United African Methodist Episcopal Church.¹¹¹ The topic of suffrage drew large audiences of African American women and men in the city, as it did across the state.

Suffrage Clubs in Upstate New York

Victoria Earle Matthews served as a link between New York City and Rochester activists. She participated in the birthday celebration of Frederick Douglass, held on February 15, 1897 at Plymouth Church in Rochester, three years

after the death of the beloved statesman. Those paying tribute also discussed the erection of a monument to commemorate his work as an abolitionist who championed civil rights, including suffrage for women. Because of his skills as a mediator, women of both races could come together to celebrate his life. In a letter composed for the occasion, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, "He was the only man I ever knew who understood the degradation of the disfranchisement of women."¹¹² Those on the platform at the birthday celebration included Hester Jeffrey, the president of the local Colored Woman's Club; Susan B. Anthony, who read the letter from Stanton; and the Reverend Anna Howard Shaw of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Jean Brooks Greenleaf, the retired president of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association, and Matthews, representing the National Association of Colored Women and recently returned from a national tour "in the interests of women of her race," joined them at the dais.¹¹³

Introduced as the "speaker of the evening" by Anthony, Matthews immediately took umbrage with Stanton's suggestion that a fitting tribute to Douglass would be to build a schoolhouse or a tenement for the poor and with Stanton's criticism of the proposed monument as "so many useless shafts of marble and granite." Acknowledging that many African American children "are naked and ignorant and in need of schools," Matthews argued that it was important for the black community have a person to whom "they can point as an example, an incentive, to their children . . . [to] stimulate a higher type of the youth of our race."¹¹⁴ Her friend and colleague Frances Reynolds Keyser described Matthews as "enthusiastic, forceful . . . [with an] eager, restless spirit" that often caused her to seem intimidating or to be misunderstood.¹¹⁵ Characteristically, Matthews dared to contradict a revered white women's rights activist publicly.

Matthews's companion on the platform, Hester C. Jeffrey, also devoted her life to civil rights activism and the uplift of her race. Jeffrey was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1842, to Robert and Martha Whitehurst Smith, both free people. At her childhood home, a station on the Underground Railroad, she met William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, and John Brown.¹¹⁶ She married Jerome Jeffrey, a political activist who stored Frederick Douglass's *North Star* printing press in the basement of the Favor Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Rochester.¹¹⁷ Religiously devout, she attended services at the First Unitarian Church, ministered by the Reverend William Channing Gannett, after she and her husband moved to Rochester. Her church attendance stimulated a friendship with the minister's wife, Mary Thorn Lewis Gannett, who, like her husband, actively supported suffrage. Jeffrey also worshipped at the Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.¹¹⁸



Hester Jeffrey founded the Susan B. Anthony Club in Rochester. Activism for woman suffrage complemented her dedication and efforts for racial uplift. Image is from *An Authentic History of the Douglass Monument* by J. W. Thompson (1903).

Jeffrey's leadership in a number of organizations and her commitment to social and political activism kept her at the forefront of black women's club work in Rochester from the 1890s into the 1910s. Alongside colleagues such as Victoria Earle Matthews, she functioned as an integral member of a broader, statewide community of black activist women.¹¹⁹ Jeffrey founded organizations such as the Climbers to encourage "both improvement and protest, combined in the concept of 'uplift.'" ¹²⁰ As the most highly educated black woman in Rochester and a role model, she funded a scholarship for young women to attend the Mechanics Institute in Rochester (now the Rochester Institute of Technology) through the Hester C. Jeffrey Club of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.¹²¹ In 1901, she helped establish a nine-member branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union; the president, Mrs. A. K. Mason, and most members hailed from the Zion Church.¹²² In addition to her church work, Jeffrey held a position as an organizer for the National Association of Colored Women; she once presented an address on the "Pioneers in Woman's Suffrage" to its membership.¹²³ She also served as organizer for and president of the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs.

Hester Jeffrey supported woman suffrage even before she met a colleague of Susan B. Anthony sometime in the 1890s, and through her met Anthony. Although Anthony is often criticized for her "willingness to accept racist allies and racist arguments in the name of political expediency," locally she supported the political and social aims of the Rochester-area African American community, clearly recognizing their right to a political voice.¹²⁴ Jeffrey was not the only black woman to work closely with Anthony. Ida B. Wells-Barnett stayed in the Anthony home during a visit to Rochester. When Anthony's secretary refused to do some clerical work for Wells-Barnett, Anthony fired her.¹²⁵ Jeffrey had a place on the platform during a mass meeting to protest Negro disenfranchisement held at the Central Presbyterian Church in Rochester on April 28, 1903, when Anthony spoke about the similarities between the situations of white women and African Americans.¹²⁶ Jeffrey accepted Anthony's invitation to join the Rochester Political Equality Club; she steadfastly sought to bridge the divide between black and white suffrage activists.

In 1902, the tireless Jeffrey organized Rochester's Susan B. Anthony Club for Colored Women, serving as its first president. The club met to discuss the importance of obtaining woman suffrage but also sought to get young black women admitted to the University of Rochester.¹²⁷ At the 1903 celebration of Susan B. Anthony's birthday, club members joined other "special guests" in presenting Anthony with an enamel green and white pin in the shape of a four-leaf clover bearing the initials of their club.¹²⁸ The club drew many

members from the Zion Church, including Lucy J. Sprague, a colleague of Jeffrey in her church work as well as her suffrage and civil rights activism.¹²⁹

Jeffrey also attended the New York State Woman Suffrage Association annual convention in Rochester in 1905, representing the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs and her suffrage club. Jeffrey's report at the convention focused on the club movement among black women, including "mothers' clubs, domestic science clubs, and literary clubs," and black women's work in "hospitals, homes, and social settlements."¹³⁰ In discussing the work of the Susan B. Anthony Club, Jeffrey shared examples of activism, including visiting the financially needy, beyond just suffrage-related work.¹³¹ That same year, Jeffrey invited Anthony to speak at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Rochester to celebrate the centennial of William Lloyd Garrison's birth. There, the eighty-five-year-old Anthony presented her last public speech.¹³²

The only black woman to eulogize Anthony at the funeral following her death on March 13, 1906, Jeffrey expressed her profound grief to the other mourners. Speaking for members of her race, she pledged "to devote our time and energies to the work thou hast left us to do."¹³³ Two years later, Jeffrey and other members of the Susan B. Anthony Club oversaw the installation of a stained glass window commemorating Anthony's work for woman suffrage at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the first of several memorials to commemorate the esteemed suffrage leader.¹³⁴ Anthony's is one among eight memorial windows installed in the church; others commemorate Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Lucy Sprague. Jean Brooks Greenleaf also attended the dedication, presenting a speech entitled "Susan B. Anthony as a Window."¹³⁵

The National American Woman Suffrage Association also commemorated Susan B. Anthony on February 15, 1907, at its annual convention. Fannie Barrier Williams, the first black graduate of Brockport Normal School (now the College of Brockport, State University of New York), spoke in tribute to Anthony. She pointed out that Anthony "never wavered, never doubted, never compromised" in her "unremitting struggle for liberty, more liberty, and complete liberty for negro men and women in chains and for white women in their helpless subjugation to man's laws."¹³⁶ Williams frequently spoke and wrote on behalf of black women's intellectual and cultural advancement. Many of the suffrage and rights activists of both races possessed extraordinary reform energy.

A "whirlwind in her work for justice," Mary Barnett Talbert of Buffalo involved herself in an array of activist organizations including the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Association of Colored

Women, the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the Anti-Lynching Crusaders. She and other members of the Phyllis Wheatley Club, founded in Buffalo in 1899, helped to support Harriet Tubman and her charity projects in Auburn, and they facilitated the development of a branch of the NAACP in Buffalo in 1915.¹³⁷ During World War I, Talbert would work for peace at the international level.¹³⁸ Reports of the activities of the Buffalo Phyllis Wheatley Club appeared regularly in "Buffalo Briefs," a column in the *New York Age*, highlighting the connections among black women throughout New York.¹³⁹

New York black women continued to champion woman suffrage to their audiences, further developing their political activism and sometimes having a lot of fun in the process. For example, in Buffalo, in 1910, Annie Thomas of the Anihita Club and William Powell of Alpha Beta Sigma debated the "Enfranchisement of Women," eliciting enough interest from the audience that they later presented a playlet, "Why We Never Married," under the supervision of Mrs. H. H. Lewis, director of the choir at the First Methodist Church.¹⁴⁰ The performance suggested that the popular suffrage debate had devolved into a battle of the sexes rather than a discussion of the merits of women entering politics. Contingents of black women spoke about, wrote about, and debated political rights, as part of a viable and vibrant movement encompassing an extensive network in support of woman suffrage across the state.

Woman Suffrage in Jeopardy

Irene Moorman administered the Afro-American branch of the Political Equality Association, with its headquarters at 83 West One Hundred and Thirty-Fourth Street, New York, from its founding. Following the meeting called by Alva Belmont in February 1910, Moorman had presided and introduced all of the speakers. The "comfortably furnished" rooms of the suffrage branch, "well supplied with suffrage literature," remained open in the evenings of the fall and winter. There, women and men met for "various lecture courses and study classes in the season." If the group expanded, Belmont promised to move it to a "regular suffrage settlement house."¹⁴¹ Moorman took an increasingly visible and more dynamic part in activities related to woman suffrage from this point on. On December 8, 1910, for example, as the organizer of the Political Equality Association, she presided over a Literary League meeting focused on woman suffrage. Moorman herself "waxed eloquent" on the subject as she introduced speakers Nettie A. Odell, Mrs. O. P. Morgan, and Harriet May Mills, the president of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association. Following the women speakers, Hubert Henry Harrison, the president of the Liberty League, and D. E. Tobias, a

British pan-Africanist who wrote about the status of blacks in the United States, spoke in favor of woman suffrage. Apparently the speechmaking continued well into the night, and the “evening was declared a grand success for the ‘cause.’”¹⁴²

New York suffragists also took advantage of travel opportunities to speak and learn about suffrage. In July 1911, Sarah Garnet traveled to London to attend the first Universal Races Congress, where her sister, Susan McKinney Steward, presented a paper entitled “The Afro-American Woman,” highlighting the condition of black women in the United States. The league held a reception for Garnet in her home on September 7, 1911, with music and poetry. Garnet distributed suffrage literature she had gathered at the congress to members of the league. In addition to Steward’s rereading of the paper she had presented at the congress, both W.E.B. Du Bois, who had also attended the congress, and Addie Hunton spoke on related topics. Many prominent people attended, including college president and professor John Hope and his wife, Lugenia Burns, from Atlanta; Verina Morton-Jones; Maritcha Lyons; and other members of the Equal Suffrage League.¹⁴³ Garnet died within twenty-four hours of that reception, and Brooklyn lost one of its foremost activists.

Black women’s suffrage groups in New York encountered other difficulties as they sought to strengthen their connections to the broader woman suffrage movement. By October 1911, Alva Belmont had apparently lost interest in the branch headed by Irene Moorman. Moorman remarked on the club’s “loneliness” and members’ desire to “ally themselves with a good live suffrage organization.”¹⁴⁴ Sarah Mulrooney Ruhlin, the president of the Women’s Progressive Political League, took over the Negro branch of the Political Equality Club that month.¹⁴⁵ Then, in a March 1913 column for the *New York Age*, the journalist May Martel demanded that more black women participate in the suffrage struggle and criticized those who led the clubs but had been chosen more for a “glib tongue and suave manner” than for a commitment to the suffrage movement. She claimed that the organization under Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont had “gone to pieces.” A thinly-veiled criticism of Moorman, the column seemed to presage a dearth of suffrage club reporting in the black newspapers.¹⁴⁶

In spite of less publicity concerning their activities, quite a few black women retained their commitment to woman suffrage. Annie K. Lewis and the “stepladder speaker” and socialist Helen Holman led suffragists in Harlem, a place where the New York State Woman Suffrage Party estimated at least 15,000 African American women would be eligible to vote once enfranchised.¹⁴⁷ Holman contended that “woman’s work has moved from the home to the factories, to the trusts. We must therefore enter politics to rear our race with health. If women don’t know any more about politics than the average man, I’ll guarantee we will get along.”¹⁴⁸ The Empire State

Federation of Women's Clubs continued to hold meetings throughout the suffrage campaign. Maria Lawton hosted Mary Talbert, Mrs. Charlotte Dett of Niagara Falls, and Mrs. M. A. Lee of Rochester during a July 1914 federation meeting.¹⁴⁹ Lyda Newman worked through the Negro Suffrage Headquarters in Manhattan, while Annie K. Lewis and the Colored Women's Suffrage Club of New York City led the "final push in Harlem."¹⁵⁰ The club had been meeting right along, hosting suffrage speakers—often white women, such as when Mrs. H. Edward Dreier and Mrs. D. W. Barker addressed club members at Carlton Hall in 1914.¹⁵¹

Black women's suffrage activism began in the years after the Civil War and continued unabated throughout the battle for women's voting rights. Black women leaders, often forerunners in their professions, dominated efforts for suffrage in New York. Seldom free to concentrate on just one aspect of racial uplift, they sought political rights and racial equality. The historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn contends that black women "could not afford to dismiss class or race in favor of sex as the major cause of oppression among Black women."¹⁵² Far too many issues required their attention, and they could not promote racial uplift nor ignore racism and economic woes in the sole interest of enfranchisement. Their club work helped them to "challenge institutions in society that restricted black rights."¹⁵³ Beyond their activism as members of the Equal Suffrage League, the Susan B. Anthony Club, or other suffrage organizations, black women incorporated suffrage goals into virtually all aspects of their activism.

Although some black and white women tried to integrate the movement, which would have added greater strength to the woman suffrage coalition in New York State, the groups for the most part remained separate from each other.¹⁵⁴ Despite their frustration with racist aspects of white women's organizations, black women usually cooperated when white women made overtures, while remaining loyal to the goal of racial uplift. Black women forged inroads, connecting to white women's suffrage activism, by establishing relationships with white suffrage activists, affiliating their organizations wherever possible, attending white women's conventions, and involving themselves in state-level legislative efforts. However, black women refused to accept marginalization. Fannie Barrier Williams counseled women against discouragement by writing that black women "are furnishing material for the first chapter and shall some day recite the discouragements endured, the oppositions conquered, and the triumph of their faith in themselves."¹⁵⁵ In the meantime, black women's suffrage contributions were critical to the ultimate victory of women's enfranchisement.