

The Gunnison Valley **VOTER**

Newsletter of the League of Women Voters of the Gunnison Valley

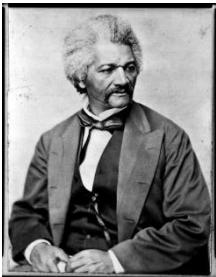
Between Two Worlds: The Black Woman's Path to the Vote

Six Minutes of Suffrage

By Shary Templeton

During this 100th Anniversary year of the Women's Right to Vote, we celebrate the extensive and hard fought accomplishments of our historic suffrage sisters. To look back with accuracy though, we discover a different path for the Black women of our country, that history has often been brushed over, with broad white washed strokes.

The famous 1848 Seneca Falls Convention that often marks the beginnings of our American Woman's Movement was remarkably a white convention. Despite many substantial black female leaders active at that time, such as Hattie Purvis and the former slave Sojourner Truth, no black women were invited and only one black man, the formidable orator and journalist, Frederick Douglass. If we are not together at the table, cultural interface and understanding refuses to show up. As an abolitionist and life-long supporter of women's rights, Frederick Douglass was one of the most famous speakers of the century and so sought after by the Women's Rights movement. Were it not for his powerful oration at the convention, it is widely believed, that the resolution to demand the vote for women might have failed.



Frederick Douglass, Abolitionist
and Women's Rights Activist
Photo Courtesy of
Library of Congress

Many suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony were aligned with Douglass, sharing many beliefs in common such as "in respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim as men", Douglass wrote in the North Star. Elaine Weiss in her book *The Woman's Hour*, points to the early cooperation between blacks and whites as a strength of

The Women's Rights movement.

But a rift occurred when "Stanton and Anthony descended into depths of vile racist rhetoric," as Elaine Weiss declares. Lucy Stone, another women's suffrage leader, took strong opposition to their verbal racism, fueled by the possibility of the Black men getting the vote ahead of White women. The US Women's Rights movement was closely allied with the antislavery movement, and before the Civil War, Black and White abolitionists and suffragists joined together in common cause. But with the proposal of the Fifteenth Amendment, which would enfranchise Black men but not women, interracial and mixed-gender coalitions began to deteriorate. Suffragists had to choose between insisting on universal rights or accepting the priority of Black male suffrage.

The split in the suffrage movement over the Fifteenth Amendment prompted Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony to sever ties with Black women's pursuit of the vote, insisting that Black men should not receive the vote before white women. "The proposed Amendment for 'manhood suffrage', not only rouses woman's prejudices against the negro, but on the other hand his contempt and hostility toward her as an equal...creates an antagonism between black men and all women, that will culminate in fearful outrages on womanhood, especially in the southern states", Stanton wrote, in opposition the 15th Amendment, while using racialized language.

Mary Church Terrell
circa 1880
Photo Courtesy of the Library
of Congress



Black women suffragists were pulled in two different directions. Black men wanted their support in fighting racial discrimination and White women wanted them to help change women's inferior status. Neither group fully understood the unique challenges of the African American woman. Black women continued to be active for the movement, but were cast apart, were asked to march separately from the White women at parades and marches and barred from some events.

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In response to these developments Black women formed their own political organizations. In 1896 the National Association of Colored Women was formed, with Mary Church Terrell as its first president.

In addition to serving as President of the National Association of Colored Women, Terrell also supported the Black woman's right to vote. She picketed the White House demanding women's suffrage. Her involvement in the early civil rights movement began in 1892 when her friend was lynched by a white mob in Memphis, TN. Along with Ida B. Wells, Terrell brought attention to the atrocity of lynching.

Painting of Ida B. Wells,
courtesy of Library
of Congress



In 1913 Wells formed the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, the first Black women's suffrage organization. She traveled to Washington to protest Woodrow Wilson's inauguration and to support Women's Rights. Her story and those of many other Black women who protested outside the major organizations can be explored in historian Susan Ware's book *Why They Marched: Untold Stories of the Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote*.

In 2020 Ida B. Wells was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism, honoring her "outstanding courageous reporting" in the post-Civil War south. As the owner of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, Wells had frequently called out racial injustice.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary also became involved in the women's suffrage movement. She was a member of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and spoke at the NWSA's 1878 convention. She also advocated for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments at a House Judiciary



Photo of Mary Ann Shadd Cary.
Courtesy of National Archives
of Canada, C-029977

Committee hearing. While Cary spoke in support of the Fifteenth Amendment, she was also critical of it as it did not give women the right to vote.

Charlotte Forten Grimke'
Courtesy of the New York
Public Library



Charlotte Forten Grimké', born free to activist parents in 1837 was educated by private tutors, as her father did not want her to attend public school. In the 1850s she published several anti-slavery poems calling for Black women to participate in the abolitionist crusade. She devoted her life to teaching and educated many Black women, effectively combatting the literacy tests requirements. She helped found the National Association of Colored Women.

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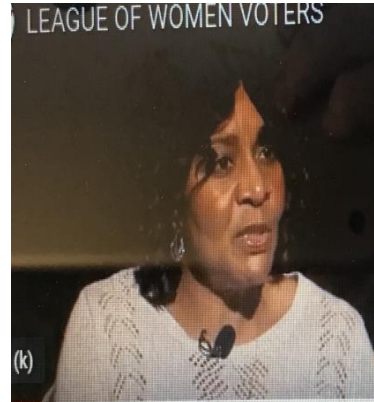
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Several other amendments prior to the famous 19th are worthy of note. As a very brief overview, The **13th Amendment**, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery. The **14th Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States—including former slaves—and guaranteed all citizens “equal protection of the laws.” The **15th Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution granted African American men the right to vote by declaring that 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.”

Although ratified in 1870, the promise of the 15th Amendment would not be fully realized for almost a century. There were also 50 years between the 15th and the 19th Amendment. Passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and **ratified** on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote.

After the 19th Amendment Black women voted in some elections, and in some states and even held political offices. However, many states passed laws that discriminated against African Americans and limited their freedoms. For the Black women, this right to vote became one of obstruction especially in the South where various methods had the same effect as the Iron Curtain. These obstructions were used to intimidate and suppress the vote. Establishing all White primaries, levying poll taxes as high as a week's wage and administering literacy tests were all used in Southern states to effectively disenfranchise and suppress the Black vote.

It would take the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 before the majority of African Americans in the South were registered to vote.



Annie Johnson Benifield,
Professor and Vice
President of Voter
Services for
LWV Houston

Photo Courtesy of
Houston LWV website.

Today Dr. Annie Johnson Benifield, a current member of the League of Women Voters in Texas, says that Black voters continue the struggle by facing the Texas voters ID law and the voter purge that removed 95,000 people from the rolls. Dr. Benifield says the next 100 years will be different from the last.

“In old photographs of the League of Women Voters a century ago, you see exclusively White women.” But today, we serve alongside Johnson Benifield and many others in the League Of Women Voters, empowering all women, Black and White.