

SUFFRAGE.RACE.POWER: *Changing the Narrative*

Unerase African American Women as Suffrage Movement Leaders

By Cornelia Swinson
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The year 2019 represents the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment – the year that women won the right to vote. African American women, are eager to see if remembrances are inclusive of the real history of the fight for the vote. Will the role of Black women leaders be "unerased" and appear in celebrations? This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to *Change the Narrative* around the role of African American women in the right to vote.

The history of the Women's Suffragist movement is governed by a popular misconception of the struggle for women's rights today. It credits White women with starting a campaign of diverse origins – while rendering nearly invisible the contributions of Black women who labored in the suffragists' vineyard. It looks away from the racism embedded in the fight for the women's vote in the years after the Civil War. History documents white women suffragist heroes who publicly expressed bigoted views of African-American men in the period just after the Civil War. As a result, the suffrage struggle itself took on a similar view, compromising the interests of African-American women when politically expedient to do so. This betrayal of trust opened a rift between Black and White feminists that persists today. After the Civil War, Black and White women had different views of why the right to vote was essential. White women were seeking the vote as a symbol of uniformity with white men. Black women were seeking the ballot for themselves and their men, as a means of empowering Black communities besieged by the reign of racial terror that erupted after.

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." Fifty years after the 15th Amendment passed, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted women the right to vote - prohibiting the states and the federal government from denying the right to vote to citizens of the United States based on sex. Racism intensified among suffragists as they neared their goals. African-American luminaries were deeply and publicly engaged, both women and men.

The roles of Philadelphia women in both the anti-slavery and suffragist movements were indeed significant. Their efforts to aid enslaved Africans in their pursuit for freedom and literary education was instrumental in supporting the abolishment of enslavement. Women acted as conduits for cultural, economic, and social assimilation not only for enslaved Africans but also for themselves since neither freed Blacks or women had civil or legal rights. Freedom, justice, and civil rights were issues that brought individuals together in the creation of new organizations such as the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The partnerships between Black and White women were essential if both movements were to realize actual results. All

activities related to both causes were viewed as significant, and African American women provided what they could, based on their circumstances.

As the nation celebrates, 2020 represents an opportunity for the Suffragist Movement to unpack a historic racial colliding context - and in the spirit and integrity of the movement – to embrace and include the leadership of African American women substantially in its history.

Will the Suffragist Movement unerase African American women leaders? Will it elevate African American women onto the national platform that acknowledges their contributions, which led to the hard-won right to vote? ***Our time is now to change the narrative.***

Some examples of amazing African American women leaders are well known and some may not be well known.



Grace Bustill Douglass was an African-American abolitionist and women's rights advocate. Her family was one of the first prominent free Black families in the United States. A Quaker, she was born in Burlington, New Jersey, into a distinguished Black activist family - parents Cyrus Bustill, Englishman and Black Quaker, and Elizabeth Morey Bustill, a Delaware Indian woman. Grace's father was the son of a slave who baked bread for George Washington's army during the War for American Independence. Cyrus Bustill was manumitted before he got married from his Quaker owner, Thomas Prior, in 1769. The Bustills were active in free Black communities in New Jersey and Philadelphia, and Grace attended a school for Black children in Philadelphia. As a young adult, Grace married the Rev. Robert Douglass, a Presbyterian minister, and

barber, and they settled in Philadelphia. Douglass, along with family friend James Forten, opened up a school of their own. This school, along with private tutors, was where Sarah, Robert, and their other siblings all received their extensive educations. Sarah went on to become a famous abolitionist and teacher like her mother, and Robert was a well-known portrait painter.

Grace and her only daughter, Sarah Mapps Douglass, embraced the Society of Friends and regularly attended the Arch Street Meeting. Although White Quakers had denounced slavery and were fervent abolitionists, many held to segregationist customs. At the Arch Street Meeting House, Blacks and Whites sat in separate sections.

Grace was active among female abolitionists in Philadelphia. She was a founding member of the bi-racial Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (1833). She served as vice president of the Convention of Women held in New York in 1837 and Philadelphia in 1838. It was from her life of privilege that Douglass decided to dedicate her life to helping less fortunate

people. Douglass and her daughter Sarah met and developed a close friendship with Lucretia Mott and the Grimké sisters, Angelina and Sarah. This friendship eventually led them to create the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society after they were not permitted to become members of the Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia because they were women. The Society was involved in different social issues and the abolitionist movement. They fought against slavery and racial and gender discrimination. The Society's constitution was signed in December 1833 by 18 women, including Douglass. The Society raised money, spread anti-slavery texts, and started anti-slavery petitions in Washington, D.C. The Society also supported the then-radical idea that women should be allowed to vote, speak in public, and become leaders. Due in large part to Grace and Sarah Douglass' dedication to educating African-American children, the Society formed an education committee, which looked after educational facilities for Black children around the Philadelphia area. After the 13th and 15th Amendments were ratified in 1865 and 1870, respectively, the Society was dissolved by the members, since they believed that their goal of ending slavery had been achieved.



Harriet Forten Purvis was the wife of Robert Purvis, an outstanding abolitionist and the daughter of James Forten, a wealthy Black businessman. Her parents helped found and funded six abolitionist organizations. Many abolitionists who visited Philadelphia stayed in the Forten home. Harriet married African American Robert Purvis from South Carolina. Like her father, Purvis was a wealthy man, an abolitionist, and an anti-slavery lecturer. Harriet and Robert worked together on their shared interests, activism, and reform efforts. Early in their marriage, Harriet aided runaways traveling through Philadelphia. Harriet was a member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and, while pregnant, attended the Women's Anti-Slavery Convention in New York in 1837. In 1838, the convention was held in Philadelphia at the new Pennsylvania Hall, which was built by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. The hall was destroyed when it was set on fire by a group of pro-slavery people. The convention then convened at teacher and abolitionist, Sarah Pugh's school. Black and White women participated as equals in the organization, which was rare at the time. It also generated reactions among people who feared a mixture of the races, or miscegenation and were generally concerned about women's intervention in public affairs. After the 13th Amendment was passed, Purvis continued her efforts to improve the rights of African Americans. The Female Antislavery Society continued to meet and in September 1866 to discuss the status of the South. Robert and Harriet became involved with the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League and the American Equal Rights Association and served on the executive committee. She spoke for the right to vote for women and Blacks and against segregation. Harriet, Robert, and Octavius Catto, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, worked to desegregate streetcars in Philadelphia, resulting in an 1867 state law that provided equal access to public vehicles for all races.



Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was the child of two free Black parents and was born in Baltimore, Maryland. Bright and talented, Harper started writing poetry in her youth. She kept on writing while working for a Quaker family after finishing school. Harper's employer encouraged her to spend her free time reading and writing. After losing her mother at a young age, Harper was raised by an aunt. She attended a school for African-American children run by her uncle, Reverend William Watkins. She became active in the Anti-Slavery movement by using her gift for language as a poet and lecturer, advocating for abolition and education in her speeches and publications. Her first poetry collection, *Forest Leaves*, was published around 1845. She moved to Ohio five years later to teach domestic skills, such as sewing, at Union Seminary. The school was run by leading abolitionist John

Brown. Harper became dedicated to the abolitionist cause a few years later after her home state of Maryland passed a Fugitive Slave Law. This law allowed even free Blacks, such as Harper, to be arrested and sold into slavery. The delivery of Harper's public speech, "Education and the Elevation of the Colored Race," resulted in a two-year lecture tour for the Anti-Slavery Society. Harper taught Sunday School at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church. Harper became Superintendent of the Colored Section of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union and helped to found the National Association of Colored Women.



Mary Ann Shadd Cary was the eldest child of thirteen children born to Harriet and Abraham Shadd, established leaders in the free Black community. Her father was a prominent figure in the Underground Railroad and a subscription agent for William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. It was against the law to educate Blacks in Delaware. Her parents took her to Pennsylvania, placing her in a Quaker boarding school at age 10. Later, she returned to Wilmington to open a private school for Blacks. Mary Ann married Thomas F. Cary of Toronto,

Canada, and they had two children. They lived in Chatham, Canada, where Mary worked on her weekly paper, *The Provincial Freeman*, and taught school. She met with Philadelphia's William Still, a chronicler of the most effective Underground Railroad systems in the country. Still acted as an agent for Shadd's *Provincial Freedman* newspaper and Canada's other Black newspaper publication. Mary moved to Washington D.C., where she served as a recruiting officer for the Union Army, promoting Black Nationalism as defined by Martin R. Delaney after the Civil War. In Washington, Mary established a school for Black children and attended Howard University Law School, becoming the first Black female attorney in the United States upon graduation. As a lawyer, she worked for the right to vote and was one of few women to

receive the right to vote in federal elections. She organized the Colored Women's Progressive Franchise in 1880, which was dedicated to women's rights.



Sarah Bass Allen was born into slavery in 1764 in Virginia's Isle of Wight County but was brought to Philadelphia when she was eight years old. By 1800, she had obtained her freedom. Sarah Bass Allen, the second wife of AME Church founder Richard Allen, was characterized as "a pillar [of] the building, a mother in Israel" whose work enabled Richard Allen and his fellow ministers to carry on their work. She actively supported Allen's activism and assisted in the work of the AME Church. With her husband, Sarah helped runaway slaves, by hiding, feeding, and clothing them in their home and the church. The unkempt appearance of the ministers at the AME Church's first annual conference inspired her to organize the Daughters of the Conference, officially

designated in 1827. These AME women mended the garments of the ministers, gave them food, and provided them with the material support they needed to survive. The work of the Daughters of the Conference continued long after Sarah's death. Today it is called the Sarah Allen Mite Missionary Society



Sarah Mapps Douglass was the daughter of Robert Douglass, Sr., a prosperous hairdresser from the island of St. Kitts, West Indies, and Grace Bustill, a milliner. Her mother was the daughter of Cyrus Bustill, a Black Quaker and a prominent member of Philadelphia's African-American community. In 1819 Grace Douglass and philanthropist James Forten established a school for Black children, where "their children might be better taught than . . . in any of the schools . . . open to [their] people." Sarah Douglass enjoyed life among Philadelphia's elite. She was well educated by a private tutor and taught for a while in New York City. She returned to Philadelphia, where she operated a successful private school for Black women. Being reared as a Quaker, Douglass was alienated by the blatant racial prejudice of many White

Quakers. Although she adopted Quaker dress and enjoyed the friendship of Quaker anti-slavery advocates like Lucretia Mott, she was highly critical of the sect. In 1831 she helped organize the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, a society whose members met regularly for "mental feasts." In 1833 Douglass joined an interracial group of women abolitionists in establishing the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and was active in the Anti-Slavery Movement at the national level. She befriended the Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, and the trio challenged racial segregation in Philadelphia.

Sarah attended the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in New York City. She was also in attendance the following year when the convention met at Philadelphia's ill-fated Pennsylvania Hall, which was burned down by an anti-abolitionist mob. At this convention, she was elected treasurer. Sarah became a delegate at the third and final Women's Anti-Slavery Convention in 1839. On the eve of the Civil War, she founded the Sarah M. Douglass Literary Circle. From 1853 to 1877, Douglass served as a teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth (now Cheyney University). During this time, she acquired basic medical training at the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania and at Pennsylvania Medical University, where she studied female health and hygiene--subjects on which she lectured in evening classes and at meetings of the Banneker Institute. In 1855 she married African-American Episcopal clergyman William Douglass. Throughout her abolitionist career, Sarah served as recording secretary, librarian, and manager for the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. She contributed to both the *Liberator* and the *Anglo-African Magazine*, became a fundraiser for the Black press, gave numerous public lectures, and served as vice-president of the Women's Branch of the Freedmen's Aid Society.



Isabella Baumfree "Sojourner Truth," was born a slave in 1797, in Ulster County, a Dutch settlement in upstate New York. She spoke only Dutch (German) until she was sold from her family around the age of nine. As an abolitionist and traveling preacher, Isabella understood the importance of fighting for freedom. After her conversion to Christianity, she took the name Sojourner Truth. This new name reflected a new mission to spread the word of God and speak out against slavery. As a women's rights activist, Truth faced additional burdens that White women did not have, plus the challenge of combating a suffrage movement that did not want to be linked to anti-slavery causes, believing it might hurt their cause. Yet, Truth prevailed, traveling

thousands of miles making persuasive speeches against slavery and for women's suffrage. Joining a growing list of Black women abolitionists, Isabella lectured before numerous audiences. She was also friends with leading White abolitionists such as James and Lucretia Mott. She spoke at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, located at 619 N. 6th Street. In 1870, she began campaigning for the federal government to provide former slaves with land in the "New West."



Harriet Tubman was born a slave about 1820, the daughter of Benjamin and Harriet Green. At first, called Araminta, she was later called Harriet. At about 12 years of age, she was struck on the head by a metal weight thrown by an angry overseer. The blow resulted in a fracture of Harriet's skull, which caused her to faint or fall

asleep several times a day. Harriet said she experienced visions of the future during many of these "spells." Some people believe that Harriet's "visions" helped her avoid being captured. She considered the dreams she had during these spells to be religious visions, and her religiosity was a guiding reason for assisting slaves to escape. In the 1840s, she married John Tubman but was later separated at the death of her master and was sold. It was then that she became even more determined to have power over her destiny, and in 1849 she followed the North Star to Philadelphia, where she established contacts with free Blacks and Quakers. Soon, she was on the move again, making her way back to Maryland to free other slaves. Harriet's efforts became so successful that the Legislature of Maryland placed a reward of \$12,000 on her head while slave owners privately banded together and put up \$40,000 for her capture. In 1857, Harriet made a very personal trip to Maryland and carried her mother and father to freedom. Her parents were conducted by Underground Railroad to Auburn, New York, where she would make her permanent home. While living in Auburn, she worked with women's rights groups, raised money for schools, and helped in her church

In 1863 Harriet was the first woman to lead a combat assault of 150 Union soldiers on a raid in South Carolina; the troops freed 750 slaves and destroyed enemy supplies. In June 1908, Harriet opened the Harriet Tubman Home. This charity shelter helped older and ill African Americans in New York. Harriet Tubman died while living in the Harriet Tubman Home. Despite her unselfish service to others, including her service to the U.S. Army during the Civil War, Harriet was not granted a service person's pension until after her death nearly a hundred years later. It was not until the 21st century that her success and value as a working woman, former slave, Conductor on the Underground Railroad and Union scout during the Civil War that she was granted a pension due to the legislative advocacy of Hillary Rodham Clinton. She was buried with full military honors.



Charlotte Forten Grimke was born a free Black in 1837, in Philadelphia, into the Forten- Purvis family. Her mother worked with the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and her father and brother-in-law were members of the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee and Anti-Slavery group and Assistance Network. So, it was no surprise that Charlotte followed in her family's footsteps, becoming an activist and civil rights leader.

In 1854 Charlotte's father sent her to Salem, Massachusetts to attend the Higginson Grammar School in 1854, where she was the only non-White out of 200 students. Charlotte loved to read and studied history, geography, drawing, and cartography. After her schooling in 1856, Charlotte became a teacher and a member of the Salem, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. She taught school, but after two years of battling tuberculosis, she was forced to return to Philadelphia. While in Salem, her poetry works were published in various anti-

slavery publications such as the *Liberator* and *Anglo African* magazine. She also traveled to and taught in South Carolina, where she became the first Black teacher involved in the Civil War's Sea Islands mission. She chronicled this time in her essays, "Life on the Sea Islands," which were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the May and June issues of 1864. She held national influence recruiting teachers in the late 1860s, and on July 3, 1873, she became a clerk at the U.S. Treasury. Charlotte married Francis J. Grimke when she was 41. Their marriage produced one child who unfortunately died as an infant. She believed Black people could achieve great things under extraordinary circumstances and just wanted fair and equal treatment for Blacks.



Caroline LeCount, an African American Civil Rights leader and educational reformer, was born in South Philadelphia in 1846. Caroline's father, James, was a carpenter and undertaker and was likely involved in the Underground Railroad. Caroline remembered her father hiding escaped slaves in coffins. LeCount attended the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY), now known as **Cheyney University of Pennsylvania**, where she was trained to become a teacher. In 1865, she began teaching at the Ohio Street School in Philadelphia. The Ohio Street School was founded initially by fellow ICY graduate Cordelia Atwell Jennings, who originally opened the school in her home for African American students. In 1864, the school was officially incorporated into the

Philadelphia Public School system as the Ohio Street Unclassified School. The school received several accolades, and in 1867, Caroline LeCount became the principal. During this time, LeCount advocated for educational reform for African American students and teachers in Philadelphia's segregated school system. LeCount is also remembered for her advocacy against streetcar segregation in Philadelphia. She and others, including Octavius V. Catto and William Still, facilitated community petitions and lobbying until Pennsylvania passed state law banning streetcar segregation in 1867. Three days after the new law was passed, a streetcar operator refused to let LeCount ride. In response, LeCount notified a police officer who fined and arrested the driver. The *Christian Recorder*, the newspaper of Philadelphia's Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, reported Le Count's name among those who had been forcibly ejected from streetcars between 1862 and 1867 (Harriet Tubman and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were also forced off). Many of the women who confronted segregation orders were involved in wartime relief work that focused on supplying and caring for soldiers of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The victory belonged not only to Le Count but also to the Network of African American women's groups she worked with groups that had identified the freedom of movement as one of their most significant obstacles to success. The overlapping network of organizations served the needs of escaped slaves, wartime refugees, and Black soldiers. It included the Ladies' Union Association of Philadelphia, the Soldiers' Relief Association, the Colored Women's Sanitary Commission, and the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association

Le Count went on to become engaged to civil rights leader Octavius Catto who was murdered in 1871 for encouraging African Americans to exercise their right to vote on the day an interracial election was held in Philadelphia. LeCount renamed the Ohio Street School to be the Octavius V. Catto School in his honor.

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