BHMVA
Black History Museum
& Cultural Center of Virginia

African American Suffragist Sheroes

Thanks to our ancestors, women, can vote. Through our **Black History at Home** program, take a moment to learn a little about a few of the remarkable African American women who were important to Civil Rights and Women's Rights.

Hallie Quinn Brown (1850-1949) Brown was an educator and elocutionist who, as an advocate for women's rights, pioneered in the movement for African American women's clubs in the United States. After graduating from Wilberforce University in 1873, she taught in plantation and public schools in Mississippi and South Carolina. Her career in education included serving as dean of Allen University and as a principal of Tuskegee Institute Alabama under Booker T. Washington.

In 1893 Brown was a principal promoter of the organization of the Colored Woman's League of Washington, D.C., which the next year joined other groups to form the National Association of Colored Women. In 1923, in the wake of the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification, Brown denounced a proposal by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) to dedicate a monument to the mythical black mammy of the South. As leader of the era's largest organization of black women, the NACW, Brown condemned the monument for its degrading caricature of an African American woman.

Frances E.W. Harper (1825–1911) Born to free Black parents in Maryland, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was orphaned as a child. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, William Watkins, an abolitionist who set up his own school, the Watkins Academy for Negro Youth which Harper attended.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Harper was one of only a few Black women included in the growing women's rights movement. In 1866, she delivered a famous speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention in New York, in which she urged white suffragists to include Black women in their fight for the vote. During the debate over the 15th Amendment (which Harper supported), she and other abolitionists split with white suffragist leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and helped form the American Women Suffrage Association (AWSA). In 1896, Harper and others founded the National Association of Colored Women Clubs (NACWC), which advocated for rights and advancements for Black women, including the right to vote.

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) Terrell grew up in an affluent family in Tennessee; her formerly enslaved parents both owned successful businesses, and her father, Robert Reed Church, was one of the South's first Black millionaires. After graduating from Oberlin College, she began working as a teacher in Washington D.C and became involved in the women's rights movement. She joined Ida B. Wells-Barnett in her anti-lynching campaign in the early 1890s, and later co-founded the National Association of Colored Women Clubs (NACWC) with Wells-Barnett and other activists. Terrell served as the organization's first president until 1901, writing and speaking extensively on women's suffrage as well as issues such as equal pay and educational opportunities for African Americans. As a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP), Terrell remained an outspoken fighter on behalf of civil rights after passage of the 19th Amendment.

Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) Born in Mississippi, she is perhaps best known for her work as a journalist and anti-lynching activist. Her writings exposed and condemned the inequalities and injustices of the Jim Crow South. In 1892, she left Memphis and moved north but kept writing about racist violence in the former Confederacy. She also campaigned for federal anti-lynching laws, and organized on behalf of many civil rights causes, including women's suffrage.

In March 1913, Wells was prepared to join the suffrage parade through President Woodrow Wilson's inaugural celebration. However, organizers asked her to stay out of the procession. It seems some of the white suffragists refused to march alongside Black people. Although the early suffrage activists had generally supported racial equality (most had been abolitionists before they were feminists), by the beginning of the 20th century, that was rarely the case. Many middle-class white people embraced the suffragists' cause because they believed that the enfranchisement of "their" women would guarantee white supremacy by neutralizing the Black vote. Wells joined the march anyway, but her experience showed that to many white suffragists, "equality" did not apply to everyone.