A Thesis

entitled

If It Is Going To Get Done, We Will Have To Do It Ourselves: African American Women Activists, 1830-1896

by

Vita Renée Norrils

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Liberal Studies Degree in Liberal Studies

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An Abstract of
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African American women were politically active in several movements in the early Nineteenth Century. After emancipation, their activisms focused on alleviating the critical issues facing the black community which included, but were not limited to, the fights for civil, political, and equal rights, and against racism and discrimination. The struggles for women’s rights and suffrage were important causes to African American women, but were not first and foremost on their agendas. There were significant issues that afflicted black women and the black community that took precedence. This thesis will identify those pressing issues and will focus on just three – Harriet Tubman, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Ida B. Wells – African American women activists who were willing to place their lives in danger to fight against the injustices that plagued the entire African American race in the United States.
For the sweetest woman I know – my mom, Ruby McWilliams.
Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

NAACP ................................ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW ............................................................... National Association of Colored Women
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Preface

In the early Nineteenth century, during and after the Reconstruction era, there were many bleak issues plaguing the African American people. African American women activists responded by working in the areas of political rights, civil rights, and women’s rights in an effort to make life better for all African Americans.

Black rights were an important crusade for African American women activists as these included obtaining rights that should be shared by all no matter the race. These rights included, the right to work in any occupation for any company, having good schools to receive quality education, being able to shop and eat in any place, having the freedom to move about within the city or town, and having the right to live in any neighborhood. These are just a few issues that were used to restrict the freedoms and upward mobility of the African American race. Many black women activists fought for the rights and against the restrictions for the African American community.

While white women pursued suffrage, African American women activists sought avenues to pursue that would battle racism, discrimination, and other oppressive issues that plagued the black community and restricted them from achieving a way of life that was beneficial for themselves and their families. The question of ‘where would they turn to fight for the rights of black people?’ is an all-important question that this thesis will attempt to answer.
Abolitionist groups grew more white male leading up to the Civil War. The Black Rights groups after abolition shifted to a male orientation as well. And the women’s rights and suffrage groups closed their doors to black women after the Thirteenth Amendment formally ended slavery. When looking at these developments, it appeared there was no place for the African American woman activist. Where would she turn and with whom would she join forces to provide help to the black community? Would she find other like-minded black women activists who were rejected by other groups and were seeking connections to fight for equality for all African Americans? Would they together proclaim, “If it is going to get done, we will have to do it ourselves?”

This thesis will attempt to answer these questions as it researches the different paths of three prominent African American women activists, Harriet Tubman, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Ida B. Wells. These women would not follow the women’s sphere restrictions, but would form their own movements, to fight racism and discrimination, and stand boldly in the face of fear to provide for the suffering African American community. These women traveled different paths, in three different areas of activism that needed to get done (emphasis mine) in the black communities. Facing the realization that they could not get things done on their own, all three would come to the same location in 1896 to join in the establishment of the National Association of Colored Women – a group that would help ‘get things done.’
Chapter 1

Introduction

When the Civil War ended slavery, African American women activists shifted their efforts from abolition to black rights, women’s rights, and ensuring the basic needs in the black community. Although emancipation and the Thirteenth Amendment granted freedom from slavery, this amendment was, by no means, the final step of the journey for actual freedom. Therefore, community involvement and activism of the black women for education, jobs, and the basic needs of living were paramount for the survival of the community.

African American women, in their activism, lived in a climate where blacks and black women in particular were considered property or second class citizens at best. They had to fight racism, classism, and sexism simultaneously. They united locally, regionally, and nationally to fight for rights for themselves and their communities. During a time when hostilities were becoming increasingly brutal against all African Americans, black women stood in the face of adversity and did all they could to support their communities.

African American women activists endured racism and discrimination, and yet, there were other obstacles against the black woman and the black community – negative
stereotypes and opinions, and sexualized violence. These negative stereotypes of the black woman ran far, wide, and deep among whites and were applied to all African American women, the same as African American men, no matter their class, wealth, education, and/or standing in the community.

These negative stereotypes against black women were beliefs deeply entrenched in white society. Paula Giddings, author of *When and Where I Enter: The Impact Black Women on Race and Sex in America* described the added issues faced by all black women. She stated that:

“Society failed to see them as a distinct political and social force. At a time when their white peers were riding the wave of moral superiority that sanctioned their activism, black women were seen as immoral scourges. Despite their achievements, they did not have the benefit of a discriminating judgment of their worth as women… Assumed to have low and animalistic urges that cast them outside the pale of the movement for moral reform, black women were seen as having all the inferior qualities of white women without any of their virtues” (78).

During this same time, white men perceived middle to upper class white women as timid, helpless women in need of protection. This thought placed women in a restrictive sphere which was resented by many. In fact, white women were given an image that was the exact opposite of the stereotypical image of black women. They were given the status of the prim and proper lady, set high upon the pedestal, but these women were rendered powerless. The white woman became, in the eyes of whites, the pristine perfection of womanhood. Lynn Olson, author of *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung*
Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970 stated, “For centuries, African American women were viewed as passionate animals while white women were perched on pedestals and thought of as timid, modest, and pure” (25).

Olson’s statement of African American women being viewed as “passionate animals” was not an uncommon thought in white society. The thought of black people possessing animalistic urges was a popular belief among whites for centuries. Olson further noted that President Thomas Jefferson “wondered if black women mated with orangutans” (25). She explained, “Jefferson’s thinking was not unusual for his time. Female slaves were seen as lusty temptresses who seduced white men, luring them away from the sanctity of their homes and wives, causing men to violate standards their society held sacred” (Olson 25). These were the thoughts white male slave owners used to justify raping their female slaves.

Female slaves experiencing sexual violence is the start of a long history of African American women being brutalized sexually by white men. Danielle McGuire, author of *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, in a presentation on *Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network Book-TV* stated, “In fact, white men often coerced and raped African American women with impunity during the country’s first three centuries” (c-spanarchives.org). Sexualized violence against female slaves was an everyday occurrence. The female slaves were expected to have sexual relations with black male slaves, their masters, the masters’ sons, other relatives, the overseers, and neighbors as well. This was designed to produce slave children who, when they came of age, would be sold away from the mother. This heinous act helped
increase the wealth of slave owners. Unfortunately, not one female slave on plantations was protected from this abuse.

The abuse and disrespect of the black female body continued after slavery, during Reconstruction, 1865-1877 and on through the Jim Crow years, 1876 to 1965. McGuire, documented in her book, *At the Dark End of the Street*, that the majority of the white assailants who committed abuses, suffered no punishment (149). The results of this injustice, in addition to the brutal sexual attacks, were felt, not only by the black woman and her family, but by the entire black community.

Consequently, the sexualized violence against and the deliberate misconceptions of black women have pitted black women against white women for centuries. This has had “far-reaching consequences for the relationships between blacks and whites – blacks and blacks for many years” (Olson 26).

White men protected the precious white woman at all cost. Even allegations, true or not, that a black man had touched, or looked at a white woman brought swift reprisal. African American women did not share that luxury of being protected. They would suffer the frustration of African American men and their powerlessness to defend them. Of the frustration, Giddings stated that although many African American women were educated and had accumulated wealth and resources to live middle-class lifestyles, “…they were frustrated by the negative epithets hurled at them and the failure of Black leaders to defend them or the race as a whole” (79). If African American men tried to defend their women, swift and brutal justice against him would often result in the loss of his life.
With so many issues stacked against the African American woman, what would the African American women activists do and where would they turn during this critical time in history? They would turn to each other… In spite of the racism, discrimination, negative stereotypes, and the sexualized violence, black women activists united in their efforts to move forward and get things done for themselves and their community.

The Women’s Realm

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women—all women, were restricted to working in certain areas of need in the community. Those areas were benevolence and reform. Benevolence and reform consisted of education, prison, religion, and temperance. These restrictions, set by white men (emphasis mine), were specifically laid out for middle-class white women. Shirley J. Yee, author of Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860 stated that restrictions of women’s duties were defined by “contemporary ideals of respectable womanhood” (4). In fact, the Women’s Rights movements were organized by white women to fight for their right to break free of the restricted sphere of the ‘women-only’ parameters.

The men of movements and organizations expected females to perform the moral functions and fundraising for the movements. Yee explained the point this way, “…as in other reform movements, women were expected to participate within the confines of women’s sphere, which was interpreted as limited to organizing all-female societies and raising funds to support the male leadership” (3). But the restrictions of “ladylike behavior… applied only to native-born, white, middle-class women” (Yee 4). Yee further explained that though the restrictions were designed for white women, free
African American women also enforced these restrictions in their effort to live in free society and to erase the horrors of slavery (4). As free black women activists accepted these restrictions, they in turn, taught these principles to the newly-freed slave women as an attempt to be accepted in society as well.

The important issues within the African American communities that far outweighed suffrage for African American women were innumerable. Not being confined to the restrictions of the women’s realm, three African American women activists chose different, yet equally important areas of activism to make a difference in individual African American lives and within the community as a whole. The three black women activists, Harriet Tubman, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Ida B. Wells, and the impact they made in their chosen areas of activism will be the highlighted in this thesis. To say that these women made a change for African Americans as a whole is truly an understatement.
Chapter 2

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman

*Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*

(front cover)

7
“I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.”

--Harriett Tubman

_Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories_

**Harriet Ross Tubman** (1820-1913): Abolitionist, Underground Railroad Conductor, Moses of her People, Soldier, Activist for Freed Slaves, Black Women Club member, and Suffragist.

Harriet Tubman, born Araminta Ross, may be the iconic black woman activist. We know her well from her prominent role in the Underground Railroad where she was active over a 10-year span. Tubman was also famously known as ‘The Moses of her people.’ She was named after the biblical Moses who led his people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Tubman received this name because she led many out of slavery in the South to the North, considered the ‘promised land.’

Tubman was devoted to freeing as many slaves as she could. She was so devoted to freeing the enslaved that the possibility of black-outs and seizures from a childhood injury did not deter her from risking her life. A recent Master of Liberal Studies thesis by Carolyn Kusi entitled “‘Am I Not A Woman’ The Myth of the Strong Black Woman” described the origination of her injury:

When Harriet was twelve, her master threw a heavy iron weight at another slave he thought was trying to escape. The iron weight missed the slave that the master was aiming at and hit Harriet in the head. She was knocked out and suffered from a fractured skull. She never went to see a doctor, but suffered from seizures the rest of her life. Sometime she would just black out without warning, but she still
spent her life leading her enslaved black brothers and sisters to freedom” (Kusi 45).

In spite of this debilitating injury, Tubman made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom. In one especially challenging trip, she rescued her elderly parents who were approximately 70 years of age at the time. Tubman once proudly pointed out to Frederick Douglass, in all of her journeys she "never lost a single passenger" (Hine 176).

Born into slavery in 1820, Tubman escaped in 1849 with the help of sympathetic whites. She traveled north to Philadelphia where “like most working class free black women, she found employment as a washer woman and domestic servant” (Blackpast.org). It was while in Philadelphia that her activism as an abolitionist began. She “participated in the Underground Railroad, and as a result, developed networks with both black and white abolitionists” (BlackPast.org). She developed meaningful friendships with the leading abolitionists of the day, both black and white. She also was present and actively involved at many antislavery meetings.

Tubman’s activism went much further than the Underground Railroad. She was not a woman who was restricted to the ‘women’s sphere’ as were other African American women who wanted to be accepted in society. Although a poor woman, she served as a role model and leader for black women activists. She maintained close relationships with prominent abolitionist movement members, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, William Seward, and Gerritt Smith, although she worked independent of any antislavery organizations (Yee 38). Sojourner Truth operated much in the same way – independently (Yee 38). Yee stated that it is believed that both Truth’s and Tubman's
independence stemmed from their “experience as a slave that taught them to place high value on self-sufficiency and resilience” (38).

Tubman’s activism within the abolitionist movement provided her an opportunity to be a Civil War spy for the Union Army. Jean M. Humez, author of Harriet Tubman: the Life and the Life Stories, stated that Tubman wanted to work with the army to help set free more slaves than she, alone, ever could (146). Most women helpers during the Civil War were cooks or nurses, and these tasks Tubman performed as well (Humez 145).

During the Civil War, Tubman worked under the command of Union Colonel James Montgomery. For the first time, a woman, not to mention a black woman, was asked to work on a major Union military operation. The night of June 2, 1863, Tubman led 150 black Union soldiers in the Combahee River Raid in South Carolina. The National Geographic Society stated that it is believed that this “was the first woman in American history to lead a military expedition” (nationalgeographic.com “H. Tubman: CW Spy”).

A description of the historical event is as follows: Tubman, the black soldiers, and…

“…three federal gunboats set sail from Beaufort, South Carolina up the Combahee River. Tubman had gained vital information about the location of Rebel torpedoes planted along the river from slaves who were willing to trade information for freedom. Because of this information Tubman was able to steer the union ships away from any danger. She led the ships to specific spots along the shore where fugitive slaves were hiding and waiting to be rescued. At first many of the slaves were frightened by the Union soldiers’ presence, but Tubman was able to talk with them and convince them to come aboard” (Blackpast.org, Combahee River Raid (June 2, 1863)).
Further details of the raid also stated that, “The raiders set fire to buildings and destroyed bridges, so they couldn’t be used by the Confederate army. The Union soldiers also freed about 750 slaves – men, women, children, and babies – and did not lose one soldier in the attack (nationalgeographic.com “H. Tubman: CW Spy”)

In Tubman’s later years, her activism did not stop. We know her famously as Moses who freed her people from slavery; however, after emancipation Tubman continued to help African American people. She was an activist until the day of her death. Dorothy Sterling, author of *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* stated that, in her home in Auburn, New York, she supported her elderly parents as well as homeless freedmen and Civil War veterans. Sterling further stated, “…she converted her residence into the Home for Indigent and Aged Negroes. The home and twenty-five acres of land that she bought to use as a community farm were later deeded to the AME Zion Church so that they would be maintained after her death (397).

Tubman did not charge the residents any board as most were unable to pay and, therefore, money to pay the mortgage was always a challenge. The relationship she developed with William Seward of the abolition movement proved valuable as he made donations to Tubman to help pay the mortgage of the home (Yee 39). Tubman also received a small pension of $20 a month for her late husband, Nelson Davis’ army service in the Civil War which helped with monthly expenses. It is an interesting note that Tubman did not receive a pension for her service in the war (Sterling 398).

A key source of income for Tubman to maintain the home was her continued speaking engagements at various meetings and conferences in the East. The honorariums
received helped with the mortgage. Other source of income for Tubman was her autobiography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* written with Sarah Hopkins Bradford and published in 1869. Tubman sold the books for $1 while on her speaking tours and at meetings she attended (Humez 85). Tubman’s friends from Auburn and from the Anti-Slavery Society also pitched in to help sell the books. Fortunate for Tubman, Bradford reported the sales of the book brought in $1,200 and it was enough for Tubman to pay off the mortgage of the Home for Indigent and Aged Negroes (Humez 86).

Tubman’s activism in the 1870s was not only the operation of the Home for Indigent and Aged Negroes, but she also had a concern for the education of freedmen. Humez stated that, “…she had an active charitable interest in two schools for freed people in South Carolina, probably through her schoolteacher grandnephew, James Bowley (80). Tubman’s own household was not always stable financially, but she managed to help raise funds for schools and collected donations of clothing for destitute children.

Tubman, with the help of friends in Auburn, raised funds for the two schools by organizing the fund-raising bazaar called, “Harriet Tubman’s Fair” (Humez 80). The friends of Tubman worked long hours for months to make crafts for the fair. With the fair being held just before Christmas, many items sold quickly and in abundance as they were needed for Christmas gifts. Items sold at the fair were aprons, children’s lap bags, pin cushions, rag dolls, and towels (Humez 80). Of course, the fair was a big benefit for Tubman in securing donations for the two schools; and since she was always doing social work, the fair gave assistance to her as she was always helping so many others.
Tubman also participated in the emerging national suffrage movement. In 1911, two years before she died, she attended a meeting of the suffrage club in Geneva, New York, where a white woman asked her: “Do you really believe that women should vote?” Tubman reportedly replied, “I suffered enough to believe it” (Blackpast.org). Tubman died in Auburn, New York in the spring of 1913.
Chapter 3

Fannie Barrier Williams

When and Where I Enter

(p 79)
"Whether I live in the North or the South, I cannot be counted for my full value, be that much or little. I dare not cease to hope and aspire and believe in human love and justice, but progress is painful and my faith is often strained to the breaking point."

--Fannie Barrier Williams

_A Northern Negro’s Autobiography, 1904_

**Fannie Barrier Williams** (1855-1944): Social activist, Teacher, Lecturer, Journalist, and Black Women’s Club organizer

Fannie Barrier Williams would sum up the feelings of frustration and the unity of black women activists in her essay "The Club Movement Among Colored Women", in _A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race_, authored by Booker T. Williams, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Norman Barton Wood by stating,

“At the very time when race interest seems at such a low ebb, when our race leaders seem tongue-tied and stupidly inactive in the presence of unchecked lawlessness and violent resistance to Negro advancement, it is especially fortunate and reassuring to see and feel the rallying spirit of our women” (Washington, et al 379).

Williams was an African American teacher, social activist, clubwoman, lecturer, and journalist. Her parents were well-respected members of a New York community where few black families resided. Williams was educated in public schools and was talented in both music and art. In 1870, Williams became the first African American to graduate from State Normal School which is now SUNY College at Brockport (Edwards, "F.B.Williams").
Growing up in Brockport, New York, Williams associated with whites without restrictions and was unaware of racial discrimination in the other parts of the country. Of her life of freedom in Brockport, Williams stated in an article published in *The Independent* in 1904 entitled, “A Northern Negro’s Autobiography” that,

“We suffered from no discrimination on account of color or “previous condition” and lived blissful ignorance of the fact that we were practicing the unpardonable sin of “social equality”. Indeed, until I became a young woman and went South to teach, I had never been reminded that I belonged to an “inferior race” (Williams 91, *The Independent*).

A family friend, Frederick Douglass, along with her parents, encouraged Williams to take a teaching position in one of the “Federal government established schools to educate newly freed slaves” (Edwards, “F.B. Williams”). Williams wrote of the cruel racism she faced when she traveled to the South for the position.

Being talented in painting, Williams sought an art class to obtain further instructions to sharpen her talent. Her article in *The Independent* detailed a painful incident of being told by the principal to leave the class because Southern white students were uncomfortable with her presence. She wrote,

“The second day of my appearance in the class I chanced to look up suddenly and was amazed to find that I was completely surrounded by screens, and when I resented the apparent insult, it was made the condition of my remaining in the class. I missed the training that would have made this continued humiliation possible… I never quite recovered from the shock and pain of my first bitter
realization that to be a colored woman is to be discredited, mistrusted, and often meanly hated” (Williams 92, *The Independent*).

Williams returned home after a few years of teaching in the South. Her activism would focus on reform, social justice, and finding employment opportunities, other than domestic work, for young educated African American women. In 1892, her activism led her to join a group of women that included Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews, Susan McKinney, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. They formed the National League of Colored Woman, a black women’s clubs in the North. “Between 1892 and 1894, clubs proliferated throughout the country, from Omaha to Pittsburgh, Rhode Island to New Orleans, Denver to Jefferson City” (Giddings 79). One of the first items of business for the African American women’s club members was to, “…defend their moral integrity as women. Significantly, this was done not by separating themselves along class lines from other women, but by defending the history of all Black women and redefining the criteria of true womanhood” (Giddings 81).

The World Columbian Exposition of 1893 gave the black activist club members the opportunity to discuss in a public interracial forum the negative views of them in society and the vulnerability of black women to sexual exploitation. The purpose of the exposition was to display the achievements of Americans to the world. There was an exhibit to showcase the achievements American women – American white women – American black women were excluded. African Americans as a group were not allowed to participate. However, a few educated, middle-class black women were permitted to speak.
Fannie Barrier Williams was one of the women allowed to speak and would shock the audience with the subject of her speech. Williams would detail the facts of the sexual violation and exploitation of black women by white men. She would state,

“I regret the necessity of speaking of the moral question of our women, but morality of our home life has been commented on so disparagingly and meanly that we are placed in the unfortunate position of being defenders of our name. …the onus of sexual immorality did not rest on Black women, but on the White men who continued to harass them. While many women in the audience were fantasizing about Black rapists, Black women were actually suffering at the hands of White ones. If White women were so concerned about morality, then they ought to take measures to help protect Black women. I do not want to disturb the serenity of this conference by suggesting why this protection is need and the kind of man against whom it is needed” (Giddings 82).

Williams’ speech boldly informed the audience that black women were not to blame for their sexual exploitation. Also, the view of black women as promiscuous and being the cause of their own victimization was not an accurate judgment of them. It was the white men who are blamed as they inflict sexual violence against them (Edwards “F.B. Williams).

Williams’ speech at the Exposition would be echoed by Anna Julia Copper, another black woman activist who was an educator who would become a founder of the NACW in 1896. She was born in North Carolina and graduated from Oberlin College. Cooper’s mother had been a slave and her father was her mother’s owner, therefore, the issue of sexual exploitation resonated with her greatly. She would inform the audience,
“...the real struggle wasn’t temptations as much as it was the painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain title to the bodies of their daughters” (Giddings 83). Many of the black club members were daughters, like Cooper, of women who had once been slaves. Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell were both daughters of former slave women, so this was an issue that clearly needed a resolution as it hit home with many of the black women activists.

Williams continued her activism within the black community in the form of helping young women who had graduated from college obtain employment other than being domestic help in white homes. This activism had a dual purpose: 1) to help improve the economic opportunity for young women, and, 2) to spare them of the ongoing threat of sexual violence that many black women who were domestic help in white homes had become subjected to. As Williams sought help in finding employment for young black women, she reached out to the white women who were kind to her. She sought help from whom she experienced no racial prejudices from and who knew her on a personal level. While seeking help from these women, she made a grave discovery. In her essay in *The Independent*, she stated:

“...this kindness to me as an individual did not satisfy me or blind me to the many inequities suffered by young colored women seeking employment and other advantages of metropolitan life. I soon discovered that it was much easier for progressive white women to be considerate and even companionable to one colored woman whom they chanced to know and like than to be just and generous to colored young women as a race who needed their sympathy and influence in
securing employment and recognition according to their tastes and ability”
(Williams 92).

Williams was surprised at how difficult it was to find “suitable employment for helpless young colored women – young women of very refined and dignified appearance” (Williams 94, The Independent). She contacted bank presidents, company managers, and others who had openings in clerical positions. She wrote in The Independent, details of her exchanges between a bank president who was, “…well known for his broad, humane principles and high-mindedness” (93). She also wrote of an exchange she had with a manager of a large company. Williams stated she asked them for assistance with, “…difficulties that stand in the way of ambitious and capable young colored women” (93). The young ladies Williams sought employment for would, unfortunately, not be hired. The bank president stated, “I felt it was my duty to say to the directors that this young woman had a slight trace of Negro blood. They promptly said, ‘We don’t want her, that’s all” (The Independent 93). The bank president’s final remark about the young woman Williams sent for the position was, “…she was the most skillful and thoroughly competent young woman who had ever applied for the position” (93).

Williams’ interaction with the company manager was also detailed in her essay. The manager told Williams that his parents were staunch abolitionists and he, “as a child was not allowed to eat sugar that had been cultivated by the labor of the poor slave or to wear cotton manufactured by slave labor.” Yet, he told Williams, “he had an overwhelming desire to help the colored people” (93). When Williams proceeded to ask him to consider employing a young lady, his response, “Oh I wish you had not asked me
that question. My clerks would leave and such an innovation would cause a general upheaval in my business” (93).

Williams, in her essay, wrote that in spite of these two stories, she was successful in finding a few good positions for the young women. She further wrote in The Independent, “…not one of them lost her position by fault of hers. On the contrary, , they have become the prize workers wherever they have been employed” (93).

Williams would come to the realization that the sad fact about prejudice is that:

“Here in the Northern States I find that a colored woman of character and intelligence will be recognized and respected, but the white woman who will recognize and associate with her in the same club or church will probably not tolerate her as a fellow clerk in an office” (96).

Williams’ continued activism throughout the years led her to “organize Sunday schools, work for black education, and head temperance work among blacks under the auspices of the National Woman’s Temperance Union. She helped found the National League of Colored Women in 1893 and its successor, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. She was also among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She died in Philadelphia in 1911” (Sterling 406).
Chapter 4

Ida B. Wells

LC-USZ62-107756 DLC.
"One had better die fighting against injustice than die like a dog or a rat in a trap."
--Ida B. Wells

_A Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells_


The Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery in America; the Fourteenth Amendment recognized black citizenship, and the Fifteenth opened the door for black male suffrage. These milestones accorded black people privileges and freedoms that they had never before enjoyed on a national level. However, they also elicited racially motivated oppressive measures, including violence, on the part of some whites who sought to nullify their effects. Many believed these privileges of freedom and rights were a threat to white superiority. The terrorist acts, oft-times sanctioned by law enforcement as many were a part of hate groups, were an effort of white supremacy to restrict African Americans and maintain domination over them.

In addition to the angry white violence against the black man because of political and social rights and freedoms, another issue that led to hate-filled aggression against them was the perceived need to defend the white woman. White woman, according to white men, had the image of timid and pristine and they were in need of defense from newly enfranchised black men. Most often, the violence was against black men whose image was degraded as badly as the black women’s. They were viewed as sex-hungry animals whose mission was to defile the white woman. The punishments for black men accused of touching, looking at, or raping of a white woman were swift, brutal, and oft-times deadly. These acts of terror were in blatant disregard of the truth that the encounter
may have been consensual. This aggression targeted all black men regardless of education, class, or status.

Ida Bell Wells, black woman activist and journalist began her crusade against lynching when the number of lynching increased at an alarming rate. Wells was an African-American woman of striking courage and conviction. She achieved nationwide attention as a leader of the anti-lynching crusade. Wells was born to slave parents in Holly Springs, MS during the Civil War on July 16, 1862, only a few months before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Wells’ leadership skills were developed at an early age when both her parents died of Yellow Fever when she was thirteen. Not wanting to split the family by parceling them to different relatives in different areas of the country, Wells took on the role as the family leader and became the breadwinner to financially care for them.

In May 1884, an incident occurred that changed her life forever. Traveling to a school in Memphis, she purchased a first-class train ticket and took her seat in the ladies’ coach on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad train (Hines and Thompson 194). Her biography on the “National Women Hall of Fame,” website explained: “…a train conductor insisted she move from the parlor car to the smoking car, the one reserved for Blacks. She refused; he grabbed her wrist; she bit him, and Wells brought a suit against the railroad for their actions, and won” (National Women Hall of Fame).

In December 1884 the Memphis circuit court levied a maximum fine of $300 against the railroad company and awarded Wells personal damages of $500. “Although her ruling was overturned on appeal to the state supreme court, she was the first black person to initiate a legal challenge to the Supreme Court’s nullification of the 1875 Civil
Rights Bill” (Hines and Thompson 194). This event and the legal struggle which followed it catapulted her into the fight that would last her entire lifetime – the fight against the racial injustices of her people.

Darryl Lyman, author of *Great African American Women*, detailed in Wells’ biography that she was bravely outspoken in her journalism. Wells taught in Memphis from 1884-1891 where she became a writer and “…co-owner and editor of a Memphis black newspaper, *The Free Speech and Headlight*; her pen-name was Iola” (257). She used this avenue to publicly express her criticism concerning issues within the black community such as, the treatment of blacks, social exclusion of blacks, and the depressing economic conditions of the black race. Her editorials also attacked issues such as the evils of lynching and the South’s Jim Crow laws (pbs.org). Wells’ anti-lynching campaign was launched by using her editorials in *The Free Speech* – the name shortened by Wells (Wells and Duster 7). Eventually, she was dismissed from her teaching position because of her public criticism of the Memphis Board of Education for the inadequate education and unequal distribution of resources to the segregated black schools (Lyman 257).

Wells wrote a famous editorial in *The Free Speech* that criticized the supposed reason whites used for the lynching of black men where she stated that relationships between black men and white women were, possibly, consensual. Kenneth Goings of Ohio State University, in his 2009 entry on the historical newspaper, *The Free Speech* wrote,

“Wells attacked the supposed reason for the lynching of black men, the rape of white women. Suggesting that white women only claimed rape after their illicit
affairs with black men had been discovered, she cautioned the lynchers that their activities threatened to sully the reputation of the South’s fairer sex” (tennesseeencyclopedia.net, “Memphis Free Speech”).

In March of 1892, *The Free Speech* would receive national attention for the reports of the lynching of three black storeowners. Tom Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, respected businessmen, owned the People’s Grocery Store, a successful store in the black neighborhood of Memphis. All three men were also close personal friends of Wells. Wells, in her autobiography entitled, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, which was edited by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster stated that Moss’ wife was the “best friend she had in town”, and she was godmother to the Moss’ daughter (Wells 47).

The People’s Grocery Store was located in a thickly populated African American community where there was already a grocery store. A white store owner, Will Barret, was angered by the competition from the store because before the People’s Grocery opened, he had a monopoly in the black community (Wells 48).

Wells wrote of the fatal incidents that led to the lynching of the three men and the disturbing events that happened after. It began with an African American boy and some white boys fighting over a game of marbles. The father of the white boys began to whip the African American boy, which led some black adults to come to his aid. The white father and the white grocery keeper called the police and included the African American grocery keepers in the dispute. The black men and the grocery store owners were jailed and an angry white mob took them “a mile north of the city limits” where they were shot.
to death. An angry mob riot took place at the People’s Grocery Company where African Americans were killed by white men “as if they were on a hunting trip” (Wells 48-51).

Wells further described the lynching of her friends as “…the lynching in Memphis which would change the course of my life” (Wells 7). Grieved and outraged, she would turn her “scathing pen on the lynchers and on the white population of the city who allowed and condoned such a lynching” (Wells 7). Wells wrote in her autobiography, “I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched, because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers. I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap” (Wells 62).

It was this incident that led her to take a long hard look at lynching in the South (Hines and Thompson 195). Wells wrote several fiery, radical editorials. Another famous article where she attacked lynching and advised her readers to leave Memphis was written in The AME Church Review July of 1892. In “Afro-Americans and Africa”, Wells declared, “Blacks must leave Memphis. …save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but take us out and murder us in cold blood when accused by white persons” (Lyman 258). She further stated in her article that no one really believed black men were raping white women, and “If Southern men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women” (Hines and Thompson 196). This was Wells’ most inflammatory statement that, once again, sent white southerners into frenzy.

Wells’ outspokenness in her editorials caused white journalists to be critical of her in other newspapers. “…Edward Ward Carmack, editor of the Memphis Commercial,
demanded retaliation against the black wench for her denunciation of the lynchings” (tennesseeencyclopedia.net “Memphis Free Speech”). She was away on a speaking engagement in Philadelphia in May of 1892, an angry white mob ransacked and destroyed her newspaper offices. Wells’ life was threatened if she didn’t leave town as the angry mob “declared that they would have lynched her if she had been found” (Wells 7). “She was informed by white newspaper reports that if she dared to return to Memphis, she would be the next to be lynched” (Hines and Thompson 196).

Wells moved to New York City, and there became a columnist and part-owner of the New York Age. The New York Age was an influential black newspaper published from 1887-1953. She continued her battle against racial injustice, especially lynching. In 1892 she wrote the book Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases and in 1895, she wrote A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894 (Lyman 259).

In 1893, Wells distributed 20,000 pamphlets written by her and her husband, Ferdinand Barnett, detailing the woes of lynching entitled, The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the Columbian Exposition (Hines and Thompson 196). In this pamphlet she detailed, year by year, beginning 1882 and ending 1891, the number of “Negroes murdered by mob” (Wells 26). The number is astounding – the total for the ten years is 731. Wells further categorizes the number and shows how many were lynched for different crimes (emphasis mine). Most, 369, were accused of rape; murder totaled 253, and other crimes such as miscegenation, race prejudice, quarreling with white men, making threats, and no reason given, accounted for 146 (Wells 26-27).

Wells further informed the public in the pamphlet that the lynch law is,
“…still in force today in some of the oldest states of the Union, where courts of justice have long been established, whose laws are executed by white Americans. It flourishes most largely in the states which foster the convict lease system, and is brought to bear mainly against the Negro. The first fifteen years of his freedom he was murdered by masked mobs for trying to vote. Public opinion having made lynching for that cause unpopular, a new reason is given to justify the murders of the past 15 years. The Negro was first charged with attempt to rule white people, and hundreds were murdered on that pretended supposition. He is now charged with assaulting or attempting to assault white women. This charge is false as it is foul, robs us of the sympathy of the world and is blasting the race’s good name” (Wells 25).

Being a thorough journalist, Wells wrote detailed stories of lynchings in different cities including the lynching of her three friends in Memphis which changed her life forever. Wells also included a gruesome photo of a white mob at a lynching in Clanton, Alabama in August of 1891.

Wells wrote another pamphlet in which she chronicles the lynching of African American men over a six month period in Georgia in 1899. The pamphlet is entitled, *The Lynch Law in Georgia*, and can be seen at the Library of Congress. Here’s a portion of what she wrote:

“During six weeks of the months of March and April just past, twelve colored men were lynched in Georgia, the reign of outlawry culminating in the torture and
hanging of the colored preacher, Elijah Strickland, and the burning alive of Samuel Wilkes, alias Hose, Sunday, April 23, 1899.

The real purpose of these savage demonstrations is to teach the Negro that in the South he has no rights that the law will enforce. Samuel Hose was burned to teach the Negroes that no matter what a white man does to them, they must not resist” (Wells “Lynch Law in GA”).

During April and May 1893, Wells took her cause to England, Scotland, and Wales to gain support by informing the British public about the lynching of blacks in America’s South. She earned a reputation as a fiery orator and courageous leader of her people. Traveling to Britain twice, Wells became a much-sought-after lecturer and organizer for anti-lynching societies made up of men and women of all races. Wells was militant in her demands for equality and justice for African-Americans and insisted that the African-American community must win justice through its own efforts (Lyman, 258).

Wells’ strong activism for the African American people continued throughout her life. She was also a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. She was also a founding member of the National Afro-American Council in 1898, served as its secretary, and was chairman of its Anti-Lynching Bureau in 1901. She attended a special conference for the organization that would later become known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1906 (Wormser pbs.org).

Wells continued her fight for black civil and political rights and an end to lynching until her death March of 1931 in Chicago.
Chapter 5

National Association of Colored Women

As stated above, there were more important and immediate issues in the African American communities that far outweighed obtaining the vote for black women. Though suffrage was desired by and important to black women, helping the brothers and sisters in the communities in which they lived and worked was their first priority. Addressing these priorities was done by black women activists individually such as the three mentioned here. These issues were also addressed by black women’s groups, church organization, and clubs. Black women's clubs were established parallel to those of white women, partly because white women's clubs (with the exception of those in New England) did not allow black women to be members, but also because black women had somewhat different priorities for their organizations.

Outlined above in the individual chapters, Harriet Tubman, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Ida B. Wells made great strides in three areas of countless needs in the black community. However, there were innumerable other issues that plagued the community and only by uniting with other like-minded women could progress be accomplished.
No one can deny Tubman’s impact within the Black community. She risked her life to bring the enslaved to freedom. And after emancipation, her activism led her to organize a home for the homeless and war veterans. So generous in her charity, Tubman found ways to keep from charging room and board as these people were already destitute. The realization of homelessness within her community was an issue too enormous for her to rectify alone.

Williams was concerned about young, black, educated women working as domestics in white homes and who, by doing so, risked being violated sexually by their employer. Therefore, her activism was searching for different employment opportunities, such as clerks and receptionists, for these qualified young women. Unfortunately, in spite of all her efforts, she could not help them all alone. Williams stated that she was, “…constantly in receipt of letters from the still unprotected colored women of the South, begging me to find employment for their daughters according to their ability, as domestics or otherwise, to save them from going into the homes of the South as servants, as there is nothing to save them from dishonor and degradation” (Williams 96 *The Independent*).

Williams further stated that, “Their own mothers cannot protect them and white women will not, or do not” (*The Independent* 96). For this reason and others, Williams knew the difficult tasks of protecting young black women from violation while being domestics in white homes and finding more suitable and safe employment for them could not done by her alone.

Wells’ life was forever at risk with her non-stop effort to bring to light the atrocity of lynching. She traveled far and wide, wrote reports and pamphlets, and newspaper
articles to stop this horrific act. In all that she accomplished with her activism, she still knew that this was too large of a feat to accomplish alone.

These three women heeded the call of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin – “A CALL: Let Us Confer Together” (Davis 14) – to unite all black women’s clubs under one banner to work together for the welfare of black communities all across the nation. There were many women’s clubs that were formed to help with the many issues that plagued the community particularly after emancipation. Hine and Thompson stated that “…the black community was faced with poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination on a massive scale. When black women found that white governmental agencies and other organizations had no intention of providing services to the communities in which they lived and worked, they stepped into the void” (177).

If the issues that plagued the community were going to get resolved, black women were going to have to do it themselves. To accomplish this, they needed to join forces together under one banner. This would be a huge undertaking, but it was worthy of a try – where there is unity, there is strength. Thankfully there were women who were passionate about accomplishing this endeavor.

The United States had hundreds, possibly thousands, of women’s clubs that dotted every city and state. For instance, “In Richmond, Virginia, there were twenty-five female benevolent orders” (Hine and Thompson, 178). In Boston, New York, and Washington DC, the free blacks, black elite, and black women entrepreneurs lived and were involved in clubs such as the Bethel Literary and Historical Society in Washington DC, and the Woman’s Era Club of Boston. Famous names like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Josephine St.
Pierre Ruffin, and Anna Julia Copper were among the membership of these clubs. All these clubs were vital to their communities, but they were all disjointed.

Along with the massive needs within the black communities, two other major issues arose which black women, nationwide, needed to address. These matters further made the need of unity among the clubs a necessity. The two matters, “exclusion and slander, led to the formation of the national federated black women’s club movement” (Hine and Thompson, 178).

The first event centered around the United States hosting the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago where black female activists were excluded by white women participants from involvement. Feminist Susan B. Anthony was determined that women would be represented at the fair. Hine and Thompson stated that, “…she brought together a group of socially acceptable feminists together with a group of influential Washington ladies” (178). Anthony submitted a petition to Congress and Congress urged that black women be represented at the fair. However, when the Columbian Commission for the fair “appointed a group of women to take responsibility for the women’s representation, they did not appoint Anthony…” (Hine and Thompson, 179). The women appointed were the Commissioner’s wives and other women leaders of Chicago; these women, in turn, appointed who they wanted. “This board was virtually devoid of suffragists, and it was entirely, completely, and unalterably devoid of black women” declared Hine and Thompson (180).

This exclusion caused a group of black women to submit a proposal requesting representation of black women at the fair, but it was rejected. The chairperson of the women’s board said the proposal was rejected because it was not “presented by a national
organization of black women and, therefore, there could be no black representative on the Board of Lady Managers” (Hine and Thompson, 179). Fannie Barrier Williams also sent a proposal to the board. “She was far more acceptable...” to the chairperson and her committee members, explained Hine and Thompson – “She was beautiful, well spoken, rich, and from Chicago” (179) and therefore, her proposal was accepted by the Board of Lady Managers. She was also invited to speak at one of the Women’s Congresses at the fair; a fraction of her speech and its impact is included in her chapter above.

This incident, which infuriated black clubwomen, brought them together. The Colored Woman’s League was the group that initiated the push to unite as a national organization. One black women’s club in Boston had a newsletter entitled the, Women’s Era that was circulated nationwide; the Colored Woman’s League published “an announcement asking for delegates from other clubs to come together to form a national black women’s organization at the National Council of Women convention in 1895. A number of clubs responded and became the National Colored Woman’s League” (Hine and Thompson, 179).

The second major issue that caused the need for the clubs to unite was a false slanderous attack on the character of all African-American women by a southern journalist. Sadly, for more than a century, the character of African American women had been attacked. Character slander and negative stereotypes had plagued all black women no matter her class or standing in the community.

This incident began when an Englishwoman publicly gave Ida B. Wells-Barnett accolades for her courageous anti-lynching crusade. In an open letter, white journalist James W. Jacks took it upon himself to correct the Englishwoman. “...he explained that
she should not encourage or support such a person, accusing black women of having no sense of virtue and of being altogether without characters. He also declared that all black women were prostitutes, thieves, and liars. The letter was circulated to black women’s clubs around the country” (Hine and Thompson, 180).

Brilliant and respectable Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of Boston, known for her charitable work across racial lines, received this letter and she was furious. She sent all the call to the black women club members requesting their presence in Boston. Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, historian of the NACW and author of *Lifting As They Climb: The History of the National Association of Colored Women* wrote that Ruffin’s call expressed, “One of the pressing needs of our cause is the education of the public to a just appreciation of us, and only here can we gain the attention upon which so much depends” (14). Of the Jacks letter, Ruffing stated in her letter,

“The letter of Mr. Jacks which is also enclosed is only used to show how pressing is the need of our banding together if only for our protection; this is only one of the many matters upon which we need to confer. We do not think it wise to give this letter general publishing and ask you to use it carefully” (Davis 15).

The meeting was scheduled a month from the time Ruffin sent the call – the hastiness illuminates the sense of urgency Ruffin must have felt. Details in the club’s historical records, *Lifting as They Climb*, indicate that 104 women came together for the three-day meeting in Boston (Davis 5). In Ruffin’s address to the ladies at the meeting, she stated,
“…today, with little over a month’s notice, we are able to call representatives from more than twenty clubs. It is a good showing. It stands for much. It shows that we are truly American women, with all the adaptability, readiness to seize and possess our opportunities and willingness to do our part for good as other American women” (Davis 17).

Ruffin further addressed objectives that “demand our serious consideration” (Davis 17). She highlighted the importance of inspiration and encouragement “of those working for the same ends” and the need to talk over the “things that are of especial interest to us as colored women” (Davis 17). Those special interests Ruffin identified were:

1. “the training of our children;
2. openings for our boys and girls;
3. how they can be prepared for occupation;
4. occupations may be found or opened for them;
5. moral education and physical development;
6. preparing our children “to meet the peculiar condition in which they shall find themselves”;
7. How to make the most of our won, to some extent, limited opportunities” (Davis 17-18).

In addition to the interests listed, Ruffin stated,

“…the general questions of the day, which we cannot afford to be indifferent to: temperance, morality, the higher education, hygienic and domestic questions, we… need to take every opportunity and means for the thoughtful consideration which shall lead to wise action” (Davis 17-18).
Her final proclamation to the women was to collectively “teach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women” (Davis 18). She then stated that black women must collectively teach the world this lesson, “not by noisy protestations of what we are not, but by a dignified showing of what we are and hope to become” (Davis 19). Hine and Thompson noted that Ruffin’s declaration “would remain themes of the black women’s clubs well into the twentieth century (180).

And so it was three major reasons that sparked the necessity for black women’s clubs to unite. The first was the undeniable strength of black women as one entity to fight the spread of disfranchisement, lynching, and segregation facing black communities. The second was the exclusion from participation by white women at the world’s fair held in Chicago in 1893. The third reason was to show a united front as they fought the vicious slanderous attack on the character of all black women.

The Boston conference, called by Ruffin, formed the National Federation of Afro-American Women and elected Mrs. Booker T. Washington as the first president (nacwc.org). Its membership would include “thirty-six clubs from twelve states” (Hine and Thompson 180). The National Colored Women’s League, organized in 1893 with Mrs. Helen Cook as president, was another national organization of black women’s clubs (nacwc.org). Ironically, the two groups had “the same goals and same values. They even had the same date and place for their national convention – Washington DC, July of 1895” (Hine and Thompson 180). One year later, the two groups merged and became the National Association of Colored Women at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in
Washington DC, July of 1896, electing Mrs. Mary Church Terrell as the first president (nacwc.org).

The NACW adopted the motto “Lifting as We Climb.” Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin set the tone when she announced that black women have to present a positive image of the race to the world. The Public Broadcasting Service quoted Ruffin’s speech as stating, “Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges; we cannot expect to have them removed until we disprove them through ourselves” (pbs.org “Jim Crow Stories: NACW”). The website further quoted Terrell’s first presidential address echoed the sentiments of Ruffin and stated she wanted the organization’s agenda to focus “…on job training, wage equity, and child-care” (pbs.org “Jim Crow Stories: NACW”).

A memorable and special highlight of the 1896 convention was the honored guest, Harriet Tubman. Tubman was the iconic pioneer whose activism spanned from the early stages of the abolitionist movement to that very day – the forming of the NCWA – where she is considered one of the founding members. Her appearance at this convention as one of the founders was considered one of Tubman’s most memorable public appearances. Being the oldest at the convention, a special request was asked of her – to introduce the youngest of the convention, Ida B. Wells’ infant son. Below is the special occasion described by Sterling: Harriet Tubman’s…

“…most memorable public appearance was at a convention in Washington in 1896 when two generations of women met to organize the National Association of Colored Women. To the younger delegates, few of whom had known slavery, she was the embodiment of black women’s capacity to struggle. “The audience rose as one person and greeted her with the waving of handkerchiefs and the clapping of hands,” an observer reported. During another emotional session, Mother
Harriet, the oldest member of the convention, was asked to introduce the Baby of the Association, the infant son of Ida B. Wells. Many who witnessed the meeting of the aging heroine of the antislavery wars and the youthful anti-lynching crusader, perceived it as a moment in which a torch was passed from one strong bearer to another” (Sterling 398-399).

The National Association of Colored Women would later change its name to the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, NACWC, and is today still involved in making a difference in black communities throughout the entire country. I can proudly say that I was a member of one such club in Toledo, Ohio. Throughout the organization’s history, they have “called public attention to issues such as lynching, peonage, prison conditions and segregated transportation” (nacw.org). They have also opened “day nurseries, kindergartens, working girl’s homes, orphan homes, homes for girls, homes for boys, homes for the aged and infirmed” and these ventures were “owned and controlled by the women of NACW” (Davis 5).
Chapter 6

Conclusion

African American women activists worked continuously on issues other than suffrage. This was a legacy that began in the early 1800s when African American women considered work in benevolence and social reform within the black community more beneficial to their race. Free African American women, from a wide range of socio-economic levels, performed duties in the area of benevolence, not suffrage. Yee stated,

“Activities such as charity work and campaigning for education, temperance, and moral reform were closely tied to women’s domestic responsibilities. Many women worked collectively and individually, often through their churches, to provide everyday necessities to their black neighbors – food, clothing, money, shelter, schooling, burial services, babysitting, and health care” (5).

It was these same women who, in spite of working and caring for family, devoted time to unite in the struggle for justice. They made history as activists and many times risked their lives to bring political, civil, and equal rights to the African American community. It was not women’s suffrage, but the many cries for help in the black
community that kept these women moving forward in spite of dangers. They were often rejected, ignored, marginalized, and minimalized in mainstream history, but black women activists – much like the ones mentioned in this thesis – Harriet Tubman, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Ida B. Wells – pressed forward with persistence, with equality and justice in view, to make a difference for themselves and African American people as a whole.

…and I am one African American woman who is so thankful they did.
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