

# THE COMPLICATED STRUGGLE FOR WOMAN SUFFRAGE

A scholarly discussion guide produced by the League of Women Voters of Ohio



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August 26, 2020 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. While this anniversary means that women in the United States have voted for just about a century, it also reminds us that, for most of history, gender excluded more than one half of all adults from voting. Moreover, a study of this historic achievement reveals that, even with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, large numbers of American adults remained disenfranchised because of race, region, and more. The complicated history of the long struggle for woman suffrage brings into focus our nation's prolonged and imperfect movement toward equal rights for all. The movement's victories and losses, its tensions and coalitions, its debates and debacles, resulted in the ratification of the amendment that eliminated barriers to the vote based on sex, but left much to be done for racial justice and gender equality. Today, we wrestle with its legacy; and with persistent inequalities manifest in our elections and in society based on gender, race, geography, class, and party. The centennial of this significant milestone provides an opportunity to learn about, and from, one of the most significant movements for equal rights in U.S. history.

At the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared "That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise." But the struggle of American women to vote began far earlier. Property-holding women in several northern colonies were allowed to vote before the American Revolution. They were actually disenfranchised when their newly emergent states limited the franchise only to men. In New Jersey, the last hold out, female voters exercised their access to the ballot until 1807. As states matured they extended suffrage by eliminating property requirements, while at the same time categorically denying voting rights to free men of color. By the era of Andrew Jackson, suffrage was limited to adult white males almost everywhere in the United States. Women's disenfranchisement was but one of their legal and social disabilities. Most lacked the status to claim legal personhood and even their own wages, to pursue professions or education, or equality within marriage. Enslaved women struggled to assert their basic humanity.

During this period, antislavery women - and some of their male allies - began to connect emancipation and equality for people of color with the struggle for women's rights. Taking seriously the founders' assertion that "all men are created equal," abolitionists including Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone attended conventions, issued declarations, edited newspapers, and organized. The Seneca Falls Convention was built on a firm foundation. As *One Woman, One Vote* illustrates, conventions attracted allied organizers, including dress reformers and temperance advocates like Susan B. Anthony, who, as Lori Ginzberg's book demonstrates, soon became the inseparable partner of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These meetings also opened their doors to free women of color, bringing into the agitation northern African American women including Maria Stewart, Frances Harper, Harriet Purvis, and, most famously, Sojourner Truth.

Born into slavery in New York, Truth emancipated herself, becoming an indefatigable worker for women and for abolition. While not always successful, many antebellum white feminists intended to work in tandem with African American women in the struggle for emancipation and black equality; as Paula Giddings notes, although sometimes with tension, free Black northern women often recognized their efforts as part of the larger battle to establish racial equality for African Americans of both sexes.

When the Civil War came, movement leaders Stanton and Anthony focused on work to support the antislavery movement. They suspended their annual woman's rights conventions and instead, in 1863, established a new organization, the Woman's Loyal National League. The League called on President Abraham Lincoln to push beyond his tentative emancipation of enslaved people in states in rebellion, and secure permanent freedom for all throughout the country. Emboldened and heartened by the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ending slavery, Stanton believed that, "when the Constitutional door" would again open, women would "avail ourselves of the strong arm and the blue uniform of the black soldier to walk in by his side" to claim the vote. Yet, when Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, it guaranteed suffrage only for men. By the time Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, allowing for equal suffrage irrespective of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," but neglecting to mention sex or gender, the suffrage duo was thoroughly infuriated. Stanton lashed out with virulent, racist language. She worked against ratification that, she insisted would place unqualified men, "who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who can not read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling-book," in the position of making laws for educated white women activists.

Their racist language and intemperate actions alienated other suffragists who insisted on immediate need for African American enfranchisement, even as they recognized this compromise as an imperfect resolution. As *One Woman, One Vote* recounts, the resulting split in the movement led to the founding of two separate women's rights organizations. The National Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Stanton and Anthony, pushed with a single focus for the passage of a national suffrage amendment; the American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, supported a variety of causes related to women's equality and agitated for state-level action. The rivalry remained until 1890, when, under the leadership of a younger generation, they reunified as the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Yet, as Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's work underscores, a lingering resentment remained, causing irreparable damage to interracial solidarity efforts between African American and white women in the suffrage movement.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, a new wave of suffrage activism emerged, bringing fresh ideas to established campaign organizations. Turning away from older arguments for suffrage based on the notion of equal rights of all citizens irrespective of gender, suffragists began to trumpet the significance of their womanhood. They asserted the importance of having women's particular voices, perspectives, and interests in the political sphere, doubling down on womanhood as part of a distinct political identity. In so doing, they broadened suffrage support to include the Woman's Christian Temperance and the women's club movement.

Promoting new ideas about feminine propriety, temperance, modesty, and equanimity, the women's club movement surged in popularity for both African American and white women in the United States at the turn of the century; and suffrage activism became a key component of this growing movement, propelling new kinds of activism, including the innovative accomplishment documented in *Why They Marched*. In addition, the early twentieth-century emergence of the ideal of the "New Woman" signaled women's claim to space in the public sphere and civil society, justifying the necessity of their gendered perspective as necessary for the uplift of society as a whole.

In these years, cross-racial cooperation existed, but racial separatism also thrived as a result of racism, classism, and differing experiences with sexism. Moreover, African Americans inhabited a different political reality since, despite the passage and ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, many legal and extralegal barriers prevented African American men from exercising these rights.

Most white suffrage leaders did not confront African American disenfranchisement in the South, the rise of segregation in the North, or the intensifying of racial violence throughout the nation. Many accepted the arguments of Southern white women who pushed for approval of state-level voting restrictions that would leave black women without the franchise. This resulted in a fracturing of the movement and the formation of autonomous African American women's clubs, including suffrage societies, which provided space for independent action, and created parallel and sometime overlapping experiences within suffrage activism.

Racial tensions within the women's movement reached a peak with the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Without significant inclusion of African American women in leadership or attention to their concerns, the victory was hard-fought, but incomplete. Some white suffragists continued to advocate for universal suffrage, while others saw the amendment as the final victory in a nearly hundred years battle. For black women, the amendment was bittersweet. African American women fought alongside and separate from white women, despite the virulent and widespread anti-black racism.

As we commemorate and honor the one hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, it is important to remember which women this amendment enfranchised and who was left behind. Understanding the racial and class dynamics of this historical moment does not diminish the significance of the amendment or the activism that led to its ratification. The tensions and fractures among suffragists suggest the less laudable part of suffrage activism history - its racism, classism, and elitism. Both *When and Where I Enter* and *African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote* delve deeply into the differing and interconnected experiences of African American and white suffragists. By examining these tensions, it is easier to contextualize contemporary, divergent responses of African American and white women to this anniversary. Today's agenda - to know the importance of and fully realize gender equality, racial justice, and voter fairness for our futures - can learn from the past the importance of beginning with cross-race, cross-class ideals.

## **Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America***

One of the canonical books on African American women's history, this is an expansive and detailed history of African American women in racial and gender equality and justice movements. Moving from an exploration of the status of enslaved black women to African American women's activism during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, Giddings takes a close look at the ways African Americans rallied against various forms of oppression. Giddings uses original documents - particularly the letters, speeches, diary entries, and printed ephemera of African American women - to uncover formerly untold stories of African American women throughout American history.

In Chapter Seven, Giddings explicitly focuses on African American women's involvement in the U.S. Women's Suffrage Movement. Her examination spans from the 1800s until World I - prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. By focusing on how anti-black racism and sexism affected the way African American women thought about and organized for woman suffrage, Giddings illuminates the importance of unpacking what suffrage meant to a group legally and doubly marginalized by a lack of full equality. Giddings carefully unmask the quest for African American women seeking greater political equality via the ballot.

Especially striking in this chapter is the emphasis on the number of organizations African American women founded committed to suffrage activism. From church groups to national, interracial organizations, African American women participated in various efforts to achieve woman suffrage. This chapter also documents conflicts and cooperation with African American men and white women in struggles for universal suffrage. Giddings utilizes the words of African American leaders such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Ellen Harper to capture tensions and disagreements among African American women, white suffragists, and African American male leadership.

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Conflict about expediency and inclusion plagued the U.S Women's Suffrage Movement from its inception. Although African American women were present from the movement's earliest stages, racism and sexism played integral roles in attempts to marginalize the concerns and interests of African American woman in suffrage movements. Giddings discusses the responses of African American women to barriers put in place by the law as well as by African American men and white women. The chapter compels the reader to comprehend the role of intra-racial sexism and anti-black racism throughout the suffrage movement.

African American women's suffrage activism breathed life into the broader U.S. Women's Suffrage movement. From poor, uneducated African American women to comparatively elite women such as Mary Church Terrell, African American women suffragists fought tenaciously for the right to vote. Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, African American women remained undeterred in their commitment to securing the right to vote. In this book, Giddings shows not only why the vote was so important to African American women, but the tremendous lengths to which African American women went in their pursuit of woman suffrage.

Readers may want to think about: What were some of the key tensions between African American and white suffragists? How did African American women respond to intra-racial sexism as it pertained to voting rights activism? What strategies did African American suffragists employ?

## ***Susan Ware, Why They Marched: Untold Stories of the Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote***

In nineteen elegantly written biographically focused vignettes, each cleverly linked to an accompanying object, historian Susan Ware artfully narrates the struggle to achieve woman suffrage, culminating in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Her engaging and enlightening accounts shed light on participants, from the well known to the obscure, and, taken together, provide a fully formed narrative of the battle for votes for women.

Ware's chapters fall into three sections that carry forward the chronology of the suffrage struggle: "Claiming Citizenship," "The Personal is Political," and "Winning Strategies." Within each section, chapters introduce an object - examples include a pin, a picture, and a flag -, and link it to an individual character with a particular story important to the achievement of woman suffrage. Individuals range from the familiar to the little-known, with even the most familiar appearing in less accustomed guises. The ballot cast by Susan B. Anthony in Rochester, New York, in 1872 anchors a discussion of women's claim to citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, while the biography of Alice Stone Blackwell, born into the movement as daughter of pioneering suffragists Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, connects the struggle for women's rights to the Armenian Genocide and through it to the popular maxim that "Women's Rights Are Human Rights." Then too, the unknown Clairborne Catlin and her remarkable "Suffrage Pilgrimage" on horseback across Massachusetts in 1914 illustrates how ordinary women accomplished astonishing feats in pursuit of votes for women.



Ware is honest about the limits of the suffrage movement. In chapters on African American activists Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell she documents their difficulties with white-dominated suffrage organizations. And Ware also recounts the normalization of racism within the National American Woman Suffrage Association in a deftly told biography of now-forgotten white southern novelist Mary Johnston.

Ware's final section "Winning Strategies" reveals the ways in which suffragists increasingly brought their cause into public spaces in the final years of the struggle. Mountaineer Cora Smith Easton, pageant promoter Hazel MacKaye, cartoonists Nina Allender, Lou Rogers and Blanche Ames, and working class organizer Rose Schneiderman all pioneered new venues for marketing suffrage. The book concludes with the successes of Alice Paul's National Women's Party, Maud Wood Park's "Front Door Lobby," and finally Sue Shelton White's expert engineering of Tennessee's ratification, which, by adding the thirty-sixth state, added the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

On finishing this little book readers may want to think about whether these biographies change their understanding of the suffrage movement. Who participated and why? Did African American women and working class women change the suffrage movement? And did suffragists reinforce traditional gender roles when they presented demands for women's rights based in arguments for the importance of female self-protection, and municipal reform? That is, in the language of later generations, did these suffragists miss the opportunity to directly challenge the sexual subordination of "the patriarchy"?

## Two Primary Texts: Mary Church Terrell, *The Justice of Suffrage* and Ida B. Wells, *On Lynching*

Some of the most powerful texts on the U.S. Women's Suffrage movement are primary, original documents authored by suffragists. These documents convey the urgency and significance of suffrage for those directly affected by the denial of voting rights. Two of the most prominent African American women activists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries wrote about suffrage and equality. Noting the importance of suffrage for achieving any semblance of equality, both Terrell and Wells mobilized, organized, and rallied around universal suffrage through their speeches and their writings. These primary sources offer rich insights into the plight and conviction of African American suffragists in their own words.

In an undated and handwritten document, "The Justice of Woman Suffrage," Terrell made an impassioned case. More specifically, she asserted that the denial of the right to vote to African American women is a pernicious form of injustice. Moving the conversation about suffrage from a discussion about equality to one about justice is an important political strategy. Many suffragists discuss woman suffrage as an important frontier for achieving equality. Terrell and many other African American women viewed suffrage as a vehicle through which they could aggrieve injustices and improve the conditions of African American communities. As part of a people who formerly occupied the status of property, Terrell understood that a woman suffrage movement - inclusive of African American women - could force a turning point in American government and politics. The ballot could be a powerful tool to address, at least partially, the political concerns and interests of African American women.

Wells spoke on suffrage and worked closely with suffrage clubs such as Chicago's Alpha Suffrage Club. She joined with white suffragists, even while calling out anti-black racism within the broader U.S. Women's Suffrage movement. With her pen and her voice, Wells unequivocally advocated for universal suffrage, stressing the importance of the right to vote for African American women. In a particularly stirring speech on lynch law delivered in 1900, Wells connected one of the most pressing issues of racial injustice at the turn of twentieth century - anti-black violence and lynching - to universal suffrage.

Focusing upon the uptick of racial violence after the passage and ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which secured the right to vote for African American men, Wells described efforts to intimidate and suppress “the Negro vote.” She directly linked the rise of lynching of African Americans to African American men attempting to exercise their right to vote. Wells also forcefully criticized those who view universal suffrage as a “menace.”

Both Terrell and Wells’ words on suffrage, and more specifically, universal suffrage resound more than a century after they were written or spoken. These women did not believe African American women could attain justice or equality without universal suffrage. Their voices as suffragists were among the most influential and widely recognized. They provide historical context and lay out the case for universal suffrage in clear and concise terms. Reading their words is essential to grasping what suffrage meant to those fighting for it. What can we learn from these primary sources written by Black suffragists? How did Black suffragists connect woman suffrage to other struggles for equality? What is distinct about the voices of Black suffragists?

## **Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920***

This is the most comprehensive book on African American women and suffrage activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using original documents, and more specifically the stories of African American women fighting for the right to vote, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn deftly explores the role of African American women in the U.S. women’s suffrage movement from the historic Seneca Falls Convention to the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. The book reconsiders the interracial, interclass, and intergender dynamics of a movement often posited as a middle-class white women’s movement. By centering the voices, perspectives, and experiences of African American women, this book offers a new understanding of the fight for universal suffrage in the United States.

Unflinching in its recollection of tensions and fissures within the U.S. women’s suffrage movement, Terborg-Penn addresses how racism and class elitism affected solidarity between white and African American suffragists. Furthermore, this book explores anti-black racism as a formidable force within the suffrage movement and as a roadblock to full citizenship for African American women. After the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, many white suffragists left the movement, ignoring the efforts of many state governments to legally prevent African Americans from voting. Through a close examination of the distinct standpoints of African American women, Terborg-Penn pushes back against a myth of interracial solidarity among women and opens up space to learn about the uniqueness of African American women resisting efforts to deny their full participation in civil society.

Terborg-Penn shows readers the range of perspectives extant among African American women fighting for the right to vote as well. This book carefully addresses the differing strategies of African American suffragists—some radical, some comparatively conservative. The thread binding differing forms of African American women’s suffrage activism was the belief that the right to vote was a foundational part of U.S. citizenship. This book underscores how many African American women viewed the vote not only as an individual right, but also as a necessary and important tool in uplifting and strengthening their communities. The sharp and incisive focus on African American women gives an in-depth look at the stakes of universal suffrage for a community affected by both racism and sexism.

Organized primarily chronologically, each chapter expands a comprehensive understanding of the U.S. women's suffrage movement. From the "question" of race posed in early suffrage activism to the differing meaning of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment for African American women, the book sheds light upon a continually understudied portion of U.S. history. The book combines an incisive look at both interracial cooperation and anti-black currents within the U.S. women's suffrage movement. Although intended for a scholarly audience, the book is a must-read for a deeper contextualization of women's suffrage activism. Readers may want to ask: what were the co-existing meanings of the Nineteenth Amendment for African American and white women? How did African American suffragists' activism change from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries? What did the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment mean to African American women?

## **Lori Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life***

Lori Ginzberg's critical biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton presents this key figure in the struggle for women's rights as a complicated and contradictory woman, and brilliant philosopher. Known for her central role in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and her authorship of its foundational Declaration of Sentiments, Stanton pushed forward the formation of an autonomous movement devoted above all to women's equality. Throughout her long life, Stanton battled the "aristocracy of sex", seeking independence and full citizenship for women. In Ginzberg's account, Stanton triumphed with monumental achievements, even while she never escaped her unexamined prejudices with respect to race and class.

The daughter of a judge in upstate New York, Stanton was born in 1815 into a wealthy household that actually included enslaved people. She received the best education then available to girls. Her cousin abolitionist Gerrit Smith introduced her both to antislavery and to her future husband, Henry Brewster Stanton, a dashing, brilliant radical antislavery orator. On their honeymoon at London's 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton met women abolitionists who inspired her lifelong passion for women's equality. A reunion with these colleagues set the stage for the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention at which the harried young mother first publically tested her radical philosophy of equal rights for women. Its most extreme tenet, enfranchisement, met opposition in mainstream society where men's political domination rarely merited questioning.

Despite her ever growing family, Stanton threw herself into the work of making woman's rights into a movement. Pursuing gender equality in the midst of the struggle over slavery, she was, according to Ginzberg, carried forward by the "brilliant simplicity of lofty ideals" (p. 101). Yet the post Civil War controversies over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments - declaring Black citizenship while protecting male voters and securing suffrage for African American men - unloosed Stanton's underlying racism, nativism and elitism. In the name of "equal suffrage" Stanton's attacks devolved into language that even Ginzberg sees as "ugly, conscious and unforgivable" (p. 121). The resulting fissures in the suffrage movement were never fully repaired. Stanton nonetheless forged ahead, crafting a philosophy of woman's "self-sovereignty" that held in tension a cherished individualism and a belief in the universality of womanhood. Today, the self-interested history of the suffrage movement that Stanton wrote - in which she placed herself and her beloved Susan B. Anthony in the center - still dominates most histories of woman suffrage.

Ginzberg's biography of Stanton raises questions about both this leader and the larger movement. Were Stanton and the struggle she centrally helped construct both essentially so flawed by their origins in privilege that they could never escape an unacknowledged elitist, and sometimes racist, perspective? How do we understand the way she navigated between ideals and tactics? Is Ginzberg in the end too much of an apologist for Stanton--just too forgiving of her foibles? And how radical was Stanton? Finally, how do you evaluate Stanton's legacy?

## About Our Scholars



Dr. Carol Lasser, Emerita Professor of History at Oberlin College, chaired the History Department and the Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies Program. Her books include *Elusive Utopia: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Oberlin, Ohio* (with Gary Kornblith, 2018); *Antebellum American Women* (with Stacey Robertson, 2010); *Teaching American History* (co-edited with Gary Kornblith 2009); *Friends and Sisters: Letters Between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-1893*, (with Marlene Merrill, 1987) and *Educating Men and Women Together: Coeducation in a Changing World* (1987), and her articles have ranged from Civil War courtship, to working women, feminist historiography, and the scholarship of teaching.



Dr. Treva Lindsey, Associate Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Ohio State University, specializes in African American women's history, black popular and expressive culture, black feminism(s), hip hop studies, critical race and gender theory, and sexual politics. Her first book is *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington D.C.* She was the inaugural Equity for Women and Girls of Color Fellow at Harvard University (2016-2017). She is currently working on her next book project tentatively titled, *Hear Our Screams: Black Women, Violence, and The Struggle for Justice*.

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