

African American Women in the Suffrage Movement: Then, Now, and Forever

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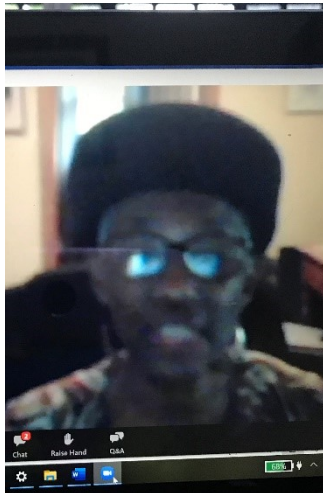
Kansas City, Missouri, July 11, 2020 – [Clay County African American Legacy](#) (CCAAL) Inc. and the [League of Women Voters of Kansas City](#)/Jackson-Clay-Platte counties co-organized a panel discussion on African American Women in the Suffrage Movement. Originally planned as an in-person event with a brunch in March 2020, due to covid19, it was held on July 11, 2020 via Zoom and Facebook live.

Opening

Dr. Cecelia Robinson, Emeritus Professor of William Jewell College, CCAAL Board member, and Historian of [Garrison School Cultural Center](#) in Liberty, Missouri, welcomed the participants. She reminded the audience that after decades of agitation, the 19th amendment was adopted in 1920 as part of the U. S. Constitution. It guaranteed that the “right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” This year of 2020, the U. S. is celebrating the 100-year anniversary of women gaining suffrage, or the right to vote in elections. Note that the first sovereign nation to award and maintain women’s suffrage continuously was Norway, in 1913.

Sandy Eeds, President of the League of Women Voters of Kansas City and event chair, then welcomed all the “doctors” of Zoom to the panel discussion, delayed from March.

Mr. A. J. Byrd, President of Clay County African American Legacy Inc., thanked the League for the excellent collaboration in co-organizing the event to celebrate an important historic moment and to engage in non-partisan discussion and politics. He encouraged everyone to vote and to get involved in democratic processes.



Then **Theresa Habernal** of Liberty, Missouri, who attends Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, beautifully and inspiringly sang a cappella the Negro National Anthem, [Lift Every Voice and Sing](#).

Liberty resident and CCAAL Board member, **Theresa Byrd**, led in prayer. “Lord, God, we stand on the shoulders of great women, **Sojourner Truth** to name only one. May we be moved from a place of complacency and be plummeted to a place of action. Let our voices be heard through the vote.”

Sheryl Eufinger, member of the League of Women Voters, thanked CCAAL for all the collaboration, going back to the beginning of the year, in planning for the event. She recognized the perseverance required to postpone the event from March and turn it into a virtual gathering during the covid19 pandemic.

Three African American women panelists

The featured speaker, joining in from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was **Dr. Delia Gillis**, Professor of African American History at the University of Central Missouri, in Warrensburg. The theme of her presentation was about the African American woman learning that politics “meddle constantly with her and hers¹.”

Dr. Gillis began by referring to the 1998 groundbreaking book, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, by [Rosalyn Terborg-Penn](#). She was Professor of History at Morgan State University in Baltimore and founder of the Association of Black Women Historians. She just died in December 2018.



[Elsa Barkley Brown](#)² wrote about women after and during the reconstruction period in the United States. After the Civil War, in 1870, suffrage was extended to African American men, via the 15th Amendment, which prohibited states from denying a male citizen the right to vote based on “race, color or previous condition of servitude.” African American women exercised their soft power at that time to ensure that the vote of men made a difference for the community.

Dr. Gillis went on to describe African American women who made their mark during the suffrage movement. [Maria Stewart](#) was a journalist, educator, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist. She spoke at the [African Meeting House](#) in Boston.

Many people are aware of the pivotal and multifaceted work of journalist and activist [Ida Bell Wells-Barnett](#). Ida B. Wells stressed that “the way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” She was an advocate of empowerment and fought social injustice at every turn. In her early days, she put up her hair up and lied about her age to become a teacher. When she was thrown off a first-class train despite having a ticket, she filed a lawsuit and won at the local level, though the case was overturned at higher levels. Long before equal rights activist [Alice Paul](#) went to England, Ida B. Wells went to England to plead the cause of women. She was a colleague and peer of American social reformer and women’s rights activist [Susan B. Anthony](#). “We need to look at the *whole career* of Ida B. Wells. She impacted this country in profound ways,” said Dr. Gillis. Dr. Gillis was inspired how Ida B. Wells took her children to meetings, and Dr. Gillis did the same while working on her PhD.

Ida B. Wells founded the [Alpha Suffrage Club](#) in Chicago, after women in Chicago were given the right to vote in 1910. The club members agitated and advocated – because power does not concede without a demand. They registered black women to vote and instructed them in the vote.

Racism reared its ugly head at the [1913 Women’s Suffrage Parade](#). Alice Paul organized the parade. Women went with their delegations to Washington, DC to march. However, Ida B. Wells, though she was part of the movement for longer than many others, was denied the right to march like others. She

¹ This expression was used in the article titled “Colored Women as Voters” by Adella Hunt Logan in the September 1912 issue of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). See https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/1912/womens_suffrage/AdellaLogan

² See the 1994 paper by Elsa Barkley Brown in *Public Culture* (volume 7, issue 1, pages 107-146), “[Negotiating and transforming the public sphere: African American political life in the transition from slavery to freedom](#).” It begins as follows: “On April 15, 1880, Margaret Osborne, Jane Green, Susan Washington, Molly Branch, Susan Gray, Mary A. Soach and ‘over two hundred other prominent sisters of the church’ petitioned the Richmond, Virginia, First African Baptist Church’s business meeting to allow women to vote on the pastor.”

nonetheless ended up joining the Chicago delegation in the march. About a year later, she founded a suffrage club supporting the right of all women to vote.

The insistence of Ida B. Wells is reminiscent of what [Anna Julia Cooper](#) wrote in *A Voice from the South* in 1892: that “only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter [...] and there the whole Negro race enters with me.” Cooper insisted how women will not rise if all women do not rise above division³. Political expediency harmed the suffrage movement over the long term.

Voting is not the only issue on which African American women worked. [Nannie Helen Burroughs](#) (1879-1961), an educator, was active in the African American Baptist Convention, the suffrage clubs, and several other organizations, including the National Association of Colored Women, which had the motto of “Lifting as we climb.” Burroughs advocated through her life for equal rights and for women’s work beyond domestic responsibilities.

Besides education and the vote, African American women were also involved in anti-lynching efforts. Despite the building of schools and institutions and literacy rates among African Americans having gone from 20% in 1870 to 80% in 1920 and 1930, racialized violence was the order of the day.

It is now well known that Blacks were massacred in Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. Today, 99 years later, if activists wrote “Black Lives Matters” on the streets in Greenwood, it shows that staying alive is still a struggle. This is now a matter of concern for the entire nation. Voting is part of what will make the needed changes.

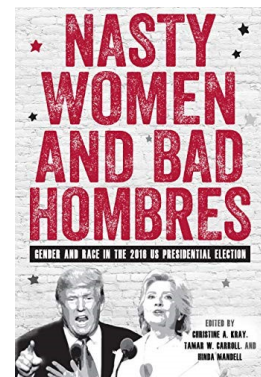
Despite the hard-won right to vote, via the 19th amendment, women continued to struggle to exercise their right to vote. See [Illusion of Suffrage](#) by Ronnie L. Podolefsky about the Southern poll tax, which had to be paid to register to vote. Even white women were disenfranchised through poll taxes.

“Today we still have important questions to ask,” affirmed Dr. Gillis. “Do we have the vote, even since the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Can we exercise it in a way that is meaningful? Is voting in 2020 a reality for African Americans?”

[Fannie Lou Hammer](#) (1917-1977), in the 1940s and 1950s was a timekeeper on a plantation. In the 1960s, she risked her life to register and exercise her right to vote in Mississippi. She also challenged decision-making processes of the Democratic National Convention (DNC).

In *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres*, see chapter 22: “When they go low, we go high: African American women torchbearers for democracy and the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” by historians De Anna J. Reese and Delia C. Gillis.

African American women, more than any other group, participate in democracy, but with too few returns. But it is not a hollow victory, because of the communal value of the efforts. [Donna Brazile](#) as interim chair of the DNC had the role to ensure that it spoke to the diversity of the democratic party. African American women voted in the highest percentages in the 2018 elections. They were persistent.



³ See the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary “The Vote”: www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/vote

The ongoing fight for the vote requires ongoing persistence. Women work as jurors, canvassers, poll workers and more. “Men may be in the lead, but women are organizing. Look behind the people in front,” said Dr. Gillis in concluding.

The second panelist was **Joanne Collins**, the first African American woman elected, in 1974, to serve on the Kansas City Council. She was reelected in 1975, 1979, 1983, and 1987, retiring in 1991. She served as mayor pro-tem and acting mayor. She has been active in the League of Women Voters and the Jackson County Republican Committees and dozens of other organizations over the years, including in the early days colored clubs and black women political congresses. She admires the suffragists and the years they put in and says today’s women still have work to do. “We are still working on the Equal Rights Amendment, and we need to keep on working on it,” she insisted.

As a Council member, she wanted to work from within the organizations of which she was a part. She remembers when Sam Houston said that women made a difference in his election. Sam Houston was the first African American to serve on the Liberty, Missouri, City Council, and he served for 18 years. “I encourage women to vote in the next election. African American women can make a difference in every election.”



Ms. Collins encouraged anyone interested in running, in the Democratic or Republican Party, to give her a call for support. “Women should not wait to be ask to be involved. If you see a need, meet the need.” Dr. Gillis asked Ms. Collins if she thinks the notion of “lifting up the community overall” keeps African American women from running for office. Ms. Collins responded, “I love an irate citizen because they have an answer to their problem. We need to be willing to serve in positions that serve others.”

The third and final panelist was **Ruth Emery**, cofounder and past President of Clay County African American Legacy (CCAAL) Inc. Ms. Emery informed listeners about the Freedom Fountain monument on the square in downtown Liberty, Missouri, where the country administration building is located. The monument recognizes African Americans that contributed in various ways to the development of Clay County.

Ruth Emery said it is hard for her to believe that she was the first African American woman to run for a Clay County office and that to this day, she is still the only one. “In 1998, I ran for Recorder of Deeds. I believe I was the most qualified candidate, but I did not win. Though I had been endorsed, I did not have enough backing.” She said that had the vote been today, there would be more voters out there, particularly women, who would have pushed her into winning.

Today Ms. Emery is involved in the community and in promoting diversity. She strongly encourages women to run for office. She has thought about running again, though it is hard work. “It is hard work, especially when you are working full time,” she explained. Joanne Collins tried to convince her to run again – or to find other women willing to do so.

Questions from participants

Q: How can black and white women work together to elect black women?

A: Women need to work together, all women. Registration is important. Policymaking is important, “and I’ve learned about it from the League of Women Voters,” said Joanne Collins. “Be a part of organizations with inclusive leadership. We also need to encourage women to run,” she continued. Politics is time-consuming, for African American women already involved in so many different community initiatives, but one of the necessary pathways for change. Also, suggested Joanne Collins, “Talk to university students. Learn from them and mentor them. They are the future.” Cecelia Robinson said she is impressed how in her native Texas, in Harris County, 17 African American women were elected in 2019 as judges. “To see that in Texas was outstanding. We need that kind of diversity. Let us continue to encourage women to run as judges. We can impact our community in this way,” she said.

Q: How do we get more women on boards and commissions?

A: The [Women’s Foundation](#) is a source to go to for assistance in getting women on boards and commissions. “Historically,” said Cecelia Robinson, “we’ve not been at the table nor had anyone to represent us, for example via local elections.” When boards and commissions are formed, the founders should encourage and endorse diverse candidates. Recruit from female organizations like sororities, black social clubs, churches, and Church Women United chapters, and possibly from parent-teacher organizations from various schools in the city’s core. People in churches and sororities and fraternities (i.e. Delta Sigma Theta sorority, or the first African American sorority created in 1908: Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority) can recommend women who can be involved. Part of the work of [African American sororities](#) is to prepare women for leadership. One panelist said, “Someone at the table must give us an invitation to come in.” At the same time, [Shirley Anita Chisholm](#) is known to have said, “If they do not invite you, bring a folding chair.” Shirley Chisholm was the first black woman elected to the U.S. Congress, serving seven terms from 1969 to 1983, and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. “We need boldness in spirit,” insisted Joanne Collins.

Q: What can I do if I am currently not ready to run for office?

A: We need African American election judges. Cecelia Robinson explained that when she saw none in Clay County, she wrote a protest letter and was subsequently asked to become an election judge and then served in that capacity for several years. Ruth Emery has been an election judge for about five years now. “And we also need poll workers,” explained Cecelia Robinson. “When you look at the tables in front of voting sites and see people of color serving, it is more encouraging to go in and vote. **We need to see more people of color serving as poll workers.**” Joanne Collins explained that every candidate needs support. Candidates recruit volunteers from their web sites. “If not running, check out the web site of a candidate you want to support. Become a supporter,” she insisted. And there seemed to be consensus that “we need to vote in 2020 as if our life depends on it.” Black women are likely to come out again in very high percentages.

Q: Is the League of Women Voters active in Kansas City's northlands?

A: "Yes, the League is active in the northlands of Kansas City," said Sandy Eeds. He invited people to visit the League web site at www.lwvkc.org. He also referred people to www.vote411.org which provides election information according to your address, including dates, voting sites, and what is on upcoming ballots.

Q: Will a recording of today's session on celebrating African American suffragists be available?

A: The [recording](#) is available on the League Facebook site. Groups are free to share today's panel discussion video with other groups and sponsor discussions. Kansas City's Women's Equality Coalition is planning to do just that in upcoming weeks.



Q: Are you hoping for a woman of color as a running mate? And do you prefer she is Black?

A: There was consensus among the panelists that they would vote for a woman who supports women and that they prefer a black woman running mate. "However," Dr. Gillis insisted, "Americans and especially women need to be ready to vote women into office."

Q: How do we get women's suffrage in the school curriculum?

A: Joanne Collins explained that, because it is the 100-year celebration of women in the United States of America obtaining the right to vote, there are web sites about the 19th amendment, including curriculum and lesson plans all the way through high school and into college and university studies. Families may consult and use the online resources⁴ for family discussions and learning. These resources about the women's suffrage movement are widely available and being promoted on TV, radio, the web, and social media. See at the link [here](#), for example, **more on African American women in the suffrage movement**.

Q: What about Kansas City women who participate(d) in the suffrage movement?

A: Many [women from Kansas](#) and [women from Missouri](#) participate(d) in the suffrage movement. Take **Harriet U. Andrews**, for example, and **Rebecca Harrison** from Joplin. They came to the area during the Great Migration. They both participated in [Watchfire demonstrations](#) of the National Woman's Party in 1919 and were each jailed for 5 days. The court case of [Virginia Minor](#) from St. Louis, who, with her husband, defended her right to vote under the 14th amendment (as a citizen of the United States of America) went to the Supreme Court. [Josephine Silone Yates](#) came to Missouri

⁴ For example, the National Education Association, www.nea.org/tools/lessons/63472.htm, and the National Park Service, www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/2020-crash-course.htm, are two organizations among many that have developed curriculum, lesson plans, and resources for learning about the fight for the 19th Amendment. And the 2020 theme of the **Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASAALH)** is "African Americans and the Vote" and explores the "ongoing struggle on the part of both black men and black women for the right to vote": <https://asalh.org/asalh-announces-2020-black-history-theme-african-americans-and-the-vote>

in 1881 and became Chair of the Science Department at Lincoln University in Jefferson City but had to give that position up when she married. That is when she became active in the women's club movement.

Which women, then and now, inspire the panelists, and Why?

Joanne Collins said she is inspired by today's young people. She takes the time to mentor young women and encourage them to take on leadership roles. She particularly enjoys working with young women who have done sports and taken drama. "They have learned collaboration and communication," she said. Going back in history, she said she is inspired by [Mary Church Terrell](#)⁵ (1863-1954), the first African American woman to be appointed to serve on a school board in a major U. S. city. She was a member of numerous organizations, the first President in 1896 of the National Association of Colored Women, and a founding member in 1910 of the National Association of College Women, now the National Association of University Women. She apparently had a supportive spouse. His judgeship lent her credence and contacts. "It is important that we recognize, in recruiting women to run for office and to take on leadership roles, the important role a spouse plays in being supportive," said Joanne Collins.



Cecelia Robinson said she finds Ida B. Wells inspirational, because of her many talents. She was a writer and was engaged in so many different ways. "If she were alive today," said Dr. Robinson, "she would be involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. The whole country is involved and is reacting to what happened to George Floyd. Knowing how Ida B. Wells fought oppression, hatred, lynching, and racism, I know she'd be out there today."

Ruth Emery said she finds inspiration in all the women suffragists and could not choose a favorite. "It is their drive to make change that inspires me," she said.

Delia Gillis said she is inspired by how black women mayors in the United States have reacted during the pandemic. "They, along with the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, are who inspire me today," she said.

⁵ [A Colored Woman in a White World](#) autobiographically journals the life of **Mary Church Terrell** as an "outspoken woman ahead of her time," according to Allyson in a comprehensive [review](#) on Amazon. The book was published in 1940, the year Terrell turned 77 years old; she lived to be 90 years of age. Allyson also writes as part of her chapter-by-chapter review: "In this self analysis the reader is taken on a journey towards Mrs. Terrell's destiny as a leader. This writing has proven to be inspiring for any reader no matter their race, culture, age, and gender. Mrs. Terrell's writing of this book has been successful (1) in generating sentiment in support of the African American race and (2) in acquainting the public with facts about race discrimination and women's rights [...] I, myself, view Mrs. Terrell's writings within this story as humble, honest, and encouraging. Also, I found Mrs. Terrell's tone within her journal to be very guarded in her feelings, and she maintained a contemplative, unexcited tone throughout the entire text." Terrell also advocated "for unbiased social and scientific research." "Although she lectured extensively at a long list of cities, schools, and other events, I was especially interested in her famous address to the International Congress of Women in the city of Berlin in 1904 [...] This conference was special because several prominent and socially active women from around the world came together for several days to have discussions and give speeches about various topics, such as morality, marriage, a woman's place in society. They later added the topic of women's suffrage." In her speech, Terrell shares "vivid details to impress upon her audience the long list of contributions that African Americans have made within the Western World, how the struggle for racial equality continues, and how the delegates should never give up on the campaign for women's suffrage. Yet, to set herself apart from the rest, besides being the only delegate of African descent, she was also the only one to deliver her speech three times *[sic]* that day in English, French, and German languages [...] I also feel that her story would be very beneficial to any future student or community advocate learning about social equality in America."

Wrapping up

Sandy Eeds recognized all those who took the time to come together to learn more about and celebrate African American women in the suffrage moment, then and now. “Zoom has not diminished our ability to see each other and dialogue.” He informed listeners that the League is very active in supporting Medicaid expansion in Missouri and needs phone bank volunteers to help with that (especially before the August 4 vote); see the League web site under “Committees/Interests” to sign up or contact Mary Lindsay of the League.

Dr. Robinson thanked all members of the League of Women Voters who helped organize the event and all the supporting technicians, like Mary Herring and Cheryl Barnes. “We had planned a brunch to go with this event in March and were even collecting bottles to decorate the tables. Sorry that did not work out, but we are pleased with today’s dialogue.”

She also thanked the CCAAL Board members and reminded listeners about the annual Juneteenth program, being held this year on July 24. With the [Native Sons and Daughters of Greater Kansas City](#), a historical marker will be placed at Garrison School Cultural Center of Clay County African American Legacy Inc., and the event will be live streamed on Facebook.

The public is invited to an online tour of Garrison School at https://ccaal-garrisonschool.org/join_us and to **donate generously to the Juneteenth fundraiser** to help Garrison continue to preserve history, celebrate culture, and promote human relations: https://ccaal-garrisonschool.org/join_us.

Dr. Robinson concluded with a clarion call to all listeners and readers: “As women and voters, it is our responsibility to educate current and future voters and to remain vigilant in the fight for equality. Register to vote. Get involved. Vote.”

***Kathryn Toure**, the author of this article on the July 11, 2020 event on “African American Women in the Suffrage Movement: Then, Now, and Forever,” takes responsibility for any errors in reporting. This article, which may be shared widely and also repurposed for education and learning, is available, among other places, from her web site at www.kathryntoure.net*