

Making Strides | The Voting Rights Act

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"The 19th Amendment was an important but incomplete victory in the struggle for women's voting rights," says Melinda Gates, philanthropist and creator of Truth Be Told – a digital collection of historical artifacts spotlighting Black women activists and suffragists. "As we commemorate its centennial, we also have a responsibility to grapple with its complicated history and elevate the stories of courageous Black activists who challenged both sexism and racism in their long fight for the vote."

BACKGROUND

"While the 15th Amendment barred voting rights discrimination on the basis of race, it left the door open for states to determine the specific qualifications for suffrage," including literacy tests, poll taxes and other discriminatory practices – primarily implemented in Southern states. [i]

"In the 1950s and '60s, securing voting rights for African Americans in the South became a central focus of the civil rights movement. While the sweeping Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally banned segregation in schools and other public places, it did little to remedy the problem of discrimination in voting rights." [i]

The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson and "aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote as guaranteed under the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution." [i]

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

"The story of the fight for women's voting rights begins with the story of Black women's fight for freedom from slavery. As part of their mission to be fully recognized as fellow citizens, Black women built on their work in the antislavery movement to lead the movement to win the vote." [ii]

SOJOURNER TRUTH

Born enslaved around 1797, Isabella Baumfree "walked away from her master's New York farm in protest of his failure to live up to a promise to emancipate her ahead of a state law that would have made her free." [iii]

Isabella changed her name to Sojourner Truth and "became an antislavery reformer, publishing her memoir and traveling the country to share her story. In the 1860s, she was inspired by fellow activist Frederick Douglass to sell her portrait to challenge popular racist cartoons that mocked Black people. [Sojourner] used her pose, props and dress to highlight her dignity and counter harmful stereotypes of Black women." [ii]

MARY CHURCH TERRELL

Born in 1863 in Memphis, Mary Church Terrell was one of the first Black women to earn a bachelor's degree – graduating from Oberlin College in 1884. As a co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women – which advocated for suffrage and numerous other reforms to improve life for African Americans – Mary was elected their first president in 1896.

"After the 19th Amendment's passage, [Mary] encouraged leading suffrage organizations to help challenge the various poll taxes and other laws passed by Southern states that blocked Black voters, male and female. They refused, arguing that gender equality, not civil rights, was their mission." [ii]

"In 1923, the National Woman's Party proposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to win gender equality. Mary Church Terrell testified before congressional committees [in its favor]." [ii]

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

Born enslaved in 1862, Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a suffragist and anti-lynching activist. As a co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women, Ida also founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in 1913, which "organized women in the city to elect candidates who would best serve the Black community." [iv] That year, she was invited to march in the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington D.C. with dozens of club members. "Organizers, afraid of offending Southern white suffragists, asked women of color to march at the back of the parade. [Ida] refused, and stood on the parade sidelines until the Chicago contingent of white women passed, at which point she joined the march." [iv] "Throughout her career as an activist, she urged white women to join her in fighting for Black women's rights." [ii]

"Work done by [Ida] and the Alpha Suffrage Club played a crucial role in the victory of woman suffrage in Illinois on June 25, 1913 with the passage of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Act." [iv] The Act granted women the right to vote for President and local officers.

Top photo courtesy of [Truth Be Told](#).

Center photo courtesy of [The New York Times](#).

Bottom photo courtesy of [The New York Times](#).

[i] Pruitt, S. (2020, January 29). When Did African Americans Actually Get the Right to Vote? Retrieved August 24, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/34mGlgY>

[ii] Stories of Black Women's Fight for the Vote. (n.d.). Retrieved August 24, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/2Yp2pJB>

[iii] Blakemore, E. (2016, July 28). How Sojourner Truth Used Photography to Help End Slavery. Retrieved August 24, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/2YpARE5>

[iv] Ida B. Wells (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved August 24, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/2FlxPEh>

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