

5-2021

Early 20th Century African American Women's Suffrage Movement in Rhode Island

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Recommended Citation

Riordan, Katherine, "Early 20th Century African American Women's Suffrage Movement in Rhode Island" (2021). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 916.
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Early 20th Century RI African American Women's Suffrage

Katherine Riordan, Political Science

Sponsor: Kathleen McIntyre

How did Black women organize their suffrage clubs and what impact did this have on the overall struggle for women's suffrage in Rhode Island?

Historical Context

- ★ Slavery officially ended in Rhode Island in 1843; the 13th amendment abolished slavery nationally in 1865
- ★ After the Civil War (1861–1865), Black women founded many organizations, including the 1890 National Association of Colored Women (NACW)
- ★ When WWI broke out in 1914, many African American men entered the military; more women entered the workforce
- ★ Jim Crow segregation and violence leads to the Great Migration
- ★ “Colored Women Denied Work in Rhode Island” published in the prominent Black newspaper *The New York Age* in 1918
- ★ *The Advance* newspaper, based out of Providence, was founded in 1909 to cover African American news and activism.
- ★ In 1918, Rhode Island suffragist Mary E. Jackson wrote an article for the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, discussing the entrance of African American women into the workforce.
- ★ Mary E. Jackson encouraged women's clubs to address these problems, as she described organizing for activism as “the solution of industrial problems, and every possible method of achieving it must be utilized.”
- ★ Rhode Island ratified the 19th Amendment on January 6, 1920, making RI the 24th state to ratify.

COLORED WOMEN DENIED WORK IN RHODE ISLAND
PROVIDENCE, R. I.—The colored people of Providence are up in arms over the refusal of the Gorham Manufacturing Company to employ race women at its plants on Eddy street and at Phil-ly-dale. Although this concern is greatly in need of help, it has turned down all colored applicants for work. This vicious form of discrimination is being practised in Rhode Island—not Mississippi.
Governor Beelman has received a formal complaint against the ban on colored workers and is conducting an investigation. The Women's Committee, Council of National Defense, is trying to adjust the matter.
The management of the plant says employment has been refused colored girls because white girls will not work with them. This vicious form of discrimination is being practised in Rhode Island—not Mississippi in this instance.

New York Age,
November 9, 1918



Photograph of Mary E. Jackson, in Sara Algeo's 1926 *Memories of a Sub-Pioneer*

Organizing

- ★ Clubs
 - African American cultural clubs such as the Women's New Century Club played a significant role in promoting Black authors, celebrations of Black history, and musical events.
 - Such clubs became key tools for activism, allowing African American women to organize pro-suffrage events and NAACP meetings, thus mobilizing Black activism.
- ★ Churches
 - The Congdon St. Baptist Church, the oldest Black church in Providence, served as a mobilizing structure for suffrage activism and social movements.
 - In 1916, the Resolution of the Colored Women's Clubs Supporting the Federal Woman Suffrage Amendment was signed at the Congdon St. Baptist Church in Providence
 - The Olney St. Baptist Church and the Pond St. Baptist Church in Providence, along with the Union Baptist Church in Pawtucket, and the Shiloh Baptist and Union Congregational Churches in Newport were all important spaces for Black women's social and political organizing.
 - Signers included Mary E. Jackson and Bertha Higgins.

RESOLUTION
WHEREAS, The women of one-fourth of the States of the Union are entitled to vote for President in 1916;
WHEREAS, The women of Australia, New Zealand, a large part of Canada and several important European countries, now vote upon equal terms with men;
WHEREAS, The unfranchised women of the United States are an intelligence, law abiding and patriotic as any women in the world, be it
RESOLVED: That we, the citizens of Providence, in our meeting assembled at Congdon St. Baptist Church, hereby call upon all candidates for member of the House of Representatives and the United States Senate to pledge their aid, if elected, to vote and influence to secure the extension of Federal woman suffrage amendment for ratification by the Legislature of the several States.

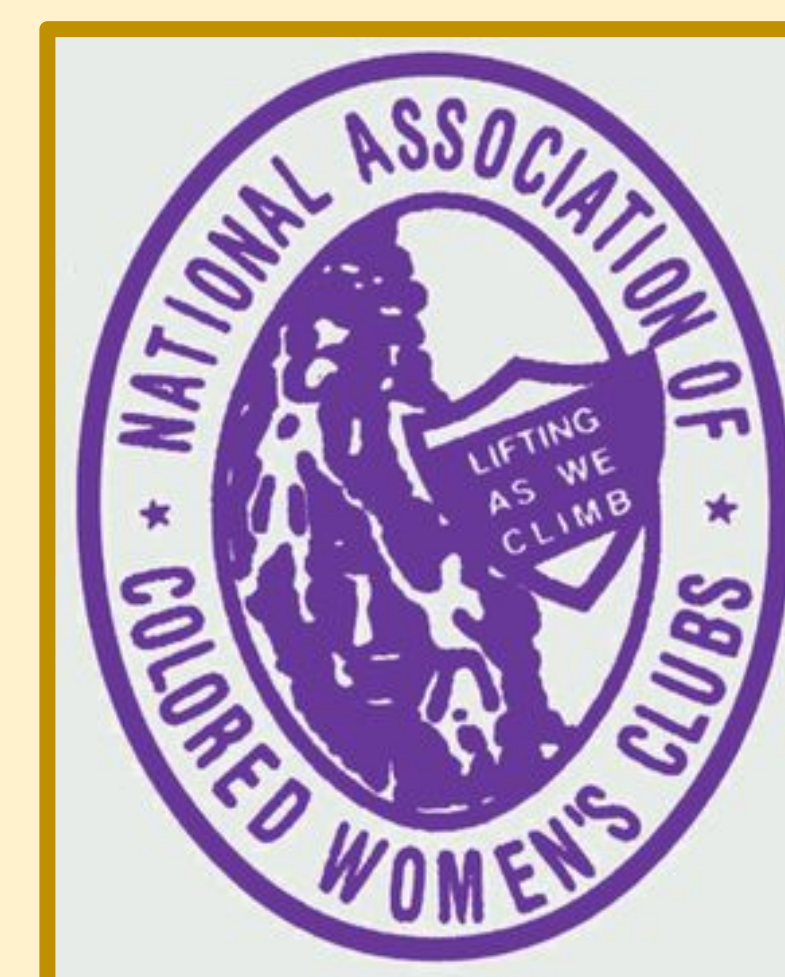
Resolution of the [Rhode Island] Union Colored Women's Clubs Supporting the Federal Woman Suffrage Amendment, 1916

Divisions Over Race

- ★ The Rhode Island Suffrage Association represented the flagship organization in the state, with deep ties to the National American Woman Suffrage Association. NAWSA's overarching stance on the inclusion of African American women was highly problematic and inconsistent.
- ★ Some white suffragists were motivated by racism in their activism, using the argument that if Black men could vote, why shouldn't they?
- ★ White Rhode Island suffragist Sarah Algeo, wrote in her memoir “there should be no stock-taking account of suffrage progress in Rhode Island in 1913 without mention of the honorable part played by the colored women.”
- ★ Prominent Black suffragist and civil rights leader Roberta Dunbar and Sara Algeo maintained a personal friendship while collaborating in Rhode Island's movement
- ★ Founded in 1913, the Rhode Island Women's Suffrage Party sought to be more inclusive and promoted goals of racial integration.



Top: Leaders of the Women's League in Newport, 1899. Library of Congress



Left: NACWC's “Lifting as We Climb” Logo
<https://www.nacwc.com/>

“... all objections to the ballot for women are but protests against progress, civilization and good sense.”

-Mary E. Jackson