Woman Suffrage Matters

By Angela P. Dodson

When I show up to discuss my book on the woman suffrage movement, people often look confused about why an African American woman has taken up this subject. Black women and men often think African Americans had only bit parts, if any, in that cause. When I speak to Black audiences, the little that some attendees knew beforehand about the movement was negative — a recollection of slights and even flagrantly racist acts perpetrated by some of its leaders. Most of the people who attend my book events, however, are white, and some of them seem to fear that I am there only to dredge up that shameful history of bias and to smear their beloved heroines.

As the centennial of the 19th amendment's ratification in August 1920, passed, a narrative seems to have developed that somehow the suffrage movement is not relevant to African Americans. That is because of its track record for discriminating against or dismissing Black suffragists, because of a long history of dissonance between white and Black feminists to the present day, and/or because most Blacks in the South were disenfranchised anyway.

As women seek greater leverage in the political system, and with Kamala Harris, a Black/Asian woman, on the Democratic presidential ticket, now is the time to examine and credit the contributions of all suffragists. We must expand our knowledge of the entire movement as an example of what can happen if people focus on the commonalities, instead of their differences.

The decision last year by the Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Statue Fund Inc., after years of controversy, to add a figure of the orator Sojourner Truth to a statue for New York City's Central Park depicting Stanton and Anthony was a step in the right direction, though it still raised questions. On September 16, 2019, the New York City Public Design Commission had postponed a vote on the redesign saying it still did not address its concerns about inclusivity and historical accuracy. It later approved the design, and Monumental Women, an organization that had campaigned for the statue, unveiled it on August 26 of this year, on the centennial of the adoption of the 19th Constitutional amendment.

My book, "Remember the Ladies: Celebrating Those Who Fought for Freedom at the Ballot Box," certainly mentions the racist components of the long campaign to gain the vote for women in our nation, but it takes a much broader view of the movement. Published first in hardback in May 2017, and in paperback March 5, 2019, mine is not a book that focuses only on Black women in the struggle, nor is it a book about how a handful of stoic white women in flowy white dresses stormed the castles of injustice and won victory for us all.

I did not set out to write a Black version or a white version of the fight for woman suffrage. I accepted a challenge from my publisher, Center Street, to write an account of what it took to win the right to vote for women in this country in anticipation of the centennial of the 19th Amendment ratified in 1920 and how it has impacted politics since then. As a journalist, I wanted to tell that story as fully, impartially, and inclusively as I could.

I had few preconceived notions about the movement, if only because, like most women of my generation in this country, I had learned almost nothing about women's history, even while earning two college degrees. Since then, even as a self-confessed feminist, history buff and book review editor, I had not read much of women's history. Feminist/womanist theories? Yes. African American/civil rights history? Check. Women's history, biographies? Not so much.

Part of my quest in researching this book was to find out what motivated each woman to become a leader in a movement that challenged thousands of years of law and tradition. What kind of woman would do that and endure the firestorm? For some, the fuel was anger. For others, it was altruism.

Women in the United States, and elsewhere, had no rights to speak of, and not voting was among the least of their deprivations. Women generally could not own property, divorce, gain custody of children, get an education, preach, or address secular audiences that included men.

To learn about the individuals who broke those chains, I had to read the biography, sometimes multiple biographies, of many women and men involved, women as diverse as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most tenacious and controversial white leaders of the movement, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the crusading African American journalist and suffrage leader. I sifted through other histories and source documents, such as newspapers, speeches, and letters of the period. Among the suffrage leaders were many heroic, courageous and admirable people worth study.

As I researched, I began to see themes and connections among certain people and events that few other sources emphasized, and it became clear early on that our nation's tortured racial history was a big part of the story. It was all there to see as I dug deeper, but the fact that I am a Black woman undoubtedly had an impact on my choice not to ignore the racial aspects of the story as if they were not germane to the women's movement.

In many ways, the history of race in the United States is inseparable from the history of the woman suffrage movement, as it is from so many issues. Indeed, the women's rights movement was rooted in the anti-slavery movement.

William Lloyd Garrison founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1831 but refused to allow women to join. Lucretia Mott, a radical abolitionist and Quaker preacher formed the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society with Black and white members. Among the founders were Black women like Charlotte Forten and her daughters, Margaretta Forten, Sarah Forten, and Harriet Forten Purvis; Grace Bustill Douglass; and Sarah McCrummell. They worked alongside Mott and other white women, including the author Lydia Maria Child and Abigail "Abba" Alcott, mother of the famed author Louisa May Alcott. This group raised funds to support abolitionist activities and aid runaways at a time when Philadelphia was a hub for the Underground Railroad. After the Civil War, the society continued to assist the newly freed.

Mott and most of the other women, and their husbands, of both races, knew each other through their work in the "free produce" movement, which called for the boycotting of any products produced with enslaved labor. That included sugar, molasses, cotton, and rice, which required

great sacrifice. These abolitionists argued that shutting down the market for these goods would undercut incentives for enslavement.

Suffrage leaders often cite the 1848 women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., as the beginning of organized agitation for women's rights. However, one of the conveners of that meeting, Mott, emphatically rejected the notion that this was the start. Instead, she traced the women's movement to the interracial anti-slavery conventions of the 1830s. Mott recalled the first national Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held May 9, 1837, in New York City. A mob opposed to "race mixing" broke up a second convention in Philadelphia in 1838 and burned the building where it was held to the ground that night, just days after it opened.

Organizing any movement for women would have been difficult before the abolitionist cause gathered steam in the North. Until then, few women had ever spoken before audiences of men and women together. The first American woman to do so was a free Black lecturer, Maria W. (Miller) Stewart of Boston, who spoke on abolition, the education of girls and other issues, from about 1831-33.

Other Black women who emerged as abolitionist lecturers in the 1850s were Frances E.W. Harper, also a free woman from Baltimore, and Sojourner Truth of New York, who freed herself. Both became active in the women's rights movement in the pre-Civil War era. Truth attended her first women's rights convention in 1850. White women on the abolitionist lecture circuit also became leaders of the women's movement, including Angelina Grimké, Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone during that period.

Frederick Douglass, the famed Black abolitionist editor, publicized, addressed, and reported on women's conventions, beginning with Seneca Falls in 1848. The organizers of that convention asked him to publish a notice in his newspaper and urged him to attend. It was a hastily called meeting organized by a handful of mostly Quaker women but attracted 300 women and men from the vicinity. That meeting did not focus on suffrage but rather on all the freedoms that women lacked – the rights to receive an education, own property, divorce husbands, maintain custody of children or pursue professions. When Stanton offered a resolution demanding the vote as well, attendees were aghast, women, as well as men. Only Douglass spoke in favor of it and eloquently so. Had he not, it probably would not have carried.

Douglass attended many more women's rights gatherings over the next five decades, as did other Black men, even after a great falling out in the movement over whether to support the 15th Amendment securing the right to vote for freed Black men, while asking women to wait.

"This hour belongs to the Negro," declared Wendell Phillips, a white Bostonian who took over as head of the American Ant-Slavery Society in 1865. "As Abraham Lincoln said, 'One war at a time,' so I say, 'One cause at a time.' This is the Negro's hour."

Some women, white and Black, agreed. On May 10, 1866, when the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention met in New York City, Harper called on the audience to remember that the rights of white women and men were all "bound up together" with those of black women and men. It was, therefore, pointless to argue over who should have the vote first.

“Talk of giving women the ballot-box?” she said. “Go on . . . The white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.”

Sojourner Truth did not agree.

“I am glad to see that men are getting their rights, but I want women to get theirs, and while the water is stirring, I will step into the pool,” she said. “Now that there is a great stir about colored men’s getting their rights is the time for women to step in and have theirs.”

Ironically, Stanton and Anthony had set up office in New York City during the Civil War and gathered thousands of petitions demanding passage of the 13th Amendment to make emancipation permanent in the Constitution. They also helped organize an abolitionist lecture tour early in the war.

After the war, they felt entitled to some reward. Before that, the movement had not focused on the vote as a goal, and if it did, the leaders thought state-by-state referenda was the only route to getting it. It dawned on them that if Black men could gain the vote by Federal amendment, so could and should women.

With white women’s suffrage at stake, Stanton wrote vicious, racist articles, fulminating against the idea of giving the vote to uneducated Black men and immigrants – “Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a Monarchy and a Republic, who never read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book” — while elite white women waited.

Confronted about her stance by a white abolitionist man, she had stormed out of a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, which was formed in 1866 to fight for voting rights “irrespective of race, color or sex.” With Anthony, she formed the National Woman Suffrage Association to work for the women’s cause only. Later, Lucy Stone and others (men and women) formed the American Woman Suffrage Association to support the 15th Amendment and seek woman suffrage at the same time. Black women belonged to each association.

After the adoption of the 14th and 15th amendments, some women began to argue that those two measures already gave women the right to vote, because they were “citizens.” A Black woman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a law student at Howard University, petitioned the House Judiciary Committee making that argument. In 1871, she also tried to vote but was barred.

In 1890, the two main suffrage groups merged as the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Douglass remained on cordial terms with Anthony and attended women’s conventions regularly until Anthony disinvited him for a NAWSA convention in Atlanta in 1895. She was pushing a “Southern strategy” to broaden support for suffrage in a region where women had not flocked to the movement and many were anti-suffrage. The suffragists needed Southern support for a voting amendment, but lawmakers from the region openly admitted they feared

doubling the Black voting base with an influx of African American women (though they had managed to disenfranchise or buy the votes of most Black men).

The lawmakers would deny all women the right to vote just to keep Black women from having it and would surely be hostile to an integrated convention.

Anthony, whose family had been friends with Douglass for decades in upstate New York, argued that the sight of a Black man on the platform with white women would upset their Southern hosts. Douglass usually had such a place of honor at these gatherings, including at an international women's meeting on the day he collapsed and died the same year.

"It is a singular fact, in connection with the death of Mr. Douglass, that the very last hours of his life were given in attention to one of the principles to which he has devoted his energies since his escape from slavery," the New York Times wrote.

Anthony had helped escort him to the stage, and a few days later, eulogized him and read effusive praise from the ailing Stanton as well.

After Anthony's "highly eulogistic" remarks at the funeral held at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church of Washington, D.C., Carrie Chapman Catt, then rising in the ranks of the reunified woman suffrage organization, and later its leader, confided to another suffragist, that the gushing sentiments for a Black man had undone most of the progress gained by the dubious "Southern strategy."

"The relationship of our leaders to the colored question at the Douglass funeral has completely taken the wind out of our sails," she wrote. "You should see some of the clippings I have from the Southern Press and some of the letters. They were suspicious of us all along, but now they know we are abolitionists in disguise."

Yet racism within the women's movement, often using Southern sensibilities as an excuse, continued, notably when Anthony turned down a request from Black women to form their own chapter of NAWSA. Ida B. Wells-Barnett criticized her, saying, "She might have made gains for suffrage, but she confirmed white women in their attitude of segregation."

(On the other hand, Anthony hosted Well-Barnett at her home for a speech in Rochester, New York, and fired her own secretary for refusing to take dictation from Wells-Barnett because of her color.)

Black suffragists like Nannie Helen Burroughs and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, both of Washington, D.C., wrote and spoke in favor of woman suffrage. Black women belonged to and attended conventions of white-dominated NAWSA. Even when barred from attending its conventions in the South, light-skinned Black women like Adella Hunt Logan, a teacher at Tuskegee Institute, sometimes "passed" to attend. Mary Church Terrell delivered her famed "Lifting as We Climb" speech at an NAWSA convention.

In the late 1800s, Black women formed clubs and organizations to address women's rights and other issues. Hallie Quinn Brown, a professor at Wilberforce University, began pushing for a national organization. In 1895, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a suffragist and editor, issued a call for a meeting in Boston to form such an organization to support woman suffrage. More than 50 women attended and formed the National Federation of Afro-American Women. Frances Harper, Mary Church Terrell, an educator from Washington, D.C., and Margaret Murray Washington, an educator and wife of Booker T. Washington, were among the attendees. A year later, the federation united with the Colored Women's' League of Washington, D.C. and formed the National Association of Colored Women, headed by Terrell. In 1913, Ida B. Wells founded the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago.

Leaders of the mass suffrage parade organized by Alice Paul, a New Jersey suffragist, in Washington, D.C. in 1913 first sought to exclude Black women to avoid offense to Southerners and later relented. Among those who marched were Terrell and the founders of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority from Howard University. When parade leaders told her she could not march with the Illinois delegation, Wells-Barnett pretended to comply, left her fellow delegates, and waited on the sidelines. When her delegation passed, she fell into step with the white women.

Terrell wrote that a few years later she sometimes joined National Woman's Party leader Alice Paul's suffrage picketers at the White House. Many of Paul's picketers, the Silent Sentinels, went to jail and suffered horrific conditions, beatings, and forced feedings after they went on hunger strikes to secure passage of the 19th amendment. In her autobiography, Terrell said she narrowly missed arrest because she could not go to the White House one day to picket when police rounded up and jailed suffragists there.

Despite the racism that often reared its head during the movement, we should celebrate the centennial of the 19th amendment as a milestone to honor the memory of Black women and men who fought valiantly for it.

Certainly, Black women in the South were still often disenfranchised, but the Great Migration was well under way by the time the 19th was ratified, and those outside the region organized and voted enthusiastically. It is worth noting that Native American, Latina and Asian women still faced barriers to voting in the United States, as well. Native Americans did not gain U.S. citizenship until 1924, but officials in some states prevented them from voting. Latina women often confronted the kind of poll taxes and literacy tests that prevented Black southerners from voting, and immigration laws barred Asians from citizenship until 1952.

Fear that Black women's votes would shift the balance in the South and topple white supremacy fueled efforts to deprive all women of the vote and prolonged the movement for more than 70 years. The women's rights movement of the 19th and 20th centuries also secured other important rights that women enjoy today, notably opportunities for education and employment—though the struggle for pay equity, justice, and other rights continues for all women.

To make political progress, Blacks and whites, especially women, must seek some common ground, and one way to do it is by having a more thorough understanding of the movement to

secure the right to vote for women, all women, and of the contributions made by women and men of all races to that struggle.

Angela P. Dodson is a longtime journalist and the author of "Remember the Ladies: Celebrating Those Who Fought for Freedom at the Ballot Box." (Center Street publishing, 2017) She also wrote the introduction to the 100th anniversary edition of "Jailed for Freedom: A First-Person Account of the Militant Struggle for Women's Rights" by Doris Stevens. (Black Dog & Leventhal, 2020). This article is adapted from others by the author that may have appeared in other publications.