



Freedom's Daughters

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preface

When the March on Washington took place in August 1963, the women of the civil rights movement were all but forgotten.

In later years, the march would be remembered as the most glorious moment of the civil rights struggle, the culmination of years of bloodshed, arduous work, and incredible hardship. Yet on that red-letter day, women, who had played such vital roles in launching the modern movement and propelling it forward, were thrust into the background. No woman marched down Constitution Avenue with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and the rest of the male civil rights leaders. No woman went to the White House afterward to meet with President John F. Kennedy.

Indeed, until a week or so before the march, no woman was to receive any recognition at all. But the committee planning the event, prodded by its only female member, finally agreed that women were far too important to be excluded entirely. So after all the months of pinpoint planning, down to the number of portable toilets and cheese-sandwich bag lunches needed for the hundreds of thousands of people expected to flood Washington, committee members, as an afterthought, put together a brief, backhanded "Tribute to Women." The plan called for the venerable leader of the march, A. Philip Randolph, to introduce some of the movement's heroines for a quick bow at the Lincoln Memorial rally. None of them, however, was to be given a chance to speak.

There would be no voice for Rosa Parks, whose refusal to get up from her seat on a Montgomery bus had set in motion a social revolution that would, in less than a decade, turn the country upside down. Parks was far more than the image that Martin Luther King, among others, had crafted for her—a seamstress too tired to move, who had been less a free agent than a vessel of the forces of history, someone who had been "tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times." In fact, she had been a committed civil rights activist since the 1940s, a staunch member of the NAACP with a history of rebellion against the casual cruelties of white bus drivers.

Daisy Bates, too, would make no speech. The major force behind the integration of Little Rock's Central High School, she had braved mobs and

death threats in 1957 to shepherd nine black teenagers through the hell of attending a previously all-white school. In doing so, she had helped awaken the country to the violence of its racism.

There would be no say, either, for Diane Nash, a former beauty pageant contestant with the delicate features of a porcelain doll, who had taken over command of the Freedom Rides in the spring of 1961, after the first Riders had been brutalized by mobs in Alabama. Badly battered and stunned by the violence, the Riders had decided to give up their heavily publicized bus trip through the South, designed to test a federal court decision desegregating bus terminals and other interstate public facilities. The twenty-two-year-old Nash, a veteran of countless sit-ins and jail cells herself, dispatched a group of students to Birmingham to take up where the first group had left off, then oversaw successive waves of Riders who poured into the South. The revival of the Rides succeeded in reinvigorating the civil rights crusade.

But the vast crowds that gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on that hot late-summer day in 1963 were given little inkling of the importance of Nash or Parks or Bates to the cause they were celebrating. And there was no mention at all of other women who had been essential to the movement's birth and growth. Women like Ella Baker, who had helped establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Martin Luther King, and then had become the guiding force behind the burgeoning student crusade. Or Septima Clark, the tough but motherly former teacher whose adult literacy and citizenship schools were now the engine for the movement's voter registration work throughout the South. Or Jo Ann Robinson, the demure college professor who was the real architect of the Montgomery bus boycott.

No mention, either, of the hundreds of poor, unlettered women in Mississippi, Georgia, and the rest of the Deep South who daily were braving bombings, beatings, and other forms of terrorism in their blazing determination to win the right to vote. Women like Ida Mae Holland, an eighteen-year-old prostitute in Greenwood, Mississippi, who had been transformed into one of Greenwood's boldest activists. Or the older women of Greenwood who inspired Holland—"mamas" like Mrs. Laura McGhee and Mrs. Belle Johnson, who, in Holland's words, "would walk their walk, and when they'd see the human barricade of police, they'd start talking their talk and singing their songs and saying, 'I ain't scared of your jail because I want my freedom. Ain't going to let nobody turn me around. Going to keep on marching.'"

Lillian Smith, a white Southern writer who had called for an end to racial segregation as early as 1941, noted in 1962 that the images of women throughout history had largely been crafted by men. It was time, Smith believed, for women to engage in the "great and daring creative act" of discovering and declaring their own identities. In my view, the story of the women in the civil rights movement is truly one of discovery. Until recently, the pivotal role that women played in the movement was largely ignored, just as it had been overlooked during the events of the March on Washington. The oversight of women began with contemporary newspaper and broadcast accounts of the civil rights cause, which focused almost entirely on Martin Luther King, Jr., other male civil rights leaders, and the groups they led. Karl Fleming, who covered civil rights for *Newsweek* and is widely thought to have been one of the best reporters on the beat, said in 1998: "There were no women, period. No women covering [the movement] as journalists, and no visible women on the front lines." The only activists he ever dealt with were men, Fleming said. "It was very macho." Yet, according to civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael, "the ones who came out first for the movement were the women. If you follow the mass meetings, not the stuff on TV, you'd find women out there giving all the direction. As a matter of fact, we used to say, 'Once you got the women, the men got to come.'"

For the most part, historians followed the journalists' lead: Virtually all the major early works about the period portray the movement through the filter of the men and their organizations. Only in the past few years has significant attention been paid to movement women and their singular achievements. A number of scholarly studies has been published, as have biographies of such major figures as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Septima Clark. Women who were active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee banded together to put down on paper their own accounts of what happened. But the broader story of the movement's women—the leaders and foot soldiers, firebrands and strategists, white Junior Leaguers and black sharecroppers—remained unwritten.

When I began work on *Freedom's Daughters*, it soon became clear that the story I was planning to tell began much earlier than the 1950s and 1960s—the period generally recognized as the time frame of the modern civil rights movement. The struggle for racial freedom, in fact, is a multi-layered saga that spanned several generations, originating before the Civil War and finally reaching its climax at mid-twentieth century. It was a struggle that women helped to mold, lead, and organize from its very

beginning. In order to adequately recount the story of the women of the 1950s and 1960s, I realized I would also have to write about their forebears and the remarkable legacy of activism, courage, and rebellion that these early pioneers handed down.

Their story—and that of their twentieth-century counterparts—is a rich and vibrant one, filled with conflict and drama. It's a tale of women making difficult choices, trying, in many instances, to balance lives as wives and mothers with their all-consuming work. It's women boldly defying presidents and sheriffs and the Ku Klux Klan; defying their male leaders' admonitions to be more cautious and more political; defying, too, society's standards of proper female behavior. It's women wrestling with the complexities of their relationships with the men they worked alongside.

And, finally, it's the story of the complicated, often tortured connection between African-American women and white women in the civil rights cause. Black women were always in the vanguard of the movement but, from the beginning, white women were involved as well. At times, black women and white women worked closely together, supporting and nurturing each other. Yet there was also considerable tension and anger between them, the poisonous by-products of the intertwining of sex, gender, and race going back to the days of slavery. The ways in which black and white women were perceived and treated during slavery profoundly affected the ways in which they would be regarded by society in later years—and how they would regard each other. As writer Marita Golden has noted: "We have been defined as symbolic and actual opposites. The white woman weak/the black woman strong, the white woman undersexed/the black woman oversexed, the white woman the symbol of sexual desire/the black woman neutered. And this mumbo jumbo of imprisoning, corrupting imagery still rages in our heads and in our hearts, and makes it all the more difficult to throw a life or love line to one another."

Twice in the history of the United States, the fight for black freedom and equality gave birth to movements for women's rights. Launched in the wake of the abolitionist movement of the early 1800s and the civil rights battles of the 1960s, both women's rights crusades were begun by white women who won their activist spurs in the civil rights struggle. In both cases, black women felt torn between loyalty to their race and loyalty to their sex. Most of them chose race, insisting that their own liberation could not be separated from black men's freedom. They would discover, however, that their needs and interests would be largely ignored by black male activists, just as they would be overlooked by white leaders of the

women's movement. The relative invisibility of black women is a problem that persists to this day.

One final note: In writing about women in the civil rights movement, I do not mean to dismiss or minimize the leadership or accomplishments of male activists. Their work was obviously essential to the movement. I have not written much about the men because their achievements have already been well documented. As I see it, both men *and* women played crucial roles in the civil rights movement, and both deserve due recognition as the history of that movement continues to be written.

"Far More Terrible for Women"



Pauli Murray

IT WAS APRIL 22, 1944, A WARM

Saturday in Washington, D.C. The skies threatened rain, but the cherry trees near the Jefferson Memorial were in bloom, and hundreds of people, many of them soldiers and sailors in uniform, strolled the banks of the Tidal Basin to admire the lacy pink and white foam of the blossoms. News from the war was mostly good: The Marines had recently captured blood-soaked Iwo Jima, the Fifth Army was about to liberate Rome. In the capital city of the United States, however, a small, thin black woman named Pauli Murray had a different sort of liberation in mind.

Murray, due to graduate in June from Howard University Law School, was standing with some other Howard students outside Thompson's cafe-

teria, a few blocks northeast of the Tidal Basin. She watched as her fellow students slipped, two and three at a time, inside the cafeteria. Finally, Murray took a deep breath and joined them. Once inside, she picked up a tray and entered the serving line. When the stone-faced employees behind the steam tables refused to serve her, as they refused to serve any black, Murray silently carried her empty tray to a table and sat down among the other black students who had been turned away.

The silent demonstration at Thompson's cafeteria, led by Murray and three other Howard activists on a cloudy afternoon in wartime Washington, was a harbinger. But it did more than prefigure many similar actions almost two decades later. It also symbolized the importance of women to a movement that always *seemed* to be dominated by men. Of the approximately fifty black students who sat in that day at Thompson's, most were women, and *all* of the leaders were. Together, they had stepped from behind a historical curtain and, for the moment, were deferring to no one. Sitting at Thompson's table, waiting to be served, they read textbooks and poetry. Some were glancing at the latest issue of the liberal tabloid newspaper *P.M.* Others watched apprehensively through the windows as a crowd of whites gathered on the sidewalk, where another group of students walked a picket line, carrying placards. One of the placards read: "Are You for HITLER'S Way (Race Supremacy) or the AMERICAN Way (Equality)? Make Up Your Mind!" And another: "We Die Together. Why Can't We Eat Together?" Some soldiers jeered and taunted the pickets. A woman spat at them. Through it all, "[o]ur demonstrators were thoroughly disciplined," Murray wrote to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt several days later. "No response was made to any taunt. . . . We clamped down on our teeth and kept our eyes straight ahead."

The manager of Thompson's pleaded with the students to leave, but they replied, politely, that they would stay till they could eat. By dinner-time, the cafeteria's trade had dropped by half. After several desperate telephone calls from Thompson's manager to his superiors, an order finally came down from the chain's national headquarters: Serve the demonstrators. Even with that, two of Thompson's waitresses refused, so the manager and the chain's district supervisor quickly filled in. For the first time since Reconstruction, a downtown whites-only eating establishment in Washington, D.C., was serving black customers.

"It is difficult to describe the exhilaration of that brief moment of victory," Murray wrote long afterward. The sit-in at Thompson's was the culmination of months of intense planning and training. The participating students had been carefully selected, then rigorously schooled in the non-

violent principles and tactics of Mahatma Gandhi. Each student had signed a pledge not to retaliate against harassment or violence. And it had all worked! Soon, however, the glow of victory vanished. The press wasn't much interested, and the president of Howard University, fearing a backlash from a Congress dominated by Southern racists, ordered the students to suspend further action. Murray was furious that the students' "brief act of imaginative defiance, a commando raid against entrenched racism . . . which, if expanded, could have brought new hope to millions of black Americans," was so abruptly and completely throttled. But throttled it was, and, with the pressure lifted, Thompson's went back to "no Negroes allowed."

Not until sixteen years later would civil rights demonstrators use the same kind of nonviolent resistance employed by Murray and her fellow students. By then most activists didn't even know who Pauli Murray was. When Eleanor Holmes, a brilliant young Yale law student and member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, returned to Yale for classes after a summer of civil rights work in 1963, she met Murray, who was then studying for her doctorate in law. Holmes, who as Eleanor Holmes Norton would later become a noted civil rights lawyer and the chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, had never heard of the 1944 Howard sit-in. She recalled being stunned on learning about the "nerve and bravery of this little woman who had already done what we were only beginning to do [but without] the safety and protection of the full-blown movement and reformist national mood that cushioned our risk."

Important as Murray was to the history of the early civil rights movement in the United States, she and the other Howard women with whom she demonstrated were merely in the middle of a long line of female soldiers of change, black and white, that stretched from the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement forward to twentieth-century civil rights and feminism. Indeed, the interconnections between race and gender, and between racism and misogyny, have helped place women at the very center of social ferment and conflict over the last two centuries of American history. Pauli Murray thus stands as a bridge between present and past. The granddaughter of a slave and great-granddaughter of a slave owner, she sprang from a family whose history, like the histories of countless others, illustrates how far the United States has come since the days of slavery, unbridled racism, and pernicious sexism—and how far it has still to go.

From the beginning, from the days of slavery and the drive for abolition, women of both races were deeply involved. Wrote Frederick Douglass in

1881: "When the true history of the antislavery cause shall be written, woman will occupy a large space in its pages; for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause." For women, there was a particular spur, a special urgency in the nineteenth-century struggle to abolish slavery. Harriet Jacobs, an escaped slave who wrote a book about her experiences in captivity, put it this way: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own."

Slave women were expected to work as diligently and as long as men in the fields, but they also had to bear children, raise them, cook, sew, clean, and perform other household chores for their families. Because the field work was so harsh, and medical care and nutrition so poor, miscarriages and stillbirths were all too common. Many women were weak and in constant physical pain, many looked and seemed old by the time they reached their twenties and thirties. Nor did their gender shield women from whippings and the other brutal punishments and treatments of slavery. If their children managed to survive babyhood, they still could be lost forever at the whim of a master who decided to sell them. "Babies was snatched from deir mother's breasts and sold to speculators," one old ex-slave recalled after the Civil War. "Chillens was separated from sisters and brothers and never saw each other again. I could tell you about it all day, but even den you couldn't guess de awfulness of it."

Yet brutality and degradation were not the mortifications that Harriet Jacobs wrote about. Uppermost in her mind, as in the minds of most slave women, was the ever-present danger of rape by white men. The silent menace of interracial rape and concubinage hung over the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century South like a dense miasma. Teenage girls were especially vulnerable, never knowing when they might be preyed upon by their master, the master's son or other relative, the overseer, a neighbor. As hard as black women might fight against such assault, they were, more often than not, forced to submit. According to sociologist Louis Wirth, the sexual assault of slave women by white men was ubiquitous throughout the South. Indeed, it was regarded in some quarters as a rite of sexual passage for young white men. "[N]o likely looking Negro, or more especially mulatto, girl was apt to be left unmolested by the white males," Wirth wrote. "[V]ery few of the young white men grew up 'virtuously' and their loss of virtue was scarcely to be attributed to cohabitation with white women." For generation after generation, young black women in the South were refused what most cultures deem the birthright of women: They were, as Maya Angelou put it, "denied chastity and refused innocence."

Pauli Murray's maternal grandmother, Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, was born into slavery as a result of just such a rape, a fact that haunted Murray until the end of her life. Her great-grandmother, a beautiful light-skinned slave named Harriet, had been given as a gift to Mary Ruffin Smith, the daughter of a North Carolina plantation owner, on the young white woman's eighteenth birthday. Harriet became Mary Ruffin Smith's personal slave. A few years later, she married a free black farmer and bore a son. But Smith's two bachelor brothers—Sidney, a lawyer and politician, and Frank, a doctor—had had their eyes on Harriet, too. Sidney, in particular, took to following her around, frequently cornering her and trying to kiss her. She resisted and began nailing the door of her cabin shut at night. Then, in 1843, Sidney Smith finally made clear who was master and who was slave. After ordering Harriet's husband off the plantation, Sidney broke down her cabin door and raped her. He returned to her night after night, until his brother, Frank, waylaid him one evening outside Harriet's cabin and beat him bloody. Sidney stayed away from Harriet after that, but she was already pregnant with his child, Cornelia.

Frank Smith's throttling of his brother was hardly a protective act. Frank just wanted Harriet for himself, and she ultimately bore him three daughters. Yet he paid no attention to her outside the bedroom. When around others, she invariably approached him with the same servility that she displayed to the other slave-owning Smiths. Her four girls were raised in a kind of limbo in the Smith home. They were regarded as better than field hands yet were not—quite—house slaves and were not acknowledged as blood kin, either. Their white aunt, not their mother, was the dominant figure of their lives. The two women were linked in a strange kind of motherhood in which, Pauli Murray noted, "[t]he same overpowering forces which had robbed the slave mother of all natural rights had thrust them unwanted upon the childless spinster."

Mary Ruffin Smith, still unmarried, suffered great shame over her brothers' behavior. After Harriet gave birth to her second daughter, the family moved to another part of North Carolina to flee their neighbors' gossip. Probably, though, Mary's shame was relatively mild compared with the humiliation of countless Southern white wives, who discovered that their husbands were forcing themselves on slave women. A wife might pour out her fury, jealousy, and pain in a diary or journal, but she usually didn't dare confront her husband openly. For as cosseted and supposedly hallowed as the white Southern belle famously was, her legal status, in the final analysis, was not much different from that of a slave woman. Declared slavery apologist George Fitzhugh in 1854; "Wives and

apprentices are slaves, not in theory only, but often in fact." A wife had no rights to speak of—no rights over her property or her children, no right to vote, no right to participate in public life. She was, in effect, the possession of her husband, barred from education, prevented from entering business or the professions. "In truth, woman, like children, has but one right, and that is the right to protection," Fitzhugh wrote. "The right to protection involves the obligation to obey . . . if she be obedient she stands little danger of maltreatment."

A white woman's reward for her submission was to be idealized beyond measure, to be pictured as the quintessence of ethereal loveliness, an angel who devoted her life to caring for her husband, children, and anyone else who needed her help. It was unthinkable for a woman to put her own needs first, unpardonable for her to show any spark of spirit, ambition, or independence. She was expected to perform her wifely duties without complaint—which, in the case of a slave owner's wife, included not only duties toward her own family but also attending to the feeding, clothing, medical care, and other needs of slaves. In many cases, she had far more daily contact with slaves than did her husband.

Fanny Kemble, a strong-willed young English actress who married a Georgia plantation owner in 1834, was astonished at how much her life was intertwined with those of her husband's slaves. From morning to night, they came to her with their cares: "[N]o time, no place, affords me a respite from my innumerable petitioners; and whether I be asleep or awake, reading, eating, or walking—in the kitchen, my bedroom or the parlor, they flock in with urgent entreaties and pitiful stories . . ." Opposed to slavery, Kemble raged at her helplessness in the face of the misery she saw every day. One morning, she was visited by a slave woman who was the mother of sixteen children, fourteen of them now dead. The woman also had suffered four miscarriages, one of which occurred after she'd been tied by her wrists, hung from a tree, and whipped. "And to all this I listen," Kemble declared, "—I, an English woman, the wife of the man who owns these wretches, and I cannot say, 'That thing shall not be done again; that cruel shame and villainy shall never be known here again.' I gave the woman meat and flannel, and remained choking with indignation and grief long after they had all left me to my most bitter thoughts." (Kemble's thoughts on marriage were just as foreign for that time and place as her opinions about slavery. When her husband, Pierce Butler, divorced her in 1849, he blamed the end of their marriage on his wife's "peculiar views which . . . held that marriage should be a companionship on equal terms. . . . [A]t no time has one partner a right to control the other.")

Although few wives and female relatives of slave owners shared Kemble's views on the immorality of slavery, many, nonetheless, detested the institution. They bridled at the constant psychological and physical impositions it made on their lives—rendering them, as one put it, the “slave of slaves.”

Above all, the wives hated their husbands' sexual betrayal that slavery had made so easy. The Southern white woman “was confronted with a rival by compulsion, whose helplessness she could not fight,” Pauli Murray said. “Nor could she hide the mulatto children always underfoot who resembled her own children so strongly that no one could doubt their parentage.” Wrote one planter's bitter wife: “We are complimented with the names of wives, but we are only the mistresses of harems.”

Unable to strike out directly at their husbands, wives often took out their rage on the husbands' victims. Fanny Kemble was horrified to learn that the wife of her husband's overseer had personally supervised the flogging of three slave women, all of whom had recently given birth to children he had fathered. “Jealousy is not an uncommon quality in the feminine temperament,” Kemble observed, “and just conceive the fate of these unfortunate women between the passions of their masters and mistresses, each alike armed with the power to oppress and torture them.”

In the nineteenth-century South, black and white women alike were caught in a tangle of sexual contradictions, repressions, and lies. Perched firmly on their pedestals, white women—supposedly timid, modest, and pure—were forced to deny any sexual feelings of their own. Black women, on the other hand, were pictured as passionate animals. Thomas Jefferson, who is believed by some to have produced at least one son with his Monticello slave Sally Hemings, once wondered if black women mated with orangutans. Jefferson's thinking was not unusual for his time. Female slaves were seen as lusty temptresses who seduced white men, luring them away from the sanctity of their homes and wives, causing men to violate standards their society held sacred. Of course, the roles that Southern white males assigned to women of both races—purity for the white woman, animal lust for the black—served to assure male domination of both. Neither was allowed to be fully human. Each was “only half of a self,” yearning for the missing piece of identity assigned to women of the other race.

Moreover, placing all blame on slave “temptresses” for interracial sex helped ease white men's consciences and explain away the contradictions of a society that trumpeted a chaste and soulless ideal of white womanhood. It also had far-reaching consequences for the relationships between

blacks and whites—and blacks and blacks—from then on. The image of sexual wantonness has haunted black women, shaping the way they've been treated by American society since slavery. Writer Willie Morris, for example, grew up in Mississippi in the 1940s believing that white women didn't engage in sex for pleasure, that "only Negro women engaged in the act of love with white men just for fun, because they were the only ones with the animal desire to submit that way."

The pitting of black women against white women produced suspicions and rivalries that affected the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the women's movement. Likewise, white Southerners' attitudes toward sexuality, sexual predation, the South's devotion to the ideal of "pure white womanhood"—all had profound repercussions on the region and the rest of the country during slavery, Reconstruction, and the century of rigid racial segregation that followed. Yet these suspicions and rivalries, these attitudes and acts, were largely ignored in the popular press of the day and were long consigned to the shadows of history. Even today, they are seldom publicly discussed.

Sex, nonetheless, has always been inextricably entwined with race and racism. "[At] the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted, rooted so deeply that it is not always recognized when it shows at the surface," declared James Weldon Johnson, the noted black poet, writer, and civil rights leader. "... [T]he race situation will continue to be acute as long as the sex factor persists."

When Sarah Grimké, the daughter of a wealthy slaveholder, was growing up in the genteel South Carolina city of Charleston, she hated many things about slavery. Above all, she hated the psychological havoc it played on women, black and white. For Grimké, whose father once told her she could have been the greatest legal scholar in the country if she had only been born a boy, the helplessness of Southern white women was akin to that of slaves.

From an early age, she rebelled against the treatment of both. As a girl, she taught her "little waiting-maid" to read and write: "The light was put out, the keyhole screened, and flat on our stomachs before the fire, with the spelling-book before our eyes, we defied the laws of South Carolina." There clearly was no room in the South for this budding young abolitionist, and in 1821 she moved up North. Grimké's younger sister, Angelina, joined her there eight years later. The Grimké sisters,

two well-brought-up white women from the South, became noted lecturers and writers in the vanguard of the battle for abolition and women's rights.

According to the law, white women were as subordinate in the North as they were in the South. Lacking legal rights, they were consigned to the home and family. By the 1830s, the "cult of true womanhood," encouraging domesticity, subservience, and piety in middle-class and upper-class white women, was firmly established in the North. In truth, though, Northern women had been tiptoeing away from the hearth since the beginning of the century, organizing charitable and temperance societies, missionary groups, literary clubs. As these activities were largely sponsored by churches, they were considered perfectly respectable: Their main priority was to help others less fortunate—sinners, the heathen, the poor. Few church leaders (or, for that matter, husbands) thought they would encourage women's independence.

Free black women in the North were organizing, too, but with different goals. Unlike white women, most black women had to work outside the home, yet were still hemmed in by legal and social constraints. Theirs was not the "do-gooder" mentality of helping the unfortunate with whom they had little in common. Their societies were more often aimed at mutual relief, designed to help themselves, their families, neighbors, and other blacks for whom poverty and discrimination were realities or ever-present threats. Black women established schools and orphanages, founded settlement houses, aided their down-and-out sisters. They also organized literary and moral improvement societies, determined to prove that they were just as genteel, just as culture-loving, just as free from moral taint as any white woman.

With antislavery sentiment swelling in New England in the early 1830s, women, black and white, rushed to the abolitionist cause. Maria Stewart, a fiery young black abolitionist and former domestic, caused a furor in 1832 when she urged an audience of men and women at Boston's Franklin Hall to join the fight. "It is of no use," Stewart declared, "for us to sit with our hands folded, hanging our heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition; but let us make a mighty effort, and arise." She aimed her message particularly at black women: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" Stewart's speech, sponsored by the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, was the first public lecture ever delivered by a woman in America. Church and civic leaders were so appalled at her audacity—the very idea

that a woman dare get up in public and make a speech!—that she was forced to leave Boston.

Still, the walls had been breached. Women soon organized antislavery societies in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other cities throughout the Northeast. Collecting money through fairs and other fund-raising events, they played a crucial role in financing the abolitionist movement. They inundated Congress and state legislatures with hundreds of thousands of signatures collected on antislavery petitions. With mounting confidence, they published magazines, wrote articles, spoke out at meetings, and organized conventions. Along the way, they encountered increasing opposition from men, even from some of their own male allies in the abolitionist cause. In a passionate retort, abolitionist writer Lydia Maria Child asserted: "Some will tell you that women have nothing to do with this question! . . . When Bonaparte told a French lady that he did not like to hear a woman talk politics, she replied, 'Sir, in a country where women are beheaded, it is very natural they should like to know the reason.' And where women are brutalized, scourged and sold, shall we not inquire the reason? My sisters, you have not only the right, but it is your solemn duty . . ."

In 1837, black and white women abolitionists gathered in New York City for the first Antislavery Convention of American Women. They formally declared that a woman had the right to carve out her own role in fighting slavery, independent of men, the right "to do all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse, and the influence of her example, to overthrow the horrible system . . ." Church leaders viewed such bold assertions with growing alarm. All the same, audiences jammed meeting halls throughout the Northeast to hear the Grimké and others link the question of women's rights with the antislavery movement. "It is not only the cause of the slave that we plead," Sarah Grimké said at one such meeting, "but the cause of woman as a moral, responsible being. . . . Men and women are *created equal*! . . . whatever is right for man to do is right for woman." As far as most churches were concerned, this was akin to heresy. In 1837, the same year as the women's antislavery convention, an organization of Congregationalist ministers attacked the Grimké and their upstart female associates, thundering: "The appropriate duties and influence of woman is in her dependence. But when she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer . . . we put ourselves in self defense against her . . ."

Consternation over this new female spirit of independence wasn't the only reason for the widespread anger and hostility toward women abolitionists. Only a small minority of Northerners actively supported the antislavery cause. Many in the North held views that were as racist as those

held in the South. The notion that black and white women would meet together—even stay in each other's homes!—was regarded as an abomination. There was fury over the resolution against racism passed by the delegates to the 1837 convention, which stated that whites and blacks should treat each other “as though the color of the skin was of no more consequence than that of the hair or the eyes.” Fury turned to violence at the women abolitionists' 1838 convention in Philadelphia. A mob hurled stones through the windows of a hall where black and white delegates were meeting, then blocked the doors and threatened the women as they left. That night, the hall was set ablaze. Unswayed, the women gathered the next morning to insist they would continue to sit together, eat together, and even have tea together in each other's parlors.

In Boston and other Northern cities, unruly crowds heckled women abolitionists, sprayed them with ice water, threatened them with bodily harm, and sometimes roughed them up. One Boston newspaper ridiculed that city's female antislavery society as a “parcel of silly women, whose fondness for notoriety has repeatedly led them into scenes of commotion and riots.” On several occasions, female abolitionists rushed Northern courthouses and rescued fugitive slaves about to be sent back South. Reporting on one such raid, an antiabolitionist newspaper described in horror how “a colored woman of great size who scrubbed floors for a living . . . threw her arms around the neck of one officer immobilizing him.”

Other women smuggled fugitive slaves out of the South, via the Underground Railroad, and into the North and Canada. Harriet Tubman, herself a runaway slave, became a legend by leading more than three hundred slaves to freedom during nineteen trips to the South, boasting that she “never lost a single passenger” on her underground railway. With a \$40,000 bounty on her head, Tubman carried a pistol to defend herself against bounty hunters. But she also sometimes used the pistol to encourage hesitant runaways. “You'll be free or die,” she barked.

Black and white women provided stops along the way on the Railroad—refuge in their homes for escaped slaves. Among them was the mother of Laura Spelman, the future wife of John D. Rockefeller. Another was the wife of the chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court. Shortly after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, making it a crime to harbor runaway slaves, the judge confronted his wife. “What am I going to do?” he asked. “You know I must enforce the new law and I know what you are doing.” She answered simply, “Just walk right out of the front door and never look back to see what's going on.”

* * *

For all their daring, for all their ringing speeches and awe-inspiring fund-raising, women in the antislavery crusade found they were still regarded as inferior and subordinate, even by many male abolitionists. "Verily," wrote a sympathetic male supporter, "some of our northern gentlemen abolitionists are as jealous of any interference in rights they have long considered as belonging to them exclusively, as the southern slaveholder is in the right of holding his slaves."

That fact was made abundantly clear in 1840, at the first worldwide abolitionist gathering in London, when women delegates from the United States were refused seats on the floor and confined to a railed-off section on one side. Twenty-four-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the daughter of a wealthy New York landowner whose abolitionist husband took her to the convention as part of their honeymoon, was so outraged that she promptly enlisted in the fight for women's rights. In 1848, she and her close friend Susan B. Anthony were the key figures behind the first Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York. The convention marked the beginning of the generations-long struggle for women's equality in this country.

Before and during the Civil War, Stanton and Anthony regarded the antislavery cause to be inseparable from the fight for women's rights. Anthony, in particular, was an ardent abolitionist. She traveled nonstop throughout the North as an organizer for the American Antislavery Society, her uncompromising lectures often drawing hostile, catcalling crowds. With Stanton, she lobbied Congress and the country for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to free the slaves, and urged other white women to do the same. When the Civil War broke out, Anthony and Stanton put aside the campaign for women's rights and focused exclusively on ending slavery.

When the war was over and the Thirteenth Amendment a reality, however, Stanton and Anthony argued with more vehemence than ever that it was time for women to be allowed into the tent. Republicans, who dominated Congress, and male abolitionist leaders had other ideas. The newly proposed Fourteenth Amendment, providing "equal protection of the laws" to all citizens (thus, in effect, granting full citizenship to former slaves), included the word "male" as a qualification for voting. Anthony and Stanton urged congressional Republicans to omit the word, but were turned down. Arguing that "this hour belongs to the Negro," Republican leaders insisted that their party could not bear the political strain of trying to enfranchise women, white or black, along with black men. The

"hour of the Negro," in their view, did not extend to Negro women, let alone white women.

After ratification of the vaguely worded Fourteenth Amendment, it quickly became clear that yet another amendment was needed to assure voting rights for blacks. As debate raged over the Fifteenth Amendment, Stanton, Anthony, and their forces once again lobbied for the inclusion of women and once again were turned down. Even their male allies in the abolitionist movement—including one of their staunchest supporters, Frederick Douglass—urged them to step aside. The men argued that while it was important for women to have the vote eventually, it was *essential*—immediately—for the physical and economic survival of black men.

Stanton and Anthony felt profoundly betrayed. For well over a decade, they and hundreds of other women had risked a great deal, sometimes even their lives, for the antislavery movement. Was this . . . *indifference* to be their reward? Their pain was understandable. So was their fury. What was incomprehensible was the stunningly racist way in which they vented it. Racism, in some form and degree, had always been present in the abolitionist movement. While there were white abolitionists who treated their black colleagues as equals, many others were unable or unwilling to reconcile their opposition to slavery with the idea of equality for blacks. In this connection, it is instructive to note that women's antislavery societies in New York and several other cities would not permit blacks to join.

As for Stanton and Anthony, instead of simply continuing to demand voting rights for men *and* women, they denounced Congress for favoring "degraded, oppressed" men over the "daughters of Jefferson, Hancock and Adams." While the Republicans had "lifted up two million black men and crowned them with the honor and dignity of citizenship, they have dethroned fifteen million white women—their own mothers and sisters, their own wives and daughters—and cast them under the heel of the lowest orders of manhood." On this basis, Stanton and Anthony went so far as to urge the amendment's defeat. Their racism alienated many of the women who had been their allies in the suffrage and abolitionist causes, resulting in a fateful schism in the crusade for women's rights.

As the abolitionist and women's movements tore themselves apart over the Fifteenth Amendment, the quarreling players—white women, and white and black men—largely ignored the interests of the other major actors in the drama: black women. Seeking a political voice for themselves, white women turned their backs on allies who had fought with them for women's rights and an end to slavery. Black newspapers, meanwhile, urged black women to be "true women" and defer to their men.

Black female activists were caught in a terrible dilemma. If they backed Stanton and Anthony, they would be throwing in their lot with women who were prepared to deny the major right of citizenship to black women's fathers and brothers and husbands, thereby assuring continued white hegemony over blacks. But if black women supported voting for black men only, they would be endorsing a plan that would give *them* no voice at all. The failure to recognize the interests of black women in the battle over the Fifteenth Amendment was not an isolated event. In the century to come, black women would remain largely invisible to the public eye—in the renewed fight for women's suffrage in the early 1900s, in the modern civil rights movement, and in the blossoming of the women's movement in the late 1960s. When one talked about "blacks," one usually meant black *men*. When "women" were discussed, the emphasis was on *white* women.

Anguished by the choice they were forced to make after the Civil War, many African-American women gave up the struggle for their own suffrage and aligned themselves with black men. As Frances Harper, a noted black abolitionist writer and lecturer, wrote about herself: "When it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go." Other women, like the celebrated Sojourner Truth, insisted that neither side was right, that this was not an either/or proposition, that black men deserved their rights along with women, black and white. The tall, gaunt, elderly abolitionist, whose deep, Dutch-accented voice had thundered throughout the country on behalf of antislavery and women's rights, demanded that she and her black sisters not be overlooked. "There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women," she observed, "and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before."

In the end, Congress passed and the country ratified the Fifteenth Amendment for men only. Despite the racist attitudes of the leading white suffragist leaders, black women continued to work with them in the drive for passage of a women's suffrage amendment. Sojourner Truth set out again to lecture for women's rights, and Harriet Tubman joined a Geneva, New York, suffrage club. "Do you really believe that women should vote?" a white woman asked her once. Tubman, who added to her Underground Railroad exploits by risking her life repeatedly as a Union scout and spy during the Civil War, replied simply, "I suffered enough to believe it."