

Chapter Thirteen

“We Shall Overcome”: Minority Women’s Long Road to Progress

Political progress is not necessarily a straight line, as shown by the fact that women of color were more active in the feminist movement during the mid-nineteenth century than in the early twentieth century. Former slave Sojourner Truth spoke at the 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, a mere three years after the first meeting in Seneca Falls, New York. As long as Quaker women such as Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony headed the movement, black women were welcome. Later leaders, however, did not encourage efforts by non-white women. (See Part One for discussion of many of these black leaders, such as Frances Watkins Harper, Lottie Wilson Jackson, Harriet Forten Purvis, Sarah Remond, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Fannie Barrier Williams).

When, for example, the National American Woman Suffrage Association met in New Orleans in 1903, only three white women accepted an invitation from a black women’s organization, the Phillis Wheatley Club—an aging Anthony, Alice Stone Blackwell of *Woman’s Journal*, and dress reform leader Elizabeth Smith Miller. The dress reform issue is rather illustrative of the gap between white and black women: black women were in many ways more conservative, especially in terms of feminist visibility. They had no interest in wearing pants or otherwise challenging male social prerogatives; instead, their political action often was driven by protecting their men, especially from the real possibility of lynching. Another round of racial terrorism appeared after

World War I, during the same years when the Nineteenth Amendment went into effect, and for black women, exercising their new rights became dangerous.

Nevertheless, they showed courage. As soon as the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, Florida educator Mary McLeod Bethune began registering voters, and the Ku Klux Klan responded with a night attack on her Daytona boarding school. Bethune, however, had been astute enough to recruit trustees such as John D. Rockefeller Jr., and after she went public about the attempted terror, the Klan never bothered her again. Farther north, Richmond banker Maggie Walker campaigned for the statewide office of superintendent of instruction in 1921; although she did not come close to winning, she made the point that black women could be political activists.

In another case of changed status for ethnic minorities, the Seminole tribe of Oklahoma chose Alice Brown Davis as their first female chief in 1922. In that same year, voters in New Mexico chose Soledad Chavez Chacon as secretary of state; in the first election in which New Mexican women could vote, an all-male delegation of Democrats came to her home and recruited her. During the same era, Republican Blanche Armwood of Tampa, who was so brilliant that she passed the Florida State Teachers Examination at age 12, traveled throughout the South for the Urban League, registering voters and teaching the new field of home economics. Racism, however, remained on Florida's west coast to such an extent that in 1923, a white mob completely annihilated the African American town of Rosewood.

Washington D.C. still was very much a Southern city in this era, and Anna Julia Cooper would lead efforts for African Americans from the 1920s on through the 1960s. Born in slavery and probably fathered by her "master," she became perhaps the world's best educated black woman: after a career as a principal in segregated schools, Cooper earned a doctorate from France's prestigious Sorbonne in 1925. Her longtime local ally was Mary Church Terrell; having spoken to the 1904 International Woman's Suffrage Alliance in three languages, Terrell would become even more radicalized as she aged. Another black woman in Washington with a very feminist viewpoint was Nannie Burroughs, who ran a boarding school for girls. She candidly attacked black men for their failure to support women, writing in her autobiography: "the men ought to get down on their knees to the Negro women. They've made possible all that we have." In the same era, Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkála-Šá), a member of the Yankton Dakota tribe, spent much of her life lobbying for American

Indians. In 1926, she helped to establish the National Council of American Indians, which she would lead as its president until her death. When she died in 1938, she was honored with burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

Education remained key to advancement, minority women knew, and better educational opportunities remained the highest priority of most black



A photograph of African American activist Anna Julia Cooper published in her 1892 book, *A Voice from the South*. (Wikimedia)

women. In 1926, Atlanta's Selena Sloan Butler founded the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, but the slowness of progress was indicated by the fact that it would not fully merge with white PTA units until 1970.

Professional education also was a concern of African Americans in an era when opportunities were closed to many. A 1926 study, for instance, of the nation's 1,688 accredited nursing schools showed that only 54 accepted African American students.

Across the spectrum, black women faced discrimination. In a high-profile 1929 case, First Lady Lou Henry Hoover invited the

wife of a black congressman, New York's Oscar De Priest, to a luncheon for congressional wives, resulting in a huge uproar. A Washington newspaper raged that Hoover was "defiling the White House," and several state legislatures passed resolutions condemning her.

The Great Depression of the 1930s hurt minorities even more than most Americans, but the New Deal that began in 1933 would ultimately improve the lives of many. When, in 1935, Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Mary McLeod Bethune to head the Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration, she became the federal government's first African American of either gender in an executive position. She traveled thousands of miles across America, working for opportunities for needy young people, including Mexican Americans and Native Americans. Later, she would

be the only woman of color in the entire world who had an official status at the founding of the United Nations.

Several organizations merged into the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935, and the NCNW soon had some 800,000 members. They focused on creating employment opportunities, ending state poll taxes, and securing a place for black women in the military. Another milestone came in 1938, when the first African American woman was elected to a state legislature. Quaker women in Philadelphia organized a phone bank—then a new campaign technique—to elect Democrat Crystal Bird Fauset in a largely white district. She soon disappointed her supporters though: she resigned before her term was over, switched parties, and worked in the 1940 presidential election for Republican nominee Wendell Willkie against Democrat Franklin Roosevelt. Republicans did not keep her on the payroll after they lost, and Fauset spent the rest of her life seeking another political position in vain.

The decade's closing year brought another national debate on race, when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to rent their Washington hall to celebrated soprano Marian Anderson. Hundreds of white people signed petitions objecting to this race-based insult, including two Supreme Court justices and several Cabinet members—who, of course, were white men. Eleanor Roosevelt resigned her DAR membership, and New York Congresswoman Carolyn O'Day headed a committee that moved the concert to the Lincoln Memorial, greatly enhancing the attention it drew and leading to its renown as a historic event.

That some racial progress was being made is indicated by the fact that 1940 was the first year in which there were no recorded lynchings. However, Congress consistently rejected federal anti-lynching law as it did throughout Roosevelt's administration, including after Democratic President Harry Truman put it at the top of his civil rights agenda. He did manage to get the Pentagon to accept racial integration of the armed forces in 1948, but it was done by executive order, not congressional act. The military also was gender-integrated in 1948, after black women had proven their worth during World War II. Again, this was largely due to the ubiquitous Mary McLeod Bethune.

She served on the advisory board that formed the Women's Army Corps in 1942, and the corps, headed by a white Texan, Oveta Culp Hobby, accepted black women from the beginning and even promoted them as officers. This was in contrast to the women's corps of the naval branches: although they could

have followed the Army's precedent, they initially excluded blacks, despite the corps' leadership under Northern white women. Nor did the older nursing corps of either the Army or Navy include black women until late in the war, even though there was a desperate need for nurses. Mabel K. Staupers of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses led congressional lobbying to force the corps to accept black applicants.

Women did hold top editorial positions at newspapers and magazines aimed at black readers, and Jessie Vann was owner and publisher of the weekly *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1940 to 1963. It had a national circulation, and Vann may have been the wealthiest black woman in America. *The Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), featured Jessie Redmon Fauset as its literary editor; a 1905 graduate of prestigious Cornell University, she was probably the first black woman in the world to earn Phi Beta Kappa membership. Ethel Payne of the nationally circulated *Chicago Defender* reported from every inhabited continent except Australia during World War II, and soon was known as "the first lady of the black press."

The war's 1945 end marked the beginning of the modern civil rights movement—and that was not limited to Southern blacks. Alaskan natives also lived in a segregated society, with businesses even posting notices that banned Indians. When the territorial legislature met in 1945, Elizabeth Peratrovich of the Tlingit nation delivered such moving testimony on the discrimination she encountered that the legislature overwhelmingly passed bills assuring natives access to public accommodations and the right to live in a neighborhood of their choice. It would be another two decades, however, before similar legislation passed on a federal level—and even when it did, there would not yet be any female minority in Congress.

With segregation still the rule in the nation's capital, a nearly 90-year-old Mary Church Terrell led other blacks in a 1953 sit-in at a Washington restaurant. When they were refused service, she sued on the basis of never-repealed Reconstruction laws, and the Supreme Court conceded that she was right. Even more creatively, Terrell surreptitiously bought up theater tickets and distributed them to African Americans, thus forcing management either to admit them or play to an empty house.

The next year was a big turning point. In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Supreme Court ruled that young Linda Brown could not

be excluded from her neighborhood school because of race. The decision was the result of legal research and careful planning by black parents, and other, lesser known school discrimination cases would dominate the next decades as millions of white parents refused to send their children to integrated schools. The nation's attention especially focused on Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, when NAACP leader Daisy Bates led nine students—the majority of them girls—who undertook the difficult task of being first. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to protect them, and the school was integrated, but the lives of Bates and other leaders were threatened, and they routinely were denounced by newspapers and politicians as "communists."

Outside of education, other women worked to integrate other institutions. The most famous action was on December 1, 1955, when seamstress Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. That was the law in Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, and she was arrested and jailed. Her passive resistance not only forced many white people to think about issues they had never considered, but also inspired countless African Americans to emulate her. Blacks in Montgomery boycotted buses, which meant missing work and paychecks, but they brought the economy to a halt and ultimately made progress.

Rosa Park's action, which helped build the career of young Martin Luther King, Jr., overshadowed another tragic incident that occurred a few weeks later on Christmas Day in 1955. Harriet and Harry Moore were Florida educators who had been fired from their jobs for civil rights activity. When they continued to register black voters, racists planted a bomb in their home in a rural African American community near today's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. After returning from a Christmas Eve dinner with family, they went to bed, and a bomb exploded that could be heard four miles away. No ambulance service was available for blacks, and Harry died on his way to a segregated hospital in Orlando. Harriet lived long enough to tell federal officials not to trust the local police, but their killers were not convicted.

Racist resistance to integration remained strong for years, and, like Harriet Moore, other unheralded women played important roles. Autherine Lucy successfully went to court to be allowed to enter graduate studies in library science at the University of Alabama, but when she appeared on campus to enroll in February 1956, a large mob greeted her. She went back to court to have

the ruling enforced, but the university's administration trumped up technical violations of school rules to expel her.

During the same period, South Carolina passed a law forbidding government employees from joining civil rights organizations, and Septima Poinsette Clark, who had taught in black schools in the Charleston area for 40 years, was fired when she refused to deny that she was a member of the NAACP. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was greeted by a yelling mob when she became the only student at a previously all-white elementary school in New Orleans. She and her white teacher spent her first grade alone, as no one else enrolled. Some, including black students, did the next year.



Rosa Parks (left) and Septima Poinsette Clark (center) with Parks's mother, Leona McCauley, outside the Highlander Folk School in 1956.

Dorothy I. Height became president of the National Council of Negro Women in 1957 and held that position in Washington for the next 30 years, working on countless campaigns for equality. Atlanta-based Ella Baker mentored young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which conducted sit-ins at restaurants and other public businesses, and she would become a leading force in the civil rights movement. A young Marian

Wright Edelman, later the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, used the legal skills she acquired at Yale to free civil rights workers from Mississippi jails. In South Florida, Eula Johnson led young people with "swim-ins" to integrate beaches in 1961. Previously, there had been only one beach along the five-hundred-mile peninsula where blacks could legally swim.

Racists continued to resist, however, and what may have been the most heartless attack came in September 1963, when four black girls died in the



Fannie Lou Hamer at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964.

bombing of a Birmingham church.

Local police did not investigate, and no one would be convicted of these murders until 1977. Instead, police attacked nonviolent African Americans, including Fannie Lou Hamer of rural Mississippi. The twentieth child of sharecroppers, Hamer began registering black voters in 1962 and was repeatedly beaten. At one point, policemen had the temerity to arrest and jail her for "driving a bus of the wrong color." She courageously continued, though, and challenged Mississippi's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Business was held up for days while the credentials committee debated; its compromise

satisfied neither side, but that convention marked the end of "Dixiecrats" who claimed to be Democrats.

A less-noted 1964 milestone was the election of the first Asian American in Congress, Patsy Takemoto Mink of Hawaii. Mink went on to decades of feminist leadership and was nationally known, but Verda Freeman Welcome's precedent was much less known: she was quietly elected as the nation's first black female state senator in 1962. Welcome had won election to Maryland's lower chamber in 1958, and, four years later, moved up to represent part of Baltimore as a senator. In April 1964, five pistol shots were fired at her, slightly wounding her and shattering the glass in her car. An investigation revealed that