Hidden in Oral Histories
Black Female Mobilization Before the Civil Rights Movement

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On March 26, 1918, Texas became the second Southern state to enfranchise women, albeit only in presidential primary elections and nominating conventions. This statewide change produced a moment of racial reckoning in Kingsville, Texas when local black women directly demanded enfranchisement from their county’s white registrar. This confrontation helped ignite the civic psyche of a black Kingsville schoolteacher named Christina Adair.

In 1912, Kingsville, Texas, was a sleepy railroad town of about 4,000 people. By 1930 it had grown to almost 7,000. A large proportion of the population of Kingsville was African American. In 1912, around 530 black men and women called Kingsville their home. Like many Southern towns, Kingsville was extremely segregated. As Christina Adair said of Kingsville in a 1977 oral history, “the little town was populated according to race. It had what they called Negro Town, White Town and Mexican Town. And it looked like never the twain shall meet.”

The Kingsville community of black women joined white Kingsville suffragists almost accidentally, out of a direct desire to fix local problems rather than an awareness of larger political issues such as suffrage. After Adair witnessed “one of my teenage boys, Sunday school boys,” walking out of a notorious gambling house, she and other black women decided to enlist the help of “white women who have sons and daughters” to shut down the establishment. Together, they formed an “Interracial Mothers Club” and forced the Kingsville sheriff to “go and nail up the building himself.” Through a mutual concern for both black and white youth, these women accessed a shared identity more powerful than woman: mother. By working with the white mothers, black women were able to use the power of “group action” to address their problems.

The trust built between these African American and white mothers of Kingsville manifested itself in political organization for female suffrage, and later, in attempts to vote. As Adair recounted, “these [white] women told us about...a bill where women would be able to vote like men. Well, we still didn’t know that didn’t mean us, but we helped make contacts and excited public opinion and worked on people about it. And the bill did pass.” Adair and her fellow black friends were inspired to take part in the suffrage movement by their alliance with white women. They had been politicized by their success with the gambling house. Their victory in civic society expanded their own understanding of the political access they could claim as black women in early twentieth-century Kingsville, Texas.

Adair and her fellow black women tried to vote, to exercise the very right they had worked to achieve. When they proceeded to the precinct to cast their votes in the July primary election of 1918, white Kingsville officials prevented them:

And we dressed up and went to vote and when we got down there, well we couldn’t vote... So finally, one woman, a Mrs. Simmons said, ‘Are you saying

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1 Hanes Walton Jr., Sherman Puckett, and Donald Deskins, An African American Electorate (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2012), Table 20.7; Austin History Center, “Primary Suffrage in Texas,” project reconnecting their class children at the postcolonial political order. It man. All the white woman raped and murdered by “project reconnecting their class children at the postcolonial political order. It man. All the white woman raped and murdered by “ accessed December 21, 2017, http://library.austintexas.gov/abc/primary-suffrage-texas-353750.


5 In a sense, Adair and this biracial coalition of mothers acted out the early American ideology of “Republican Motherhood,” in which women played political roles by raising virtuous sons, young men who were not to be exposed to gambling houses. The women stepped outside of the traditional female domain and were communally justified in their participation in civic culture because as mothers they were uniquely suited to advocate politically for the purity of their sons. Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,” American Quarterly 28 (1976): 204–205.

6 Civil rights activist Ella Baker emphasized “group action” when organizing towns of Southern black men and women in the late 1920s and 1930s: “The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use—and how group action could counter violence.” Ella Baker interviewed by Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America (New York City: Random House, 1972), 347.

7 Hill, Black Women Oral History Project, 59.
that we can’t vote because we’re Negroes?” And he [the registrar] said, “Yes, Negros don’t vote in primary in Texas.”

Adair and the other black women solemnly trudged away from the polling place. In this moment, the political engagement that had begun with motherhood-based organizing and evolved to suffrage work became explicitly racial as Adair and her friends were forced to confront the reality that as African Americans living in the South, traditional electoral politics were withheld from them.

However, the blatant denial of their political rights was a motivating push to organize for racial justice rather than a discouraging defeat. Adair recalled that she and her companions were hurt by this incident, yet not “sorry we were Negroes, it made us realize that we all the more had to do something that would break these discriminations.”

This detailed account of a small moment in the summer of 1918 between black women and a white registrar highlights many of the routines these oppositional characters would repeat as black women continued to approach the Southern polls. This specific experience with the combined sexism and racism of white officials was a catalyst for Adair, just as similar encounters would be for many other women. Inspired in part by the event, Adair spent the rest of her life working for black civic organizations such as the NAACP and the United Methodist Church.

Yet as historically revealing—and clearly impactful for Adair—as this incident was, it cannot be found among the pages of an organization’s records or in the local newspaper. Their names would not even be in the Kingsville, Texas voter registration book from 1918. In terms of traditional political impact this episode yielded nothing: the black women were not allowed to vote. No one was arrested, no policy was changed. Christina Adair did not become a Rosa Parks. Thus, traditional historical documents rendered this moment and these political black women of Kingsville, Texas invisible. The evolution of the political engagement of Adair and her black friends in 1918—maternal activism to enfranchisement mobilization to pushback against white supremacist structures—can only be gleaned from a passing, four-paragraph story in a 53-page transcript of an oral history given by Christina Adair in 1977. In these short recollections, embedded amongst later oral histories such as Adair’s, are the outlines of a different African American civil rights story, one of individual moments of female politicization and activism long before the era of the traditional Civil Rights Movement.

The lessons of political organizing these Southern black women learned, this change of political possibility, and their moment of direct confrontation with white authority took place nearly four decades prior to the established historical time period of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet as definitive assertions of black, Southern, and female civil rights, these incidents nonetheless impacted the lives, community, and children of Adair and her friends. Perhaps their grandchildren, the next generation who came of age during the era of the traditional Civil Rights Movement, grew up hearing renditions of this story recounted by their grandmothers. Maybe, as young African American men and women, these grandchildren approached similar Texan registration sites as part of an organized effort in the 1950s or 1960s to mass register. Oral histories such as Christina Adair’s suggest a history hidden from written sources, namely a history of African American female social mobilization throughout the early twentieth century, that, although neither significant in numbers nor successful in electing candidates, played an important role in gradually transforming the political consciousness of African Americans.

Two years after Adair and her black female neighbors demanded their right to vote, the states finally ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. Women across the country legally claimed the right to suffrage. As a consequential political movement in American history, there is ample scholarship on this moment and the experiences of suffragists who organized to obtain the vote. However, after the Nineteenth Amendment, feminist literature on female, especially black, involvement in electoral politics largely receded into a 20-year hiatus. Much of the literature on suffragists contains a short epilogue detailing the impact

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8 Hill, Black Women Oral History Project, 60.
9 Hill, Black Women Oral History Project, 60.
10 The black feminist theorist bell hooks promoted scholarly recognition of both the sexism and racism black women faced. She wrote about their intersectionality: “The assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex or sex from race has so clouded the vision of American thinkers…we cannot form an accurate picture of the status of black women by simply focusing on racial hierarchies.” bell hooks, Ain’t I A Woman (New York: South End Press, 1981), 12.
11 Adair also became a precinct officer, the official responsible for proper and orderly voting in local precincts. Ruth Edmonds Hill and Patricia Miller King, Guide to The Black Women Oral History Project (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991), 2–4.
12 The majority of oral histories such as Adair’s were created during the 1970s, shortly after the Civil Rights Movement, through an urgent push by elite institutions such as Duke University, The Library of Congress, and The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University to record the individuals whose demands for social justice set the Civil Rights Movement into motion.
of female suffrage. Scholars concluded any comprehensive chronicle of the Suffrage Movement with the 1920 passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and occasionally the presidential election of that same year. The mass disenfranchisement by white registrars of the black Southern women who tried to vote both in the 1920 election and in subsequent elections is rarely mentioned in these works or treated with historical scrutiny. This is a mistake.

One reason why traditional scholars disregarded the civic activity of African American women in the pre–Civil Rights era was because academia has largely circumscribed the entirety of politics to formal political processes and thus only researched conventional political actions, such as successful voting, where black women were rarely found. However, that black women did not typically operate within the confines of the formal political system does not negate the often intensely political character of their lives. These women had anti-hierarchical and anti-bureaucratic tendencies that led them to act politically in their own communal spaces, outside of mainstream political systems.

In this paper, I shed light on some of these unconventional, yet deeply political activities African American women modeled while they attempted to take part in electoral politics. I follow the lead of more recent feminist scholars who have pushed to demonstrate a complicated black female engagement with politics that existed outside of typical political institutions. These scholars have depicted black women’s continuous relationship with politics that, despite being limited by the unique legal and social status conferred by the double burden of gender and racial discrimination, was nonetheless extremely important to them.

I used a variety of primary sources to understand the experiences of black, Southern African American women voting. As Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore wrote regarding her research for *Gender and Jim Crow*, “I believed no truth and took no evidence at face value. Fiction in the archives? What else?” Following Gilmore, I examined white archival sources through a critical lens. I relied on the records of large organizations such as the NAACP to demonstrate the daily strategic decisions made to advance and document the causes of black female and male disenfranchisement. I also depended on newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Daily Worker* and the NAACP’s *The Crisis*. Local papers such as *The Savannah Tribune* or *The Charlotte Observer* as well as U.S Census and voting data, provided further context. However, these documents and data rarely revealed the continued efforts of African American Southern women from the 1920s through 1940s to resist the amalgamation of powerful white forces which sought to prevent their disenfranchisement and silence their political voices. For a record of this, I turned to oral histories.

This paper is largely based upon these histories, though they can be rife with sensationalized, selective, and romanticized recollections of the past. Notwithstanding, oral histories offer distinct insights into the life under Jim

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19 Particularly *Crisis*, vol. 10 published on August 1915, an edition completely devoted to the issue of votes for women. I also examined the politics section of *Crisis* from the monthly editions of 1915-1940, to find records of black women attempting to vote.

Crow. They are especially useful for illuminating that during the Jim Crow era, Southern white supremacy was in part maintained through prejudicial customs, not codified law. That is, unwritten etiquette that for instance, mandated that blacks cede the right-of-way to white drivers or enter a white person’s house through the back door, are uniquely revealed in oral history. Likewise, it was primarily in oral histories that I found the day-to-day displays of defiance and collective protests against Jim Crow etiquette that black Southern women performed in their local communities, decades prior to the outset of the Civil Rights Movement as traditionally understood. As personal narratives, oral histories allowed me to understand the grassroots activism championed by these often-overlooked women. Uniquely, they revealed moments of opposition that cannot be found in traditional written sources. The experiences of black women in this period were rarely granted attention, whether in media, politics, popular culture or academic study of their time. Thus, memories from this generation of African Americans, especially black women, open a window into a poorly documented past.

Although there is a wide range of oral histories documenting the later Civil Rights Movement, very few of these oral histories touch on the political awakening of black, Southern woman during earlier decades. This is in part due to the infrequency with which African American men and especially women, attempted to vote from the 1920s to 1950s. The lack of black female testimonies about voting can also be attributed to the local nature of these incidents that rendered them less likely to be recorded by national research libraries. Thus, the stories I included in this paper are largely all the relevant oral histories I was able to uncover. Due to the paucity of the sources, this paper jumps through decades and states. It is best read as a collection of many local stories linked together by this common pursuit of political rights.

Like Christina Adair, other black female leaders in the Civil Rights Movement attributed their later activism to these earlier instances of political awakening. Woven together, these oral histories reveal the powerful, local actions of black women that common depictions of the 20th-century African American struggle for civil rights fail to include. As Charles Payne wrote in *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, “We know beyond dispute that women were frequently the dominant force in the movement. Their historical invisibility is perhaps the most compelling example of the way our shared images of the movement distort and confuse the historical reality.”

**They Existed: Black Women as Voters Before the Nineteenth Amendment**

Adair and her neighbors in Kingsville, Texas, were neither the first nor the only African American women to demand their right to vote in the years prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. To understand the experiences and context of black women who attempted to vote after the Nineteenth Amendment, I will provide a brief overview of their precursors. Before the Nineteenth Amendment, some states allowed for women to vote in school board elections, as women, “Republican Mothers,” were the primary caretakers and thus clearly had a stake in the education their children would receive. For example, black female leader Josephine Ruffin boasted in a 1915 Crisis magazine article titled *TRUST THE WOMEN!* that “in Massachusetts for forty years and more…I have voted forty-one times under the school suffrage laws.” Ruffin recognized the importance of African-American female votes as an uplifting force for the entire race. In her article, she attested to this effect of black voting in her state of Massachusetts, proclaiming that “the success of this movement for equality of the sexes means more progress

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23 Although I have combined them in this paper, these distinct oral histories remain undoubtedly fragmented as short remarks that I excavated from long interviews primarily about the Civil Right Movement.

24 For insight on how memory, through the telling of oral histories, provides a unique view into the Jim Crow South, see Holloway, *Jim Cross Wisdom*.

25 The task of unearthing these specific stories about electoral politics required me to listen to or read through a plethora of more general oral histories. Furthermore, as they figured in continuous narrations reflecting interviewees’ streams of consciousness, it was often quite difficult to temporally situate these anecdotes about voting. It was frequently unclear when exactly the acts of resistance these women described so earnestly had taken place. I typically had to use historical clues embedded in their stories to firmly root their activism in a particular decade. See footnote 87 for an example of my process for reconstructing historical events from the oral histories.

26 For example, in Louisiana in 1940, there were only 886 African Americans registered to vote, although the adult African American population of the state was 473,562. (Prestage, “In Quest of African American Political Women,” 95). From a largely male population as small as this, my task was to find the recorded stories of females who were either included in this number of registered voters or who had advocated to be. Clearly this proved to be an exercise in finding a needle in a haystack and thus when I located a relevant oral history story, I tended to include it.

27 Undoubtedly, there were black women from municipalities across the country who also attempted to register or vote, yet whose stories were never formally documented.


toward equality of the races.” 31

Beginning with the territory of Wyoming in 1869, in the five decades before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment 21 states and territories fully enfranchised all women, both African American and white. 32 During this period the story of African American women voting truly began. 33 Before the Nineteenth Amendment, enfranchisement of women was limited to a handful of locales largely consisting of Western territories that had been recently admitted to the Union, such as Colorado, Utah or Arizona. No former Confederate or border states fully enfranchised women until forced to do so by the Nineteenth Amendment. Southern legislators viewed any expansion of suffrage, including to white women, as a step towards granting enfranchisement and political power to blacks. 34 Many Southern politicians worried it would not be politically, or ethically, palatable to disenfranchise African American women with the often-violent methods they used against African American men. As Senator John Sharp Williams of Mississippi complained, “We aren’t afraid to maul a black man over the head if he dares to vote, but we can’t treat women, even black women, that way. No, we’ll allow no women suffrage.” 35 For perhaps less violent reasons, Eastern states likewise did not grant female enfranchisement. Until 1920, New York was the only Eastern state where women could vote in all elections. 36

Politicians in Western states freely enfranchised both black and white women as they were far less concerned by the possibility of African American inclusion in politics. They had neither the legacy of the Civil War nor large black populations to contend with. With as few as 209 African American women living in Utah in 1895, the year women were enfranchised in Utah, or 109 in Idaho in 1896, these women lived in tight-knit, insular communities of African Americans who had largely achieved equal social positions to white settlers. 37 Furthermore, some historians have argued that women had an elevated independent status out West because of the egalitarian, raw democratic influences of frontier life and extremely skewed male to female ratios. 38 This unique stature of women in the West likely accelerated their enfranchisement. 39 Perhaps overlooked due to their tiny numbers, and without serious opposition from their white neighbors, black women in these Western states were able to zealously organize for—and exercise—their right to vote.

As was true of black women voting in the South decades later, the relatively small numbers of black, Western women mattered less than their presence and their desire to take part in the formal political process of voting. Enfranchised African American women in Colorado exemplified this desire. When Colorado gained statehood in 1876, female petitions for the vote were initially rejected for racist reasons similar to those raised in the South, such as the dangers of granting enfranchisement to “Negro wenches” and Chinese women. Yet in 1893 Republican, Populist, and Prohibitionist parties banded together and created a coalition to pass the law for full female enfranchisement. 40 At 3,058, Colorado had a far larger population of African-American women than any other Western state. 41 In this state, black women were influenced by acquiring the vote to integrate political discourse into their daily lives.

Beyond merely exercising their right to vote, black women in Colorado were politicized and personally empowered by the process of claiming their suffrage. Black journalist Elizabeth Ensley described this phenomenon in the first newspaper published by and for black women, The Women’s Era. Writing about her community of black women during the presidential election of 1894 she explained:

All voted, those who had protested against having the ballot thrust upon them and those who had hitherto taken no interest in politics. Theyelectioneered, they drove from house to house bringing voters to the

31 Josephine Ruffin, “TRUST THE WOMEN,” The Crisis, August 1915, 188.
33 While beyond the scope of this paper, black women, “free women of color,” voted in Colonial Virginia and Antebellum New Jersey. Walton Jr, Puckett, and Deskins, An African American Electorate, 3–7, Table 20.3.
36 Walton Jr, Puckett, and Deskins, An African American Electorate, Table 20.4.
37 Walton Jr, Puckett, and Deskins, An African American Electorate, 20.4. As Walter Webb proclaimed in his classic description of American frontier life, The Great Plains: “Why the men of the West were the first to grant the women the franchise... population was sparse and women comparatively scarce and remarkably self-reliant.” He conjectured that it was ultimately the “spirit of the Great Plains which made men democratic in deed and in truth” that “gave women the ballot.” Walter Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 505.
41 Walton Jr, Puckett, and Deskins, An African American Electorate, Table 20.4.
polls... Lessons learned from the election and campaign preceding it: 1. Women will study politics. Proven by the great number of political study clubs formed during the past year...Politics was the theme of discussion morning, noon and night. The women talked politics over their sewing, their dish-washing, and during their social calls. Politics has made them read and think more, and in new and different lines. Some of the women are getting these economic questions drilled into their heads in a way that would astonish you, and when the mothers understand these things it is going to make a vast difference, for they will teach them to the children. 2. Women will vote. The women of Colorado have demonstrated that conclusively.42

Over two decades before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, these black women of Colorado exemplified the politicization of earning the right to vote. Voting drew an increasing number of women into the wider orbit of formal political participation; it led woman to feel ownership over electoral politics. Furthermore, while after enfranchisement these black women gained a new intellectual independence and entered the realm of political engagement, they still maintained a commitment to their domestic duties. Earning the vote provided the basis for women to “read and think more,” however these powerful political colloquies could take place “over their sewing, their dish-washing.” The black women of Colorado were able to successfully integrate the political into the personal.43 Enfranchisement invited a new citizen, a black woman, to the civic discourse and the black women of Colorado continued their engagement with the electoral process. In fact, Helen Woodbury, an early twentieth century economist, found in a 1906 investigation of women’s suffrage in Colorado that more black women voted than white women in the Denver elections of 1906, relative to their total racial populations.44 As we have seen, even before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment black women demonstrated their eagerness to be dynamic participants in both traditional electoral politics and the intellectual discourse generated by that very act of voting. From Colorado to Massachusetts, from presidential elections to those of local schoolboards, by 1920 there was a small yet significant precedent for African American women contributing their votes and voices to upholding American democratic integrity.

**Demanding Democracy: African American Women Voting in the 1920 Election**

With the 1920 passage of the Nineteenth Amendment female citizens across the United States were finally granted the right to vote. A national desire to witness women registering for the first time led to documentation in both newspapers and reports by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) of the standoffs between registrars and African American women in the South. In the 1920 election, black women were especially eager to finally take part in the electoral process. One observer in Jacksonville, Florida, described black women waiting to register in late September 1920, a mere month after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment: “they began to arrive at 8 o’clock and many of them sat down on the curbing to rest, so many hours were they in line...Some went with babies in their arms and others took their lunches.”45 All over the country African American women rushed to register, only to be consistently denied the use of their political voice at the hands of white registrars. For instance, according to the United States Census of 1920, there were 292,551 African American women eligible (by the Nineteenth Amendment) to vote in the state of Georgia. Yet, based on NAACP records, only 3,418 of those African American women from Georgia were able to actually register to vote. This means that a mere 1.2 percent of potential African American female voters succeeded in registering. In Americus, Georgia, 250 black women attempted to vote, yet all of them were denied, while in the 1st district of Atlanta only eight women successfully registered.46 As these figures reveal, in the South especially, white registrars sent black women away from the polls alongside black husbands and fathers whose Fifteenth Amendment rights had long been denied.47 Notably, these accounts demonstrated the refusal of white officials across the South even to register African Americans, let alone permit them to cast their vote.

42 Elizabeth Ensley, “Election Day”, Women’s Era 1, no. 9, December 1894.
43 It is important to note that, as with much suffrage activity, the black women Ensley described were likely wealthy and not working-class women. They had the time and resources to “electioneering” and “drive from house to house bringing voters to the polls.”
44 In this election, 45.2 percent of the black votes were cast by women, while 42.6 percent of the white votes were cast by women. Helen Woodbury, Equal Suffrage: The Results of an Investigation in Colorado (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909), 107, 117.
45 “7,502 Women Registered in the City,” The Florida Times-Union, (Jacksonville), September 28, 1920.
For black men and women alike, voter registration in much of the South was an intricate, intensely partisan, and occasionally violent process that typically prevented, rather than facilitated, the act of voting itself. Any voter—white or black—attempting to register in the landscape of nineteen-twenty American South faced numerous restrictions that varied immensely from state to state and even county to county. These restrictions straddled the fine line between codified law and understood custom that comprised Jim Crow. They were carried out in a unique fashion by each registrar, a “guardian of racial supremacy and party success,” across the country. In the 1920 election black women knew to expect these restrictions and consequently prepared themselves. As Addie Hunton, the NAACP Field Secretary, documented after an interview with a black Virginian woman, “she slept with her [voting] application form…for a week—studying it the last thing at night and first thing the morning.”

“I could kill the clerk who questioned me; I could kill his wife and children,” a black woman spitefully proclaimed to Hunton after she was turned away from voting registration in Hampton, Virginia. She was not alone. No amount of preparation by black Southern women could ensure white Southern registrars would endorse African American Nineteenth Amendment rights. One after another, registrars and circuit clerks kept black southern women away from registration by whatever means they could. These tactics in the 1920 election were meticulously documented by newspapers across the country and an NAACP special investigation led by Hunton. Although reporters and the NAACP recorded the egregious methods of registrars only in this 1920 election, in the decades following, as evident from oral histories, registrars continued to employ similarly devious tactics to block black Southern women from voting.

In the 1920 election, white officials used a wide variety of creative, surprisingly non-confrontational, and even amusing tactics to prevent black female enfranchisement. For instance, in Columbia, South Carolina, where black women outnumbered black men and were “accordingly the largest [voting] class in the state,” registrars initially were caught off guard by the “many colored women, bright and intelligent” who appeared by the hundreds. They reacted by calling for “white people [to register] first” and keeping black women “standing for hours while they registered every white person in sight.”

24-year-old Lucille Wheelock was a graduate of Hartshorn College, a college for local black women, and a public-school teacher when she went to register in Phoebus, Virginia. She was handed a paper with two typewritten questions, “What is a Democracy?” and “What is a Republic?” When Wheelock surprisingly answered those to the satisfaction of registrar, she was promptly quizzed for 45 minutes on archaic voting procedures only to be told she had not passed and consequently could not register. After this experience Lucille Wheelock told the NAACP’s Hunton, that she was simply “too humiliated to return” and would not make another attempt at voting. Others shared Wheelock’s shame. The Independent, a local newspaper from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, observed, “Many colored women educationally qualified would not apply for registration, preferring disfranchisement to the humiliation of examination by hostile registrars.”

Other women testified to the heads of their local NAACP chapters that registrars simply rejected any claims by black women to enfranchisement. In New Bern, North Carolina, a black woman named Clara Mann was asked by the register to read and then write the entire constitution of North Carolina “by heart”. When Mann indignantly objected to this, the registrar admitted that “because she belonged to the Negro Race she could not register” even “if she was the President of Yale.”

In Birmingham, Alabama, a schoolteacher answered intricate questions about habeas corpus law only to then have an official tear up her registration card and throw it in her face. In Jefferson County, Alabama, black women were forced to fill

54 “1,000 Women in County Register”, The Independent, October 29, 1920, 7.
out forms to prove they owned Naturalization Papers and then told their voting certificates would be mailed to them. These women never received any such papers, so were ultimately unable to vote.\textsuperscript{57}

National newspapers reported on white registrars’ refusal to allow black women voting rights by simply stating the facts of the showdowns between officials and African American women. None of the articles interviewed a single black woman; no reporter actually asked a black woman what her motivations were for approaching the Southern polls or how she felt about the blatant denial of her rights.\textsuperscript{58} Only the NAACP’s Addie Hunton recorded how black Southern women prepared for the vote and how they felt about the subsequent rejection.

In 1921 Hunton presented this carefully researched, alarming report on female black disenfranchisement to her New York City colleagues at the national NAACP headquarters. However, her report prompted no significant response perhaps because during this period the organization shifted attention from documenting standoffs at the polls to gradually challenging issues such as poll taxes, lynching, and segregation in courts.\textsuperscript{59} As the NAACP continued this national legal focus (led primarily by white constitutional lawyers) throughout the decade, the organization felt increasingly irrelevant to the black Southerners who asserted their citizenship right through local, face-to-face confrontations with municipal officials.\textsuperscript{60} Oral histories, rather than written sources such as NAACP records, offer unique testimony to these continuous efforts of black women from the 1920s through 1940s to combat the humiliation and inequalities of the Jim Crow South.

**Human Catalysts: African American Female Activists Before the Civil Rights Movement**

[T]he human catalysts of the movement, the people who really gave direction to the movement’s organizing work…were not those whom most scholarship on the movement identifies as the “leaders.” Instead, in any list, long or short, of the activists who had the greatest personal impact upon the course of the southern movement, the vast majority of names will be ones that are unfamiliar to most readers.\textsuperscript{61}

As the African American female demand for the vote was deeply rooted in women’s social networks and inner friendships, a single strong-minded woman, just such a “human catalyst,” had the mobilizing capacity to enlist fellow women to the enfranchisement cause. Once this individual became politically involved, the strength of her ties within her social network naturally drew in other members.\textsuperscript{62} In the quest to claim enfranchisement as both women and blacks, personal relationships and encouragement, more than specific political ideology, were able to motivate black women across the South and bring them to the polls. Kathleen Adams recalled growing up as a small child in Atlanta, Georgia during the turn of the century and watching a black female graduate of Atlanta University, Lavinia Wimbish, “assisting at the polls.”\textsuperscript{63} Adams recounted Wimbish’s political impact in motivating black women in Atlanta to vote, “When you saw Miss. Lavinia coming, you knew what her subject was going to be—‘We’ve got to get to the polls and vote. We’ll never be able to accomplish anything without the vote.’” Wimbish showed—and spread—an unabashed commitment to the importance of black female inclusion in electoral politics. She inspired black women to such an extent that according to Adams, her rallying cry of “We’ll never be able to accomplish anything without the vote”, became a “slogan in Atlanta right straight on down through the years to…now.”\textsuperscript{64}

Amelia Boynton Robinson remembered her mother, Anna Platts, physically taking women to vote in Savannah, Georgia, right after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. “My mother was a politician also though she was a dressmaker and she had a horse and buggy and when women’s rights became a reality she said...”\textsuperscript{65}

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\textsuperscript{57} Charles McPherson to the NAACP Headquarters, November 9th, 1920 Papers of the NAACP, Part 04: Voting Rights Campaign, 1916-1950, African American Voting, Disenfranchisement, and Oklahoma Grandfather Clause, NAACP Library of Congress, Folder L-C-284, 41; After the 1920 election, Jefferson County, Alabama continued this chicanery, claiming to have sent registration certificates that never actually arrived, for the next nineteen years. Finally, in 1939 the NAACP sued the Board of Registrars in six separate cases and elicited federal intervention from the newly founded Civil Liberties Bureau. Augusta Strong, “3,000 Ignore Buffs of Alabama Poll Bosses” (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 274.

\textsuperscript{58} That is, not in any articles I found documenting the 1920 election.


\textsuperscript{60} Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 87.


\textsuperscript{62} Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 274.

\textsuperscript{63} Atlanta University, Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Atlanta University (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1890), 38; Kathleen Reddings Adams, interviewed by Gay Francine Banks, Spring 1977, Black Women Oral History Project, Harvard University, 33.

\textsuperscript{64} Kathleen Reddings Adams, interviewed by Gay Francine Banks, Spring 1977, Black Women Oral History Project, Harvard University, 33.
'I'm going around and get the women’… wherever there were women that she knew about and I would knock on the doors rang the doorbells we would get the women out we would take them to the polls.”


Amelia Boynton Robinson, interviewed by Carolyn Fennell, April 2015, Orlando, Florida, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iv--DXyYLkYM, 45.00.


Yale psychologist John Dollard's 1937 exposition of social patterns in an anonymous Southern town, Caste and Class in a Southern Town, helped me a great deal to picture life in a Southern, Jim Crow town during this period. John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town, 213.

Marissa Chapell, Jenny Hutchinson, Brian War, "Dress Modestly, Neatly...As If You were Going to Church: Respectability, Glass and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in Gender In the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Marissa Chapell (New York: Garland, 1999), 69-72; Cynthia Flemming, Soon We Will Not Cry (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 47, 113.

felt that these two parts of her life were inherently intertwined. Her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was a continuation of that day ringing doorbells in Savannah, Georgia, a day that “was the first thing I heard of or even knew anything about voting.”

Through personal narrations, oral histories trace how seemingly distinct social movements, such as the Suffrage and the Civil Rights Movements, can be for an individual a single stream of continuous activism throughout his or her life.

In 1918, when they went to vote, Christina Adair and her fellow women “dressed up”. Around 25 years later, before attempting to register in Halifax County, North Carolina, Florenza Grant’s husband asked her, “Flo, will you get dressed? Look nice now…to register.”

This aesthetic choice that accompanied voting was prevalent throughout many of the oral histories. The act of registering or voting itself was an auspicious public occasion, one that required fancy clothing. Furthermore, the moment in which a black woman walked into a white registrar’s office and dared fulfill her legal right was also an undertaking that disrupted the white ruling order. Participation in civil defiance such as this necessitated the black woman present herself well. A put-together, manicured appearance cultivated an important overtone to the interaction. Through their polished exteriors, black woman demanded they be taken seriously as citizens and recognized as members of the middle class. Their mode of dress outwardly manifested of their inner desire for respectability and legitimacy. This practice of dressing with special care for moments of confrontation with white supremacist structures continued during the Civil Rights Movement. During the sit-ins, marches and boycotts of the movement, “Sunday Best” attire was mandatory. By “dressing up” black women asserted their femininity and middle-class status, and thus during the Civil Rights Movement both discouraged white violence against them and projected wholesome appearances for the news cameras.

African American women rarely approached the polls or spoke to the white registrar alone. In many of the accounts from the 1920 election, coalitions of wom-
en, clusters of female friends, registered together. This phenomenon persisted for decades. Black women’s social connections to their families and to each other gave them the courage and care they needed to demand their voting rights. A teacher named Elizabeth Carlett described how in the 1930s a colleague at her Durham, North Carolina school, took “a car full of teachers to vote and would bring them back and take another carload of teachers to vote and so forth.”73 Other African Americans recalled approaching the Southern polls in the 1930s and 1940s with their spouses, parents, or family friends. As Reverend Gardner Taylor of Baton Rouge, Louisiana explained, “I remember going to the fire station not too far from my home. Both of us Laura [Bell Scott, his wife] and I went together. And the misgivings, the uncertainty, maybe the fear of what was gonna happen.”74 Interior designer, Zonia Way reminisced about her father “taking me to the polls, I was twenty-one” and how he said, “Zonia, you’re old enough to now...So that’s what you want to do every year, you vote.”75 Mahlon Puryear also recalled a traditional twenty-first birthday mandatory march to the polls in Winston, North Carolina: “The first time I registered in North Carolina, Papa carried, he carried us to register on our twenty-first birthday.”76 Essie Alexander remembered her trouble encouraging black women outside of her family to register in Carroll County, Mississippi: “I had a time trying to get the other women to go. We went together to register and to vote. I went with my cousin’s wife and one or two other ladies to Carrollton.”77

All over the South, African Americans built lasting social movements by creating networks of trust and solidarity strong enough to outweigh the terrifying and persistent structures of political domination. It was the familial relationships, often these coming-of-age moments between father and daughter, or the connections between groups of women who approached the polls together, that allowed these ordinary people to risk engagement in politics. These small private moments shared between colleagues, family members or good friends rarely appear among the pages of written histories. However, oral histories in which individuals have the opportunity to recount the intimate details of their lives are uniquely situated to reveal these personal, truly political occasions of black female voter registration.

As shown in the oral histories above, from the 1920s through the 1940s, black women mobilized to register by informal ties and acted as (or responded to) independent leaders. However, black women also turned to official associations for structure and guaranteed support of political activism. They were not the only ones seeking organizational affiliations during the interwar period. In fact, the “greatest extent of associational activity in the whole history of American women” took place in this era after women were granted the right to vote and before a substantial proportion of them entered the work force.79 As a resounding voice for black women in the Suffrage Movement in years prior, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) remained the primary outlet for black female political mobilization after the Nineteenth Amendment.80 The NACW facilitated the creation of thousands of black women’s clubs across 41 states and united these clubs with a broad common vision of racial uplift that encompassed (yet did not necessarily focus on) electoral politics.81 For example, in West Virginia, the letters female clubwomen wrote encouraging black women to vote were sent to both the women themselves and to various local churches. These West Virginian clubwomen also engaged their fellow voters through an anonymous question box to identify salient political topics.82


Other national civic organizations for black women similar to the NACW allowed individual clubs to set their own agendas. For instance, of Memphis, Tennessee in the 1930s, Imogene Wilson recounted “the emphasis of the National Council of Negro Women [in Memphis] escalated into a voter rights kind of this...voter education. Civic kinds of things. Organize. Showing them how to organize for political purposes.”

Lottie Watkins, described the role of mixed gender neighborhood clubs in “helping with voting strategies” during the mid 1940s. Watkins was the first female African American real estate agent in Atlanta. Undoubtedly influenced by her experiences and contacts from voter registration in the 1940s, she was later active in the Civil Rights Movement and became a Congresswoman. Watkins recalled how club “men and women was able to knock on all those doors talk to those people...and see how many registered voters was there and where we had to work.” Organizations brought order and discipline. By connecting African American women (and men) to their black compatriots across the country, national associations added a sense of a larger purpose to the vote itself and gave black communities the hope that collectively they would be able to affect electoral politics.

Despite the unity engendered by collective political organizing, black Southerners regularly perceived the act of voting (or lack thereof) as a reminder of their individual social standings. During this period, Southern African American voting as a public display of white-sanctioned enfranchisement often amounted to a status symbol rather than a successful expression of political will. Christina Adair described her anger at the disenfranchisement of middle class black women in the 1930s alongside “the gullible Negro, the ignorant Negro, and the illiterate Negro.” At the polls in Houston, Texas, Adair was reduced to the same level, the same treatment, as a person she perceived to be far below her.

A wealthy and educated black woman, Adair existed in the upper echelons of her insular black community. Once she stepped out of that world and interacted with white institutions, she was often instantly stripped of this upper-class identity. Just as disenfranchisement reduced Adair’s social standing, a successfully cast vote could restore that identity to her. In 1937, sociologist John Dollard described the tendency of Southern communities to only bestow voting privileges on African Americans who were “well known as ‘good Negros’.” By virtue of their womanhood, even privileged black women like Adair had trouble receiving the commendation of the “good Negro” that was often necessary for white registrars to allow African Americans voting rights.

Black political scientist Ralph Bunche’s investigation of African American political life during the Great Depression, The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR, also detailed this belief shared by both African Americans and whites that only “intelligent” African Americans should vote. The chairmain of registrars in Dougherty County, Georgia proudly disclosed that their county had “a good nigger vote” of “property owners and taxpayers.” He explained how his registrars prevented even these African Americans from ever voting in primary elections, however gave “the good ones a chance to show the white people...by registering and voting for president.”

The African American men Bunche interviewed spoke of the added social status voting granted African Americans. As one black man from Huntsville, Alabama divulged to Bunche, “people treat you different when you vote...
they treat me too nice sometimes.”  Although a very rich source, Bunche’s work focused almost entirely on the political status of black men and thus provides another example of the need to examine oral histories for parallel political experiences of black women during this period.93

During this Great Depression era, blacks were not the only Americans whose social standing mirrored their enfranchisement. Beginning in 1929, the economic devastation of the Great Depression converted millions of laborers into relief recipients. Consequently, many of these citizens relied on President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs to subsist. Some Republicans believed that all relief receipts would unquestionably vote Democrat to ensure tax dollars continued paying for their sustenance. Amid accusations that President Roosevelt was a conniving politician who used federal funds to buy votes, in fall of 1934 twelve states took steps to strip relief recipients of the vote and thus prevent mass political support for Democrats.94

At a press conference on October 17, 1934, President Roosevelt called this “a thoroughly un-American procedure” and assured the public that “men out of work” could not “be denied the privilege of voting.”95 Just over two years later, on the eve of his second presidential election and amid the ongoing economic crisis, Roosevelt gave a public speech in which he summarized the history of American disenfranchisement and emphasized that “today you have a different situation.”96 Beyond merely extolling the virtues of American universal suffrage, with these words Roosevelt demonstrated the divided national attitudes toward disenfranchisement that existed during the Great Depression.

This powerful presidential praise—and public American discussion—of enfranchisement must have excited African American political activists across the country. But the racial implications of this moment could not have been lost on them. For decades, the South had blatantly denied voting rights based on race, yet when politicians attempted to overtly deny white Americans voting rights based on economic and social status, the President himself responded forcefully.98 Despite having received seventy to eighty percent of the black vote, this was typical of President Roosevelt’s attitude towards Southern discrimination against African Americans.99 As he was dependent on a few Southern white Democrats who chaired economic congressional committees that were crucial to his New Deal polices, President Roosevelt tactfully chose not to publicly endorse Southern black civil rights.100

Roosevelt is not mentioned at all in the accounts of small-scale political mobilizations undertaken—and recounted decades later—by Evangeline Hall Bradenton and Amelia Boynton Robinson. Robinson and Bradenton, who lived in Florida and Alabama respectively during Roosevelt’s presidency, exemplify those black Southern women whose higher social status and education cultivated in them a belief in the importance of enfranchisement. President Roosevelt must have seemed very far away when Robinson and Bradenton explained powerful notions of American citizenship to poorer African Americans in their communities as they helped them register. Evangeline Hall Bradenton recounted teaching poorer blacks in Bradenton, Florida of the 1940s, a place she referred to as “City of Hate,”101 how to “handle a ballot.” She explained, “I registered many a people…I say [to them], ‘That’s all you got anybody wants to vote. If you don’t vote, just hang it up honey.’”102 Likewise in the 1930s through 1940s Amelia Boynton Robinson registered poor black male and female farmers in the countryside of Selma, Alabama.103 She told the groups of black agricultural workers, “you are not a first-class citizen, you are chattel unless…you fill out these applications and try to register so you can vote.”104

To these rural African Americans, Robinson emphasized the importance of citizenship, articulating:

[Y]ou’ve got to be a citizen, you’ve lived here in the United States of America and your fathers and grandfathers have lived here and you can’t vote—we’re going to teach you…how to realize what
politics really are and what democracy really is and you are going to register and vote.\textsuperscript{105}

Although for the majority of American history the right to vote was not universal,\textsuperscript{106} central to America’s national mythology was the self-image of a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.”\textsuperscript{107} American citizenship was both a legal status and an identity. American citizens were legally entitled to American passports, federal benefits, and participation in electoral politics. As an identity, American citizenship was far more complicated, but at minimum conferred a sense of personal, historical, and political belonging. This belonging and an understanding of what politics and democracy “really are,” were what Robinson, herself a recently enfranchised black woman, encouraged poor Southern African American men and women to claim in the 1930s and 1940s.

The names of the black men and women Bradenton and Robinson helped register could conceivably be found in a voter registration book. However, these recorded names would not disclose the manner by which these African Americans succeeded in registering: neither Bradenton’s nor Robinson’s self-motivated, neighborly, and class-based attempts at empowerment were documented in writing. The political contributions and civil rights organization of black women such as Bradenton and Robinson in the 1930s and 1940s South are revealed in short anecdotes from oral histories that focus primarily on the Civil Rights Movement. As Jacqueline Jones noted, “black women’s work in the 1930s took place within a matrix of federal action, class-based and black political activism, neighborly cooperation and personal initiative.”\textsuperscript{108} Bradenton’s and Robinson’s oral histories reveal that during this period black women applied similar strategies and networks employed for organizing female labor to mobilizing voters.

Although most black female attempts to claim suffrage took place in relatively small and personal interactions with white registrars, some African American women embarked on a more confrontational approach to demanding their rights. The accounts of these antagonistic black women can be found in traditional historical sources such as newspapers. These women fought exclusion from electoral politics with overt acts of resistance and thus made national headlines, ensuring their political legacy would be documented. For instance, in January 1926, Indiana Little, a black teacher from Birmingham, strode to the entrance of the local courthouse. With a group of over 1,000 of her black community members, mostly women, behind her, she led rousing calls demanding an end to black disenfranchisement. Little attempted to register and gave the clerks “a piece of her mind”, when they stopped her. Little was arrested along with many of her compatriots and was initially charged with vagrancy that was later changed to “disorderly conduct.” This event appeared in newspapers across the country and subsequently sparked national debates over black disenfranchisement in the South.\textsuperscript{109}

Black women’s political activity also sometimes filtered into headlines when they organized on a local level in parallel with their national political moment. On April 1, 1935, the Supreme Court declared in \textit{Norris v. Alabama}, the landmark case on the Scottsboro Boys, that the systematic exclusion of African Americans from Alabama juries was unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{110} Consequently, in front page appeal in the \textit{Daily Worker}, the most widely circulated national Communist newspaper of the time, the International Labor Defense (ILD) (a Communist legal advocacy organization that just had defended the Scottsboro Boys in court) called on blacks to assert their right “to sit on juries and to vote.”\textsuperscript{111} With this uncompromising attitude the ILD built on the national African American political momentum the Scottsboro case had achieved and specifically rallied blacks to agitate for their rights.\textsuperscript{112} Later in April, “a group of Negro women workers” from Alabama followed this battle cry and demanded their rights be upheld “in accordance with the recent Scottsboro decision.” These black women marched to the “Jefferson County Court,” and commanded white officials to grant them both their enfranchisement and their names on jury rolls. Although they were denied these rights, these anonymous African American women left a traceable mark in the historical


\textsuperscript{106} Whether as paupers, immigrants, felons, women or African-Americans, American citizens throughout the centuries have lived their lives without the ability to participate in the electoral process. See Keyssar, The Right to Vote.


\textsuperscript{108} Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 166.


\textsuperscript{110} Kelley, \textit{Hammer and Hoe}, 123.


\textsuperscript{112} Sullivan, \textit{Days of Hope}, 88.
record. Their commitment to see the Supreme Court decision carried out locally was documented in the Daily Worker.113

The Vital Momentum: Conclusion

Through an amalgamation of written documents and oral histories, this paper has examined a chapter of the long history of black women voting—and not voting—in America. The African American women who attempted to vote in the South from the 1920s through 1940s were the predecessors of activists in the era traditionally thought of as the Civil Rights Movement, or themselves remained activists in this period. They attempted to register decades before the better-known campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, and thus laid the groundwork for—and were often later on the frontlines of—the crucial mobilization efforts of black Southern women in those years. As Andrew Young, the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), powerfully articulated, “It was women going door to door, speaking with their neighbors, meeting in voter-registration classes…that gave the vital momentum and energy to the movement.”114 Recognition of the continuous black female fight against the perpetuating forces of Southern injustice endows us with new insights into the many drivers of gradual social change.115 Their experiences from the 1920s through 1940s help elucidate how the later Civil Rights Movement was truly mobilized on a grassroots level in the South and was not just carried out by political and religious leaders who welcomed the aid of Northern college students.

However, beyond merely viewing black women as precursors to the official Civil Rights Movement, this paper has followed the relatively recent historiographical push, led by Jacquelyn Hall, to recognize a “long civil rights movement.”116 Through the brief testimonies found in longer oral histories given by black women about the Civil Rights Movement, I have expanded the temporal boundaries of the African American push for civil rights beyond the standard 1954-1968 era. Recognizing black women in the 1920s through 1940s as key players in the “long civil rights movement” encourages historians to widen their perspectives and include in the civil rights movement new organizations, such as the local branch of a national black women’s club that Imogene Wilson belonged to in Memphis, and individuals, like Anna, who have previously been overlooked.117 This temporal redefinition is an important analytical tool that was aided immensely by the stories embedded in oral histories.

Since African American women’s civic involvement took the form of actions beyond or in opposition to traditional political behaviors, oral history as a method of examining lived experiences is uniquely poised to reveal their impact. Just as Addie Hunton’s interviews with African American women revealed their personal feelings about the 1920 election, it was in oral histories that I found the lasting impact of these encounters between black women and white registrars. The oral histories give us unique access to many kinds of episodes: Lucille Wheeler never attempted to register again after her attempt failed; defiant women like Clara Mann voiced objections and were energized to mobilize the women in their own towns or to become registrars themselves; the Jefferson County women filled out forms to prove they were “naturalized” in the U.S and then sat at home endlessly waiting for the registration certificates that would never arrive, thinking deeply about their own claims to citizenship; and the list goes on. The 1920 election largely marked an end to the written history on African American women who waged an assault against the Southern white supremacist system through their quest for inclusion in electoral politics. Thus, black female oral histories are crucial sources for recapturing black women’s continuous efforts throughout the following three decades to vote and change the political consciousness of their communities.

Focused on African American female voting in the 1920s through 1940s, this paper did not delve into many of the crucial national changes that impacted the African American community during this period. I did not mention the geopolitics that influenced African Americans such as the two world wars or the rise of an international Communist movement with the Soviet Union at its helm.118 I did not even allude to the Great Migration, in which millions of African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North and Midwest in the interwar period. I also only briefly referenced the radical realignment of African American political allegiance in 1932, namely the widespread black political shift that FDR’s election

113 “Negro Women Demand Place On Jury Lists,” The Daily Worker, April 25, 1935, 3.
inspired, from the Republican, “Abe Lincoln’s”, Party to the Democratic Party. However vital to understanding the events that impacted African Americans during this time, these historical phenomena are less relevant to this paper’s story about black female activism in local communities and social networks that spanned across different eras. For instance, in the oral histories, black women such as Christina Adair and Essie Alexander did not discuss a desire to vote for a particular candidate such as FDR. Rather, these women sought the right to vote at all. They fought for the simple ability to write the name of a political candidate on a slip of paper and place it in a ballot box, while looking straight into the eyes of their local registrar, a governmental official who personified one of the many white supremacist structures that constrained these women. In that sense, this paper deals with a history that although political, was affected more by local cultural or social relationships and trends than the influence of global or national political currents.

Through engagement with oral histories of Southern black women, this paper demonstrated black female activists’ persistence and commitment to enfranchisement, despite obstacles white municipal officials, employers, and citizens placed in their way. This paper illuminated a small yet persistent movement carried out by black Southern women who did not always succeed in registering people, but who nonetheless continued mobilizing and returning to the polls.

Decades before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, African American women, primarily in the West, documented and celebrated their voting rights. After the Nineteenth Amendment, African American women rushed to vote alongside millions of white women. Southern black women expressed dismay at the ridiculous yet effective tactics white registrars used to defeat black female attempts at voting. Yet, in small acts of political resistance over the following decades, Southern black women gradually found ways to confront the repressive, white supremacist powers of their local municipalities and in doing so, helped alter the collective political imagination of black men and women across the country.