

Nellie Griswold Francis:

The Vicissitudes of Activism for Women and Race

William D. Green

ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1919, the Minnesota Legislature ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, the culmination of years of hard work by Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association. Though the campaign led by Ueland was carried out by a membership that demographically reflected the population of the state—white and largely of northern European descent—a small contingent of African American women, reflecting the state's Black demographic, shared in the victory. Their leader was Nellie Griswold Francis. Upon meeting her, Ueland referred to Francis as “a star . . . possessing the spirit of a flame.” To be sure, their common purpose was to promote woman suffrage. But while it was Ueland's single focus, Francis's interest was broader. As Ueland admiringly noted: “To help her race is her ruling motive.”¹

Ueland's words could not have been more prescient. Francis's suffrage work was intertwined and at times at odds with her work for her race, community, club associations, and the war effort, as well as with shouldering what Susan B. Anthony deprecatingly called the “double duty” of marriage and family. Ueland genuinely admired the Black leader, albeit from a lofty paternalistic vantage point where the lines that separated esteem, class privilege, and

racism were often blurred. Indeed, white people of status confused Francis's light skin as her one trait suggesting a superior character. Such was the nature of race relations in Francis's experience. To identify herself as a “race person”—one fully committed to the welfare of her people—had to be emotionally clarifying. So much needed to be done, even in Francis's home base, the racially insulated neighborhood of Black St. Paul within the seemingly tolerant capital city and state of Minnesota. The capital contained, as historian and lawyer Paul Nelson termed it, “a village within a city.”²

Although the boundaries surrounding the “village” were not strictly enforced by the racist laws so characteristic of the Jim Crow South, nevertheless, the insidious social customs of restrictive property covenants, police abuse, the threat of lynching, or white harassment could happen at any time when a Black person ventured beyond the confines of the neighborhood. Yet, until 1885, when the *Western Appeal* dared to begin reporting “what thousands of Black men and women kept to themselves,” the Black community had no voice of its own. Before then, racism in Minnesota remained undocumented and unaccountable. In July 1885, *Western Appeal* readers learned of a Black man named C. W. Baptist,



Nellie Francis, 1921.

who was ordered by unnamed persons to move his business because it was situated across from the prestigious Ryan Hotel “or they would find some way to make him.” (Ironically, the hotel was the largest employer of Black laborers.)³

In 1887—the same year 13-year-old Nellie Griswold first met William T. (Billy) Francis, whom she would marry in 1893—another member of St. Paul's proper Black society, Mrs. J. J. Wiley, was part of a St. Paul crowd that had gathered to see the visiting US president Grover Cleveland. Jammed next to “some burly white men,” Mrs. Wiley grew impatient after the men continued to insult her. A policeman

worked his way over to the commotion and, “seeing Mrs. Wiley was colored,” at once arrested her for being drunk and disorderly; the men were allowed to go free. Though charges were eventually dropped, the lesson to Black people was very clear: the dignity of Black people, regardless of their gender and class, could be at any time affronted with impunity. This story was not reported in the white press—the same papers that four years later, ironically, would praise the speech on America’s race problem that Francis gave at her high school graduation. In 1895, this same white press would egg on separate white mobs that nearly lynched two Black men just outside Francis’s neighborhood. Outside the “village” it was indeed a hostile world.⁴

The first two decades of the twentieth century were quite turbulent, with riots against Black people erupting in several cities, including Brownsville, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; and Springfield, Illinois. Lynchings were commonplace; Americans were desensitized to the fundamental horror of these vicious acts. Francis would look on with alarm as throngs of moviegoers flocked to the Shubert Theatre in Minneapolis to cheer on the images of *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that romanticized the murder of Black men. Whites who considered themselves friends of Francis’s race acted as if they saw no harm in the gruesome spectacle on display. Indeed, organizers of the 1916 suffrage conference in Albert Lea used the film to promote its two-day affair.⁵

Race, in this sense, was a blind spot for white people in Minnesota, including women fighting for their right to vote. No white suffrage leader reached out to the Black community in the spirit of sisterhood, confirming to many Black women that the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association

was meant entirely to be a white affair. The words of Mary Church Terrell, an early national leader of what was then called the “colored” women’s club movement, echoed forth from 1900 when she addressed the overwhelmingly white National Council of Women of the United States when it met in Minneapolis. Historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn summarized Terrell’s powerful speech this way: “She addressed the group not only about the needs of Black women, but also about the prejudice and lack of sympathy on the part of white women. Terrell indicted them for not extending a helping hand to African Americans whose aims were similar to their own.”⁶

Francis saw the potential not only for promoting her community’s interests to the state leadership of the colored women’s clubs but also for advocating woman suffrage among her own people.

Francis understood this antipathy to be a challenge to generating support for the suffrage movement among Minnesota’s Black women, though she also knew that they did not reject the principle of woman suffrage. In the Baptist church tradition of Black women in leadership roles, Francis staged a debate on woman suffrage as early as 1911 at her own Pilgrim Baptist Church. But though the event was a successful fundraiser, the suffrage issue itself did not galvanize Minnesota’s Black community. Other matters confronting community leaders took priority. Minnesota had a vibrant network of colored women’s clubs that, in addition to social and cultural activities, addressed the issues of education, family support, child welfare, and housing for orphans and the aged.

Francis saw the potential not only for promoting her community’s interests to the state leadership of the colored women’s clubs, some of whom she had gotten to know through political activities with her husband, but also for advocating woman suffrage among her own people. Despite not having been active in the organization previously, Francis was elected president of the Minnesota Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (Minnesota Federation of CWCs) in 1912, unopposed, “in a blaze of glory,” as the *Appeal* reported.⁷

Those who followed her in the press had noted that Francis was effective at organizing. Leading a campaign to raise funds for her

church, she had traveled to New York to successfully persuade Andrew Carnegie to contribute the funds her church needed. Before returning to St. Paul, she stopped over in Washington, DC, where she was escorted by Minnesota senator Moses Clapp to the White House to meet President William Taft. Her election brought to the Minnesota Federation of CWCs a certain positive notoriety that it had never before experienced. This notoriety caught the attention of the officers of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (National Association of CWCs), which would soon be holding its biennial conference in Hampton, Virginia. Within days of her election, on behalf of the Black women in Minnesota, Francis prepared to attend the national conference, where she would meet

NATIONAL FEDERATION.

Women's Clubs Doing Good Work for the Race.

Special Correspondence THE APPEAL.

Hampton, Va., July 25.—The National Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs opened its session upon the beautiful and historic spot where was founded by General Armstrong—who was one of our best friends—that great institution of learning, Hampton Institute. Great, not only in its industrial achievements, but doubly great in that it made possible Booker T. Washington and caused thereby the foundation of Tuskegee Institute. Women from all parts of the United States are here. Women who stand for the best in the communities in which they live. Women who go things, and are obsessed with the desire to benefit the race, and are making history as to our womanhood.

Practically all of the leaders are here.

The opening ceremonies were very impressive and the convention organized without a clash of any kind. Harmony seems to be the watchword and spirit of the meeting.

Mrs. W. T. Francis was appointed second recording secretary.

Many important committees were appointed to facilitate the work of the convention. The one in which the deepest interest was manifested was the committee designated to call upon the Governor at Richmond for the purpose of securing the commutation



MRS. W. T. FRANCIS,
St. Paul Representative.

of the death sentence imposed upon a young Afro-American woman. This committee was composed of Mrs. Mollie Church Terrill, of Washington, D. C., and Mrs. W. T. Francis, of St. Paul. The ladies at once went to Richmond and were successful so far as to secure from the Governor a stay of two weeks with the privilege of introducing new evidence, and from the Governor's attitude the committee is satisfied that the death penalty will not be enforced.

Weather conditions here are ideal. This is the largest convention ever held by the National Federation, more than five hundred delegates being in attendance.

Reports from all parts of the country show a large increase in the number of clubs of the various State Federations, and it is conceded that better work can be done where all clubs are connected with the state organization.

Much work of a helpful nature is under way and the desire uppermost in the minds of all here is to do good and waste no time in frivolity.

luminaries such as Nannie Burroughs, Ida B. Wells, Hallie Q. Brown, and Maggie Washington (with whom Francis would become close)—all present to discuss topics such as domestic-service training; anti-lynching efforts; updates on segregation laws in public transportation; and woman suffrage. The conference was exactly where she wanted to be. It was a place where all of her powers and her sense of purpose intersected, for it posed the greatest opportunity to bring to bear the backing of the National Association of CWCs to mobilize Minnesota's Black women in the name of suffrage.⁸

But she would be drawn away from the suffrage cause by a more significant need of the formidable National Association president, Mary Church Terrell, who had not yet met the Minnesotan in person. Francis's contacts with the powerful Carnegie and Taft were needed in an urgent mission. Terrell enlisted Francis to join her in going to the office of Virginia governor William Hodges Mann to persuade him to stay the execution of a 17-year-old Black girl named Virginia Christian, convicted of murdering her abusive employer. But the plea fell on deaf ears. Virginia Christian died by electrocution on August 16, 1912. This would seem to bode ill for Francis's club work over the coming months.⁹

Personal challenges temporarily curtail activism

Club work had been keeping Francis busy on several fronts. Some included travel throughout the state and lobbying at the capitol for various

Francis attended the 1912 meeting of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in Hampton, Virginia, as St. Paul's representative. She was elected second recording secretary.

legislative initiatives. Yet suddenly Francis was confronted with another, more pressing matter. Billy Francis had taken on the solo law practice of his best friend, Fredrick McGhee (1861–1912), a trial lawyer who had founded Minnesota's first NAACP chapter. McGhee had recently died. Billy had never practiced criminal law, nor was he temperamentally disposed for trial practice law office management. His prior experience was in the Northern Pacific Railway's legal department. Billy was in over his head. He needed his wife's help. Nellie was now expected to manage the paperwork, research and type briefs, record meetings and write correspondence (she had trained as a stenographer), respond to inquiries and clients, and be present in the office while Billy was away.¹⁰

There was no alternative. The practice was their only source of income. They had invested everything in the law practice, which had not been lucrative when McGhee ran it. Between her club work and the law office, Francis had no chance to mobilize her club members around woman suffrage. Worse, her health was weakening. At the April 1913 meeting of the Minnesota Federation's executive board she resigned. Though board members tried to persuade her to change her mind, Francis was adamant: "Her health would not permit her to hold the office longer." She must have felt incredible pressure to meet the divergent demands of presiding over a statewide organization while managing a law office practically singlehandedly.¹¹

And yet, there was grumbling. One can only speculate on the cause. Perhaps it was because, for the first time, under Francis's leadership, the Minnesota Federation of CWCs had enjoyed public attention. With that attention, membership and presumably funds grew. Some may have



William T. "Billy" Francis

feared that the spotlight would dim after Francis stepped down. This attitude would have also provided fertile ground for envy by members who, within the world of the Black women's clubs of Minnesota, had resented her meteoric rise to leadership. Envy seemed to explain her ostracism from the club world over the following years. Remarkably, even during the suffrage and anti-lynching campaigns to come, neither the Minnesota Federation of CWCs nor individual clubs stepped forward to participate or even endorse the efforts. The only exception was the Everywoman Suffrage Club, founded by Francis in 1914.

Others had a dim view of Francis personally. To some, it may have appeared that claiming ill health was really a ploy to block further inquiry into her family affairs or, worse, salvage a reputation. To still others, she had abandoned the organization that had cast her in the role of a dilettante; her striving for the presidency had not been about service to her people but self-promotion. The accusation would linger for years.¹²

Moreover, some may have presumed that the Francis family were of means. After all, Billy had worked all

those years in the Northern Pacific Railway legal department. Critics likely presumed that Fred McGhee's law practice must have been successful, for a provocative Black lawyer could never have survived within St. Paul's staid, white-dominated legal and political community. Surely Billy would do just fine inheriting McGhee's legacy as Minnesota's most prominent civil rights spokesman. It had to have been hard for some to believe that the couple was, in fact, desperate for income. And for those grand dames who did, the couple's economic straits may have seemed like a failure of character or, worse, a discomfiting reminder of how insecure their own finances were. In any event, it seemed that Francis had failed her obligations to their social class.¹³

On July 4, 1913, at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Federation of CWCs in Duluth, Francis sent a note of greeting to the delegates. There is no record of how it was received, and suffrage was not on the agenda. It

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would be months before Billy Francis's law practice could take on a person to relieve Nellie of much of the office work and allow her to attend a function of the Minnesota Federation of CWCs. When she did later, it was to honor the guest speaker, Mary Church Terrell, whom she had accompanied on the futile mission of mercy a little over a year before. But Francis was not done with the cause.¹⁴

By spring 1914, the executive board of the Minnesota Federation of

CWCs had changed and Francis was back in the fold in time for the tenth annual convention, which was to meet in Minneapolis. As a clear indication of the changing of the guard, the executive board had elected her honorary president, giving her the high-profile position of responding to Minneapolis mayor Wallace Nye's greeting. Her remarks, though cordial, nonetheless gave her critics another reason to reject her leadership, however titular, for she took the occasion to ask "only for justice for her people, without any apologies or favors." Then, she went further. To the discomfort of delegates who wanted a more conciliatory tone, Francis, in speaking of suffrage for the Black women of the state, called for their "Civil Rights, believing that the Negroes were highly capable of a proper regard for their rights."¹⁵

To the old guard, woman suffrage had not been approved as a priority for the Minnesota Federation of CWCs. These women resented anything that Nellie Francis touched,

but they could hardly speak against suffrage. To do so would place them in direct opposition with the National Association of CWCs, which they were not about to do. Instead, the old guard attempted to invalidate Francis's election, arguing that an honorary president could only be elected by the delegates at the convention. But once again, their argument went nowhere, for the bylaws clearly empowered the executive board to fill that post at any time.

All the old guard could do was pull their five clubs, all from Minneapolis, out of the Minnesota Federation of CWCs, which they did. Minneapolis was the home of Ione Gibbs, Francis's predecessor, who two years before had grudgingly handed over the presidency to the younger woman. A week later, Francis went to Wilberforce, Ohio, to attend the biennial convention of the National Association of CWCs. It would mark the beginning of a new phase of activism for Francis, for it offered her—even 700 miles away—the opportunity to breach the racial barrier she witnessed in her state.¹⁶

On August 4, she crowded into the cavernous Galloway Hall of Wilberforce University, a historically Black institution, where she reconnected with some of the most important women in Black activism—Francis's mentor and incoming president Margaret Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington; Nettie Napier, wife of James C. Napier, register of the US Treasury who had once served with Francis's father, James Griswold, on the Nashville City Council; and Matilda Dunbar, mother of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. But more notable to delegates, unaccustomed to seeing white women sharing the platform with Black leaders, were Zona Gale, a committee chairwoman of the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs (white) and vice president of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association; and Harriet Taylor Upton, president of the Ohio Woman Suffrage Association. Francis gave a series of updates, including on the National Association of CWC's lobbying campaigns against the recently enacted Jim Crow bill in Illinois and segregation in Washington, DC, as well as its work among children in urban slums, its plea for peace in Europe as war grew imminent, and its resolution against lynching and segregation in common carriers.¹⁷

But the first major topic of concern at the convention was woman suffrage. "The suffrage movement is apparent," reported the *Twin City Star*, the Black newspaper of note in Minneapolis. "The reports of the officers contain strong suffrage sentiments, and 'Votes for Women' banners are flying everywhere." But with Gale committing herself to visit the white clubs in Minneapolis in October, and with Upton asking in her address for the cooperation of Black clubwomen in obtaining equal suffrage for all women, Francis saw the first real expression of urgency by white leaders to encourage their counterparts in Minnesota to reach out to their Black sisters.¹⁸

An important realization

Suddenly Francis could see the simple reality of race relations in Minnesota, where Black people were vastly outnumbered and thus virtually invisible to most white people. For her race to gain respect from white women, it was not enough for Black women to work in racial isolation for suffrage equality; it was crucial for them to be seen working along with white people. The opportunity now seemed to present itself with the pronouncements from Gale and Upton. After Wilberforce, Francis toured several cities with Washington and Napier, ostensibly to meet with leaders of the National Association of CWCs and continue talks with Upton and Gale. The two white leaders, in turn, may have helped smooth the path for Francis to meet the soon-to-be-elected president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA), Clara Ueland.¹⁹

In the meantime, Francis renewed efforts to organize a group of Black St. Paul women. This time she carefully identified those singularly committed to suffrage. To maintain



Clara Ueland

a presence within the Minnesota Federation of CWCs, she called the new organization the St. Paul Federation and became its president. The group would become the precursor to the Everywoman Suffrage Club, which would serve as a vanguard of support for woman suffrage in the Black community, and would bridge the gap between their community, the larger white community in general, and MWSA in particular. Knowing that MWSA saw the Minnesota State Fair as an opportune occasion to attract new members and raise funds, Francis recognized the possibilities: "Through the efforts of Mrs. W. T. Francis, President of the [St. Paul] Federation," polished singers and musicians presented a novel experience to white fairgoers who had never seen Black people perform. "They were listened to with rapt attention by the audience in the Hall of Fame, and heartily applauded." Proudly, the *Twin City Star* reported, "This is the first time recognition has been given any member of our race on a program of the white State Federation [of Women's Clubs]."²⁰

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Minnesota that would appeal to both Black and white audiences in the state. One speaker who would prove invaluable to Francis in the coming months was St. Louis suffragist Victoria Clay-Haley, “one of the leading women of her race . . . who is doing so much for the good of her people, and who had been so honored and assisted by the white people because of her untiring energy and integrity.” On October 12, 1914, Francis presided at a St. Paul Federation meeting of 25 women held at Zion Presbyterian Church where Clay-Haley, active in the National Association of CWCs, spoke on “The Emancipation of the Woman.” Francis also persuaded a few white women from outside the Twin Cities to share remarks on the importance of the ballot. At this meeting the attendees established “a suffrage club organized for the purpose of studying the question of the equal ballot”—the Everywoman Suffrage Club. Two days later, the new group held its first meeting in Francis’s home, 606 St. Anthony Avenue, St. Paul.²¹

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One of the people who attended the meeting was Emily Noyes, a white suffragist from St. Paul. She was the daughter of a businessman who, as a young man in Alton, Illinois, had risked his life during the riots in 1837 to offer shelter to the radical abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, who was shot and killed by a proslavery mob. Her marriage to Charles P. Noyes, a successful Minnesota businessman, enabled her to spend a considerable amount of time doing good works in the community.



Nellie Francis, front row center, was a member of the Folk-Song Coterie of St. Paul, “organized for the serious study of Negro folk-songs,” as described in the original caption for this 1910 photo from Musical America.

Noyes founded and was the first president of the Woman’s Welfare League of St. Paul, formed to “protect the interests and promote the welfare of women; to encourage the study of industrial and social conditions affecting women and the family; to

I went to a meeting of Negro women the other day that was very interesting. It was a suffrage club named “Every Woman’s Club.” They were a nice lot of women comparing favorably with the ordinary club women—with one or two exceptionally graceful and charming. But the leader of the club is a star! Mrs. Francis is petit and what we call a “lady,” but her spirit is a flame. To help her race is her ruling motive. She talks well in an emotional, eloquent way—indeed talks constantly if she has a sympathetic listener.²³

It was curious, then, that what the enthusiastic Francis said to Ueland “in an emotional, eloquent way” went unreported and seemed less significant than the décor of the Francis home.

[It was] extraordinary for such intelligent people to have such an unattractive home: the walls covered with such cheap pictures while here and there would be

enlarge the field of usefulness and activity open to women in the business and professional world; to guard them from exploitation and as a necessary means to these ends to strive to procure for women the full rights of citizenship.” Such a mission no doubt endeared Noyes to Francis as one of the sincerest activists she knew.²²

It was likely Noyes who decided that the time was right for Ueland and Francis to finally meet. This was how Ueland related her visit to Francis’s home to her husband, Andreas:



Residence of Nellie and Billy Francis, 606 St. Anthony Avenue, in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood (left, now demolished), where the Everywoman Suffrage Club was founded. Crosses were burned on the lawn when they moved in 1924 to 2092 Sargent Avenue (right), in the nearby Macalester-Groveland neighborhood.

Mona Lisa or the Battle of the Parthenon, but chiefly photographs of people (they probably were very interesting people). The furniture is ugly and things are cluttered and disorderly.

It seemed rich for one who had the benefit of two live-in immigrant servant girls and a workman living on their estate on the south shore of Lake Calhoun to describe in this manner the home of an extraordinarily busy couple. Though the two women would collaborate until suffrage ratification, the initial sparkle of admiration that Francis had displayed to Ueland seemed afterwards to dim.²⁴

As Ueland prepared Minnesota to be “the next campaign state,” Francis prepared to protest the upcoming showing of *The Birth of a Nation* in St. Paul. The film’s romanticized murdering of Black men seemed to whet the audience’s appetite to act on that impulse—a major concern for the NAACP, which kept records on lynchings throughout the country. While

Francis worked to recruit members for the Everywoman Suffrage Club, she also became an officer of the local branch of the NAACP. With Billy, she researched and drafted an ordinance to ban the film and lobbied the city council to prohibit movie theaters from showing it.²⁵

The effort to combat the showing of the film and coordinate the efforts of whites who had never before worked with Blacks demonstrated how her leadership had grown, leadership she would later exhibit in the anti-lynching campaign. To keep up the pressure on the St. Paul City Council to ban *The Birth of A Nation* in city theaters, Francis employed her contacts among a small group of primarily white women, powers-behind-the-throne, whose spouses and family ties effectively ran much of the business, civic, and political affairs of the city. By now, Francis was a member of this group of women. She made the case that they should join the colored people of St. Paul to protest the film. Going one step

further, Colonel John X. Davidson, former owner and editor of a forerunner of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and former president of the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, joined Sophie G. (Mrs. George) Kenyon, president of the white Women’s Welfare League, to have the group send resolutions to the city council to ban the film’s showing, which the league agreed, without dissent, to do. In November 1915, the city council approved the ordinance. St. Paul’s curiosity seekers now had to go to Minneapolis to be entertained. (Or if they lived in southern Minnesota, they could view the film in Albert Lea.)²⁶

Francis had no time to reflect on this marginal victory. She had a national convention to promote. As Ueland had noted about her host at the meeting at 606 St. Anthony, “She is on the board of some society for the improvement of Negro women.” Indeed, as the recently elected chair of the press and publicity committee of the National Association of CWCs, to generate enthusiasm for the upcoming convention, Francis set the context in a number of notices by reminding readers that the Wilberforce convention had provided the springboard that “was wonderful and

far reaching in its effects. On to Baltimore [the next site of the National Association's convention] is the slogan of every race organization of women, and where the women (and the men) will likewise be found."²⁷

But Francis's path ahead would not be smooth. In the spring of 1916, a small story from Detroit caught her eye that would result in her effectively being rebuked by the Minnesota Federation of CWCs and censured by the national leadership. The all-white Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs had been informed that it would be banned from the all-white General Federation of Women's Clubs because the Detroit affiliate had included a colored women's club in its membership. In response, the Detroit members threatened to relinquish their memberships in the all-white group if it insisted on the discriminatory stance. Francis felt that Detroit's action might pose an opening for other white federations who similarly regretted their discriminatory policies to feel emboldened to welcome their Black sisters into the fold. In doing so, those white clubs might apply pressure on the national organization to change its racialized strategies. Francis also hoped that she could persuade her own national affiliate and her sister state federations of colored women's clubs to join the suffrage campaign, knowing that she could not rely on her own state group for support. Deep fissures remained within the state organization.²⁸

In the end, Francis could only rely on the organization whose very name reflected its belief in interracial inclusion. She published a resolution calling for support for the Detroit women that read in part: "Be it resolved that the Everywoman Suffrage Club of St. Paul, Minn., Mrs. W. T. Francis, president, does hereby heartily commend the action of this magnanimous body of women,

engaged as they are in an effort to uplift all women without respect to race or color, and to wish them success in this effort." And she urged "that the colored press make public the generous attitude of the Detroit Federation of Women's Club [sic], composed of white women's clubs, toward this colored club of their city."²⁹

Francis had committed a twofold crime: she had signed the resolution as an officer of the National Association of CWCs, and she had published her resolution in local African American newspapers and *National Notes*, the journal of the National Association of CWC's, without the endorsement of the National Association. About the affair there was no public hue and cry, which likely occurred only behind closed doors. But nothing was mentioned for the record. The only indication of retribution appeared months later, when incoming president Mary B. Talbert announced a nationwide campaign to raise funds to rehabilitate Frederick Douglass's home in Washington, DC; Francis's name did not appear in the list of officers who would lead the effort. The omission was noteworthy; it implied that the major initiative would proceed without Francis in her official national role as chair of press and publicity. The only member listed from St. Paul was Clara B. Hardy, sister of Mary Talbert. Francis was completely cut out of the fold. This extreme rebuke suggested that the mounting antipathy toward her in Minnesota had spread to the national office. As if to buck up Francis after what must have been a difficult time for her, Charles Sumner Smith, editor of the *Twin City Star*, would later write, "In spite of jealousy and criticism, [Nellie and Billy] can look into the mirror of memory and see a pleasant past—a record of service to church, state, and society—the happy heritage worthy of a king's ransom."³⁰

A more modest arena

Nellie Francis would go on to serve her community not on the showy stage of national activism but rather in Minnesota's modest, more manageable political arena. In July 1916, she led members of the Everywoman Suffrage Club—"Black St. Paul's representatives with the suffrage group"—in a grand street parade of prohibitionists held in conjunction with the convention of the National Prohibition Party, which met in St. Paul. Then in December Francis led a delegation from Everywoman Suffrage Club to Minneapolis to attend the thirty-fourth annual convention of the otherwise all-white Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association. The delegation "received a warm welcome at the hands of the president and the convention." The *Twin City Star* reminded its readers of the significance of the occasion: "Everywoman Suffrage Club of St. Paul is the only woman's suffrage club in the state composed entirely of Negro women." After the convention, Francis and the club began working assiduously on two fronts: (1) to educate Black women of the need to support MWSA's efforts, because in Minnesota a victory for MWSA was a victory for the Black women of the state; and (2) to further cultivate relationships with the white leaders of the state's woman suffrage movement. Francis recognized that both communities were concerned about the so-called Southern strategy, in which southern politicians promised to support woman suffrage if white women would agree to compromise the vote for Black women.³¹

To address this concern, in October 1918 Francis wrote a letter to the editor of the (white) *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that was reprinted in the *Appeal*. In it, she declared her support for white suffragists who stood with their

Black sisters in the national campaign for suffrage:

Personally, I am not surprised at the high ground taken by the suffragists. It is exactly what I would have expected of suffragists, as I know them, and keen would have been my disappointment if they had failed to make this sacrifice. It is this broad stand, the actual practice of the principles for which they contend, that has inspired me to add my humble effort to the struggle for equal suffrage.

As a daughter of former slaves, Francis went on to pay sympathetic suffragists the highest compliment, writing, "They are the modern abolitionists, and fortunate indeed is the Negro woman to have in the suffragist a champion who is willing to sacrifice all that is dear rather than accept a victory that is tainted with dishonor." Francis concluded,

This broad, united stand of the suffrage body for the principles of a democracy which must include black women as well as white will win for the cause of suffrage many sympathizers who would otherwise have been indifferent to its success. The cause of Suffrage will triumph, for it is just.³²

This interracial accord was noted by virtue of her memberships in the influential Women's Welfare League and MWSA. For the remainder of 1918, Francis was often seen about the Twin Cities in the company of suffrage leaders, taking lunch at the exclusive Minneapolis Athletic Club with Sophie Kenyon, first vice president of MWSA and promoter of *The Suffragist*, the official publication of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (later the National



After the 1920 election, the first after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, these African American women were pictured in the St. Paul Daily News (later reprinted in the Appeal) as being important factors behind "the recent Republican victory." Nellie Francis is number 3. Others: (1) Mrs. A. W. Jordan (2) Mrs. Frances M. Davenport, (4) Mrs. O. C. Hall, (5) Mrs. J. H. Dillingham, (6) Mrs. Grant Bush, (7) Miss Lucille James, and (8) Mrs. Geo. W. James.

Woman's Party), of which Francis was also a member. In December, Francis, "the pioneer suffragette among our women and [holder of] a high place in state affairs," led a small delegation from the Everywoman Suffrage Club to attend the annual MWSA convention in the Gold Room of the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis.³³

To be sure, Minnesota was on firm footing in terms of pushing for woman suffrage without the threat of excluding the state's Black women

to appease bigots. Nellie Francis—in the greatest tribute that many suffragists could probably imagine, given the paternalistic sensibilities of the day—was the best of Black women. Perhaps her light skin facilitated her ability to circulate among white women. Regardless, in Francis, Minnesota's small Black population had an able and refined race and suffrage leader who could sit with poise in the stately Minneapolis Athletic Club and in the elegant Gold Room

at the Radisson Hotel, places where few of her sisters—all survivors of Jim Crow—had ever imagined going. She sat at ease in the presence of the doyens of the women's movement, as well as with many of the "great men" of the day, making the race issue that defiled the national movement seem unthinkable to Minnesota's white powerbrokers.

Yet, as historian Evelyn Higginbotham wrote, "In the very years when support for women's rights grew in intensity and sympathy, racial prejudice became acceptable, even fashionable, in America." To many in the Minnesota of 1919 it seemed inconceivable that this trend would extend to their state. At the time of the final push for ratification, the bestial impulse to use the lynch-man's noose that would surface the following year in Duluth—and that lurked just beneath the surface of Minnesota civility—seemed far, far away. And it seemed unthinkable that in 1924, five years after the Minnesota Legislature ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, all of Francis's purported white friends and allies would appear to abandon her when residents of the white Macalester-Groveland neighborhood in which she and Billy had purchased their new house, at 2092 Sargent Avenue, burned crosses on the front lawn.³⁴

But to many with a long memory of race relations, it would all sadly be too familiar. In 1870, with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, white supremacists terrorized America's newly enfranchised citizens, seemingly unimpeded by those whites who considered themselves friends of Francis's race. It would stand to reason that Francis—born in Tennessee during the violent years of Reconstruction, just miles from where the Ku Klux Klan had been founded, and an example of what happened to one who left the "village" to venture

where they did not belong—would harbor the same skepticism of white commitment to racial justice. Yet, it was engrained in her to strive for change. In Minnesota, she achieved progress in 1921 when she persuaded the legislature to do what Congress would not—enact an anti-lynching law. But then what? Would race still matter? Would combating racial inequality become a sustainable priority? Or would this be a new failed Reconstruction?³⁵ □

Notes

1. Clara Ueland to Andreas Ueland, in Brenda Ueland, *O Clouds, Unfold! Clara Ueland and Her Family* (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2004), 214.

2. Paul D. Nelson, "William T. Francis at Home and Abroad," *Ramsey County History* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 3. The phrase "double duty" relates to an exchange between Ida B. Wells and Susan B. Anthony recounted in Wells's autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Alfreda M. Duster, editor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 255. Wells noticed "the way [Anthony] would bite out [Wells's] married name." Wells finally asked Anthony whether she "believe[d] in women getting married." Anthony replied:

Oh, yes, but not women like you who have a special call for special work. I too might have married but it would have meant dropping the work to which I had set my hand. . . . I know of no one in this country better fitted to do the work you had in hand than yourself. Since you have gotten married, agitation seems practically to have ceased. Besides, you have divided duty. You are here trying to help in the formation of this league and your eleven-month-old baby needs your attention at home. You are distracted over the thought that maybe he is not being looked after as he would be if you were there, and that makes for divided duty.

Regarding William T. Francis's appointment as US minister of Liberia, US senator Thomas Schall of Minnesota wrote a letter of endorsement to President Calvin Coolidge: "He is a recognized leader of his people. He is very light. I am told you would hardly know he is colored. His wife is also very light in color. They are both educated and refined." Nelson, "William T. Francis, at Home and Abroad," 7.

3. *Western Appeal*, July 11, 1885, 1.

4. *Western Appeal*, Oct. 15, 1887, 4; William D. Green, *Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865–1912* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 145, 253–55; Paul D. Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the*

Color Line, 1861–1912 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 54–55.

5. "Suffrage Week in Albert Lea," ad, Jan. 27–28, 1916, Minnesota Women Suffrage Association records, MNHS, Location 308.C.15.8F, box 5, 1916–1920 (digital), 2/117, "Pro-Suffrage Materials: Literature Relating to Suffrage, 1912–1920," <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00756/pdfa/00756-00083.pdf>.

From 1882 to 1884, the majority of lynching victims were white. After that year, the majority of victims were Black, a trend that continued into the 1930s. "Lynchings by Year and Race," statistics provided by the Archives at Tuskegee Institute, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html>. The NAACP reported that over a 31-year period (1889–1919), 2,549 Black men and 51 Black women were lynched. In 1919, 78 Negroes were lynched; 11 of the Black men were ex-soldiers, one was a woman, and 14 were burned at the stake. Twenty-eight cities staged race riots in which more than 100 Black people were killed. *The Crisis* 19, no. 5 (Mar. 1920): 243.

6. Mary Church Terrell helped found the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 and served as its first president until 1901. Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," *The Journal of Negro History* 67.1 (Spring 1982): 24; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 119; "Woman's World: Work for Humanity," *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 15, 1900, 8. The National Council of Women of the United States was an organization founded in 1888 to unify national associations of women, and was an affiliate of the International Council of Women.

7. "Mock Debate on Women's Suffrage," *Appeal*, Jan. 21, 1911, 3; "Women's Clubs Convene," *Twin City Star*, July 6, 1912, 1; "Women's State Federation," *Appeal*, July 6, 1912, 3. In 1889 the *Western Appeal* changed its name to *Appeal*. For a discussion of the Black woman suffrage activities in the Baptist Church, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 12, 76.

8. *Appeal*, June 12, 1909, 3 (Carnegie visit); *Appeal*, Apr. 24, 1909, 3 (Taft visit). Moses Clapp, a white man and a Republican, served as Minnesota attorney general (1887–93) and as US senator from Minnesota (1901–17).

9. *Appeal*, July 27, 1912, 3 (Nellie's photo included); Virginia Department of Corrections, State Penitentiary, Series 11: Prisoner Records, Subseries E: Execution Files, box 373, folder 3, Accession 41558; Roger Christman, senior state records archivist, "Virginia Christian: The Last Woman Executed by Virginia," Sept. 14, 2010, <https://uncommonwealth.virginiamemory.com/blog/2010/09/14/virginia-christian-the-last-woman-executed-by-virginia/>; David V. Baker, "Black Female Executions in Historical Context,"

Criminal Justice Review 33, no. 1 (Mar. 2008): 64–88, doi:10.1177/0734016808316782; Victor L. Streib, "Death Penalty for Female Offenders, January 1, 1973, Through December 31, 2011," 66 (2012): 7, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FemDeathDec2011.pdf>.

10. McGhee's law practice left no assets behind: see Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee*, 195, 205.

11. "State President Resigns," *Twin City Star*, Apr. 18, 1913, 2.

12. Years later, Francis's friends would comment on this accusation, noted at the celebration of Francis's victory of passage of Minnesota's anti-lynching law.

13. Billy's last job at the railroad as clerk probably did not pay a significant wage, and the practice he inherited from McGhee had little property value at McGhee's death. Billy's clients were generally of modest means, and as busy as he was in community activities and fraternal organizations, he did not appear to spend much time developing the practice into a lucrative operation. When Nellie left her job as stenographer at West Publishing, she did not earn a wage for years, until after Billy's death. When they sought to purchase a modest house in St. Paul's Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, they had to borrow the down payment from Nellie's Aunt Juno. And when Billy died in Liberia, Nellie could not afford to transport his body to the United States to be buried in Nashville until she was able to lobby Congress for the necessary funds. Being Black and middle class did not mean the same as white and middle class. For whites, property ownership was part of the equation, but for Black people, it was about appearances.

14. "Federation of Afro-American Women of Minnesota Meet in Ninth Annual Convention," *Twin City Star*, July 4, 1913, 3; "Mrs. Mary Church Terrell," *Appeal*, Nov. 15, 1913, 3.

15. "Women's Clubs in Convention," *Twin City Star*, June 26, 1914, 2.

16. "Federated Clubs Resign," *Twin City Star*, July 3, 1914, 2; "Minneapolis," *Appeal*, July 4, 1914, 4, col. 1. Ione Gibbs (c. 1871–1923), a Black club-woman from Minneapolis, served as the first president of the Minnesota Federation of CWCs (1905–11) and as vice president of the National Association of CWCs (1912–14). Franklin Lincoln Mather, ed., *Who's Who of the Colored Race: A General Biographical Dictionary of Men and Women of African American Descent*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The editor, 1915).

17. "Notes from the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 14, 1914, 1, 2; "Notes from the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *Appeal*, Aug. 8, 1914, 3; Lillian Serece Williams and Randolph Boehm, eds., *Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1895–1992*, part 1, *Minutes of National Conventions, Publications, and President's Office Correspondence* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1993), 3, microfilm frame no. 0406. Other luminaries present were Nettie Napier's husband, J. C. Napier; W. E. B. DuBois, founding editor of the NAACP's *Crisis*

magazine; and William S. Scarborough, president of Wilberforce University.

18. "Notes from the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 14, 1914, 2; *Appeal*, Aug. 15, 1914, 2.

19. "St. Paul Notes," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 14, 1914, 2; Barbara Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 86. Francis, Washington, and Napier traveled to Cincinnati, Toledo, Chicago, and Waukesha (WI). Soon, Francis would add prominent white leaders like Sophie Kenyon, vice president of MWSA, and Emily Noyes, president of the St. Paul Women's Welfare League, to her circle of contacts.

20. "Recognition for Colored Vocalists at State Fair," *Twin City Star*, Sept. 18, 1914, 2.

21. "Mrs. Victoria Clay-Haley," *Twin City Star*, Sept. 18, 1914, 2; "A Suffrage Meeting on Monday Night," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 9, 1914, 2; *Appeal*, Oct. 10, 1914, 3, col. 2; "Suffrage Meeting," *Appeal*, Nov. 7, 1914, 4.

22. Mary Dillon Foster, "The Woman's Welfare League, St. Paul," *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women: A History of Woman's Work in Minnesota from Pioneer Days to Date* (St. Paul: The author, 1924), 358; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 80; Rhoda R. Gilman, "A Beautiful, High-Minded Woman": Emily Gilman Noyes and Woman Suffrage," *Ramsey County History* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 18–20.

23. Ueland, *O Clouds, Unfold!*, 215.

24. Ueland, *O Clouds, Unfold!*, 42, 52.

25. Harriet Upton to C. Ueland, Feb. 25, 1915, 307C.15.7B, box 1, 28/149, Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association Records, MNHS.

26. *Appeal*, Nov. 6, 1915, 3 (the meeting); Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 80 (Ueland's regard for the Woman's Welfare League); William D. Green, *Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits on Black Opportunity, 1860–1876* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 391 (John Davidson); "Jose H. Sherwood: Defender of His Race," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, 4, quotes text of the St. Paul ordinance prohibiting exhibitions that "tend to incite riot or create race or religious prejudice, or purports to represent any hanging, lynching, burning, or placing in a position of ignominy any human being"; "A Damnable Photo-Play" *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, 2.

27. Ueland, *O Clouds, Unfold!*, 215; "On to Baltimore," *Twin City Star*, Apr. 22, 1916, 4.

28. "Stands by Negroes," *Twin City Star*, May 6, 1916, 2; *Twin City Star*, July 1, 1916, 2.

29. "National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *Appeal*, May 13, 1916, 4; "Women's Clubs Take Stand Against Race Prejudice," *Twin City Star*, July 8, 1916, 1.

30. "Women to Save Old Landmark," *Twin City Star*, Jan. 13, 1917, 1; *Appeal*, July 14, 1917, 2; *Appeal*, Aug. 12, 1916, 3; *Appeal*, Dec. 9, 1916, 3 (Hardy as Talbert's sister); "The Francis' [sic] Celebrate Their Silver Wedding Anniversary," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 10, 1918, 5. Mary Talbert (1866–1923) was a Black suffragist, orator,

and reformer who served as president of the National Association of CWCs from 1916 to 1921.

31. *Appeal*, July 22, 1916, 3; "Votes for Women to Have Big Place in Parade of 'Drys,'" *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 20, 1916, 1; "Negro Women Attend Convention," *Twin City Star*, Dec. 9, 1916, 2.

32. "Mrs. W. T. Francis Praises Stand Taken by the Woman Suffragists," *Appeal*, Oct. 12, 1918, 3.

33. "Mrs. W. T. Francis Praises Stand Taken by the Women Suffragists," *Appeal*, Oct. 12, 1918, 3; *Appeal*, Nov. 2, 1918, 3 (lunch between Francis and Kenyon); Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 123; *Appeal*, Dec. 7, 1918, 3; "The Suffrage Delegation," *Twin City Star*, Dec. 14, 1918, 2.

34. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 185.

On June 15, 1920, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were lynched in Duluth. For the history, background, and documents of the event, see Minnesota Historical Society, Duluth Lynchings, <https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/>.

For references to the mob action that harassed the home of Nellie and Billy Francis, see Nelson, "William T. Francis, at Home and Abroad," 6, 12n24; *St. Paul Daily News*, Dec. 7, 1924, sec. 2, p. 1 (Arneson's quote); Douglas Heidenreich, "A Citizen of Fine Spirit," *William Mitchell Magazine* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 5.

35. For a general history on the spread of white supremacy throughout the South during Reconstruction and after, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1993). To find more on the anti-lynching law and Francis's leadership in getting the law approved, see "Mrs. W. T. Francis, Author of Anti-Lynching Bill," *Northwestern Bulletin*, May 12, 1923, 1, 4, http://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Mrs_WT_Francis_Author_of_Anti-lynching_Bill-831.001.php.

Images on p. 128 (May 7, 1921), 130 (July 27, 1912), 134 (left, Oct. 28, 1911), 136 (Nov. 20, 1920), the *Appeal*, Minnesota Newspaper Hub, MNHS; p. 131, 132, MNHS; p. 133, University of Minnesota Libraries; p. 134 (right), courtesy of Paul Nelson.



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