

## **Nellie Francis: Fighting for Racial Justice and Women's Equality in Minnesota**

**William D. Green**

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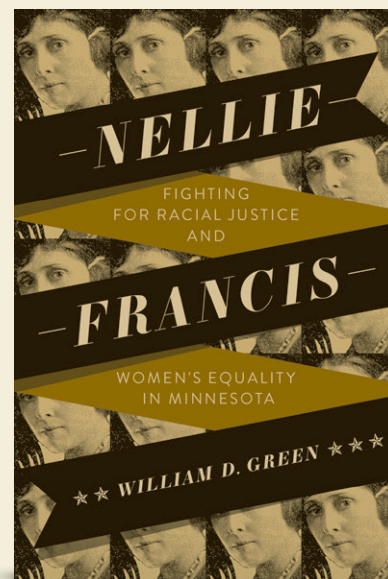
When then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killed an unarmed 46-year-old Black man named George Floyd on May 25, 2020, Black Minnesotans and their allies in the state, throughout the country, and around the world poured into the streets to protest a Black American's death at the hands of a police officer. Within Minnesota, the sustained organizing and activism to address systemic racism that followed may mark a watershed transformation in the North Star State. Against this profoundly important political moment, I can imagine few books more timely or welcome than William D. Green's superb exploration of Nellie Griswold Francis—Minnesota's foremost Black suffragist of the early twentieth century. A lifelong champion of racial justice and women's rights, Francis's proto-intersectional feminism and "race work" laid groundwork on which Black Minnesotans could sustain an ongoing effort to protect and value Black lives as much as any others. *Nellie Francis: Fighting for Racial Justice and Women's Equality in Minnesota* is the first full historical treatment of Francis's story. In sharing her life, William Green reveals a crucial figure in the long battle for civil rights in Minnesota.

Green's chronological investigation of Francis establishes that her family migrated to St. Paul to escape Nashville, Tennessee, where the Reconstruction was rapidly collapsing into Jim Crow fascism. Green paints a portrait of the tight-knit Griswold clan, in which patriarch Tom shaped young Nellie's emerging work ethic and racial pride in a northern state that was more yielding than Tennessee but hardly a utopia. The lone Black graduate in St. Paul High School's class of 1891, Nellie exposed

the state's inequities in her commencement speech, arguing that "the race problem" only existed for white Minnesotans, while Black Minnesotans were hardworking patriots deserving of the citizenship privileges expressly guaranteed by the United States.

Francis's innate confidence and her intellectual and artistic gifts propelled her as a leading figure in the Pilgrim Baptist Church, Minnesota's oldest Black congregation, as well as among the small circle of Black middle class and elites in St. Paul. She enraptured and married William T. "Billy" Francis, an ambitious man deeply influenced by Booker T. Washington. Her husband blazed his own trail as one of Minnesota's first Black lawyers and as the state's first Black diplomat, whom President Calvin Coolidge named US consul general to Liberia in 1927. Green showcases that Nellie and Billy became Black Minnesota's power couple as she stepped into the role of clubwoman in concert (and sometimes in competition) with fellow Black political activists Amanda Lyles and Ione Gibbs. Nellie's term as president of the Minnesota Federation of Colored Women's Clubs led to partnerships with national Black women leaders—including Mary Margaret Washington and Mary Church Terrell—on behalf of Black women prisoners and racial uplift across the nation.

Green shows that Francis's crowning achievements in Minnesota, however, ultimately established her as a grandmother of civil rights in the state. She founded the Everywoman Suffrage Club, which centered Black activists and succeeded in partnering with the all-white Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association to secure voting rights for women in state elections in 1919—a year before Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. Green also underscores the urgency with which Francis spearheaded an anti-lynching campaign in response to the 1920 killings of three young Black circus workers in Duluth.



Working with the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, Francis triumphed when Minnesota became the fifteenth state to pass anti-lynching legislation.

Green's remarkable inaugural analysis in *Nellie Francis* pivots on his scrutiny of the precarious position that she occupied as a leader among the Black elite in the Twin Cities, even as she garnered respect and fame across racial lines and nationwide in the early decades of the 1900s. Green explores the classism, colorism, and clashes that led to infighting among Black clubwomen that offers a fascinating window into the layers of self-consciousness and hyper-visibility that affected Black women's public and private lives. More socially and economically privileged than most Black Minnesotans, Francis nevertheless suffered racist attacks that culminated in crosses burned on her lawn after she and her husband moved into a white neighborhood in St. Paul. Green's book offers not only splendid reading that would appeal to anyone interested in diving into Minnesota civil rights and feminist history, as well as academics, but also a foundational resource for anyone looking to understand Black Minnesota activism before 2020.

—Misti Nicole Harper



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