

## **Q and A: Alice Paul, Racism, and the 1913 First National Suffrage March**

By J.D. Zahniser, Co-author, *Alice Paul: Claiming Power* (Oxford, 2014, 2019)

The March 1913 suffrage procession comes up a lot in discussions about the suffrage movement and African American women. The event, while important as Alice Paul's debut on the national stage, has assumed an outsized importance when we examine how black suffragists fared within the white-dominated movement. The parade can be seen as a metaphor for the long-standing uneasy relationship between white suffragists and women of color. Discussions of black women's participation in the parade have focused on the well-known figure Ida B. Wells and missed the larger story of many other black women marching in the first national suffrage procession.

For our own times, the controversies over black participation in the parade teach us a great deal about how and why racism happens and how persistence sometimes wins the day. The inaccurate depiction of parade controversies in many secondary sources also instructs us that "history" can be misleading and lack absolute knowledge of past events. As a reader, look for sources which are based on primary sources, that is, documents from that time period like correspondence or news articles.

### **Did black women experience racism when they sought to participate in the 1913 parade?**

Yes. They were not included in parade organizing committees, despite black participation in other marches in the northern states. Their input was not initially sought when questions arose about black women participating in the parade. In the run-up to the parade, they were treated as "other."

### **Were black women segregated in the 1913 parade?**

No. Alice Paul was already recruiting both black and white marchers when some local DC women objected to black participation: they felt their reputations would be damaged if they marched alongside black women. (Many people felt ANY woman marching would mean disrepute.)

There was a lengthy discussion via letter and telegram between Alice Paul and NAWSA leaders. Many sources cite *part* of this discussion but not what was finally decided. One possibility raised was to have black women march together in one section, that is, segregate them. Alice Paul remembers this part of the discussion in her 1972 oral history and many sources cite her fifty-year-old memory as truth. In fact, before a final decision was made, parade organizer Mary Ritter Beard reached out to African Americans in New York City and asked for their input. Beard wrote Paul a letter about her conversations in which she told Paul that the black women she

spoke with wished to march wherever they chose to. NAWSA leaders and Paul acceded to their wishes. Nonetheless, they chose to do no further recruiting of black women.

### **How many black women participated and where did they march?**

Thanks to the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, published at that time from Washington DC and edited by W.E. B. DuBois, we have detailed information about who marched and where they marched. DuBois himself states that black women marched where they wished to. Our best evidence, however, comes in an article deep in the April 1913 *Crisis*, by Carrie W. Clifford. Clifford was a well-known African American activist and she helped organize the black women who came to march. Clifford writes that several dozen women marched in occupational delegations; others marched with their states. Also, a *New York Times* article on the parade notes that 32 Howard University students marched in the college section.

Clifford does not mention Ida B. Wells. Was she unaware of the Wells incident? If Clifford was not cognizant of the Wells brouhaha, this suggests that the fifty-odd black women that she interacted with were only some of those who actually participated that day. We do know from Clifford that the black women who marched were treated just as well or badly as were the white women.

Historian Martha S. Jones, author of *Vanguard*, has identified other African American women who marched that day. Here is an excerpt from a recent Jones article:

“Mary Church Terrell was a former head of the National Association of Colored Women and a Washington DC powerbroker who traveled home from New York to march. Terrell had always kept one foot in suffrage association politics and knew its shortcomings well. Neither Wells nor Terrell frequented Paul's circles but they appeared on that day to make plain that Black women would never cede the question of their voting rights to others.

Wells and Terrell were not alone. Most of the two dozen or so Black women marchers were local residents of Washington, including the sculptor May Howard Jackson; the director of the Washington Conservatory of Music, Harriet Gibbs Marshall; pharmacists and drugstore owners Dr Amanda Gray and Dr Eva Ross; and a contingent of so-called college women that included Oberlin College graduate and advocate for early childhood education Anna Evans Murray, M Street school French instructor Georgia Simpson and Smith College graduate Harriet Shadd. Howard University students joined the procession decked out in caps and gowns.”

### **Who marched at the back of the parade?**

Many secondary sources mention an attempt to segregate black women at the rear of the procession. The idea that black women were relegated to the back of the parade does not seem to have any basis in fact. I have never found any primary source which discusses segregation *at the back* of the parade. Indeed, the final section of the parade was designated for automobiles and wagons carrying those women unable to march due to age or disability.

## **Who told Ida B. Wells to march separately from her state delegation?**

We probably will never know the answer to that question for certain. There is only one primary source for the Wells story, written by a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, who accompanied the Illinois delegation to Washington. The news story contradicts information in the NAACP's *Crisis* and well as the earlier decision made by Paul and NAWSA.

As contingents were assembling, the reporter wrote, a Chicago leader, Grace Trout, came in and told the state delegation that "Mrs. Stone of the National Suffrage Association and the woman in charge of the entire parade has advised us to keep our delegation entirely white." Alice Paul was at the head of the committee organizing the parade; however, Glenna Smith is described as "director of the parade" in a companion article. Given the confusion attending the hour just before the parade, I don't think it is certain that Trout spoke with Paul. In addition, Paul had recruited black women from the start. By the day of the parade, NAWSA had decided to include black women wherever they wished to march. There was no "colored delegation." Would Paul contravene decisions already made? This seems unlikely given the dozens of black women present who did march throughout the parade. What seems more plausible is that local women who objected to the NAWSA decision did what they could at parade assembly to segregate or otherwise discourage black participation.

### **Sources:**

Check pages in the April 1913 *Crisis* for details. Check pdf page 7 for the DuBois article and pdf page 36 for Carrie Clifford "Suffrage Paraders" article.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0400-crisis-v05n06-w030.pdf>

Here is an excerpt from the Chicago Tribune article, the sole source for Ida B. Wells story:

*Chicago Tribune*, March 4, page 3: "Illinois Women Feature Parade"

"The first hint that there was to be any discrimination against the colored women came when Mrs. Welles was putting the Illinois suffragists through their practice in the drill hall on the second floor of the suffrage parade headquarters. Mrs. Trout, who had been missing from the room for some minutes, came in hurriedly, held a short conference with Mrs. Welles, then announced to the waiting women that it was a question whether Mrs. Barnett would march with her delegation. A murmur of excitement passed round the room and those standing near the colored woman kept an embarrassed silence.

"Many of the eastern and southern women have greatly resented the fact there are to be colored women in the delegations," announced Mrs. Trout. "Some have gone so far as to say they will not march if negro women are allowed to take part. "

"Mrs. Stone of the National Suffrage Association and the woman in charge of the entire parade has advised us to keep our delegation entirely white. So far as Illinois is concerned, we would

like to have Mrs. Barnett march in the delegation, but if the national association has decided it is unwise to include the colored women, I think we should abide by its decision.”

[The article continues that most in the delegation were OK excluding Barnett but she had supporters. Trout leaves the room for further consultation then returns.]

“After talking further with Mrs. Stone, I shall have to ask you to march with the colored delegation. I am sorry, but I feel it is the right thing to do.”

[Article continues that Barnett and supporters left and re-appeared to march with the state delegation without objection raised during the parade.”

Martha S. Jones’ article may be found here: <https://tntribune.com/the-us-suffragette-movement-tried-to-leave-out-black-women-they-showed-up-anyway/>