The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/3jBeWCU

Meet the Brave but Overlooked Women of Color Who Fought for the Vote

In "Finish the Fight!," excerpted here, New York Times journalists tell the stories of lesser-known figures in the battle to make the 19th Amendment a reality.

By Veronica Chambers, Jennifer Schuessler, Amisha Padnani, Jennifer Harlan, Sandra E. Garcia and Vivian Wang

Published July 24, 2020 Updated Aug. 18, 2020, 1:06 p.m. ET

"Finish the Fight!" is a book about the American suffrage movement for middle-grade readers. The following excerpts have been edited and condensed.

It took the better part of a century to pass a law saying American women had the right to vote. Three generations of women, and their male allies, worked tirelessly to make the 19th Amendment — which decreed that states could not discriminate at the polls on the basis of sex — a reality. We call the right to vote "suffrage," but for a long time, that word was a kind of shorthand for women's rights. Without the vote, suffragists argued, women had little say over their lives and their futures and certainly much less when it came to the larger political questions that shaped the nation.

The 19th Amendment is a cornerstone of gender equality in our country, yet many of us know very little about the way the right to vote was won. For a long time, the history of the suffrage movement has been told mainly as the story of a few famous white women, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. It's true they were among the most important leaders of the movement in the 19th century.

[Join us on Aug. 18 for a new play, based on "Finish the Fight!" Read more here.]

But there were tons more women who helped make suffrage a reality: African-American women such as the writer and orator Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the community organizer Juno Frankie Pierce and the journalists Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Elizabeth Piper Ensley and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who championed both suffrage and civil rights; Native American women such as Susette La Flesche Tibbles and Zitkala-Sa; queer women like the poet Angelina Weld Grimké and the educator Mary Burrill; Latina women like Jovita Idár, who protected her family's newspaper and the rights of Mexican-Americans; and Asian-American women like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who led thousands of marchers in a 1912 suffrage parade in New York. They all fought for the vote as part of a broader struggle for equality, but their stories aren't nearly as well known as they should be.

Shirley Chisholm, who, in a tribute to the suffragists, wore white on the day in 1968 when she became the first African-American woman elected to Congress, reportedly said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." We hope that this book helps set a place at the table for some of the many incredible women who played their part in the battle for suffrage and equal rights for women.

Mary Church Terrell, center left with a fur shawl, in 1947. Afro American Newspapers/Gado, via Getty Images

Mary Church Terrell and the Power of Language

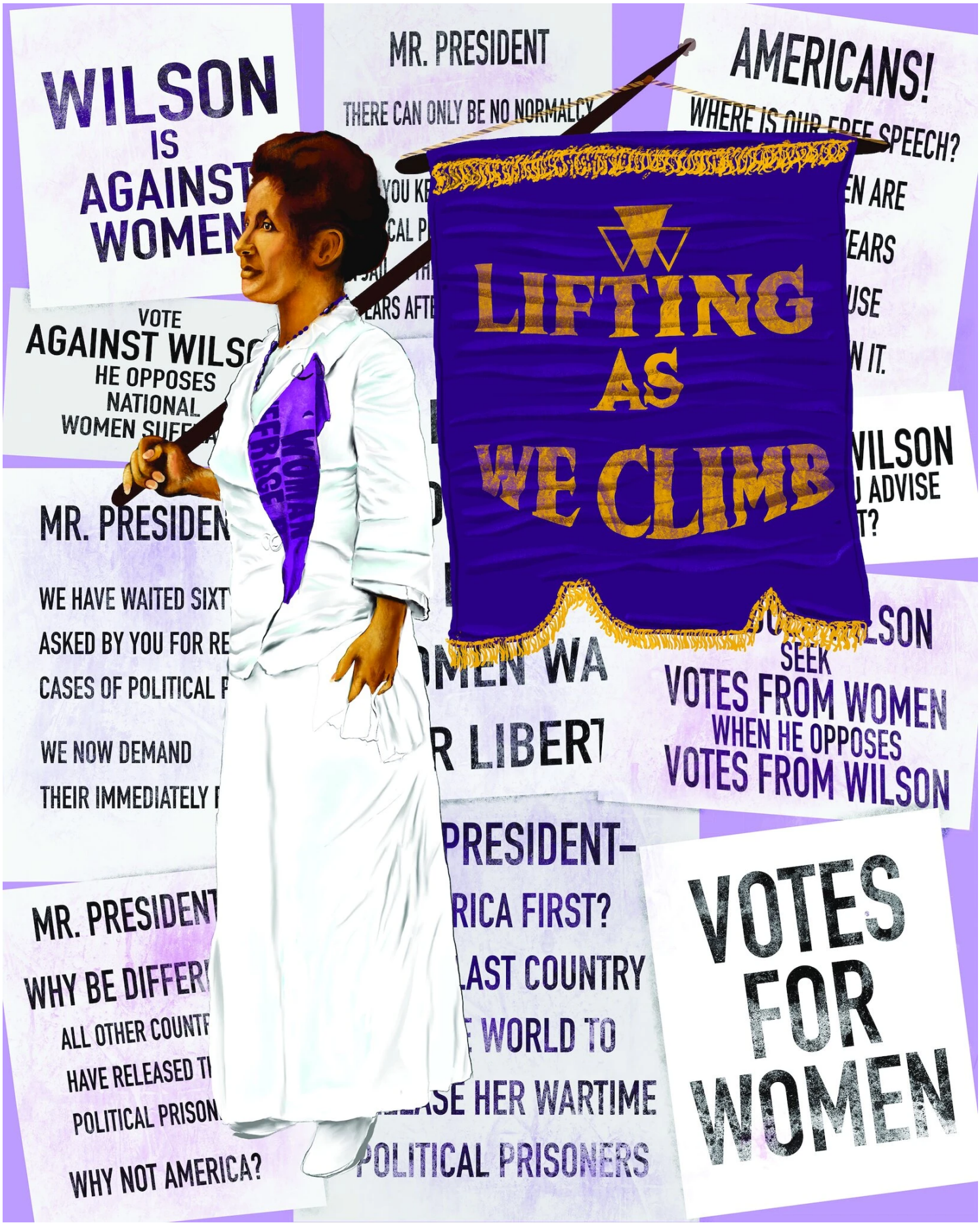
Sometimes freedom is a matter of timing. Mary Church Terrell knew that lesson well. She was born in Memphis in September 1863 — the middle of the Civil War. Her parents had been enslaved, but Mary was born free, and she charted a course of leadership that helped change the lives of women and men across the nation. She became a suffragist. She fought for the rights of all people of color. Holding America to the promises of the Declaration of Independence — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all — became her life's work.

These dreams were supported by her parents. Her father, Robert Church, was the son of an enslaved woman and a wealthy steamship owner who had allowed Robert to keep his wages. After Robert gained his freedom, he invested in real estate and became wealthy.

Mary was accepted at Oberlin College, which was founded by abolitionists and was one of the first colleges in the United States to admit women and African-Americans. She would later write in her autobiography, "A Colored Woman in a White World," that "it would be difficult for a colored girl to go through a white school with fewer unpleasant experiences occasioned by race prejudice than I had."

Mary had some extraordinary experiences. During her first year, she was invited to Washington by Blanche K. Bruce, one of the first African-American senators. He asked Mary to attend the inauguration of President James A. Garfield as his guest. It was during that trip that she met the great orator and activist Frederick Douglass. She would later follow in his footsteps, using her gift for language to speak up for the causes she believed in.

She also wrote a paper at Oberlin on the topic of suffrage, titled "Should an Amendment to the Constitution Allowing Women the Ballot Be Adopted?" Mary became one of the first Black women to earn a college degree in the United States, graduating with a bachelor's in classics in 1884.



An illustration from “Finish the Fight!” shows the motto of the National Association of Colored Women, “lifting as we climb.” Finish the Fight! published by HMH/Versify, Art by Johnalynn Holland, 2020

Mary Church Terrell in an undated portrait. Library of Congress

Later, after she earned a master's degree, Mary embarked on a two-year tour of France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, studying languages and writing in her diary in French and German.

While Mary traveled the world, the United States grew more unsteady. Lynching had become a form of domestic terrorism in the years after slavery. Over decades, thousands of Black men and women were brutally killed by white mobs, and their murderers were never prosecuted. The government rarely made arrests in these cases, which only allowed the number of lynchings to grow.

In 1895, Frederick died, and Mary became the first Black woman appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education. She later raised funds and visited schools, encouraging them to celebrate Douglass Day, a precursor to Black History Month, in his honor.

In 1896, the Supreme Court delivered its ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, which declared segregation permissible under the Constitution, as long as the segregated facilities and accommodations were "equal." But in reality, separate was rarely equal. That same year, Mary co-founded and became the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, a coalition of more than a hundred local Black women's clubs. The organization's motto was "lifting as we climb."

Around this time, Mary began to champion the cause of suffrage. She joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and was one of very few Black members. Her years at Oberlin and abroad had made her comfortable in predominantly white groups, and she took NAWSA to task for excluding women of color. An inclusive movement, she reasoned, would grow in both power and perspective.

"Seeking no favors because of our color, nor patronage because of our needs," she said, "we knock at the bar of justice, asking an equal chance."

In 1904, Mary was invited to speak at the International Congress of Women in Berlin. The cost to attend was considerable, but her husband encouraged her to go anyway. There she delivered a speech three times — in German, French and English. It was called "The Progress of Colored Women."

She reminded her audience that her parents had been enslaved, that her very being was a testament to how far one could travel on the road to freedom. "If anyone had had the courage to predict 50 years ago that a woman with African blood in her veins would journey from the United States to Berlin, Germany, to address an International Congress of Women in the year 1904," she told the audience, "he would either have been laughed to scorn or he would have been immediately confined in an asylum for the hopelessly insane."

Mary knew that freedom for all was never about one battle. No single great win — the abolition of slavery, the passage of the 19th Amendment — would right the wrongs in a country founded on such injustices as slavery and the denial of women's rights. But perhaps what made her life most extraordinary is how much joy she got from each small victory, how much stamina she displayed in her decades-long career as an activist. In 1953, the year before Mary died, The Washington Post wrote: "It may fairly be said of her that when she fought bigotry it was never with hatred; she met lethargy and prejudice with spirit and understanding. And she won the hearts as well as the minds of men."

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee's Great Parade

When Mabel Ping-Hua Lee moved to New York City from China as a child, around 1905, there were few Chinese immigrants on the East Coast. In 1910, the census reported that there were 5,266 people of Chinese descent living in the city, many of them in the neighborhood of Chinatown in Lower Manhattan. It was a new community, and the streets were alive with delicious smells, bright colors and voices from halfway around the world.

By 1912, Mabel and her parents were living on Bayard Street in Chinatown, and they had made a name for themselves. Mabel's father was a minister who led the First Chinese Baptist Church and was fluent in English. He was so active in the community that some referred to him as the neighborhood's unofficial mayor.

Everyone also knew the daughter of the "mayor," and they knew how smart she was. She attended Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn and had big plans to attend the women-only Barnard College, the sister school to the then all-male Columbia College. She hoped to return to China one day to open a school for girls.

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee in the 1920s. Library of Congress

An illustration from “Finish the Fight!” of Mabel on her white horse during the 1912 suffrage parade in New York. Finish the Fight! published by HMH/Versify, Art by Nhung Lê, 2020

Still, there was a limit to how much the community would stand behind her. And Mabel crossed the line when she got involved with the suffrage movement. The suffragists were considered radical — how dare they fight so steadfastly for equal rights? — but Mabel believed that voting was the key that would open every important door for women.

She joined the cause and persuaded her mother to join, too, even though neither of them would be able to vote because the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens. (It was repealed in 1943.)

Her mother’s participation in suffrage was so controversial that newspapers even wrote about it: “Tongues are still wagging in Chinatown,” The New York Tribune wrote, because Mabel and her mother “went to a suffrage meeting.”

In 1912, when Mabel was just a teenager, she led a contingent of Chinese and Chinese-American women in one of the biggest suffrage parades in U.S. history. The New York Times reported, “Ten thousand strong, the army of those who believe in the cause of woman’s suffrage marched up Fifth Avenue at sundown yesterday in a parade the like of which New York never knew before.”

Mabel didn’t merely march. She rode a white horse at the start of the parade, and she wore a three-cornered hat in the colors of the British suffrage movement: purple to symbolize that the cause of suffrage was noble; white for purity; and green, the color of spring, as a symbol of hope. (American suffragists usually substituted the gold of the sunflowers of Kansas — where they waged some of their earliest campaigns — for green.)

In the fall, Mabel began her studies at Barnard. She majored in history and philosophy, wrote articles about suffrage and feminism for The Chinese Students’ Monthly magazine and gave a speech, “The Submerged Half,” which encouraged the Chinese immigrant community to promote girls’ education and women’s rights. “The welfare of China and possibly its very existence as an independent nation depend on rendering tardy justice to its womankind,” she said. “For no nation can ever make real and lasting progress in civilization unless its women are following close to its men if not actually abreast with them.”

Charlotte Brooks, the author of “American Exodus: Second-Generation Chinese Americans in China, 1901-1949,” said that Mabel was part of a generation of young Chinese-Americans who traveled back and forth between China and the United States and saw the connections between the two struggles.

“Something a lot of people in the U.S. don’t realize is that Mabel’s activism grew out of China’s New Culture Movement, which included the idea that the suppression of women, and the poor treatment of women, were both holding China back and represented a kind of backwardness,” she explains.

Mabel went on to get a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University, becoming the first Chinese woman to earn a doctorate there. In 1921, she published “The Economic History of China: With Special Reference to Agriculture.”

Mabel eventually took over as the director of her father’s church, and she founded the Chinese Christian Center, a community center on Pell Street that offered English classes, health services, a kindergarten and job training. She became an example of what a woman can do when given the chance to learn and lead. As she wrote of China, “In the fierce struggle for existence among the nations, that nation is badly handicapped which leaves undeveloped one half of its intellectual and moral resources.” The same, of course, was true of the United States.