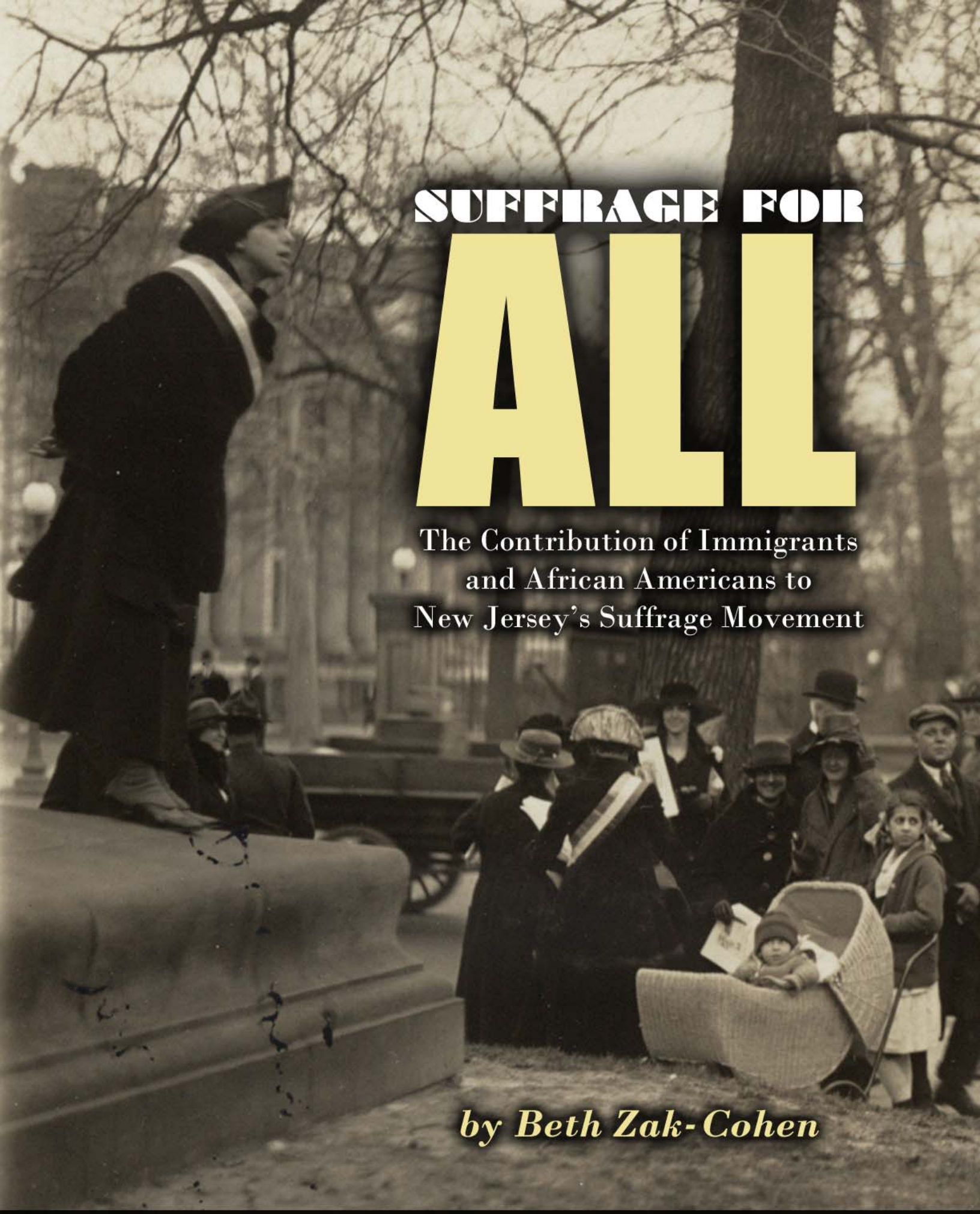

SUFFRAGE FOR ALL

The Contribution of Immigrants and African Americans to New Jersey's Suffrage Movement

by Beth Zak-Cohen

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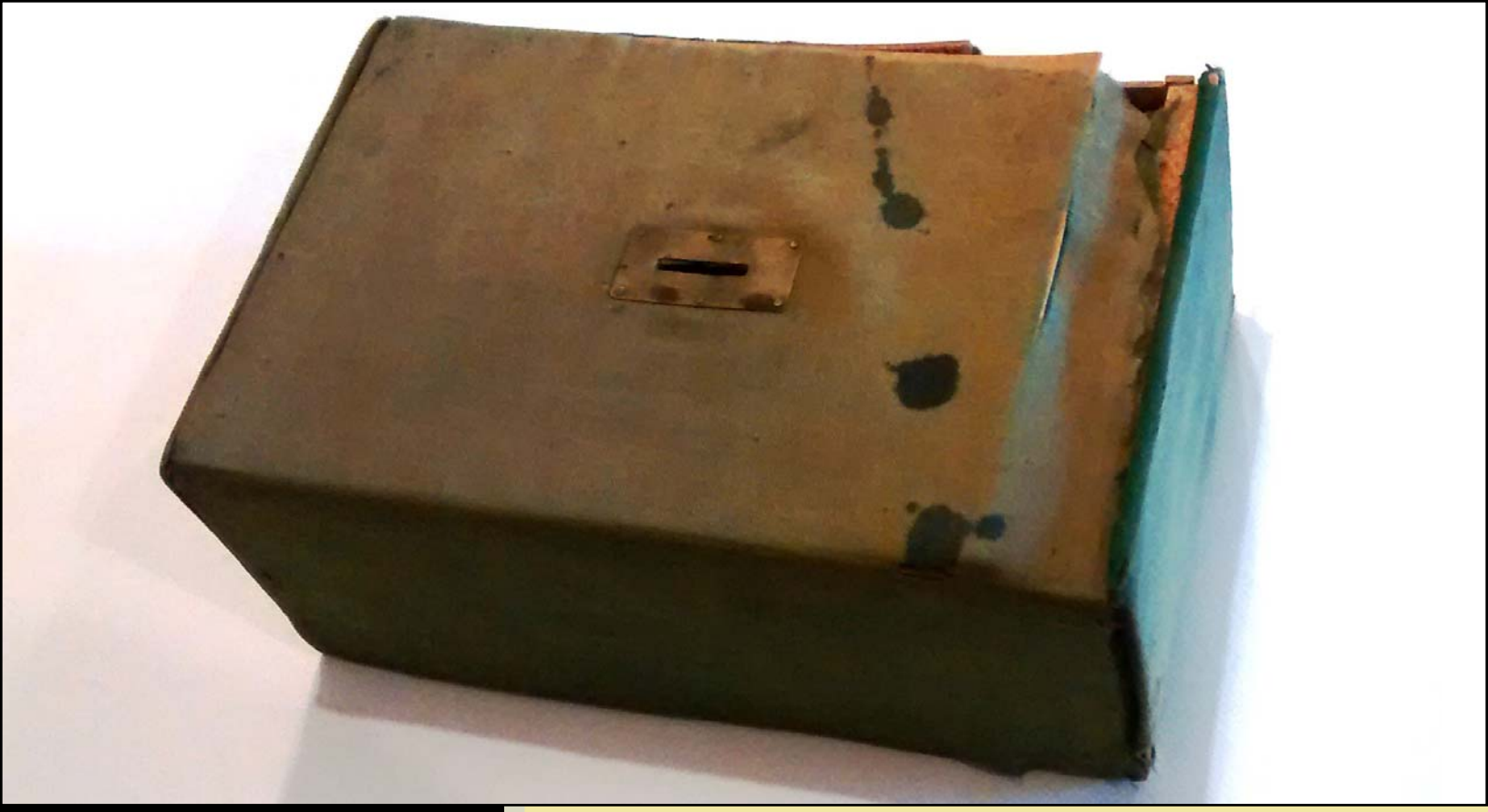
Many of the best known suffragists in New Jersey and nationally were white middle-class women, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Alice Paul. In part this is because the mainstream press often ignored the contributions of African American, working-class, and immigrant suffragists. Also, the earliest histories of the suffrage movement were written by prominent white suffrage leaders like Lillian Feickert, who emphasized their own role and downplayed or ignored the activities of women outside their inner circle. More recently, historians have been recovering the overlooked contributions of African American and immigrant suffragists. There are many more outstanding women to cover than will fit in one article, however, I'll highlight some interesting and important women and explore how the mainstream suffrage movement interacted with minority groups over time.

Early Activity

We should first note that when the New Jersey constitution was written in 1776, neither women, immigrants, nor African Americans were excluded from voting. While there are conflicting reports about who actually voted, women—including black women—were allowed to vote until 1807, when the law was changed to exclude all women and African Americans.

The earliest known example of non-white women working for suffrage in New Jersey was in 1868 in Vineland. Along with several white women, four African American women took a stand and attempted to cast their ballots on November 3, 1868.[1] These women's names were Henrietta Crawford (East Avenue), Anna Greene (Grape Street), Mary Greene (Elmer Street), and Lydia Jones (Plum St).[2] The 1870 census shows 27-year-old Lydia Jones and 28-year-old Henrietta Crawford still living in Vineland. A local paper later identified Crawford as a preacher.[3] Clearly, African American women in New Jersey were fighting for the right to vote from the beginning of the movement.

Around 1869, the national suffrage movement split over, among other issues, the Fifteenth Amendment giving African American men the right to vote. However, in New Jersey, one of our most well-known suffragists, Lucy Stone, was fiercely advocating for the right of the "Negro" to vote, along with that of all women. In a March 6, 1887 speech to the State Legislature, Stone argued, "When a person is disfranchised because he is a Negro, the principle of rational, individual choice is violated. For the Negro possesses every human faculty. Many colored persons are wiser and better than many white voters."[4] She goes on to



Voting box from 1868 vote

Vineland Historical Society

Clara Laddey

Scannell's New Jersey's First Citizens

specify how the ability to vote would increase educational and job opportunities for women *and* African Americans.

In 1871, Ann H. Connelly, daughter of two Irish immigrants, spearheaded an effort to get married women a legal right to custody of their children.[5] Despite her immigrant background, Connelly was able to advocate and change the law, an effort that was later praised in "A History of Women's Suffrage" by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Before 1915

As the suffrage movement ramped up in the early 20th century, several immigrants began to emerge who took important roles in New Jersey. Clara S. Laddey emigrated from Germany in 1888 at age 30.[6] A highly educated woman, she was an expert on German poetry.[7] However, her immigrant background did not affect her ability to take leadership positions in the New Jersey Woman's Suffrage Association, the largest suffrage group in New Jersey. In 1908, she served as President of NJWSA. In 1911, she was a member of the Joint Legislative Committee of Woman Suffrage in New Jersey and, from 1912 to 1914, a member of the National Woman Suffrage Executive Council.[8] Laddey embraced her German background and would speak German frequently to fellow immigrants while advocating for suffrage.

Several English immigrants were also active in the NJWSA, likely facilitated by their shared language. These included Rose Ann Billington (née McVey), Fanny Beatrice

Melinda Scott
The Marshfield News, 1916

Downs (née Miller) secretary of the NJWSA, and Emily Campton (née Burford), president of the Equal Franchise Society.[9] However, one of the more significant English immigrants who worked for suffrage was Melinda Scott. Scott is important because, as president of the Newark Hat Trimmers Union, she was also working class.[10] She became president of the Women's Trade Union League, which led her to her work in NJWSA.[11] Scott participated in legislative hearings in 1912 speaking about working women's need for the vote. [12] At a meeting in April 1912 she said, "I want the ballot to be able to register my protest against the [working] conditions that are killing and maiming [workers]."[13] The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire had just occurred the previous year, and a similar fire in Newark in 1910 had also killed many women garment workers. Scott accompanied a New Jersey delegation that presented a suffrage petition to President Wilson in November 1913.[14]

Immigrants were also active in groups other than the NJWSA. The Women's Political Union was a smaller group based in Newark and founded in 1908 to focus more on working women; it was originally called the "Equality League for Self-Supporting Women."[15] Though the founder, Mina Van Winkle, was herself married to a wealthy manufacturer,[16] several immigrants took part in this organization over the years. Amelia Berndt Moorfield, daughter of German immigrants, was a leading figure in the organization serving as secretary-treasurer from at least 1915 (she joined in 1914).[17] Augusta Parsonnet, a Russian Jewish immigrant, who came with her family to the U.S. at age 16, also became active in this group.[18]

In East Orange, Martha Klatschken, a German-Jewish socialist, along with Dr. Emma O. Gantz, founded and headed the Progressive Woman Suffrage Society in 1909.[19] They held the first open air suffrage meetings in New Jersey.[20] Klatschken continued to take radical steps for suffrage. In 1913, a large parade was organized for suffrage to coincide with Woodrow Wilson's inauguration as president. New York suffragists led by "General" Rosalie Jones decided to "hike" from New York to Washington D.C., through Newark, Elizabeth, Rahway, Metuchen, New Brunswick, Princeton, and Trenton.[21] In January of 1913 the *New York Tribune* reported that Klatschken had quit her job to hike for suffrage and work for the Woman's Suffrage Party.[22] The group from New York, including Klatschken, began on February 12, 1913 (they mustered at Hudson Terminal but began the actual hike from Newark).[23] They arrived in Washington on February 28th and joined the large national rally for suffrage.[24] A reporter for the *Tampa Times* described Klatcshken as, "the little corporal . . . the gamest

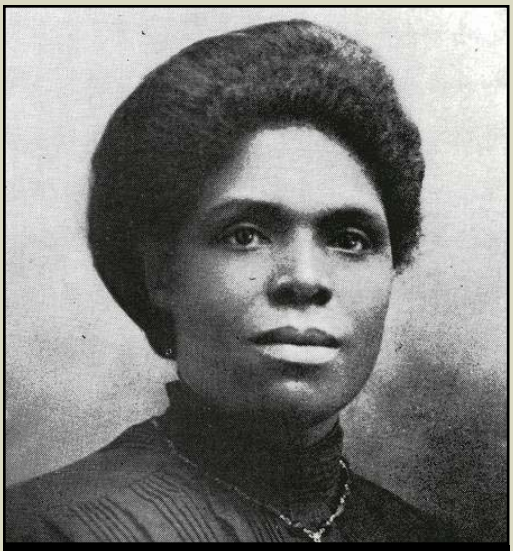
Suffrage hike to Washington, 1913
Library of Congress

little woman I ever met. Frail, weighing less than 100 pounds . . . she keeps plugging on. Day after day she trails the leaders by four five six miles . . . but when the final count is made she is always there. She looked at me and the fire leaped into her eyes 'I'd die for the cause, it's my whole life now.'"[25]

In Bayonne, Dorothy Frooks was working hard, the daughter of two Jewish immigrants. Known as the "baby suffragette," she founded the Equal Justice League, while attending Bayonne High School.[26] Many of its members had Jewish names ("Schlessing," "Cahan," "Silverstein," "Feinberg") suggesting that the League was largely Jewish.[27]

It is clear there were also African American women working for suffrage in early 20th century New Jersey. In 1913 the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* reported African Americans in Elizabeth formed a suffrage organization.[28] In 1914 "a suffrage committee" was also formed in Passaic by "colored women."[29]

However, New Jersey's most prolific African American suffragists met not in any specifically suffrage group, but in black women's clubs.[30] These clubs formed a place for African American women to get together and discuss suffrage and other current issues affecting their community. Many future suffragists, including Florence Spearing Randolph, Violet Johnson, Musette Gregory, and Armita Douglas, were



Violet Johnson

members of black women's clubs or reform groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union.[31]

All of these women had come to New Jersey from the South during the Great Migration. Douglas was born in Virginia, Johnson in North Carolina, Gregory in Washington D.C., and Randolph in South Carolina.[32] Johnson, whose life has been chronicled in "Black Christian Activism" by Betty Adams, came north for domestic work, and Randolph, at only 19, to pursue dressmaking.[33] Gregory and Douglas, on the other hand, were more middle class, as both were married to Howard University law school graduates.[34] Although from different backgrounds, they all met in the African American women's club movement and from the early 20th century were working hard on various causes from temperance to race issues to education.

In early 20th century New Jersey, there were xenophobic and racist messages from both the suffragists and antisuffragists. In 1913, suffragist Grace Bennett wrote in the *Madison Eagle,* "I am a suffragist because I should like to see the foreign vote proportionally lessened."[35] Antisuffragists, by contrast, claimed women's suffrage would double the foreign vote, a claim suffragists denied, saying it would double the native vote. This "foreign" or "Negro" vote was often equated by both sides with an ignorant vote. [36]

When suffragists did defend immigrants and African Americans, the argument was often that they weren't any worse than anyone else. Mrs. Frederick B. Carter wrote to the *Montclair Times* "the great mass of foreigners make good citizens . . . I am quite sure [foreign women] may be trusted equally with their husbands."[37] A repeated sentiment by suffragists was that foreign women were less uneducated and crass than foreign men, who could already vote. Similarly the *News* (Paterson) wrote "the negroes in New Jersey are not necessarily any more ignorant than their white neighbors." [38]

1915 Referendum

In 1915, a ballot initiative proposed amending the New Jersey Constitution to give women the vote, an extremely important moment in the history of suffrage in the state.[39]

In the lead up to the vote, African American women ramped up their suffrage activity. In 1915, Musette Brooks Gregory "presided over" a suffrage meeting for "colored folk" in Jersey City.[40] Passaic County created a Colored Suffrage Association for men, which supported women's suffrage in 1915.[41] Keyport also had a large African American suffrage meeting in October 1915.[42]

Large suffrage groups began attempting to reach out to

Women promoting suffrage in Asbury Park before the October 1915 vote.

Blanche Harris
The Competitor, 1922

African Americans. In 1913, Cranford formed a "colored women's suffrage league," encouraged by Lillian Feickert, president of the NJWSA.[43] Mary Church Terrell, a nationally known African American educator and activist, who was associated with the NAWSA, traveled the state speaking with African American men and women, including attending a large October rally with Musette B. Gregory at First Presbyterian Church in Newark.[44]

The Women's Political Union was also reaching out to African Americans. In August 1915, the *Newark News* wrote about the WPU campaigning in the "Third Ward," a Jewish and African American neighborhood.[45] By October, the WPU had an African American branch in Newark, known as the Lincoln Branch.[46] Blanche Harris was president of this group.[47] Harris had been born in Maryland, and come north with her family for better opportunities, at first working as a dressmaker, and later becoming an activist in the Republican Party. She worked as a paid campaign organizer for Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 presidential run.[48]

While, we don't know all the details on Harris's work, she did attend several suffrage meetings in 1915. The *Plainfield Press* and *Courier News* of September 28, 1915 both related that Harris spoke at a meeting under "the auspices of the Plainfield branch of the New Jersey Equal Suffrage League."[49] The *Press* said, "Harris, with eloquence and kindly humor, pointed out the need of colored women and white women alike to have representation in the government."[50] A *Perth Amboy Evening News* article from October 7, 1915 stated that Mrs. Harris attended a meeting on "colored suffrage" in Keyport, suggesting she traveled the state supporting suffrage.[51] As Harris is only mentioned in contemporary newspapers in September and October 1915, the WPU may have recruited her to increase the African American vote in the 1915 referendum.

Similarly there was a lot of outreach to immigrants before the 1915 vote. Clara Laddey spoke in German to German immigrants in both Newark and Passaic.[52] Quoted in the *Passaic Daily News* she said, "I find the German

Women outside the White House
February 1914
Library of Congress

American people exceedingly interested in the cause of votes for women and I should expect them to give a mighty good account of themselves October 19th."[53] In a 1914 speech to workers at Passaic's Botany Mills, Laddey quoted the German Kaiser, as to women's expected interests, "Kirche, Kuchen, and Kinder" (church, cooking, and children), expressing how suffrage could support these interests.[54] Passaic Mayor George Seger also spoke on suffrage in German in Passaic in 1915.[55] In the WPU, second generation German-American Amelia Moorfield was in charge of fundraising for the WPU effort on the referendum.[56]

Italian immigrants were also a target of outreach. In 1914, the *Jersey Journal* wrote, "The Newark Equal Suffrage League is making a house to house canvas of German and Italian immigrants."[57] "Countess Castel Vecchio" spoke to Italians in the "Italian quarter" of Newark in October 1915.[58] In February 1915, one of New Jersey's most well-known suffragists, Minnie J. Reynolds, spoke in Italian to the Italian immigrants of Passaic.[59] Still, one man (employed by Woman Opposed to Woman Suffrage) suggested in October 1915, "90 percent of Italians" in the Hackensack area were opposed to suffrage.[60]

Many immigrants, including Irish and Italians, were Roman Catholic. The Women's Political Union had their first

Augusta Parsonnet
Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey

Catholic speaker around 1913 in Newark,[61] and Rev. Andrew Egan spoke at St. Mary's in Bayonne in February 1913, to a largely Irish audience.[62] An Irish-American at the Bayonne meeting said that the Irish stood for human freedom and "we are going to test that claim this [suffrage] campaign."[63] Just before the vote a *Trenton Times* article proclaimed, "Many priests favor [suffrage]" and noted, "There is a very active Catholic suffrage committee in Newark," although there was a "widespread belief" that the Catholic Church opposed woman suffrage.[64]

In the Jewish community rabbis also spoke out on suffrage. Rabbi Stephen Wise, of New York, endorsed suffrage all around New Jersey in 1914 and 1915, while Rabbi Solomon Foster of Newark spoke out against it.[65] Rabbi Wise believed women voting would create "universal peace."[66] Another New Jersey suffragist who begins to appear during this time is Mary Dubrow, a Jewish immigrant from Belarus, who later became a teacher in Passaic. Before the 1915 vote, she began to appear in newspapers traveling and speaking with the Equal Suffrage League and Women's Political Union.[67] Augusta Parsonnet, with the WPU, also campaigned strongly for this referendum.[68] She was married to Dr. Victor Parsonnet, a founder of Newark's Beth Israel Hospital, and was herself active in civic affairs.[69]

Union organizer Melinda Scott was also very active in the lead up to the 1915 vote, addressing working women, many of whom were immigrants. On February 2, 1914 she led, along with other suffragists, 500 working women attempting to encourage President Wilson to support suffrage.[70] Scott was one of five speakers to make her plea to Wilson, saying, "It is not a democracy when only half have something to say."[71] During the 1915 campaign, according to Delight Dodyk's thesis on New Jersey Suffrage, Scott "chaired a mass suffrage meeting of union women at Cooper Union on June 7, 1915 and campaigned actively with Margaret Hinchey in New Jersey during the summer and fall. She authored articles in labor journals and leaflets answering anti-suffrage arguments."[72]

After the 1915 Vote

On October 19, 1915 the suffrage amendment was defeated. Some commentators blamed African Americans and immigrants. For example, a headline on the front page of the *Trenton Times* proclaimed "Say Negro Voters Defeated Woman Suffrage in Jersey" and a *Morning Call* headline blamed the "Heavy Negro Vote" for suffrage's loss in Princeton.[73] The *Herald News* (Passaic), in an editorial claimed that the future plan for suffragists was "to educate

Musette Brooks Gregory

Newark Evening News

the foreign vote to understand the women's side of the question,"[74] implying foreigners were to blame. In New York, writes Melissa Klapper in "Ballots Babies and Banners of Peace," Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of legendary suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, made statements blaming immigrants for their 1915 loss.[75] On November 4, on the front page of the *New York Tribune* she is quoted, "It is too humiliating for us American women to . . . be dominated by foreigners. Just think of those Germans and Italians and Russians . . . it makes my blood boil . . . it is pure tyranny for them to deprive us of our right."[76] Similarly, in a hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary after the vote, Jennie Law Hardy said condescendingly of New Jersey's Italians "they did not even know there was a suffrage amendment to be voted on and yet they could refuse suffrage to me, the wife of an American citizen." [77]

In fact, suffrage in 1915 lost most counties in New Jersey and New York, whether majority white, immigrant, Jewish, or African American. Susan Marshall in "Splintered Sisterhood" writes, "German Catholics, organized labor and urban immigrant voters were not solidly anti-suffrage but generally replicated voting patterns of the native-born."[78] Rev. Solomon Foster Hood responded to the *Trenton Times* article, "the writer can say what he pleases about the negro vote but if a majority of the white people of New Jersey had wanted the Franchise extended to women a few negroes could never have prevented it."[79]

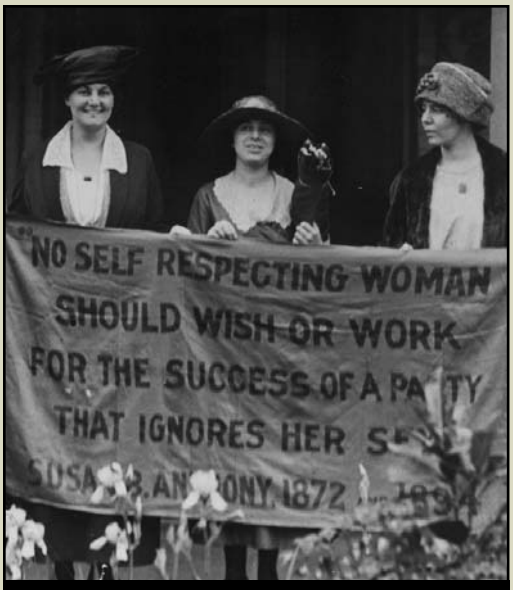
It is possible this blaming led some African Americans and immigrants to move away from the suffrage movement. Blanche Harris is no longer mentioned in articles about the Women's Political Union after the 1915 vote, suggesting she may have drifted from the mostly white organization. Adams in "Black Women's Christian Activism" notes that the African American clubwomen, including Randolph and Johnson, were hesitant to become more involved in the white suffrage movement post-1915 because they recognized the "color line."[80] They had been blamed for the 1915 vote and therefore felt disaffected from white suffragists. Instead, Randolph, and other African American women, continued to build on black women's clubs post-1915. Just after the suffrage vote, on October 29, 1915, Florence Randolph founded the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, a key vehicle for organizing and bringing together black women, a vehicle that would ultimately help win suffrage in New Jersey. At their first convention on July 28, 1916, the theme was "Temperance and Women Suffrage."[81] African American women, in their own organization, were placing suffrage as a high priority issue.

Mary Goodwin of Orange was appointed chairman of women suffrage.[82] Unfortunately, we don't know much about what Mary Goodwin did in this role. Mary Goodwin was around 47 in 1917.[83] She was born in Virginia and worked as a dressmaker in Orange and East Orange.[84]

Mary Dubrow speaks in 1917 in Washington D.C.
Library of Congress

Jewish women also seem to have been turned off by bias in the suffrage movement. Many members of the Council for Jewish Women, like future president Lillie Eckhouse in Newark, were suffragists.[85] However, the National Council voted against supporting suffrage. Rogow recounts in "Gone to Another Meeting," that among the many reasons for this vote was antisemitism in the mainstream suffrage movement.[86] Though many Jewish women supported suffrage, the Council for Jewish Women itself did not, partly because of a distrust of the mainstream movement. It is likely there were similar sentiments in other immigrant communities, after blame was placed on them for loss of the referendum in 1915. Even Melinda Scott did not participate as much in suffrage initiatives after 1915, moving instead towards the labor and anti-war movements.[87] Still, some immigrants continued their work. Augusta Parsonnet, a Russian Jewish Newarker, became president of the Women's Political Union in 1916.[88]

In 1917, as recounted by Adams, NJWSA president Lillian Feickert spoke with the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in Plainfield.[89] By working with Mary Goodwin, Feickert was able to recruit African American clubwomen to her efforts with the NJWSA.[90] She was only able to do this using the structure of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs that Randolph had created and women like Violet Johnson, Armita Douglas, and Musette Brooks Gregory had helped run and by using Mary Goodwin to make the connection. As far as we know, Feickert didn't reach out to Jewish or other immigrant groups in the same way but it's a subject ripe for future research.



Mary Dubrow at the Republican convention in June 1920 .
Library of Congress

From this point, many African American club women had big roles in the New Jersey suffrage movement. Musette Brooks Gregory was on the Executive Committee of the New Jersey Suffrage Ratification Committee (NJSRC).[91] Florence Randolph was on the Executive Committee of New Jersey's Suffrage Association.[92] In 1918 Randolph spoke at the Suffrage War Conference in Newark, with other prominent New Jersey women.[93] Johnson and Randolph were key figures at a 1919 rally organized by Feickert of the NJWSA.[94] Armita Douglas also attended rallies and parades.[95] Mary Goodwin spoke at the NJWSA's annual convention in November 1917.[96] This group of

Amelia Moorfield, later in life.

African American suffragists certainly played a large role in eventual ratification.

Some immigrants also continued to be extremely active in the movement. By 1917 Mary Dubrow was elected recording secretary of the Congressional Union of Women Suffrage of Passaic and by later that year was speaking for the National Women's Party.[97] By 1918, Dubrow was a paid organizer for the National Women's Party, demonstrating their confidence in this Jewish immigrant organizer.[98] In 1919, she, along with other activists, camped out outside the White House in the Watchfire Protests, which you can read more about in Carol Simon Levin's article in this issue.[99] This led to her arrest and ten day prison sentence.[100] Following her release from jail, Dubrow toured the country as part of a "prison special" for the NWP. [101] She led rallies in major cities like Chicago and New Orleans. Her activities were covered heavily by the nation's newspapers, which often expressed their amazement that one so young could be such a forceful and charismatic speaker.[102] Dubrow's colleagues in the NWP even claimed that her "magnetic" personality had finally converted Woodrow Wilson to the cause of women's suffrage.[103]

Elsewhere, German-American Clara Laddey also remained active in the NJWSA . She was a featured speaker at the victory convention of the ratification campaign in 1920[104]. Other immigrant women, like Amelia Moorfield and Augusta Parsonnet remained active in the WPU serving in key leadership roles in the organization.[105]

Overall, many African Americans-and immigrants played significant roles in the eventual victory of suffrage in New Jersey, with the black women's clubs playing a vital part in organizing African Americans for suffrage.

Post-Suffrage Victory

After suffrage was ratified in New Jersey, immigrants and African Americans who had worked for suffrage continued to make an impact in other movements across New Jersey and beyond.

Several suffragists were active in the interwar peace movement. Amelia Moorfield, Clara Laddey, and Armita Douglas all played leading roles in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.[106] Jewish women also continued to work for the Newark branch of the Council for Jewish Women, which in the 1930s became heavily involved with Moorfield in peace work.[107] Mary Dubrow was active in the campaign against capital punishment in the 1920s and 1930s.[108]

The women excelled in various careers. Dorothy Frooks became a famous lawyer.[109] Mary Dubrow went into

Rev. Florence Randolph, 1919

teaching.[110] Florence Randolph was a famed preacher and the first African American woman to attend Drew University.[111]

Women's clubs continued to flourish and work to connect women. Randolph, Douglas, Gregory, and Johnson remained active in the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.[112] Armita Douglas became president in 1927.[113] The Contemporary Club in Newark, of which Parsonnet and Moorfield were members, was also a liberal women's club during the 1930s.[114]

Of course, the women also continued to work for political goals. Randolph, Douglas, Johnson, and Harris were all very active with various Colored Women's Republican clubs and committees across the state.[115] Parsonnet, Douglas, and Randolph were active in the League of Women's Voters.[116] Mary Dubrow continued her involvement in the National Woman's Party.[117]

Some of these political issues included race. Violet Johnson and Musette Gregory (who died in 1921) were both active in the NAACP.[118] Armita Douglas was an officer of the Newark Interracial Committee, working closely with Amelia Moorfield.[119]

Many of the women were also involved with local causes such as Parsonnet, who served on the board of the Girl's Vocational School and Beth Israel Hospital in Newark.[120] They also pursued personal interests, Laddey continued to perform German poetry and Blanche Harris was "a pleasing singer."[121]

This is surely not a complete list of the many African American and immigrant women who participated in suffrage. Even in creating our exhibit, "Radical Women," for the Newark Public Library, Noelle Lorraine Williams, George Robb, and I discovered several women who had never been researched. There is a wealth of newspapers, archives, and other sources that have yet to be mined for data on these fascinating individuals. By telling their stories we can get a more realistic and complete picture of the true diversity of New Jersey's suffrage movement.

Thanks to Noelle Lorraine Williams for sharing information on African American suffragists; George Robb for sharing research on various Newark suffragists and for editing this piece; and Carol Simon Levin and Gordon Bond for asking me to write this piece.

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