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A Woman's Place Is in Politics: The Changing Interpretations of the Women's Suffrage Movement's Involvement in Reconstruction

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Writing Process

I wrote this historiography paper over the course of the Spring 2017 semester in my ASI 120 class. The assignment was to write a historiography paper about a topic of our choosing during the Reconstruction period in America. In addition to the analyzing historians' interpretations of our topics, we were also asked to choose the group of sources that we felt was most accurate and compelling. To prepare for the paper, I read Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*, which provided me with deeper background knowledge of the time period and guided me in the development of my topic. I decided to write about the women's suffrage movement's connection to abolition and black suffrage because I am passionate about women's rights issues and I felt that writing on this topic would not only fascinate me, but would also provide me with a more profound understanding of the roots of the feminist movement. After choosing my topic, I conducted research to find varying attitudes over time about women's suffrage organizations and their involvement in abolition and black suffrage. With my sources narrowed down to those that were most relevant to my topic, I wrote an annotated bibliography that served as the skeleton of my final paper. I used the bibliography to guide the writing of my first draft, which I then edited based on the comments from my professor, Dr. William Trollinger, a Write Place consultant, and two of my peers. Once I had made the revisions, I submitted the final draft of my historiography paper.

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During the Reconstruction period in America, after having secured liberation, freedmen began efforts to gain suffrage as well. White suffragettes, who had willingly joined in the abolition movement earlier, became involved in the freedmen's campaign for this political right. Women sympathized with the freedmen's struggle for a political voice and also saw in this suffrage movement the opportunity to gain suffrage for themselves as well as the freed blacks. When the Fifteenth Amendment passed, granting black men, but not women, the right to vote, the suffragettes became more frustrated with their lack of political influence, which led to the end of their formal support of the fight for freedmen's rights. Perhaps the conflict that arose between these two activists groups over the issue of suffrage provides grounds for the tensions that exist today between white feminists and people of color who feel neglected by the former group. Regardless of these tension's origins, it is clear that while white women once were very involved with the fight for black rights, the acceleration of the freedmen's rights compared to women's rights created a barrier between the two movements.

History's interpretation of the rocky relationship between women's suffrage and black suffrage movements has been mercurial. Throughout time, varying attitudes have arisen towards

women's involvement and disassociation with abolition and the freedmen's rights movements. Earlier sources, such as "Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gerrit Smith," "Anna Dickinson, Anti-Slavery Radical," and "Frederick Douglass and the Women's Rights Movement" reveal a willingness of both women and freedmen to help each other's causes. While they do mention a conflict between the two groups, the sources describe the tension mildly. This is a sharp contrast from the later sources, like "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement," "Women's Place in American Politics," and "Women Suffrage and Race," which all illustrate a harsh dissension between the two movements after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Moreover, these sources make it seem as if the resentment women felt toward the freedmen's success fueled their own movement, causing them to work more fiercely for suffrage. Finally, the most recent sources, namely *Woman's Voice*, *Woman's Place* and *Fighting Chance*, paint the suffragettes as more selfishly motivated than the earlier sources; they describe women's desire to join the abolition movement mainly out of an expectation that the achievement of women's rights would ride on the coattails of the achievement of freedmen's rights. Thus, the historical analysis of the women's suffrage movement's connection to Reconstruction, specifically its connection to the freedmen's suffrage, has shifted dramatically over time, from seeing the women as willing participants in the freedmen's rights movement to viewing them as acting from opportunistic motivations, an interpretation which is the most accurate and compelling of all of the historical analyses.

In the earliest interpretations of the women's suffrage movement's connection to abolition and black suffrage, historians portrayed women in the suffrage movement as inclined to help not only in the abolition movement, but also in the efforts to gain freedmen's rights. In "Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gerrit Smith," W. Freeman Galpin details how cousins Stanton

and Smith worked together for abolition before and during the Civil War. He notes that Stanton's original efforts to gain women's rights were diverted by the more impending issue of slavery, which insinuates that women's rights activists believed their own struggles were subordinate to the issues of abolition and freedmen's rights.¹ Following the abolition of slavery, while both activists fought for black suffrage, Stanton included women's vote in her activism, while Smith only focused on achievement of black suffrage, although he always supported the women's suffrage movement.² Thus, the source makes a clear statement that suffragettes and black suffrage activists supported each other, even if only one group actively worked for both causes. According to Galpin, Smith's lack of active participation in the women's movement was always a source of tension between the cousins, but Stanton never let it ruin their relationship.³ While Galpin does mention the tension between the two activists, he describes the dispute as a minimal disruption in an otherwise amicable relationship between both the cousins and the two movements.

An additional early source details the life of Anna Dickinson, another voting rights activist during Reconstruction. In "Anna Dickinson, Antislavery Radical," Judith Anderson notes Dickinson's interest in politics and women's rights early in her activist career. She cites Dickinson's unparalleled rhetorical skills and involvement in national politics as examples of her impressive activism.⁴ However, Anderson claims that after Reconstruction began, Dickinson abandoned the women's suffrage movement to focus her efforts on the political equality of the black man.⁵ Consistent with other sources of the time, Anderson portrays Dickinson as glad to give up her own cause in order to fight for the freedmen's rights. According to Anderson, the abandonment of the women's rights movement and subsequent attachment to the black suffrage movement was a logical decision for Anna Dickinson, and the transition of her support occurred

seamlessly. In fact, the article makes no mention of any conflict between the two suffrage movements, which emphasizes the early historical view that the tensions between the groups were negligible.

The most flagrant description of the discord between the women and black suffrage movements comes from the article “Frederick Douglass and the Woman’s Rights Movement,” which outlines Douglass’ lesser-known involvement in the women suffrage movement. The article describes the stances that Douglass, and other abolition and black rights organizations, took against discrimination based on sex.⁶ As claimed by Benjamin Quarles, though Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had worked together early during Reconstruction, the pair had a falling out when the debate began over whether woman or black suffrage was a more worthy cause.⁷ However, according to Quarles, the two had reconciled by the end of Douglass’ career and mutually supported each other’s causes.⁸ Even when early historians mention the conflict between the movements, they also note the reconciliation between the two involved parties and assure the audience that each side supported the other. These early sources paint a picture of harmonious activism on all sides of the fight for political rights, making light of serious debates that arose at the time about the legitimacy of black and women suffrage causes.

Later historians did not have the same oversights as their earlier counterparts; instead, they focused their works on the conflict between the woman and black suffrage movements in Reconstruction America. Ellen Dubois notes in “The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement” that women were especially resentful of men when the black man, who had only been considered a citizen for a couple years, gained suffrage before they did.⁹ Dubois even states that this resentment was so powerful that it caused the women to aggressively seek the right to vote and to use more intense tactics than those they had implemented in the abolition and

black suffrage movements. She claims that women amplified the use of propaganda and lobbying that they had implemented as abolitionists.¹⁰ Dubois makes it clear that while women were willing to help fight for abolition, their willingness to help changed to sentiments of indignation when the freedmen gained the right to vote and women did not; this inevitably led to women's disconnection with the freedmen's rights movement.

Louise Young furthers Dubois' point about the power of the suffragettes' resentment in her piece "Women's Place in American Politics," which details the suffragettes' political mobilization in the abolition movement and beyond. According to Young, the abolition movement had prompted thousands of women to become involved in political life, which gave them courage to campaign for their own rights.¹¹ When they began to fight for these rights, however, the group of suffragettes split over differences of opinion. Young describes the tensions within the women's suffrage movement that were caused by disagreements over which tactics to use to gain suffrage.¹² However, she states that after the freedmen gained the right to vote, suffragettes who had disagreed moved past their differences and united under the unanimous feelings of betrayal by the Republican Party.¹³ Young emphasizes the conflict between the groups by revealing that not only did women resent the freedmen, but they also felt bitterness toward an entire political party. Just as Dubois details in her piece, Young claims that this anger was strong enough to intensify the suffragettes' movement.

Just as in Young's essay, Marjory Nelson's article "Women Suffrage and Race" claims that the Republican Party maintained a sexist platform throughout Reconstruction that focused on black suffrage and ignored women's issues and their overall political presence in the suffrage movement.¹⁴ The party and civil rights activists alike argued that the black vote was a more imminent and important cause than women suffrage. Nelson notes that this platform added to

the conflict between the women and black suffrage movements.¹⁵ She states that tensions between the two divided the previously harmonious movement into two opposing movements, which forced people to choose which issue was more important to them.¹⁶ Nelson's claim reiterates the degree of division caused by the clash between the groups. She especially emphasizes the toll it took on women activists who wanted to help a marginalized group but who also felt ignored themselves. In fact, all three of these historians underscore the deep dissension and rancorous feelings between these once-harmonious groups.

While the most recent sources mention the conflict between the women and black suffrage movements, the following historical analyses paint suffragettes as more opportunistic than in previous illustrations. Joelle Million states in *Woman's Voice, Woman's Place* that since many women had fulfilled leadership roles previously held by men during the Civil War, they expected to maintain and expand upon those positions of leadership.¹⁷ Later, when the freedmen began fighting for the same political rights that woman suffrage activists had wanted, the suffragettes joined in the movement as a way to improve their chances of gaining the right to vote.¹⁸ Million thus offers the pragmatic reason for the women's involvement in the abolition and black suffrage movements, namely that the suffragettes were not as much noble activists for all as they were a maneuvering group that sought their own rights and tagged along with the movement that they thought would help them achieve suffrage.

This portrait of suffragettes as opportunistic activists is not limited to Million's work. Faye Dudden depicts the women suffrage movement similarly in her book *Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America*, in which she notes that even Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony first joined the abolition movement not only out of sympathy, but also because it would allow them to have more political

participation than they had ever enjoyed before.¹⁹ Therefore, according to Dudden, before the freedmen's movement started, the earliest women suffrage activists joined the abolition movement as a way to gain more political leadership. Later activists assumed that after the war, the achievement of black rights would pave the way for a similar victory of women's rights, which prompted their support for the freedmen's movement.²⁰ Dudden and Million therefore both ascribe women's involvement with the black suffrage movement to their hope that doing so would create a channel for women to gain rights as well.

Because time has allowed for a variety of historical analyses of the women suffrage movement's involvement in Reconstruction to arise, there are attitudes toward this topic that are more accurate than others, as new sources and contemporary outlooks guide historians' research. Among the analyses discussed in this essay, the group of the newest sources emerges as the most truthful and unbiased interpretation of history. The most recent historical analyses may seem cynical at times, as they portray women suffrage activists as pragmatic and opportunistic; however, this honest outlook reveals what the other two groups do not: it shows the willingness of women to join the movement, but provides them with a practical reason for this willingness. While the earliest sources make it seem as if women were just happy volunteers, ready to dedicate their lives to someone else's cause, the newest sources give a logical motivation for suffragettes to take on the freedmen's cause. These new sources also accurately depict the women suffrage movement's eventual conflict with the black suffrage movement, but give a reason for why women felt such resentment toward the movement. Without the context of the suffragettes' expectations for political rights, their resentment seems childish. However, with the inclination that the black suffrage movement would lead to their own suffrage victory, their bitterness seems much more justifiable.

These newest sources are not equal in their interpretations; in fact, within this group of analyses, Dudden's interpretation provides a more accurate depiction of women's involvement with black suffrage than Million's. While Million focuses on the informal political participation that women would gain from joining the freedmen's cause, rather than the formal right to vote, Dudden mentions the informal and emphasizes the expectations women held for the achievement of their own suffrage. Furthermore, Dudden gives a more accurate account of the conflict between the two movements by and clarifies that it was not after the 14th amendment but after the 15th amendment passed when women became angry with the black suffrage movement, since this law specifically excluded them from its anti-discriminatory measures.²¹ Therefore, even within the most accurate group of sources, there still exist discrepancies of accuracy.

As the differences of analysis in each group of sources depict, there have been drastic shifts in attitudes toward the women suffrage movement's involvement in black men's rights during Reconstruction. Interpretations of history have changed over time as contemporary attitudes have changed. In earlier times, when women had just gained a political voice, interpretations depicted them as docile, agreeable activists ready to give up their own fight for another cause. Now, in a time where women may freely express their opinion, historians portray them as activists who fiercely fight for well-deserved rights, but sometimes inch toward the demonization of women in this portrayal. In the future, as women continue to gain more social equality, perhaps historians will paint the suffragettes less fiercely and instead will present them as activists working towards political rights, no different from the freedmen.

Moreover, the description of the conflict between the women suffrage and black suffrage movements provides insight into the root of the strained relationship that exists today in the feminist movement between white feminists and people of color who feel ignored by mainstream

feminism. Many women of color feel conflicted as they seek to include racial equality in the fight for women's rights; indeed, just as activists debated which cause was worthier during Reconstruction, many people today contemplate whether gender or racial equality is more important to them. In order to alleviate the tensions, intersectional feminism needs to become more prominent in mainstream activism. Viewing feminism through a scope of intersectionality would allow feminists to understand how race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, along with gender, affect women's oppression. In the future, perhaps the context of the disconnection between the two groups during Reconstruction will allow contemporary activists to understand each other and reconcile. They could then establish more prominently intersectional feminism in the feminist movement and move forward together to gain equality for all people, regardless of race or gender.

¹ W. Freeman Galpin, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gerrit Smith," *New York History* 16, no. 3 (1935): 323. *JSTOR*.

² *ibid.*, 324.

³ *ibid.*, 327.

⁴ Judith Anderson, "Anna Dickinson, Antislavery Radical," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 3, no. 3 (1936): 160. *JSTOR*.

⁵ *ibid.*, 163.

⁶ Benjamin Quarles, "Frederick Douglass and the Woman's Rights Movement," *The Journal of Negro History* 25, no. 1 (1940): 38. *JSTOR*.

⁷ *ibid.*, 38.

⁸ *ibid.*, 43.

⁹ Ellen Dubois, “The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes Toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975): 66.

JSTOR.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 67-68.

¹¹ Louise M. Young, “Women’s Place in American Politics: The Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of Politics* 38, no. 3 (1976): 329. *JSTOR*.

¹² *ibid.*, 330.

¹³ *ibid.*, 331.

¹⁴ Marjory Nelson, “Women Suffrage and Race,” *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 10 (1979): 6. *JSTOR*.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ Joelle Million, *Woman’s Voice, Woman’s Place: Lucy Stone and the Birth of the Woman’s Rights Movement*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003). 231.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 240.

¹⁹ Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 170.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 302.

²¹ *ibid.*, 276.

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