

Philanthropy Memorializes the American Suffrage Movement

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As the centennial of the 19th amendment approaches, this paper examines the role of private philanthropy in shaping the public memory of the American women's suffrage movement. An organized women's movement to gain the right to vote began in the 1840s, and their campaign depended on grassroots mobilization, small contributions, and, especially in the last two decades of the campaign, large donations from wealthy women like Alva Vanderbilt Belmont. Despite their eventual victory in 1920, the approaching commemoration is complicated by the uneven history of voting rights in the United States. Many American women already had the right to vote in 1920, and the amendment did nothing to extend the vote to African American women in the Jim Crow south. Southern black men had already gained and lost their own voting rights. Yet the tendency to offer a celebratory history is strong. In 2020, a statue of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, two leaders of the suffrage movement, will be unveiled in New York City's Central Park. As many observers have noted, this will be the first statue that recognizes women in a park filled with monuments to great men. This memorial would not be possible without donations from everyone from Girl Scout troops to corporations.¹

Even though current scholarship emphasizes the racist words and actions of Stanton and Anthony, this statue will not be the first to memorialize them as representatives of the

¹ "The Statue Fund Announces the Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Woman Suffrage Movement Monument Design Competition Winner," Business Wire, July 19, 2018, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180719005130/en/Statue-Fund-Announces-Elizabeth-Cady-Stanton-Susan>.

suffrage movement.² I will examine three suffrage memorials, beginning with the 1921 statue dedicated to Stanton, Anthony, and Lucretia Mott, now located in the Capitol rotunda, and continue with more recent efforts, including a 2001 statue of Anthony and Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York, and the controversy surrounding the Stanton-Anthony statue headed for Central Park. All of these statues, funded largely by private philanthropy, offer a narrow history of the suffrage movement, one led by a small group of white women with ties to the antislavery movement, and ignore its tumultuous racial history. In many ways, this representation is understandable—it offers a powerful, positive story promoted in part by descendants of these same women. And it is certainly better than nothing. Potential controversy has limited other monuments and museums marking the history of women’s rights. A proposal for a national museum of women’s history has been making its way through Congress for years, and if passed, that project will also depend on private philanthropy. Though suffrage monuments offer a limited history, I argue that they create an opportunity to discuss issues of power, wealth, and race that would otherwise be lost in the absence of public memorials to the suffrage movement. There are also important efforts underway to commemorate activists of color, expanding the way the public understands the history of women’s political activism.

Recent histories of philanthropy and suffrage highlight the essential contribution of women who Johanna Neuman calls “Gilded Suffragists” in the final campaign to win a

² For recent histories of the post-Civil War women’s movement, see Faye Dudden, *Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014); Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

federal amendment for women's suffrage. Alva Belmont and publishing magnate Mrs. Frank Leslie each donated what would be \$1.7 million today; Mary Burnham, Katharine Dexter McCormick, and Mary Garrett also donated generous sums. As rich and stylish celebrities, these women drew much-needed media attention to the suffrage movement, but they reshaped the movement in their own image. They introduced glaring inequalities of wealth and power into a movement that had long been more humble, grassroots, and staffed by self-supporting career women or middle-class volunteers. As a result, some women left the movement. The suffrage movement had recently recruited working-class women, who rejected the corporate monopolies and employer exploitation that had made these women rich. Further, the suffrage movement had an uneasy history of both anti-racism and racism, and the participation of gilded suffragists cemented the exclusion of African American women. In other words, the participation of these donors had both positive and negative consequences.³

Such tensions are evident in the National Woman's Party post-19th amendment effort to place a suffrage memorial in the Capitol Rotunda. Adelaide Johnson, a suffragist and female sculptor who had exhibited busts of leading feminists at the Chicago World's Fair, was their choice as the artist. Activists had to overcome two major hurdles: funds to purchase the statue and an agreement to place it in the Capitol Building. Harriot Stanton Blatch recruited wealthy suffragists to form a committee to "raise the necessary funds." As she wrote to Cornelia Brice Pinchot in 1920, "Today is the opportune moment to complete

³ Joan Marie Johnson, *Funding Feminism: Monied Women, Philanthropy, and the Women's Movement, 1870-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 52-53, chapter 2 passim; Johanna Neuman, *Gilded Suffragists: The New York Socialites who Fought for Women's Right to Vote* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

the memorial to the pioneers of suffrage.”⁴ Former southern belle Alva Belmont, one of the largest donors to the National Woman’s Party (and whose name is still associated with their historic headquarters and museum in Washington, DC) likely was the principle contributor. Adelaide Johnson’s obituary recounted the labor involved in transporting the “seven and a half ton” statue from Carrera, Italy to the United States. “It made the first part of the journey by ox-cart,” and the size caused Italian workers to go on strike rather than transport it. Ultimately, Johnson had to pay large sums to get the job done.⁵ On Feb. 15, 1921, the 101st anniversary of Susan B. Anthony’s birth, the statue was unveiled in the midst of controversy. African American suffragists had asked to be represented at the ceremony, and the National Woman’s Party refused. Instead, African American women requested that the National Woman’s Party ask Congress to investigate violations of the 19th Amendment in the south, which had prevented black women from voting. Again, the National Women’s Party was unmoved.⁶

The statue’s inclusion of Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister better known as an abolitionist than a suffragist, highlighted the contradictions in the National Woman’s

⁴ Document 18: Harriot Stanton Blatch to Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, 6 October 1920, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Cornelia Bryce Pinchot Papers, Box 10, NF. Included in “Cornelia Bryce Pinchot's Reform Activism, 1908-1929,” Documents selected by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Corinne Weible. *Women and Social Movements, 1600-2000* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2011).

⁵ “Adelaide Johnson, Sculptor, Dies,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1955.

⁶ Document 17: Freda Kirchwey, “Alice Paul Pulls the Strings,” *The Nation*, 2 March 1921, pp. 332-33. Included in *How Did the National Woman's Party Address the Issue of the Enfranchisement of Black Women, 1919-1924?*, by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Jill Dias. *Women and Social Movements, 1600-2000* (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 1997).

Party's stance. For many suffragists, Mott represented their historic connection to the antislavery movement and their past contributions to the fight for racial equality. Mott's memory had become a shield against accusations of racism, but Anthony had also devoted her time and energy to the cause of abolition. As a result, Mary White Ovington wrote that the exclusion of black women from the ceremony "will be keenly felt by thousands of people throughout the country." Adelaide Johnson's sculpture captures suffragists' trajectory away from their alliance with abolitionists and toward what one historian has called "white women's rights." Mott's bust is placed in front of those of Stanton and Anthony, and there is a gap between her portrait and the two suffrage leaders.⁷

Though this celebratory installation came at the expense of African American women, it also demonstrated the continued limits on women's equality. Almost immediately, the statue, then titled "The Woman Movement," was relegated to the crypt of the Capitol building, and it was only moved to the Rotunda in 1997. Male congressman long used the excuse that the statue was ugly, calling it "Ladies in the Bathtub." Then, Republican representatives (male and female) refused to allocate the \$75,000 needed to move the monument. Ultimately, private funds allowed the statue to be placed in the Rotunda.⁸ Adelaide Johnson, the sculptor, did not have great success as an artist. She railed against museums that refused to recognize her work, contributing to her inability to

⁷ Ovington quoted in Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 216; Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸ "3 Suffragists (in Marble) to Move Up in the Capitol," *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1996.

support herself. In 1939, unable to pay rent on her Washington, DC, studio, she smashed all her remaining sculptures with a sledgehammer.⁹

Women, and women's rights activists in particular, continue to be underrepresented in historic landmarks and statues across the country, but when they are represented, as in Johnson's "The Woman Movement" statue, it almost always conveys a positive image of white women that avoids a messy history. In Rochester, New York, down the street from Susan B. Anthony's house, now a museum and national historic landmark, is a small park with a unique life-sized sculpture of Anthony and Frederick Douglass. The City of Rochester website explains that "Let's Have Tea" portrays these "close friends who shared the common goals of social justice and civil rights."¹⁰ Frederick Douglass attended the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, and the last thing he did before his death in 1895 was to attend a suffrage meeting in Washington, D.C, where Anthony escorted him to the stage. He and Anthony had first met in 1849, and they often appeared together to promote suffrage and other causes. And, yes, they also got together for tea.¹¹

Yet the statue depicts a collaboration that was strained by racism. In 1869, the American Equal Rights Association, which counted both Anthony and Douglass among its officers, split over the Fourteenth Amendment, which had included women as citizens, but

⁹ "Adelaide Johnson, Sculptor, Dies," *New York Times*, November 11, 1955.

¹⁰ "Let's Have Tea," sculpture by Pepsy Kettavong; "Susan B. Anthony Square Park," <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589936553>.

¹¹ Carol Faulkner, "The Famous Friendship of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony," unpublished paper delivered at "Frederick Douglass Across Times, Places, and Disciplines: An International Conference," Paris, France, October 12, 2018.

excluded them as voters, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which only enfranchised black men. Douglass and Anthony were on opposing sides. Douglass prioritized suffrage for African American men, arguing that the ballot was an urgent and necessary response to racial violence. Anthony focused on the privileges of sex, pointing out that Douglass “would not exchange his sex & color, wronged as he is, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton.”¹² Historians continue to grapple with the reactionary racism that emerged from Stanton, Anthony, and their allies in this debate, and, as we will see, it inflects the current controversy around the Stanton-Anthony statue destined for Central Park.

The statue of Anthony and Douglass, “Let’s Have Tea,” funded by a combination of private and corporate donations and public grants, was a project of urban revitalization. The artist, Pepsy Kettavong, a refugee from Laos, had a studio in the same struggling Rochester neighborhood and wanted to honor its history. “A black man and a white woman are drinking tea together; a Laotian makes their sculpture,” he said. “It could be a metaphor for American democracy. But the issues they faced are still out there - women's rights and the stigma of racism.” The director of the Susan B Anthony House observed that, the “legacy” of Douglass and Anthony “can lift the neighborhood.”¹³ Kettavong wanted people—children especially—to sit on the laps of the two figures, something Douglass, at least, might have appreciated. For a struggling city like Rochester, this history represents an important, progressive past, with local leaders in the national movement for equal

¹² Ann Gordon, ed. *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Volume 2: Against an Aristocracy of Sex, 1866-1873* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 240.

¹³ “City’s Towering Spirits Take Tea,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, Aug. 27, 2001; “Laotian Recreates American History,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, June 27, 2001.

rights. They are not interested in complicating the story.

At an earlier moment in American history, including in the lifetimes of Douglass and Anthony, the statue of a white woman and a black man would have made a controversial statement. In the 21st century, it domesticates both Anthony and Douglass. But in many ways, the statue reflects an image of their relationship that they themselves nurtured. Tea, meals, and visits, helped maintain their connection through disagreement and division. And like “The Woman Movement,” the statue offers the opportunity to tell a more nuanced history of voting rights, and the way the friendship of Anthony and Douglass served to maintain the deep, yet troubled connection between women’s rights and black freedom.

The forthcoming statue of Stanton and Anthony has already created such an opportunity. The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Statue Fund, Inc., whose vice president is Coline Jenkins, the great-great granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was founded to place a statue of (real) women in Central Park and to honor the long struggle to gain equal suffrage for women.¹⁴ Why Stanton and Anthony? Why not choose different women to represent suffrage? The investment of Jenkins and other descendants is part of the story. In addition, both Stanton and Anthony were New Yorkers (though that is not necessarily a qualification to make it into Central Park) and they literally wrote the history of the suffrage movement. But this choice is not without problems. As Brent Staples, drawing on the work of women’s historians, warned in the *New York Times*, those who organize upcoming commemorations of the 19th Amendment should keep in mind that they honor a movement “in which racism clearly played a central role.” He describes white

¹⁴ “About the Statue Fund,” The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Statue Fund, Inc. at <http://www.monumentalwomen.org/page/about-1.html>.

suffragists as betraying black women, and calls Stanton a “classic liberal racist.”¹⁵ Ann D. Gordon, the editor of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Papers, has responded that it is possible to celebrate the history of suffrage by telling “a documented story and [using] appropriate lenses.” For this scholar, the ugliness of the women’s suffrage movement represents the larger history of racism and discrimination in American history. Women were not immune.¹⁶

The statue, designed by Meredith Bergmann, who also created the Boston women’s monument featuring Phyllis Wheatley, Abigail Adams, and Lucy Stone, attempts to address this criticism. Though Stanton and Anthony are the only figures depicted, the statue points to the broader movement. Stanton and Anthony are writing on a long scroll, which will include quotations from a diverse list of suffragists, including Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Anna Howard Shaw, as well as Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. As Bergmann writes, “the scroll will be functional, legible, and assertive, reaching out to the viewer. It actualizes the metaphor that this is ‘what has come down to us.’”¹⁷ The scroll ends at a ballot box, a reminder of the hard-won right and obligation to vote. Though

¹⁵ Brent Staples, “How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2018. For reaction from Coline Jenkins and James Mott Hallowell, a Lucretia Mott descendant, see “Letters: The Suffragists and their Descendants,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2018. More recently, Brent Staples, “When the Suffrage Movement Sold Out to White Supremacy,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2019.

¹⁶ Ann D. Gordon, “How to Celebrate a Complicated Win for Women,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2018.

¹⁷ Meredith Bergmann quote in “The Winning Design,” <http://www.monumentalwomen.org/page/sculptors-page-12.html>. See also “‘Breaking the Bronze Ceiling’: The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Woman Suffrage Movement Monument,” Women at the Center Blog, New York Historical Society, <http://womenatthecenter.nyhistory.org/breaking-the-bronze-ceiling/>.

this will not assuage critics like Brent Staples, or women's historians like myself, who squirm at the continued focus on Stanton and Anthony, it does start a conversation about the complicated history of suffrage. How did Stanton and Anthony contribute to the eventual victory of the 19th Amendment, and at what cost? Who were these other women and where are their statues?

Such conversations may not be enough. As I've shown in this paper, white women, and particularly Stanton and Anthony, have repeatedly been chosen to represent the suffrage movement. This choice hides the broad, diverse, complicated, and ongoing movement to achieve and implement political equality for all women. As the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment approaches, in an election year, this anniversary should mobilize younger generations of women voters, but the portrayal of Stanton and Anthony may discourage activists from learning from the history of the earlier movement. More statues are on their way to expand these conversations. A descendant of Ida B. Wells-Barnett is behind a successful effort in Chicago to display a statue of the suffragist and anti-lynching activist. In 2020, a statue of Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman in the House of Representatives, will be unveiled in Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The latter is the effort of "She Built NYC," an initiative led by New York City First Lady Chirlane McCray, to commission public monuments to women. Their ultimate goal is to have 50% of New York City monuments dedicated to women.¹⁸

¹⁸ "Ida B. Wells Monument," <http://www.idabwellsmonument.org/>; "N.Y. Today: The City Has Few Statues of Women. Here Comes Shirley Chisholm," *New York Times*, November 30, 2018. See also <https://women.nyc/she-built-nyc/>.

In many ways, such statues are small step toward fully integrating women into the public history of the United States. A parallel effort is underway for a National Women's History Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Growing directly out of the effort to move Adelaide Johnson's statue from the crypt to the Rotunda, a non-profit dedicated to this goal was founded in 1996, and the National Women's History Museum made progress in 2014 when Congress finally voted to establish a commission to research the possibilities and make recommendations. After their positive report, Congress proposed H.R. 19 the Smithsonian Women's History Museum Act in 2017, which has strong bipartisan support.¹⁹ The bill recommends the creation of a museum on or near the National Mall. Though the non-profit National Women's History Museum had pledged to raise the entire \$500 million needed from private funds, the bill calls for private funds to be used to construct the building, and federal funds be used for planning and operations. Such a funding structure is similar to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which cost \$540 million, half of which came from Congress.²⁰ The bill's deadline of January 2019 has come and gone without a vote.

¹⁹ The National Women's History Museum and Representative Carolyn Maloney both recount this history on their websites. See <https://www.womenshistory.org/about-us/our-history>; <https://maloney.house.gov/issues/womens-issues/national-womens-history-museum-0>.

²⁰ Sarah Cascone, "Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney on Her Uphill Battle to Found a Women's History Museum in the Smithsonian, Artnet News, April 10, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/smithsonian-womens-history-museum-1258463>. Cascone points out that it took fifteen years to pass the bill for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and thirteen to build, populate, and open the museum.

Controversy has also embroiled the National Women’s History Museum. Despite genuine bipartisan support, concerns remain over which women’s history, and what women, will be represented. In 2014, a scholarly advisory council protested the simplistic, “anodyne,” and sometimes incorrect, history promoted on the organization’s website. As historian Sonya Michel wrote, the organization’s initial focus on women’s suffrage and “great women” worried the scholars. The goal of historians, she wrote, “is to show the full diversity of women’s history without portraying it as a seamless path from corset and kitchen to boardroom and halls of Congress.”²¹ The other complaint came from conservatives, who worried about the portrayal of reproductive rights, sexual liberation, and other divisive topics. Nevertheless, Republican women have been sufficiently convinced that it will include multiple perspectives, including those of conservative and evangelical women, to support the bill.²² The current board of the non-profit National Women’s History Museum includes historians as well as businesswomen and

²¹ Sonya Michel, “The National Women’s History Museum Apparently Doesn’t Care Much for Women’s Historians,” *New Republic*, April 6, 2014; Joan Wages and Sonya Michel, “The National Women’s History Museum Needs to Focus on Getting a Museum Built,” *New Republic*, April 9, 2014; Amanda Marcotte, “The Long, Controversial History of the National Women’s History Museum, Which Still Does Not Exist,” *Slate*, Dec. 11, 2014, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/12/national-women-s-history-museum-sen-tom-coburn-tries-to-hold-up-money-that-would-finally-get-it-built.html>.

²² Renee Ellmers, “A National Museum for Women’s History,” *The Hill*, March 13, 2014. Conservative women are well-represented on the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission, established by Congress in 2017 to “to ensure a suitable observance of the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/847/text>. The executive director is the former Lt. Governor of Wisconsin, Rebecca Kleefisch, and representatives of the Heritage Foundation and the Susan B. Anthony List have also been appointed. <https://www.wispolitics.com/2019/womens-suffrage-centennial-commission-announces-executive-director/>; <https://www.sba-list.org/marjorie-dannenfelser>.

philanthropists. The organization received a grant to make its website more interactive, and while it tries to offer a broad and inclusive perspective on women's history, celebratory stories of achievement and progress dominate.²³ It remains to be seen what role the non-profit will have if Congress passes H.R. 19. The new Congress has shifted its focus to ratifying the ERA, diverting attention away from the museum project.

In her book *Funding Feminism*, Joan Marie Johnson observes that despite the central role female philanthropists played in achieving greater equality for women, and the advances of women in the private and public sectors, women are still underrepresented as donors. Some women have organized to do something about this by creating women's funds, and some have even tried to avoid the issues of power and economic inequality that followed gilded suffragists into the women's movement.²⁴ Since female philanthropists are essential to building women's monuments and museums, I suggest an expansion of Johnson's argument. Philanthropists should pay attention to the stories they choose to fund and tell. Do they represent the diversity of women's history? Do they tell an inclusive and complicated history of women's voting rights? As the suffrage centennial approaches, and calls for female representation in statues and museums continues, including the Stanton-Anthony monument in Central Park and the National Women's History Museum in Washington, D.C., these questions will be critical for both philanthropists and feminists.

²³ "National Women's History Museum Receives Grant to Rebuild Website with Advanced Content Capabilities," Yahoo Sports News, Dec. 6, 2016, <https://sports.yahoo.com/news/national-womens-history-museum-receives-181500180.html>.

²⁴ Johnson, *Funding Feminism*, 223-224.