Chapter One

The Divisions Begin

There is no slave, after all, like a wife . . . Poor women, poor slaves . . . All married women, all children and girls who live in their fathers' house are slaves.

-Mary Boykin Chesnut
A Diary from Dixie, 1861

Moreover, my mistress, like many others, seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; that they were created merely to wait upon the family of the mistress.

-Harriet Jacobs
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 1861

Departing from separate, distant shores, European and African women first sailed into American history together at Jamestown in 1619. The White women came as part of a plan to ensure the continuing success of the first permanent English settlement in the New World. Those in charge of the new colony feared that if "maydens" were not sent soon, the tiny settlement would fail. In contrast, the first African women who disembarked at Jamestown that same year were rather less expected, although perhaps no less welcome. They were among a small group of mostly male African slaves on board a Spanish slave vessel en route to the West Indies when it was pirated at sea by a "Dutch man of War" ship. After finding his way to Virginia, the ship's captain, in need of food, offered his human bounty in exchange for more substantial supplies. Thus it was that, as casualties of imperialism, the first women of European and African descent stepped ashore in America.

Nearly four hundred years later, we can only speculate how these women, whose appearance and culture varied sharply, reacted when they set eyes on each other. History has traditionally been written from the male perspective, but in this chapter, our nation's past will be framed by the unique experiences of White women and Black women. They were not always in conflict. Initially, in fact, they likely shared an intense desire not to be in this strange land. But as the scattered settlements grew, and most particularly as slavery was institutionalized and race mixing banned, their experiences diverged along lines of color, class, and freedom. Even when slavery ended, relations between Black women and White women were so damaged that the women were unable to form an effective alliance to win their suffrage. Exploring Black and White women's history together can help us better understand why so many tensions still linger between them.

Early Relationships

For the most part, White women did not want to come to the New World; they were bribed, captured, and banished here as punishment. Nonetheless, some American history books continue to romanticize the arrival of the first White women-portraying them in pictures as fashionably dressed, carrying parasols, and strolling down gangplanks to a crowd of eagerly awaiting courtly gentlemen. The stark reality was that most of the women were prostitutes and waiters, ne'er-do-wells and religious dissidents, rounded up off the streets of London and rudely informed that their punishment was shipment abroad. A more accurate scenario is that of downtrodden females dressed in filthy rags, staggering off rat-infested ships, sick and demoralized, albeit grateful to be on land again. Once they disembarked, these White women, like many of those who followed, were treated like chattel, sold as indentured servants to the highest bidder. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 80 percent of all female English immigrants to arrive in the colonies during the 1600s paid for their voyage with four to seven years of hard labor.

The first Negro women who came to America were similarly sold as indentured servants. As good Christians, the colonists were morally opposed to slavery, so all servants were set free following some specified period of servitude. Originally, the darker-skinned women and men came not directly from Africa, but from the West Indies, where slavery had been in practice since the early 1500s- Some of them were educated, and a few had already converted to Christianity. In general, the colonial landowners who purchased servants of African descent viewed them as good workers, stronger than most Whites, and less inclined to escape into the wilderness like the Indians. The demand for their labor grew. A 1625 census indicated that there were only twenty-three Blacks, of whom ten were female, but by 1649 there was an estimated three to five hundred Negro servants. Even then, the majority of bound servants who came to the colonies were English.

For White and Black female indentured servants alike, life was physically demanding, with no guarantee of survival. Along with the men, they were sent to the fields to clear the undergrowth and plant the crops. In the evenings, the women were also expected to cook, clean, garden, and sew. And if they disobeyed, they were flogged at the whipping post. Female servants faced the additional hazard of being sexually assaulted by unscrupulous masters who stood to benefit economically from their misconduct. Colonial law was such that an indentured servant who became pregnant during her servitude was required to serve her master an additional two years. In 1662, this outrageous law was only slightly modified, so that a servant who became pregnant still had to serve an extra two years, but under a different master.

Before the mid-seventeenth century, far more men than women had made the journey to America, in part because landowners preferred
male to female laborers. Among the Africans there were at least three men for every two women, and among the Europeans there were as many as three to four men for every woman. The resulting imbalance had a number of curious social effects. For one, there was a fairly high rate of interracial marriage, especially between White men and Black women. In the wilderness no one seemed to care much, and mulatto children were a common sight. Second, the scarcity of females meant that a woman of either race who started life in America as an indentured servant could greatly improve her social and economic standing in the community by marrying someone with land, perhaps even her former owner. And if she was then lucky enough to outlive her husband, or if she inherited land from her father, she might become a landowner herself. The shortage of women probably helped women of both races get along better. Instead of being fierce adversaries in a tight marriage market, they could relax and be friends; for once there were plenty of good men to go around.

Slavery

By the second half of the seventeenth century, life for colonial Black women changed drastically for the worse. As the demand for a cheap, permanent labor force rose, Christian concerns about the morality of slavery ebbed. Up and down the Atlantic coast, colonies passed laws that rendered Negro indentured servants ineligible for freedom. It was also during this time that the demand for African women grew, as slave traffickers and local buyers realized the profit of exploiting slave Women as both workers and breeders. The rights of landowning African men were gradually taken away, and African women’s opportunities for marrying up were further reduced when interracial relationships were outlawed.

With the institutionalization of slavery, the growing population of free mulattoes in the colonies came to be viewed as a threat to society. What was the status of those who were half Black and half White in a land where race dictated who lived free and who was enslaved? In 1662, the same year that the Virginia Assembly modified its statute governing the servitude of pregnant women, colonial legislators declared that offspring rights in America would follow those of the mother, not the father. The immediate effect of the statute was to dash the hopes of slave women that their children sired by free Black men and by White men would live free. Even worse, the law encouraged White masters to exploit their female slaves sexually in order to increase the number of slaves they owned.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, slavery was an established fact of life. For every new indentured servant imported from England, three to four slaves were imported from Africa. The slave trade continued to flourish at this rate until 1807, when it was finally abolished. By then, close to a million slaves of African descent had been brought to America, and many others Were being born daily in the New World.

During the 1700s, women's lives divided strictly along lines of color. Tensions between women of the two races mounted as White women vacillated between relishing their higher status and relative power over Black women, and feeling sympathetic toward those less fortunate than themselves. On an individual basis, how Black and White women treated each other depended on such factors as personality, religious and political affiliation, and geography- whether they lived in the North or South, in rural or urban areas.

Before the American Revolution, most female slaves in the North worked as domestics in urban settings in groups of one to three. Male slaves tended to remain in the country, where they were needed to work the land. This was the pattern until some time after the Revolution, when the political climate began to change. The fight for national independence inspired many Northerners to liberate their slaves, and some joined the abolitionist movement. With an influx of White ethnic immigrants willing to work cheaply, the economic benefits of owning slaves also lessened. By the end of the eighteenth century, most states above the Mason-Dixon Line had voted to bring an end to slavery.

Quaker women were especially vocal in their opposition. Throughout the eighteenth century, they began offering freedom to their female house slaves, and others soon followed suit. Most White women, particularly wealthy ones charged with running large households, needed the domestic help, though, and did not wish to terminate relationships with their slaves. With their husbands' permission, they offered the former slaves a pittance to be paid servants instead, so even after freedom was granted, most Negro women remained in the homes of White women and were dependent on White women to treat them with kindness.

Northern White women varied in their treatment of Black women, both as slaves and as domestic servants. While many Whites were abusive, some nurtured their female African house slaves and supported their education. When John and Susannah Wheatley in 1761 purchased a slender girl of seven or eight, shivering on a Boston dock, they could have denied her an education and allowed her to pass into obscurity like so many African women who came to America. Instead, Mrs. Wheatley taught the girl they named Phillis to read and write, and gave her free access to the family's library. Mrs. Wheatley, by encouraging her slave to write poetry, helped Phillis Wheatley become this country's first published author of African descent. Sadly, when her White patron died, Phillis Wheatley found her life take a dramatic turn for the worse. Legally she was free, but poetry has never paid well. She ended up marrying a man who alienated her White friends, and she lost important literary contacts. Eventually she succumbed to poverty and disease in a boarding house in 1784.

In the predominantly rural South reliance on and defense of slavery grew after America's independence. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, White women and Black women viewed each other across a line of freedom, where their lives often touched and overlapped. While the majority of slaves in the rural South worked alongside poor White wives doing backbreaking fieldwork and domestic chores, less is known about these women than about those who worked on the larger plantations. And even among the slaves on the wealthier estates, less is known about the 95 percent of females who worked the fields every day than about the handful who came inside. Much of what we do know about all women of the antebellum South comes from the diaries of White mistresses, as they were called, who wrote about their house slaves, and from the journals of former house slaves who were educated enough to leave records of their own. Female field slaves and mistresses rarely interacted, nor did many free Black women and White women, rich or poor.
Well-to-do Southern White women were expected to do their part to uphold the plantation image, subservient to an all-powerful husband and mistress of a "family of contented slaves." As historian Anne Firor Scott put it, "Women, like slaves, were an intrinsic part of the patriarchal dream." The true Southern lady was at all times virtuous and self-sacrificing, and the wives of yeoman farmers and others on the social scale sought to attain her charming ways and perfect decorum. Ironically, even free mulatto women in cities like Charleston and New Orleans imitated the affections of White mistresses, carrying parasols and feigning weakness when it came to doors that needed opening.

The women of both races interacted according to these unwritten rules. White women were expected to be passive because they were ladies, and Black women were expected to be submissive because they were slaves. Not surprisingly, their feelings toward each other ran the gamut. Undoubtedly, female slaves envied mistresses for being free, and especially for knowing that their children would never be sold. Yet some White women also saw advantages in how Black men treated Black women, more as equals than as subordinates.

To keep the plantation household running smoothly, mistresses and female slaves alike worked hard. Before sunrise, house hands were expected to be at the "big house," where they cooked, cleaned, washed, mended, ironed, and made clothes. They also milked the cows, fed the chickens, and kept a watchful eye on the White children. Like their Black female slaves, White mistresses faced a mountain of chores every day. During a visit to America, Harriet Martineau, commenting on the workload of the Southern plantation wife, said that she "is forever superintending, and trying to keep things straight, without the slightest hope of attaining anything like leisure and comfort." Even slaves verified that their mistresses toiled endlessly. Polly Colbert recalled that "Miss Betsey cut out all de clothes and helped wid de sewing . . . She learnt all her women to sew . . . She done all the sewing for de children." In addition to overseeing all the cooking, cleaning, and sewing, plantation ladies were also expected to be perfect hostesses, regularly entertaining their husband and his friends. As one mistress confessed, "I have almost gotten thro' Christmas. What a slave a holiday makes of a mistress! Indeed, she is always a slave, but doubly and trebly so at such times."

Although wealthy plantation wives, including Mary Boykin Chesnut, whose diary entry opens this chapter, frequently mentioned working as hard as their slaves, few of them actually understood or identified with the condition of slavery. In reality, most mistresses saw themselves more as martyrs than as oppressed sisters in their dealings with female slaves. White Southern ladies may have complained about having to manage their house slaves, but they nonetheless believed that slavery was essential to their privileged position as plantation mistresses. In fact, the more slaves a mistress had, the greater her status as a Southern lady.

Southern White men were, of course, highly invested in making sure that White women in Southern society thought the same way they did on the subject of slavery. Virginia planter and proslavery philosopher George Fitzhugh, convinced that slavery helped preserve the natural softness of White Southern women, claimed that women of the North were hardened by having been "thrown into the arena of industrial war." Author Thomas Dew suggested that class slavery was at least better than gender slavery, because having slaves rescued White women from various kinds of labor that they might otherwise have had to do themselves. And William Drayton similarly detailed the ways in which White women benefited from the institution of slavery:

Her faculties are developed, her gentle and softening influences is seen and felt; she assumes the high stations for which nature designed her; and happy in the hollowed affections of her own bosom, unwearily exerts those powers so well adapted to the task of humanizing and blessing others.

For the most part, White women were convinced of the necessity of owning slaves. They drew the line, however, at female slaves serving as prostitutes. The argument that sex with slaves was advantageous to the plantation owner, as he could simultaneously satisfy his sexual needs and increase his slave property, was an affront to most White women. Although some may have privately believed, as did their husbands, that Black women were by nature more promiscuous than themselves, they nonetheless saw few advantages in having a spouse spend his spare time in the slave cabins.

Among the slaves, few girls could hope to reach the age of sixteen without being sexually assaulted. At any time, anywhere, a master, his son, the overseer, or a neighbor might suddenly decide to have his way with her. In addition to the physical and psychological pain of such attacks, the women often had to contend with pregnancy and venereal disease. Worse, these women were blamed for their own rape, unfairly characterized as jezebels constantly tempting good White men. Although occasionally a female slave did actively seek the affections of a master in the hope that he would grant her special favors and privileges, such women were typically scorned by the other slaves.

While White mistresses were spared the physical trauma of rape, they too suffered from their husbands' constant infidelities. One North Carolina planter rudely informed his wife that his favorite slave was now in charge of all domestic duties. This "gentleman" then proceeded to sleep with his concubine in his wife's bedroom. An Alabama woman finally left her husband and went to live with her parents when he abandoned her for one of his slaves. Some White wives simply resigned themselves to the fact that their husbands were sexually promiscuous; others comforted themselves with the delusion that their husbands' sexual commerce with slaves was better than adultery with other White women. Most Southern White women, however, learned to perfect the psychological defense of denial, a strategy apparent in an entry from Mary Chesnut's diary:

Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children-and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think.

No other issue so divided mistresses and house slaves as deeply as plantation rape. Sometimes when wives could no longer handle their husbands' infidelities, they vented their frustrations on female house slaves. One mistress, suspecting that her husband was molesting a
thirteen-year-old house slave, severely beat and whipped the girl, then locked her in the smokehouse for two weeks. Fearing that she might eventually kill the slave, the mistress finally ordered her son to sell the girl.

Light-skinned mulatto women were particularly vulnerable to the sexual advances of White men, and unfortunately they were the ones most frequently chosen as house servants. According to the "mulatto hypothesis," slaves with an infusion of White blood were more intelligent than those who were pure African. Consequently, it was erroneously believed that mulatto women made the finest house slaves, best able to learn the nuances of European customs, and slave jobs were frequently assigned on the basis of color, with darker-skinned women working the fields and lighter-skinned women inside.

Not all dealings between mistresses and slave women centered on rape. Nor were all Black-White female relationships filled with conflict. When women work closely together on a daily basis, as mistresses and house servants did, great bonds of friendship can form. One Southern gentleman, reflecting back on the relationship between his mother and a female slave, wrote of "an affectionate friendship that was to last for more than sixty years." Some mistresses looked on favorite female slaves as members of the extended family. They bought them presents and handed down to them the previous season's clothes. Because of this, house slaves were sometimes more fashionably dressed than the White wives of local farmers, much to the resentment of the latter.

An indication of the affection mistresses felt for house slaves was evident when they died. White women mourned long and hard when a favorite slave passed away, particularly if they believed that there was something they could have done to prevent her death. In several entries of an i834 diary, the mistress, Sarah Gayle, severely berated herself for failing to notice that her favorite slave, Rose, was limping from a wound that eventually caused her to die of lockjaw. She declared "that color made no difference, but that her life would have been as precious, if I could have saved it, as if she had been white as snow." Slave women remained more skeptical, however, about the sincerity of "Miss Anne's" grieving. As one house servant cynically put it, "Huh crying because she didn't have nobody to whip no more.

Working in close confines could also breed intense hostility, especially when the relationship was one of such unequal power. House slaves expected to work hard, but greatly resented mistresses who placed unreasonable demands on their precious free time. Slaves also took exception to the wrath of Miss Anne when her negligence caused them to get in trouble for damage done to a precious family heirloom, for example. Sometimes tensions became so great between mistresses and female house slaves that physical violence erupted. In We Are Your Sisters, Dorothy Sterling cites the following story of one such slave:

One day my Mistress Lydia called for me to come in the house, but no, I wouldn't go. She walks out and says she is gwine make me go. So she takes and drags me in the house. Then I grabs that white woman and shook er until she begged for mercy. When the master comes in, I wuz given a terrible beating but I didn't care for I give the mistress a good un too.

Despite their many differences, women of both races typically shared one thing-the desire to fall in love and get married. In the antebellum South, the wedding of a slave woman as well as that of a free woman was cause for great celebration. Even though slave marriages were not recognized as legal, they were sometimes encouraged by the masters, who believed such unions enhanced stability in the slave cabins and produced more property for them in the form of children. With an eye toward breeding, some masters even attempted to have particular slaves mate with each other, although their contrived efforts usually failed. The majority of slave marriages took place out of real affection. Ironically, compared with most White marriages, in which wealth, position, and class played a strong part, slave marriages were oftentimes more romantic. When slave men and women fell in love, together they would "jump the broom" and enter a slave cabin as true partners.

White mistresses may have coveted the slave women's more romantic relationships as well as their greater freedom not to marry. White girls faced being stigmatized if they remained single beyond a certain age, and many were pressed to accept even loveless proposals to avoid "old maid" status. Young White women could also be "ruined" by even a hint of premarital sexual activity, while slave women appeared to enjoy much greater sexual freedom. Mary Chesnut commented on this with more than a hint of envy when she wrote, "The Negro woman have a chance here that women have nowhere else. They can redeem themselves-the impropers can. They can marry decently and nothing is remembered against these colored ladies." Feminist scholar and women's studies professor bell hooks disagrees with this characterization of slave women, however, claiming that there is no evidence in slave narratives or diaries that female slaves were in any way more sexually liberated than their White counterparts.

Beyond the slaves' more romantic feelings for each other, their marital relationships also appeared to be more equal. Blacks' notions of equality apparently derived from a number of sources. Any woman who worked as hard as a man in the fields deserved his respect, and usually got it. Being at the bottom of the pecking order also served as a great equalizer; enslaved husbands could hardly claim privilege based on property, voting, or income. But there was another factor, too. African culture genuinely valued and respected women more than European culture did, particularly for their sacred role as mothers, though even in Africa women rarely assumed positions of political leadership, and the gender roles of women in "the Motherland" were in many ways just as traditional as they were in Europe. Unfortunately, the relationships of free Black men and women living in the antebellum South more closely resembled Whites' unequal marital relationships than those of Blacks who were slaves.

Pregnancy and childbirth were viewed as frightening, life-threatening events by White and Black women alike. Without proper medical care, women frequently died from such complications as ectopic or tubal pregnancies, breech positioning of the baby, failure to expel the placenta, and hemorrhaging.

Among slave women, ambivalence about having children ran high. On the positive side, women of African descent genuinely valued motherhood, perhaps even more than marriage, at least according to White historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. It was also considered a plus
among the slaves that a woman who was pregnant could look forward to a few months' relief from the more arduous chores. As she neared delivery, a slave woman sat with the older slaves and children, doing the plantation's weaving and spinning. Some slave women apparently regularly faked pregnancy and other illnesses to do just that, although it was hardly the case that pregnant slaves were pampered.

On the other hand, slave women could hardly feel joy at bringing a child into a life of slavery. Many of them resented that they were helping to increase a master's slave holdings. They also worried that the children, once they were old enough, might at any time be sold away from them. Slave women were also reluctant to have a child because of the sheer exhaustion of taking care of it. Even while nursing, they were expected to work in the fields. At lunchtime, young mothers could be seen trudging miles back home to feed their hungry babies, and then headings back into the hot sun for the afternoon shift. Other slave women opted to carry their newborns with them, strapping them onto their chests as they swung their scythes and picked the cotton.

White plantation mistresses reacted with similar mixed feelings to multiple pregnancies, but they enjoyed a distinct advantage when it came to child care; they had the luxury of turning to a slave woman to help watch over their young. The house slave who assumed primary child care duties around the plantation was traditionally called Mammy. Perhaps because she was selected by the mistress, the Mammy was usually an older and larger woman than some of the attractive house slaves picked by the master.

While much has been made of Mammy's responsibilities in caring for the White plantation children, less has been said of the White woman's role in supervising and caring for the slave children. Yet the mistress often attended to sick slave children, and it was she who was called in the middle of the night when a Black child required emergency attention. Beyond basic medical care, the White woman also did her part to make sure that slave girls were properly socialized. One slave woman, Ester King Casey, remembered that when she was young her mistress once whipped her for playing with the jailer's children, because, Miss Susan said, those poor White trash kids "told lies and talked bad." Another female slave, Frankie Goole, claimed that her mistress gave her advice any mother might give a daughter, saying "her alluz be a good girl, en don't let a man er boy trip me." Clearly there was honest affection between some mistresses and the slave children who worked in their homes. A slave named Dora Franks recalled that when she arrived in the big house, the mistress's own children had already grown and gone. Franks believes that her mistress was sweet and attentive to her because she missed having her children to care for.

Social Reform Movements

For Black and White women, the antebellum South was a darkly mysterious and contradictory place, where they shared a sense of gnawing helplessness, mutual respect, seething resentment, and occasional love. By the midnineteenth century, the plantation slave system was on the verge of collapse! As the winds of change blew from the North, women of the South reacted differently to the shifting political milieu. Female slaves were cheered by word of the abolitionist activities of their free sisters to the North, and perhaps heartened to learn about the antislavery work of White women there. A growing number of Southern White women, too, began expressing antiabolition sentiments in their personal documents, as reflected in the following passage written by a Southern White woman shortly before the Civil War began:

I cannot, nor will not, spend all these precious days of my life following after and watching Negroes. It is a terrible life . . . They are a source of more trouble to housewives than all other things, vexing them and causing much sin . . . When we change our residence, I cast my vote for a free state.

Women in the South who held such views tended to be closet abolitionists, though, as it was considered unladylike for them to express their political views in public.

In the North, women's political activities probably began with participation in the moral reform groups that sprang up at the turn of the nineteenth century. Benevolent societies, as they were also called, took on a number of social issues, including temperance, hunger, public education, and reform of our nation's prisons and mental institutions. While females were still considered intellectually inferior to men and not qualified to enter public life, they were thought to be well suited to perform high-minded charitable work. It was an important development. Those women who wished to do something outside the domestic sphere were for the first time granted an acceptable outlet for their energies.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, White and Black women of the urban North formed and joined their own benevolent societies. White women's groups were mostly populated by those who were financially well off, because poor women, without domestic help of their own, were too busy taking care of their families or earning a living. These wealthy women were for the most part well meaning in their social reform efforts, but they attempted to distinguish between the poor who were worthy and deserving of help and those who were not.

In contrast, Black moral reform groups made no such distinction in their charitable activities. From the beginning, when the free Black women of Salem, Massachusetts, in 1818 founded the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society, the primary goal was to offer assistance to one another. As those who had had intimate experience with poverty and racial prejudice, these women knew all too well that at any time they could just as easily be on the receiving end of their group's mission. Thus, even very busy poor Black women somehow managed to find time to devote to charitable societies.

Perhaps because of their greater identification with those whom they were helping, Black women led the way in making reform groups more explicitly political. As early as 1832, the determined Black women of Salem established this country's first women's abolitionist group, the Female AntiSlavery Society. Politically minded White women were quick to follow. One year later, Lucretia Mott, who is credited, along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for founding this country's women's movement, established an identically named group in
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Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the abolitionist newspaper Angelina became just as active as her sister in the abolitionist movement. In 1835, she wrote a strongly worded antislavery letter to William. Sarah left the South for Philadelphia, and eight years later, Angelina followed.

Two women from South Carolina, however, proved to be major exceptions. Sarah and Angelina Grimke were born in Charleston in 1792 and 1805. Their father was a slave-owning judge, and in most ways they were no different from other Southern belles of that era. But when they were old enough to view the institution as burdensome, finally, through working more closely with Black women in the abolitionist movement, White women would have come into contact with such powerful role models as the gifted and humorous orator Sojourner Truth and the courageous Harriet Tubman, who personally freed more than three hundred slaves on the Underground Railroad. Later, both of these Black women also became strong advocates of women's rights.

In the South, White women were much slower to react to the social reform movement of the early nineteenth century. One obstacle was that they were more spread out geographically, and it was harder for them to get together on a regular basis. In addition, Southern women were typically overwhelmed by the responsibilities of running their plantation households and farms, and didn't have the time to commit to outside activities. But the main reason that so few Southern women joined social reform groups was slavery; it had a chilling effect on all moral reform efforts. Even though some Southern White women did quietly oppose slavery, the majority remained content with the status quo.

Two women from South Carolina, however, proved to be major exceptions. Sarah and Angelina Grimke were born in Charleston in 1792 and 1805. Their father was a slave-owning judge, and in most ways they were no different from other Southern belles of that era. But when Sarah visited Philadelphia as a young woman, she came under the influence of antislavery Quakers and was awakened to the evils of slavery. When she returned home, she recruited Angelina to the cause but ran into trouble with other family members and friends. In 1821, Sarah left the South for Philadelphia, and eight years later, Angelina followed.

Angelina became just as active as her sister in the abolitionist movement. In 1835, she wrote a strongly worded antislavery letter to William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator. The following year, she drafted a thirty-six-page letter, "An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," on why White Southern women in particular needed to speak out against slavery. That same year, Sarah made a similar plea to religious leaders when she wrote "An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States." Few Whites in the South were ready to hear what the Grimke women had to say, though, and most dismissed the sisters as unfortunates, influenced by Northern politics.

The Grimkes were actually far more progressive than most women living above the Mason-Dixon Line. In fact, Sarah was among the first to specify how traditional male-female relations paralleled those of masters and slaves. To the annoyance of many, she asserted that slaves and women were similar in that both were expected to be passive, cooperative, and obedient to their master-husbands.

It seems obvious that in working for social reform, women were bound to begin fighting for their own rights, too. In 1840, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton became committed to women's rights issues while attending an international antislavery convention in London. Despite their considerable effort and expense to get there, the two distinguished women were denied delegate status, and had to sit in the balcony because they were female. When they returned to America, they put their considerable organizational skills to work for women's rights. By; then, other women active in female societies had begun to share with one another for the first time, away from the influence of disapproving fathers and husbands-account of their oppressive experiences. Thus, while it was indeed true that in working for the rights of slaves, White and Black women were made more aware of their own lack of rights, other factors, including the education that took place in social reform groups, made conditions ripe for the emergence of a woman's movement.

In 1848, Mott and Stanton hosted the first Women's Rights Convention, in Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19 and 20. In attendance were approximately 250 women and forty men, including Frederick Douglass, who passionately argued that women needed their political rights as much as Black men.

From the beginning, Black female abolitionists like Truth and Tubman were active in the women's rights movement. While many White women, including Mott, Stanton, and the Grimkés, welcomed Blacks to their cause, there were many other White women who shunned them. Still, Black women continued to insist that their demands be heard. Sojourner Truth officially began her participation in the women's movement in 1848, when she spoke at a small convention for women in Worcester, Massachusetts. At the second national Woman's Right Convention, in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, she made another statement, although she was almost denied the right to speak by a small but noisy contingent of racist White women who wanted her silenced. Apparently, they feared that Truth would damage their cause by giving the public the impression that women's rights were somehow "mixed with abolition and niggers." Her longtime supporters barely managed to
hold off these detractors, and it was amid boos and hisses that Sojourner Truth took to the podium to deliver her infamous "Ar'n't (or Ain't) I A Woman" speech. Outraged by what had just happened, she drew brilliantly on her experiences as a former slave to mock the logic on which sex discrimination was based:

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or give me any best place, and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me-and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well-and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen em mos'all sold off into slavery, and I when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard -and ar'n't I a woman?

Unfortunately, Sojourner Truth and other Black female activists continued to face racism at many women's right meetings, as well as sexism and racism at some abolitionist meetings.

By the end of the 1850s, women's rights had assumed all the elements of yet another social reform movement. Those involved met regularly on the local level, held annual national conventions, and formulated plans of action, but the movement ground to a halt when debates about slavery and state rights finally erupted into war in 1861. Although the American Civil War, like every war, was waged largely by men, it undeniably altered the lives of the women left behind. In the North, female factory workers were promoted to supervisory positions, jobs previously denied them but now vacated by the men joining the Union forces. In both parts of the country, heretofore exclusively male colleges and universities began to admit women for the first time as their pool of male applicants dried up. And in the South, many wives discovered that they could do just as good a job as their husbands in running family farms and large plantations.

By the time General Robert E. Lee surrendered, in April 1865, the country was in a state of near political ruin. Reconstruction, a difficult time, was especially hard on women. In both regions of the country, White women who had discovered their strength and independence in wartime were now being told to return to their roles as wives and mothers. Those who could go back to their old lives were considered the lucky ones. Tens of thousands of White women were widowed by the war, and found themselves struggling mightily, in the absence of fair wages for females, to make it on their own.

In the South, former slaves, many of whom were uneducated, similarly faced a life of poverty. They faced something else as well: White do-gooders from the North who invaded the South during Reconstruction. Black women, who had enjoyed fairly equal marital relationships under slavery, were suddenly being told by White missionaries and members of the Freedmen's Bureau that they were supposed to obey their husbands without question. Even Black preachers began to emphasize the necessity of conforming to traditional sex roles, drawing on the biblical injunction "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands." Meanwhile, Black men were told that it was their responsibility to be the family's sole provider. Wives were to stay home and take care of the house and children. Denied the option to do just that for so long, many former slave women were happy to oblige. But they discovered that when they did stay home, they were called lazy, not only by their husbands, but by White men whose own wives did the same without condemnation.

Those Black men able to earn enough money to support their families took great pride in providing fashionable dresses, pretty hats, and delicate parasols for their wives to wear in public. It is said that so many Black women began carrying parasols at that time that White women abandoned the custom. During Reconstruction, racist White men harassed well-dressed Black women who walked down the street. They were particularly vicious in their treatment of light-skinned women-many of whom came from families that had been free for generations before Emancipation-perhaps because their physical appearance and cultural manner most closely resembled those of White Southern "ladies."

**Suffrage**

Amidst the emerging social order, Black women were confused about what their new rights and roles should be, especially since everyone kept telling them they should put men's interests ahead of their own. They were particularly unclear about their right to vote.

During Reconstruction, suffrage was a subject on everybody's mind, and in 1866, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed full citizenship to former slaves and free Blacks. The amendment also introduced the word *male* into the Constitution, giving states the right to determine who among its male citizens of twenty-one years and over could vote. Alarmed by this development, female suffragists worried about the implications and disagreed about how to respond to the proposed Fifteenth Amendment, which, even more strongly than the Fourteenth, stated that citizens of the United States could not be denied the right to vote on the basis of their race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The suffragists wanted sex to be included as a protected category, along with race and color, but when it became clear that that wasn't to happen, they divided on whether to accept or reject the amendment as it was. Some suffragists believed that campaigning against the amendment would be a betrayal of their abolitionist friends, because a better law might not be forthcoming. Others, including Susan B. Anthony and her colleague Stanton, feared that if women did not win their rights at this juncture, the opportunity would not present itself again for a long, long time.

Stanton and Anthony had already butted heads with their old friend Frederick Douglass at an 1866 meeting of the American Equal Rights Association. Their former ally appeared to back down from his earlier commitment to female suffrage, and was now saying that, while the ballot was "desirable" for women, it was "vital" for Black men. In response, Anthony declared, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman." White and Black women fought among and between themselves over the best course of action, Sojourner Truth remained unwavering in her support of women's rights. In her inimitable way, Truth commented on the issue in 1867, when female suffrage was still very much being debated:

I feel that I have right to have just as much a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the
colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and colored women not theirs, the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great deal to get it going again. White women are a great deal smarter, and know more than colored women, while colored do not know scarcely anything. They go out washing, which is about as high as a colored woman gets, and their men go about idle, strutting up and down; and when the women come home, they ask for their money and take it all, and then scold her because there is not food. I want you to consider on that, chill'n.

Truth surely did not believe that White women were by nature smarter than Black women—perhaps more educated, but never more intelligent. She was savvy enough, however, to recognize the political advantages of such a comment, because her White activist friends were outraged at the prospect of illiterate former slaves getting the vote ahead of White women, many of whom were far more educated. For the most part, these women did not wish to deny Black men their franchise, but understandably, they felt qualified to vote, and were angry at being denied the right simply because they were female.

In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment passed without reference to sex as a protected category. Battered and embittered from the debate, members of the American Equal Rights Association split into two separate factions, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA).

The vast majority of American women, Black and White, did not belong to either organization. In the decades following the Civil War, they seemed inclined to accept society's claim that they were by nature apolitical beings and, as such, belonged not in the voting booth, but at home, taking care of their families. Some housewives even denounced female suffrage, claiming that if women were to vote differently from their husbands, domestic unrest would surely follow.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, White and Black women, however, did return in droves to their pre-Civil War role as social reformers. And once again the majority of women's clubs were split along racial lines. While Black women sometimes preferred segregated groups because they were more comfortable in them and could more easily assume positions of leadership, it was also the case that Black women were often denied membership in White women's clubs.

The largest and best known of the social reform groups of this era was the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1874. Temperance was considered a particularly appropriate cause for women because alcohol abuse was so disruptive of family life. From the beginning, WCTU policies encouraged separate Black and White unions, but at least one White woman, Amelia Bloomer, campaigned against racism within the movement, and some African American women did rise to positions of prominence within the WCTU. Frances Harper, for one, was most effective in recruiting Black women to the cause and was eventually appointed to the national office. Even so, she was plagued by issues of race, and once commented that "some of the members of different unions have met the question in a liberal and Christian manner, others have not seemed . . . to make the distinction between Christian affiliation and social equality."

Another African American woman highly active in social reform work was Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Initially, she was admitted to the 1800 conference of the General Federation of Women's Clubs because her skin color was so fair that the White delegates who registered her didn't know that she was Black. When they discovered the truth, Ruffin was banned from speaking, and an attempt was made to remove her from the convention. The White Woman's Era Club then issued an official statement, saying "that colored women should confine themselves to their clubs and the large field of work open to them there."

Not all Southern White women were racist. Some worked alongside Black women in various social reform groups, and many joined in the campaign to fight against the Lynchings of Black men. In 1902, the White women's societies of the Southern Methodist Church openly criticized Southern racial attitudes contributing to such Lynchings, and a year later, a White woman named Jessie Daniel Ames founded the fully integrated Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. At its peak, the group had over forty thousand members.

At the turn of the century, thousands of Black women also joined in the campaign for female suffrage, which had once again gathered steam during the 1880s. Among Black women who were staunch suffragists was Anna Julia Cooper, best known for the statement: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence or special patronage; then and there the whole Negro race enters with me." Cooper was particularly effective in emphasizing to Black women that they required the ballot to counter the belief that "Black men's" experiences and needs were the same as theirs. (Even today, ask anyone when Blacks first got the right to vote, and most will tell you "after the Civil War"—and in so doing, fail to acknowledge that only Black men were enfranchised at that time.)

Unfortunately, not all African American men supported female suffrage. Many believed, as did their White conservative counterparts, that women belonged in the home. The opposition of Black men did not stop Black female suffragists from speaking up about their rights, though. In a 1912 article for The Crisis, Mary Church Terrell wrote:

If I were a colored man, and were unfortunate enough not to grasp the absurdity of opposing suffrage because of the sex of a human being, I should at least be consistent enough to never to raise my voice against those who have disenfranchised my brothers and myself on account of race.

There also remained a significant number of Black women opposed to female suffrage. Some took that stand for no other reason than that their husbands did, and others simply distrusted anything that White women were fighting so hard to get. Even many Black women who supported the ballot recognized the expediency with which some White female suffragists treated Blacks. Antilynching crusader and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett reacted strongly to evidence of racism, and was not afraid to call White suffragists on their often hypocritical behavior. Others were more diplomatic in their response to White women. For example, when Susan B.
Anthony attended the 1903 NWSA national convention in New Orleans, she was invited to visit the all-Black Phillis Wheatley Club. While she was there, the club president, Sylvanie Williams, informed Anthony that Black women were painfully aware of their inferior position among the White suffragists, but added:

When women like you, Miss Anthony, come to see us and speak to us it helps us believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man, and at least for the time being in the sympathy of women.

It didn't seem to matter how Black women responded; they were being ignored. As late as 1919, it was clear that a growing number of White women were ready to settle for an amendment that would give them, but not Black women, the ballot. Even Alice Paul, White president of the radical National Women's Party (NWP), whose extreme suffragists experienced picketing, imprisonment, and a hunger strike, appeared willing to write off suffrage for Black women. She is alleged to have told one audience of Southern Whites "that all of this talk of Negro women voting in South Carolina was nonsense." White men, particularly those in the South, were convinced that Black women would turn out in greater numbers to vote than White women, which would upset their White advantage at the polling place.

In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote, was finally ratified, without any reference to race. As it turned out, White women's concerns about the South hardly mattered. The amendment passed without the support of Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi. In fact, the only Southern states to ratify it were Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas, and Arkansas.

White women could not have predicted this course of events, though. In a lingering era of lynchings and Jim Crow laws, any move to double the enfranchisement of the American population was perceived as having potentially volatile racial implications, and nowhere was this more so than in the South. For White women, the issue was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, had more of them visibly aligned themselves with Black women, the passage of the suffrage amendment most certainly would have been delayed by racist White men threatened by the new alliance. On the other hand, had White women fully embraced Black women into their suffragist cause, there would have been more good will between them. Ironically, some historians believe that American women would have soon gained the right to vote anyhow, as most other Western nations were moving in the direction of enfranchising their female citizens. Again, though, White women didn't know this at the time, and they used "whatever means necessary" to get the suffrage amendment ratified.

When White women and Black women did vote in the first federal election, in 1920, they learned that enfranchisement had been oversold; White men remained in control of federal, state, and local governing bodies. Women of both races discovered that their influence in politics was hardly felt.

Following passage of the suffrage amendment, younger women failed to keep the feminist handwagon rolling. Despite their short skirts, cigarette smoking, and bobbed hair, the women of the Roaring Twenties and Harlem Renaissance were basically apolitical. They were out to have fun. While women may have flirted with independence, their primary goal in life was to marry well and have children.

Even the formally activist NWSA lost its political edge when it designated as its successor organization the conservative nonpartisan League of Women Voters. During the twenties, the LWV opposed the equal rights amendment (ERA), first introduced by Alice Paul and her National Women's Party. Even though the NWP pledged to work for all women's equality, it remained a racially segregated group. Debates on the ERA, even then, were carried out mostly by middle- and upper-class White women.

For the most part, attempts at Black-White female cooperation failed during the first half of the twentieth century. One effort included the Council for Interracial Cooperation (CIC), founded in Atlanta in 1920, and another was the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA), which similarly sought to develop an interracial allegiance. But as the lynchings of Black men continued,

Black women activists turned away from White women, forming their own groups, such as the National Association of Colored women and the National Federation of Afro-American Women, and establishing coalitions with Black men to address more pressing matters of racial discrimination and hatred. As early as 1924, Black activist Nannie Burughs observed that White women were overlooking and undervaluing Black women as a political force. She repeatedly warned that White women should tap the voting potential of the Black female electorate before White men denied it, but her advice went unheeded. Throughout the South, the disenfranchisement of Blacks spread, through the exorbitant poll taxes and demanding literacy competency tests. Although Black women were disappointed, they were hardly surprised when their former White suffragist friends failed to stop this development.

During the long depression that followed, voting must have seemed the least of Black women's problems. They continued to face severe poverty and wage discrimination. By one estimate, 80 percent of Black women in 1920 were employed as menial workers, such as farm laborers, cooks, or domestic servants. Even during the Second World War, when Blacks and Whites were both hired to do so-called men's factory work, Black women continued to be paid less than White, women for doing the exact same job. By 1945, the situation was not much better, as Black women continued to hold the lowest rank in the economic scale among men and women, Blacks and Whites.

Historians Lois Scharf and Joan Jensen have described the period from the 1920s to the 1940s as the "decades of discontent" in the women's movement because so little happened. White and Black women still interacted, but primarily as domestic servants and employees in the homes of Whites, or as co-workers in factories and offices. Politically, they did not come back together until the late fifties and early sixties, when a handful of Northern White women headed South to help in the drive to register Blacks. By the end of the sixties, White and Black women again joined forces for this country's second wave of feminism. It was time for a new generation of White and Black women to learn the painful lessons of social activism and political cooperation.