



Votes for "Everywoman"

Nellie Griswold Francis, the Women of Rondo, and Their Suffrage Crusade

LEETTA M. DOUGLAS, PAGE 1

Cameos (top to bottom): Lillian McKnight, May Black Mason, Elnora Smith, Bessie Miller

Sinclair Lewis was the first US citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. The Minnesota-born author, whose doctor father once worried his son would never make anything of himself, wrote twenty-three novels, many of which were adapted to film.

Interscholastic athletic teams on which Harry Sinclair Lewis played in high school:

0^a

By 1930, languages into which one or more of Lewis's novels had been translated:

13^b

Main Street's rank on the Modern Library list of 100 Best Novels:

68^c

Appearances on college syllabi of Sinclair Lewis's work:

399^d

Rank of Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* on Amazon's Top 100 list in January 2017:

4^e

Minnesota-born writers who have won the Nobel Prize for Literature:

2^f

To learn more about the author, see Ralph L. Goldstein's article "The View from Summit Avenue: Inspiration Point for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*" on page 12.

SOURCES: See page 23.

ON THE COVER

Portrait of Nellie Griswold Francis by artist Jennifer Soriano, based on an image from *The Appeal*, May 7, 1921. Original is a 16" x 11" charcoal drawing with sprayed gouache and a Sumi-nagashi ink print wash on heavyweight watercolor paper, which will be part of an upcoming *Persistence: Continuing the Struggle for Suffrage and Equality, 1848–2020* exhibition at Ramsey County Historical Society. Art courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society. Cameo images from *Musical America* 28. Courtesy of University of Minnesota Libraries.



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Message from the Editorial Board

As always, the stories of our people make history. We are pleased to publish Leetta Douglas's profile of Nellie Griswold Francis, a Black suffragist and civil rights leader in Saint Paul during the early twentieth century. Francis and a group of determined women worked to advance the cause of women's right to vote with the Everywoman Suffrage Club in the Rondo neighborhood and later supported progressive causes nationally. This issue also features Ralph Goldstein's article on Sinclair Lewis's ties to Saint Paul, where he wrote parts of his novels, including *Main Street*, which was published one hundred years ago. And Mark Taylor presents the story of Perrie Jones, longtime city librarian, whose legacy includes establishing The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. Finally, we note that we will miss Paul Verret, who acted as a wise steward of philanthropy. During his term as RCHS board chair and continuing on, Paul had unflagging faith in our mission and our ability to fulfill it.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Correction: Regrets to Campbell Casper, whose first and last names were reversed in the article "Public Archaeology: Unearthing the Past in Ramsey County and Beyond" in the Spring 2020 issue.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Thanks to the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, the Sinclair Lewis Society, and The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library for their financial support.

Nellie Griswold Francis, the Women of Rondo, and Their Suffrage Crusade

LEETTA M. DOUGLAS

It was 1921, and there was no better way to kick off a promising new year than with a bold declaration by a bold group of women from the Everywoman Progressive Council in Saint Paul’s Rondo community. At 8 p.m. sharp, Union Hall, “was comfortably filled when the performance [of ‘The Deacon’s Awakening’] began.”¹

The one-act playlet told the story of an old-fashioned religious man opposed to equal voting rights for women. Deacon David Jones was upset that his daughter Ruth, a Howard University student and organizer of a club of

“colored suffragists”² was rallying women to vote in the 1920 presidential election. His family helped him understand and accept the positive social changes for women.³

Nellie Griswold Francis, a suffragist, civil rights leader, and president of the Everywoman Progressive Council, directed and starred in the augmented play, written by Willis Richardson following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920. It addressed the lingering resistance to women exercising their right to vote. In Mrs. Francis’s mind, the performance was not just a way to entertain the community; it was meant to send a clear message. Women’s voting rights were finally here; the debate needed to be over.

For three decades, the now forty-seven-year old Francis had stood on the front lines in the battle for equal rights for all women. She occasionally conveyed her messaging through staged performances to educate, entertain, and call Minnesota’s largest African American community to action. It was only fitting that that night’s performance ended in celebration of a new era.

The Griswolds: A Family That Made a Difference

Nellie Griswold was born on November 7, 1874, in Nashville, Tennessee; her sister, Lula, was two years older. Their father, Thomas H. Griswold, worked as a merchant at the Nashville City Market and helped found Mount Ararat, the area’s first Black cemetery. He served as one of two Black city councilmen. The girls’ mother, Maggie Seay Griswold, was active in Nashville and in her adopted community of Saint Paul. She was the daughter of Nellie Allen Seay, who had once been enslaved by Colonel Robert Allen, a Tennessee legislator. The elder Seay lived for more than 115 years and was respected within Nashville’s



The Crisis, a publication of the NAACP, published Willis Richardson’s script in November 1920 with this illustration. The magazine and the original text from the playlet are available online, thanks to The Modern Journals Project.

African American community. Francis's maternal aunt, Juno Frankie Pierce, became a prominent suffragist and activist in her own right.⁴

In 1881, friend Milton Fogg, who'd moved from Nashville to Saint Paul, convinced Mr. Griswold that the Minnesota city might offer educational advantages for the girls. The family moved north in 1883.⁵

A Natural Public Figure

When the Griswolds arrived, they shared an apartment at 181 W. Third Street with the Fogs. During the summer of 1884, Mr. Griswold worked for Hotel Chateaugay, owned at that time by the Markoe family in White Bear Lake. The Griswolds spent their summer there. Twelve-year-old Lula was a talented pianist, and Nellie loved to sing. It is said that the two young ladies impressed Ralston Markoe, who asked them to provide musical entertainment for the hotel guests on occasion.⁶

That fall, the Griswolds moved to 28 E. Sixth Street in Saint Paul. The girls attended the Madison School. For the next fifteen years, their father worked at multiple hotels and restaurants as a waiter, along with a stint as a porter with the Great Northern Railroad (GNRR). The family joined Pilgrim Baptist Church on Sibley Street, where Lula played the organ.⁷

In 1887, twelve-year-old Nellie reached her milestone year. On March 1, the preteen made her society debut at the inaugural gala for the Excelsior Literary and Social Club. She wore a blue satin gown with a lace overdress and sang a duet with her sister.⁸ Later that month, the Fogs invited Nellie to their son Charles's fifteenth birthday party. That's where she met William T. Francis, a seventeen-year-old boy who had moved from Indianapolis.⁹

In April, St. James African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church offered a series of Easter services and invited members of Pilgrim Baptist Church. At one service, the program began with "Rock of Ages," sung by the St. James choir. Spiritual and traditional folk songs were performed with essays in between. Halfway through the program, "Misses Nellie Griswold, Mandie Conway, Rena Bradbury, and Master Willie Francis"¹⁰ recited a dialogue titled "Women's Rights." It is likely this was the first time Nellie addressed the topic of women's suffrage in

front of a large audience. There is no record of what was said, but the dialogue was regarded as "one of the novel features of the evening" by the *Western Appeal*.¹¹

Taking the Stage

By high school, Nellie had learned that the stage could be used to urge social change. In June 1891, she was the only African American graduate from Saint Paul Central High School.¹² During the ceremony at People's Church, Nellie delivered a passionate commencement speech, "The Race Problem," on racial discrimination in the United States. She spoke of the progress made by African Americans over the previous thirty years and concluded:

May the people of this country, North and South, East and West, early awake to the sense of their duty in this matter and thoroughly realize that the race problem must be settled right, and then will the early rays of the morning sun kiss the fair land of a happy, peace loving, justice-doing people; and then can all, black and white, American and foreign-born, shout with one glad shout that shall sound and resound from pole to pole, and from sunrise to sunset, this is the land of the free.¹³

Nellie received thunderous applause from a "crowd of thousands," earning second-place from an oratorical contest committee.¹⁴

While Nellie liked the limelight, she also enjoyed the behind-the-scenes work of writing and directing. Performed before a crowd at Pilgrim Baptist Church on January 1, 1892, Nellie's play "The Magic Mirror" was the story of a knight seeking a bride with the help of a magician. It starred Nellie's friend and future husband, Willie Francis as Sir Knight Francis William and Nellie as the bride.¹⁵ Three weeks later, Nellie and another young woman, Fannie Dodd, assumed the role of lawyers and conducted a mock trial to "push women's rights."¹⁶

The hard-working community leader continued speaking about the rights of women in November 1895 at the Twin City Hall, where she gave a toast titled, "The New Woman" for Minnesota Lodge No. 2. Three years later, following the Cuban War of Independence, the

African-American communities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis presented a dramatic play titled *CUBA* in support of the Cuban people and their struggles. Of course, the then-married Mrs. Francis was involved in the planning. The play opened at the Metropolitan Theatre in Minneapolis to a crowd of 2,000.¹⁷ All of these artistic, motivational, and dramatic skills shaped and prepared Francis for future endeavors.

Making a Difference . . . for “Everywoman”

After graduation, Francis worked as a stenographer with the Great Northern Railway, where her new husband also was employed. She then worked for over twenty years with West Publishing Company on Third Street, now Kellogg Boulevard.¹⁸

At the turn of the century, the young couples’ prominence rose on the national political scene. They were members of the National Afro-American Council (NAAC), which hosted social receptions for prominent leaders W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington when the men visited the city on occasion.¹⁹

In 1909, on behalf of her church, Mrs. Francis traveled to New York to obtain funding for a new pipe organ. (See sidebar, page 8.) While out East, she stopped in Washington, DC, to meet US Senator Moses E. Clapp, who introduced her to President William Howard Taft. A few years later, Francis was elected president of the Afro-American Women’s Clubs of Minnesota at the organization’s state convention, after which she traveled to Hampton, Virginia, as a delegate to the national convention.²⁰

By 1914, the duo had been married twenty-one years. They never had children, but by then, Mr. Francis had worked for a decade as a successful attorney. The couple enjoyed comfortable lives, which meant Mrs. Francis could quit work and volunteer more, dedicating herself to woman’s suffrage, advocating racial equality, and leading church and civic duties and women’s club activities.

Speaking for women’s rights, including the right to vote, was especially important to Francis. In October 1914, she founded the Everywoman Suffrage Club for African American women in Minnesota. She also led a Red Cross committee affiliated with the Women’s Welfare



Nellie Griswold in 1891.
From Central High School
Records, courtesy of
Minnesota Historical
Society.

League, of which she was one of just a few African American members.²¹

At least fifty women from the Rondo community and fellow church members joined Francis as suffragists. They were homemakers, single working women, widows, and wives of mostly working-class men. This group made a significant difference in fighting for many important issues, including race.²²

For example, a reported discussion at a Women’s Welfare League meeting turned to the controversial 1915 silent movie, *The Birth of a Nation*. Francis encouraged suppressing the film because of its dangerously racist portrayal of African Americans. Many in the community worried about the movie, as it presented sympathetic views of the Ku Klux Klan. Francis’s husband lobbied the city council to ban the film. Saint Paul’s newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter also got involved. In a compromise, some offensive scenes were cut, but it was still shown at select theatres.²³

Still, attitudes began to change, and representatives in higher office were slowly showing community support. At the annual gathering of the Minnesota Federation of Women’s Clubs, Governor Winfield Scott Hammond stated, “that the time is past when there is such a thing as a hyphenated citizenship . . . The colored citizen . . . should be recognized as the people of any other race . . . he should have full privileges and be loyal to them.”²⁴

To see a partial list of African American women from Saint Paul who likely were involved in the suffrage movement, click on the link next to the Summer 2020 issue at <https://bit.ly/2BxDRWy>.

In 1916, *The Appeal* published a declaration written by Francis as president of the Everywoman Suffrage Club. She spoke in support of the Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs, which stood against the national organization because of its stance encouraging white club memberships only. The Detroit chapter invited the Detroit Study Group, a Black women's club, to affiliate. In the article, Francis said, "... the Everywoman Suffrage Club . . . does hereby heartily commend the action of women engaged as they are in an effort to uplift ALL women without respect to race or color, and to wish them success in their effort."²⁵

The work never slowed. In July, the Francises hosted Mrs. Booker T. Washington in their home at 606 St. Anthony Avenue and escorted her to Minnehaha Falls for a picnic. That same week, Francis and Albreta Bell marched in a prohibition parade downtown. The pair also represented the Everywoman Suffrage Club at the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs' convention in Baltimore.²⁶ Next came the Thirty-Fourth Annual Minnesota State Suffrage Association Convention. Over two days in early December, Francis and a handful of delegates and members, including "Mesdames H. High, Eula Hunter, S. Wright, W. V. Howard, E. Irvin, W. Hood, G. Wills, W. B. Tandy, C. Sharpe and

W. Walker,"²⁷ traveled to the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis with the goal to "secure equal suffrage for every man and woman regardless of race, creed or color."²⁸

In 1917, Francis and three other members, Mrs. W. B. Tandy, Mrs. W. V. Howard, and Mrs. B. N. Murrell, served as delegates at the thirty-fifth convention held at The Saint Paul Hotel. The following year, the convention returned to the Radisson.²⁹

Francis often spoke to groups around the Twin Cities, including the congregation of the "Women's Missionary societies of the White Baptist Church." She addressed the concerns of the African American community, including "civil and political rights and . . . the enactment of laws for the suppression of lynching also for better educational facilities for Negro children in the public schools in the South . . ."³⁰

The club met in member homes. One month, the women conducted business at the home of Mrs. W. J. Echols, and discussed "the suffrage petition in the 3d precinct of the eighth ward."³¹ At another meeting, Rev. J. C. Anderson shared "Why we should petition our Legislature to memorialize Congress to pass the Susan B. Anthony Federal Amendment."³²

There were setbacks, including factions of the suffrage movement at the national level that

Members of the Everywoman Suffrage Club joined other organizations together, including The Folk-Song Coterie of Saint Paul, where women studied and performed Black folk music. It appears that seven of the nine pictured here belonged to both groups. *Back row (L-R):* Hattie Oliver, Birdie High, Lillian McKnight, Elnora Smith, Emma Archer, and Cora Grissom. *Front Row (L-R):* May Black Mason, Nellie Francis, and Bessie Miller. *From Musical America* 28, (August 3, 1918), 10, courtesy of University of Minnesota Libraries.



wanted to deny Black or uneducated women, poor immigrants, and Indigenous women the right to vote.³³ The Everywoman Suffrage Club just kept fighting.

Francis wrote letters to the editor, and, it always helped to know people in high places. Through her work, she met Hallie Quinn Brown, the distinguished educator and civil rights activist from Ohio. Brown was twenty-four years older than Francis, but they shared compassion and the resolve to fight for women's suffrage and racial equality. They also shared mutual friendships with Du Bois and the Washingtons. Francis and the Everywoman Suffrage Club invited Brown to speak at several suffrage events as well as at a lavish twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party at the Francis home on August 8, 1918. While in town, Brown addressed the local Welfare League and participated in a fundraising event for the Crispus Attucks Orphanage and Old Folks' Home. Just for fun, the Francis family treated their guest to a performance of William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, at Como Park.³⁴

Another supporter was Clara Ueland. Ueland, the first president of the Minnesota League of Women Voters, worked closely with Francis and attended at least one meeting of the Everywoman Suffrage Club. Ueland referred to Francis as a star and observed that her friend's "ruling motive [is to] help her race."³⁵ And so it was.

Securing the Vote . . . Finally!

On September 8, 1919, Minnesota became the fifteenth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. But to amend the US Constitution, a three-fifths majority was needed. It wasn't until Tennessee voted for ratification nearly a year later that the majority was met, and on August 26, 1920, all women from every race, income, and education level could fully celebrate.³⁶ The work of the Everywoman Suffrage Club and the larger suffrage community in the state and country paid off.

Women across Minnesota celebrated. One can imagine that along Rondo, St. Anthony, and Central Avenues, Francis and other members likely stepped outside in jubilation, wearing the colors of the movement—purple, white, and gold—and waved their banners high. It's even possible that they sang their beloved club song,



Buttons like this one helped the suffragists promote their cause. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

the catchy campaign tune, "Mr. Harding, You're the Man for Us!"³⁷

As the 1920 election drew near, Everywoman Suffrage Club members walked the neighborhood and knocked on doors, encouraging women in their community to exercise their hard-won right to vote.³⁸

It's interesting to note, that after the endless work of the Everywoman Suffrage Club (members changed the name to the Everywoman Progressive Council after the election), *The Appeal*, hardly remarked on the momentous first opportunity for women to vote. Four days after the election and buried on page four, it noted, "The results of the election in Minnesota were really pretty satisfactory," and one column over, "Last Tuesday, election day, for the first time in

Nellie Francis and the Everywoman Suffrage Club placed ads and ran editorials in the weekly papers, making sure their voices were heard. In *The Appeal*, October 23, 1920, 3.

POLITICAL POINTERS.

Through the efforts of Mrs. W. T. Francis, president of the late Every Woman Suffrage Study Club, Mrs. T. B. Cook and Mrs. C. D. Jones will act as ballot judges on election day, also Mrs. Francis.

All women who did not register in June must register on Saturday, Oct. 23, if they wish to vote. You cannot vote on election day if you are not registered.



Shortly after the elections, the *St. Paul Daily News* ran this image recognizing some of the women from Everywoman Suffrage Club and their contributions to the community in securing votes for women and victory for the Republican party: 1) Mrs. A. W. Jordan, 2) Mrs. Frances M. Davenport, 3) Mrs. Nellie Francis, 4) Mrs. O. C. Hall, 5) Mrs. J. H. Dillingham, 6) Mrs. Grant Bush, 7) Miss Lucille James, and 8) Mrs. George W. James. *The Appeal* reprinted this image three weeks after the election. In *The Appeal*, November 20, 1920, 2.

history, women were employed as election officers at several of the various voting places, and had a taste of what the men had to go through at each election heretofore.”³⁹

Finally, three full issues after the election, *The Appeal* reprinted, with permission, an homage to the local African American women who were “important factors in securing the recent Republican victory.”⁴⁰ The recognition first ran in the *St. Paul Daily News*.

Clearly, 1920 was an important year for the club and the rights of women. There was much to celebrate with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but the work wasn’t over. Just because the law said women had the right to vote and had other rights as equal citizens didn’t mean all members of the general public agreed

with that outcome. So it wasn’t surprising when Francis and members and supporters of the Everywoman Progressive Council presented their play *The Deacon’s Awakening* that first day of 1921.

The afterglow from the election continued as Francis and a delegation of suffragists attended the inauguration of President Harding on March 4, 1921. In his speech, the president briefly mentioned the movement:

With the nation-wide induction of womanhood into our political life, we may count upon her intuitions, her refinements, her intelligence, and her influence to exalt the social order. We count upon her exercise of the full privileges and the performance of the duties of citizenship to speed the attainment of the highest state.⁴¹

Still, while the travel was exciting, Francis had more disturbing issues on her mind that required constant attention.

The Fight for Justice Continues

After World War I ended, murder by lynching across the country increased. Francis read a resolution against the lynching and burning of African Americans to the congregations of several Saint Paul Baptist churches in 1918. She sent copies of the resolution to President Woodrow Wilson, Minnesota congressmen and senators, the secretary of the NAACP, the Department for Suppression of Lynching, and the National Association of Colored Women.⁴²

Then, in the midst of her work to secure the vote, lynching hit close to home. On June 15, 1920, six Black laborers with a traveling circus were arrested in Duluth, accused of raping a white woman. Three of the men, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, never stood trial. Rather, they were forced from the city jail by a mob and lynched. The Black community was outraged. The NAACP established a Duluth branch in September. Many meetings followed, with a visit from Dr. Du Bois the following spring.⁴³

The fight for anti-lynching legislation ramped up thanks to Francis’s insistence, which was supported by the Everywoman Progressive Council. Her husband helped frame the legislation

as Black Minnesotans worked long weeks and months to persuade the legislature to pass the bill. It was finally signed into law on April 21, 1921, providing for the removal of police officers negligent in protecting persons in their custody from lynch mobs and ensuring that damages be paid to the families.⁴⁴

For her efforts, the members of Pilgrim Baptist Church awarded Francis with a “Silver Loving Cup,” honoring her fortitude in the fight. Francis responded:

Your children will reap the harvest of our solidarity, of our determination to stand together, to fight together, and, if need be, to die together; for they are dying, every day, the men and women of our race, martyrs to lynch-law, the fiery stake and the awful savagery of peonage; that these, your children, may know full liberty and an equal chance in life.⁴⁵

The Everywoman Progressive Council continued to meet regularly for social get-togethers, community service, and to solve continuing social injustices. For example, at a 1924 meeting, women shared thoughts on “Women—White and Colored—Can They Grasp Hands?” Among the guests was Sarah Colvin, a white doctor’s wife and leader of the Minnesota Congressional Union who, in the heat of the suffrage movement, had protested in front of the White House and was twice arrested.⁴⁶

Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Francis Make Some Moves

Later that year, the Francises purchased a new home a few miles away at 2095 Sargent Avenue. While they were well loved by most in their community, a multitude of white residents in what is today known as the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood were not happy to receive them. Thus began a multi-month campaign to stop the move by the Cretin Improvement Association. Some Saint Paulites made threatening phone calls and sent anonymous letters. They signed petitions, marched in a parade carrying torches, and offered the Francises a thousand dollars to break the contract. They even burned two crosses in the couple’s yard and one in the yard of the man

who sold the house. The pair refused to back down. They’d been fighting injustice all their lives, and they’d keep fighting. They eventually moved in and remained at the home for a few years before they made an even bigger move—to the other side of the world.⁴⁷

William Francis had done well for himself as a prominent attorney, a community leader, and as a member of the Republican party. He was well liked, well respected, and selected by President Calvin Coolidge to serve as US Minister/Consul General to Liberia. The Francises made their biggest move—overseas—in 1927, but tragedy struck less than two years in when William died of yellow fever. His grief-stricken wife returned to Saint Paul. The members of Pilgrim Baptist paid their respects on August 11, 1929.⁴⁸

Another Forty Years of Service

Shortly thereafter, Francis said goodbye to Saint Paul, her home of nearly fifty years, and returned to her birthplace. In Nashville, she buried her husband. She remained in the city to care for her grandmother until her death in 1931. Following a brief move to California, Francis returned to Tennessee to continue her work for women’s rights and civic justice, living a fairly quiet life while doing what she did best; making things happen for her community. She took a secretarial job at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University, was named Woman of the Year by the Metropolitan Chapter of the National Council of Negro Women in 1955, and was honored again seven years later. In 1961, Francis received \$10,000 in recognition for her unpaid work over a decade

William and Nellie Francis shortly before their move to Liberia. Image of W. T. Francis from *Northwestern Bulletin Appeal*, November 1, 1924, 1. Image of Nellie Francis in *Mary Dillon Foster, Who’s Who Among Minnesota Women (1924)*, 111, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



with the Vocational Training School for Girls from the 82nd General Assembly.⁴⁹

The last decade of her life, Francis lived in nursing homes; she was frail, blind, and deaf. She died in Nashville on December 13, 1969, at ninety-five. The obituary in *The Tennessean* listed her as the “widow of William T. Francis, the U.S. minister and consul general of Liberia under President Calvin Coolidge.” That was it, other than a brief mention of her “civic and church work.”⁵⁰ By then women in Tennessee, Minnesota, and across the country had exercised the right to vote for nearly a half century. Francis’s diligent efforts and those of the Everywoman Suffrage Club appeared to be long

forgotten. She is buried in the former Mount Ararat Cemetery her father helped establish, next to her beloved husband.⁵¹

“Everywoman” an Inspiration to Every Woman

These last several years, interest in Francis has grown as historians, students, and members of the Saint Paul community learn more about this courageous woman who led her neighbors and friends in the fight for justice and equality. Today, she is one of twenty-five suffragists remembered at the Woman Suffrage Memorial Garden on the grounds of the Minnesota State Capitol,⁵² but it’s important to point out that,

At the Heart of It All: Pilgrim Baptist Church

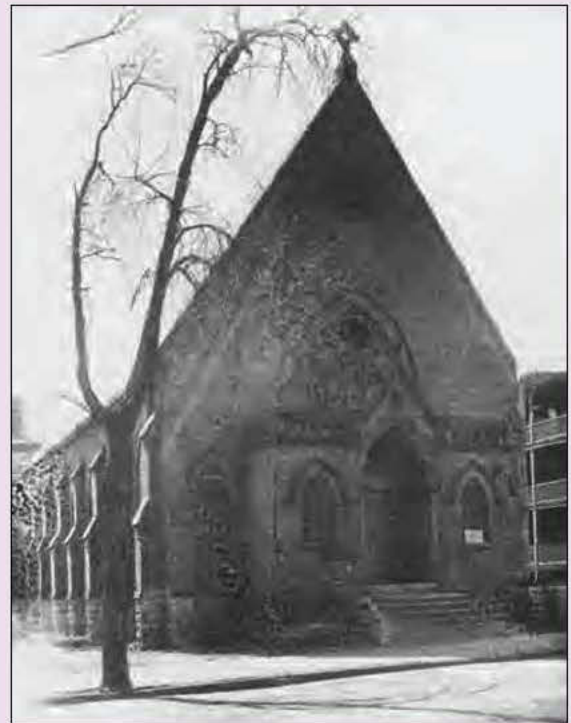
Pilgrim Baptist Church has served the African American community since 1863, shortly after Robert Thomas Hickman and a group of enslaved people seeking freedom arrived at Fort Snelling from Missouri. The group called themselves “Pilgrims” and met first in private homes and rented space, but because Hickman was not licensed to preach initially, the group was first led by white pastors. Hickman formally chartered the church in 1866, and in 1870, a sanctuary was built on Sibley Street. Rev. Hickman served the church in an official capacity from 1878 to 1886, when the congregation move to Cedar and Thirteenth Streets.^a

Under Reverend B. N. Murrell, a new church site was purchased in 1914. In the beginning, the building met the needs of the congregation, and several other groups first organized there, including the Saint Paul Chapter of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Sterling Club. Much of the community’s suffrage work also took place at that location between 1914 and 1922.^b

The church served as a community center, and as membership grew, the congregation needed more room. Dr. L. W. Harris directed the planning and building on the same site of a new sanctuary and fellowship hall between 1922 and 1928. Pilgrim Baptist Church at 732 West Central Avenue still serves a large congregation today.^c

Nellie Francis took on many roles there. One of her early efforts was securing a thousand dollars for an organ. According to church history, “Mrs. Nellie Francis, wife of W. T. Francis, . . . heard about the Andrew Carnegie pipe organ fund for poor and needy churches. [She] traveled to New York and convinced the Carnegie Foundation Organ Committee that Pilgrim was deserving of their charitable gift. As a result of her efforts, Pilgrim was presented with an [Estey] organ which remained in service until 1958.”^d

At points in her life, she served as president of the Baptist Missionary Circle and corresponding secretary of the Tri-State Women’s Baptist Convention. She also formed and directed a singing group called the Folk-Song Coterie. Made up of mostly church women, the group performed reproductions of original African American chants. Francis regarded this music as the “only real American folk music” that was developed through “faith, suffering, and tears.”^e The Coterie performed often at church and patriotic events to raise money in support of war efforts.



Pilgrim Baptist Church on Cedar Street. Young Nellie Griswold and her family would have joined the church when it was on Sibley. She spent the majority of her youth and time as a young adult at this building. A. F. Raymond photo.

while Francis is most often recognized for the work, other Black suffrage leaders are not.

This article has provided the opportunity to uncover some of the names and roles of these often unsung heroes. All of these dedicated women laid the groundwork for women today who are making a difference in Ramsey County—African American city council members, county commissioners, police officers, neighborhood development leaders, community and civil rights activists, and more. Thanks to recorded history, Nellie Griswold Francis, Miss Albreta Bell, Mrs. W. G. Hood, Mrs. W. V. Howard, Mrs. E. Irvin, and dozens of other members of the Everywoman Progressive Council continue to provide a little inspiration from the past to today's rising leaders—each and “everywoman.”

Leetta Maurine Douglas was raised in the Rondo neighborhood and St. James A.M.E. Church and spent much of her childhood at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. Douglas is an alumna of Central High School. She earned a BFA from the University of Houston and a master of education from the University of St. Thomas. Douglas attends Pilgrim Baptist Church, is the board chair of the Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (ASANDC), serves on the Heritage Preservation Commission, and is a retired educator from the Saint Paul Public School District.

Acknowledgment: Many thanks to Eboni Evans for her assistance.

An Abbreviated African American Voter Rights Timeline

1868—The Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship, but not voting rights, to African Americans.

1870—The Fifteenth Amendment stated male citizens could not be deprived of the right to vote. Still, discriminatory laws and practices, including poll-taxes, segregation, and Black codes were passed and enforced for decades in some states, effectively depriving some African American men and other men of color the right to vote.^a

1920—The Nineteenth Amendment granted women citizens the right to vote. However, African American women and other women of color often were prevented from voting in some places because of racist state and local policies.^b

1965—Citizens in Selma, Alabama, marched for the elimination of discriminatory voting practices on what became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Not long after, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed The Voting Rights Act, which was meant to abolish intentional barriers that effectively dissuaded or prohibited people of color from voting. This Act helped tremen-

dously, although discriminatory practices continued in some places.^c

2008—Voters elected Barack Obama, the nation's first African American President.

2012—For the first time in US history, African American voter turnout was higher than white voter turnout (66.2% compared to 64.1%).^d

2013—In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court eliminated a coverage formula in Section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that it warranted as no longer necessary, thus effectively gutting Section 5, which had required federal oversight for voting processes and changes in nine mostly Southern states. This made it easier for states to again place restrictions on certain voters (required voter IDs, gerrymandering, limited early voting, etc.)^e

In this abbreviated timeline, it's possible to see some of the advances that have been made in securing the right to vote for African Americans over the last 150 years. The timeline also illustrates setbacks and roadblocks, some of which continue to this day. It is important to note that roadblocks to voting rights also have affected other people of color, although this chart focuses primarily on African Americans.

NOTES

1. Union Hall, at the corner of Kent and Aurora Streets, served as a gathering space for the Rondo community. “Everywoman Progressive Council Will Present ‘The Deacon’s Awakening,’ The Playlet from the Crisis, Augmented By Mrs. W. T. Francis at Union Hall, St. Paul, New Year’s Night,” *The Appeal*, January 1, 1921, 3; Willis

Richardson, “The Deacon’s Awakening” *The Crisis* 21, no. 1 (November): 10-14, online at the Modernist Journals Project (searchable database), Brown and Tulsa Universities, www.modjourn.org.

2. “Everywoman Progressive Council,” 3.

3. “Everywoman Progressive Council,” 3.

4. Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 108, 194. Today, the cemetery is called Greenwood Cemetery West; Lovett, 108; "At Rest, At Last," *The Appeal*, April 14, 1906, 3; Different sources list different ages for Mrs. Seay—between 115 and 117; "117-Year-Old Slave Dies Here," *The Tennessean*, February 12, 1931, 5; "State's Oldest Resident Dies," *Nashville Banner*, February 12, 1931, 21; Carole Stanford Bucy, "Juno Frankie Pierce," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/juno-frankie-pierce/>. Pierce was president of the Negro Women's Reconstruction League and the founder of the Nashville Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Pierce opened the Tennessee Vocational School for Colored Girls in 1923.

5. "Prominent Race Woman Reaps Final Reward," *The Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal*, January 10, 1925, 1, 4.

6. "Prominent Race," 1, 4.

7. "The St. Philips Society," *The Appeal*, May 25, 1889, 3; *St. Paul City Directories* (St. Paul: R.L. Polk & Co., 1884-1906); "They Stood High," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 1, 1885, 3; "St. Paul News: Into the High School," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, June 26, 1887, 6; "Prominent Race," 1, 4; "Old Folks Concert," *Western Appeal*, June 20, 1885, 4; "Minneapolis: The Excelsior Literary Society," *Western Appeal*, July 18, 1885, 1; "A Testimonial Concert," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 2.

8. "E.L.S.C.," *Western Appeal*, March 5, 1887, 1.

9. "Locals," *Western Appeal*, April 2, 1887, 1.

10. "St. Paul," *Western Appeal*, April 9, 1887, 1.

11. "St. Paul," April 9, 1887, 1; "St. Paul," *Western Appeal*, April 16, 1887, 1.

12. The school was originally called Saint Paul High School. It was renamed Central in 1888.

13. "Nellie Francis Griswold," *The Appeal*, June 13, 1891, 3.

14. "Bright and Beaming. The Class of '91 of the High School Has a Right Royal Send-Off," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, June 12, 1891, 2; "Nellie Francis Griswold," 3.

15. "The Magic Mirror," *The Appeal*, January 2, 1892, 4.

16. "Saint Paul," *The Appeal*, January 23, 1892, 3.

17. "Spirit of Lincoln," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, November 8, 1895, 4; "Cuba," *The Appeal*, November 12, 1898, 3.

18. Heidi Bauer, "Nellie Griswold Francis" in *The Privilege for Which We Struggled: Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1999), 118; Paul Nelson, "West Publishing Company," MNopedia, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.mnopedia.org/group/west-publishing-company>.

19. "N.A.A.C.," *The Appeal*, July 5, 1902, 3; "Saint Paul," *The Appeal*, July 19, 1902, 5; "The Washington Reception," *The Appeal*, February 15, 1908, 3.

20. "Mrs. W. T. Francis Presented to President Taft at the White House," *The Appeal*, April 24, 1909, 3; "Women's Clubs Convene," *The Twin City Star*, July 6, 1912, 1.

21. "Suffrage Club Organized," *Twin City Star*, October 16, 1914, 2. Other officers of the club included Mrs. J. E. Johns, Vice President; Mrs. S. L. Maxwell, Secretary;

and Mrs. Samuel Hatcher, Treasurer; "Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Francis Have Useful Public Careers in This Community," *The Appeal*, August 24, 1918, 3.

22. Members and participants were identified in issues of *The Appeal* and *The Twin City Star*.

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25. "National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *The Appeal*, May 20, 1916, 4.

26. "Week's Records of Happenings in Minnesota's Capitol," *The Appeal*, July 22, 1916, 3.

27. "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, December 9, 1916, 4.

28. "St. Paul," 4.

29. "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, November 17, 1917, 4; "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, December 7, 1918, 3.

30. "Francis Makes Strong Appeal to White Baptists," *The Twin City Star*, April 27, 1918, 4.

31. "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, October 26, 1918.

32. "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, January 25, 1919, 3.

33. Brent Staples, "Opinion: A Whitewashed Monument to Women's Suffrage," *The New York Times*, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/opinion/central-park-suffrage-monument-racism.html>; "The Nadir: New Tactics in the Continued Fight for Suffrage | Your Vote Your Voice, The Continuous Struggle," accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.yourvoteyourvoicemn.org/past/communities/women-past/division-progressive-campaign-suffrage/nadir-racial-divide-and-black>. Before Everywoman Suffrage Club formed, Susan B. Anthony visited Minneapolis in 1901 for a national suffrage event and proposed an amendment to grant voting rights only to women who could read and write English, not only discriminating against some Black women but Indigenous women and poor immigrants, as well.

34. "Atty. And Mrs. W. T. Francis," *The Appeal*, August 17, 1918, 3-4.

35. "St. Paul," *The Appeal*, July 27, 1918, 3; Stuhler, 81.

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40. "St. Paul Daily News Reprint," *The Appeal*, November 20, 1920, 2.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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Perrie Jones in the early 1940s around the time she stepped into the role of city librarian. Her presence and the ideas and changes she brought to the table still positively impact the Saint Paul Public Library System today. (See "The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library Celebrate Seventy-Five Years: Honoring Perrie Jones, The Librarian at the Center of It All" by Mark Taylor beginning on page 24.) *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*