

Praise for
VANGUARD

“Martha S. Jones is *the* political historian of African American women. And this book is *the* commanding history of the remarkable struggle of African American women for political power. The more power they accumulated, the more equality they wrought. All Americans would be better off learning this history and grasping just how much we owe equality’s vanguard.”

—Ibram X. Kendi, National Book Award–winning
author of *Stamped from the Beginning* and
How to Be an Antiracist

“Bold, ambitious, and beautifully crafted, *Vanguard* represents more than two hundred years of Black women’s political history. From Jarena Lee to Stacey Abrams, Martha S. Jones reminds her readers that Black women stand as America’s original feminists—women who continue to remind America that it must make good on its promises.”

—Erica Armstrong Dunbar, author of
Never Caught and *She Came to Slay*

“You cannot tell the history of modern democracy without the history of Black women, and vibrating through Martha S. Jones’s prose, argument, and evidence is analysis that takes Black women seriously. *Vanguard* brilliantly lays bare how a full accounting of Black women as powerful political actors is both past and prologue. Jones has given us a gift we do not deserve. In that way she is as bold and necessary to our understanding of ourselves as the women in this important work.”

—Tressie McMillan Cottom, author of
Thick: And Other Essays

“In her inspiring new book, *Vanguard*, renowned historian Martha S. Jones gives us a sweeping narrative for our times, grounded in the multi-generational struggle of black women for a freedom and equality that would not only fulfill their rights but galvanize a broader, redemptive movement for human rights everywhere. Through the carefully interwoven stories of famous and forgotten African American women, together representing two hundred years of history, Jones shows how this core of our society—so key to winning elections today—also gave us ‘the nation’s original feminists and antiracists.’ From organizers and institution builders to preachers and writers, journalists and activists, black women found ways to rise up through the twin cracks of race and sex discrimination to elevate democracy as a whole. At a moment when that very democracy is under assault, *Vanguard* reminds us to look for hope in those most denied it.”

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author of *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*,
and executive producer of the PBS series
Reconstruction: America After the Civil War

VANGUARD

ALSO BY MARTHA S. JONES

*Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights
in Antebellum America*

*All Bound Up Together:
The Woman Question in African American Public
Culture, 1830–1900*

VANGUARD

*How Black Women Broke Barriers,
Won the Vote, and Insisted on
Equality for All*

MARTHA S. JONES

BASIC BOOKS

New York

Copyright © 2020 by Martha S. Jones

Cover design by Francine Kass

Cover image © 2019 Charly Palmer

Cover copyright © 2020 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Basic Books

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

www.basicbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: September 2020

Published by Basic Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Basic Books name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Print book interior design by Jeff Williams

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jones, Martha S., author.

Title: Vanguard : how black women broke barriers, won the vote, and insisted on equality for all / Martha S. Jones.

Description: First edition. | New York : Basic Books, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020006087 | ISBN 9781541618619 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781541618602 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: African Americans—Suffrage—History. | Women—Suffrage—United States—History. | African American women suffragists—History. | African American women social reformers—History.

Classification: LCC JK1924.J66 2020 | DDC 323.3/4092396073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020006087>

ISBNs: 978-1-5416-1861-9 (hardcover), 978-1-5416-1860-2 (ebook)

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Nancy Belle Graves,
and all of us who are her daughters.*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Our Mothers' Gardens	1
CHAPTER 1	Daughters of Africa, Awake!	15
CHAPTER 2	The Cause of the Slave, as Well as of Women	43
CHAPTER 3	To Be Black and Female	69
CHAPTER 4	One Great Bundle of Humanity	95
CHAPTER 5	Make Us a Power	121
CHAPTER 6	Lifting as We Climb	149
CHAPTER 7	Amendment	175
CHAPTER 8	Her Weapon of Moral Defense	203
CHAPTER 9	A Way to Express Themselves... and Make Change	227
CONCLUSION	Candidates of the People	267
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	277
	<i>Notes</i>	281
	<i>Index</i>	325

Introduction

OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS

I started writing *Vanguard* by collecting stories of the women in my own family. These begin, as far back as I can trace, with Nancy Belle Graves, who was born enslaved in 1808 in Danville, Kentucky. I wondered what it had been like for Nancy's daughters and granddaughters when, in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment opened a door to women's votes. That year, three generations of women in my family—from my grandmother to her mother to her mother's mother—faced the same question: Could they vote and, if so, what would they do with their ballots? And though I knew lots of family tales, I'd never heard any about how we fit into the story of American women's rise to power. I knew that Black women had won the vote unevenly in a struggle that took more than a century. They'd fought for their rights, hoping to change the lives of all Black Americans. They confronted an ugly mix of racism and sexism that stunted their aspirations. Still, I knew that I came from women who had always found a way to gather their strength and then promote the well-being of their community, the nation, and the world.

My great-great-grandmother, Susan Davis, was Nancy's oldest daughter, and when she said that she wanted to vote, it was a radical idea. Born enslaved in 1840, twenty years before the



*Nancy Belle
Graves*
(1808–1889)
MARTHA S. JONES

Civil War, Susan was a young woman when slavery was abolished in 1865. Her husband, Sam, had fought for the Union and against slavery as a private with the 114th US Colored Infantry. Sam's valor gave him a claim to political rights. Susan celebrated when, with adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment, he won the ballot in 1870. But disappointment soon followed when local laws such as poll taxes along with intimidation and violence kept her Sam from the ballot box.¹

Susan learned a critical lesson in those years: without the vote, Black Americans had to build other routes to political power. Racism kept Black Kentuckians to the sidelines on Election Day, but Susan got busy. She banded together with friends and neighbors to form a Black women's club that linked them to thousands of women across the country, in a movement that would use political power to ensure the dignity of all humanity. When the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted in 1920, Susan knew it was a new chance

for her and women like her. I can't say precisely what she did in that moment, though I like to think that she steered her buggy from her home on the edge of Danville to the voting precinct office. White commentators in Kentucky certainly worried that she would do just that. Black women, they feared, might outnumber white women at the polls and tip the balance in favor of the Republican Party. Likely Susan didn't worry about that one bit. The potential for an upset would have been just what she had in mind.²

Susan's daughter, Fannie, was settled in St. Louis, Missouri, by 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment became law. Susan had given Fannie every advantage she could manage. Above all else, that meant an education. As a teen, Fannie had left her mother's home in Danville and spent a preparatory year at western Pennsylvania's Allegheny College. Then she enrolled in the Classics course at Berea College, a place that taught Kentucky's poor, Black and white. Fannie received her bachelor's degree in 1888 and married her Berea schoolmate, Frank Williams, three years later. They began teaching careers and raised four children in Covington, Kentucky, before settling in Missouri's largest city. Frank rose to prominence as head of St. Louis's fabled Sumner High School.³

When it came to politics, Fannie borrowed a page from her mother's book. While barred from voting, she built power where she could. She proved to be a talented organizer and fundraiser and spearheaded construction of the first African American YWCA in St. Louis—named for the enslaved eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley. Its rooms gave Black women a toehold in Fannie's city, a base from which they built skills and influence. In 1919, Missouri became the eleventh state to approve the Nineteenth Amendment, but it would take the approval of fifteen more states to make it law.⁴

In the meantime, there was work to do. Fannie spent the months before the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted preparing the city's Black women for the literacy and understanding tests that officials would use to keep them from joining voters' rolls. When Election Day 1920 came around, Fannie knew what was at stake. Perhaps she even cast a ballot. If so, she would have taken special care in dressing for the occasion, putting on

a tailored dress, modest pumps, the right piece of jewelry, and a smart hat. The day of the first vote felt as special as any wedding, graduation, or public ceremony.⁵

Even when they could cast ballots, the work of winning voting rights was not complete for Black women. The Nineteenth Amendment cracked open a door, and some entered into the heart of American politics. Small numbers of those in northern and western cities exercised new political rights. But the daughters of Nancy Graves held no illusions. Even if some of them may have maneuvered past poll officials and cast ballots, the door remained closed to too many African American women. The same poll taxes, literacy tests, understanding clauses, and violence that hampered their husbands, fathers, and sons now beset Black women's lives.⁶

Susan Davis passed away in 1925. The women of Danville's Domestic Economy Club carried her vision forward for decades to come, raising student scholarship funds with poetry readings, concerts, and lectures. In St. Louis, Susan's daughter, Fannie, picked up her mother's mantle and poured her commitment to women's power into the College Club of St. Louis. She led nationally as a member of the YWCA's inaugural Council on Colored Work. When she boarded a train east to Baltimore in 1936, Fannie represented her state at the annual National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) convention, where delegates resolved: "We insist upon the right to vote and denounce the methods used in some states to deprive Negro citizens of their suffrage." Fannie—the schoolteacher turned activist—believed that getting Black women to the polls was a goal that all Americans should work toward.⁷

In 1926, Fannie's daughter, Susie, settled into her own life's work. She and her husband, David Jones, arrived in Greensboro, North Carolina, that year to do some building of their own. Four children in tow, they set down their bags in David's hometown, charged with establishing a new liberal arts school for Black women, Bennett College. Since the end of the Civil War, David's family had called Greensboro home. There, his father, Dallas, discovered that politics fit his ambitions. He, along with his uncle William Holley, became county Republican Party leaders in the 1880s and 1890s.

to power in central North Carolina as part of a coalition of Black and white Republicans.⁸

Sometime around 1890, the hammer dropped on Dallas's political career. In advance of an election, anonymous men circulated a printed notice that urged election officials to refuse Dallas and nearly four hundred other Black men from Greensboro at the polls. Each of the city's Black voters was identified by name: "The following is a correct list of the COLORED VOTERS registered at Greensboro....If any of them are on your book let us know AT ONCE, through a letter from your *Registrar*, that we may challenge them here and we may urge you to do so at your place: *but don't challenge until the day of the election.*"⁹ The surviving records don't say whether Dallas or any other Black man voted that year, but that episode marked the end of his political career.

This was the family history of voting rights that greeted Susie and David Jones when they arrived in 1926. David would be Bennett's president, and Susie acted as his partner at each turn. Together they undertook to build a college devoted to Black women's higher education. Every task Susie took on—cutting the ribbon on a new building, registering a new Bennett Belle for classes, depositing a check in the endowment fund—reflected her conviction that Black women were headed toward lives of leadership. She carried this view into the early civil rights years, raising the funds for a young Black activist and lawyer, Pauli Murray, who was documenting how Jim Crow laws blanketed the US South. Susie, a member of the Methodist Church's Women's Division of Christian Service, Board of Missions and Church Extension, underwrote and then published Murray's *States' Laws on Race and Color*. Theirs was a quiet alliance across generations. When, in 1960, Bennett College students organized a local Operation Doorknock, registering Black voters in Greensboro, Susie's support for their efforts came easily. When those same students sat-in at the city's Woolworth's lunch counter, Susie endorsed how young women used nonviolent resistance to win human rights.¹⁰

These women's stories—of Susan Davis, Fannie Williams, and Susie Jones—mark a starting place for the history that *Vanguard*

tells. Their shared foremother, Nancy Graves, persisted even as she had endured enslavement, sexual violence, war, segregation, and the denial of her political rights. Nancy had kept the homes, cradled the children, and laundered the dirty linens of white Americans, people who thought that she and her daughters were worth little more than meager shelter or paltry wages. Still, by 1920, Nancy's daughters were women of learning, status, and enough savvy to navigate the maze that led to the ballot box. They were not typical, in that their education, homes in Upper South cities, and membership in middle-class circles shaped their journeys to the vote. Still, their stories teach lessons about African American women's politics. To them, power always mattered. They supported women's suffrage, in their states and in a federal constitutional amendment. They prepared themselves and the women around them to overcome hurdles that might otherwise have kept them from voting. Still, the vote was never their only strategy or goal. The women of my family, like so many Black women, constructed their political power with one eye on the polls and the other on organizing, lobbying, and institution building. They dreamed big about women's rights and aimed high, committed to using their power to win the dignity of all people.

VANGUARD GATHERS UP Black women's stories in the spirit of Alice Walker's 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. There, Walker uncovered, waded through, and immersed herself in the lives of the women who came before her. Many of them were unknown and too few of them had been celebrated. But Walker believed that in recovering their art, their activism, their joy, and their troubles she could help us know the worlds that Black women alone had created. She went in search of how they survived and thrived in a world not always of their making. Walker discovered what she termed Black women's distinct "womanist" worldview, one that took seriously their strivings for self-possession and for power and honored their capacity for making the whole world over in an embrace of all that is human.¹¹

This book turns to the archives of Black women's political pasts to rediscover the worlds they made there. It recounts how, in their search for power, Black women built their own many-faceted and two-centuries-long women's movement. Their voices come through in the pages of tracts, newspapers, books, court transcripts, and memoirs. Yes, they struggled against racism and sexism from nearly every direction. Yet they never allowed doubters or opponents to define them. They looked out from their own positions and then devised a shared mission: winning women's power that would serve all humanity. Their grand, visionary ambition rebuked those who confined the nation's political culture to small, parochial, and exclusionary terms. *Vanguard* illuminates our own time, charting out how Black women—their values and their votes—came to sit today at the center of twenty-first-century American politics.¹²

Vanguard begins with a first generation of women who broke barriers in the 1820s, stepping up to the podium and the pulpit to insist upon having a voice in churches, antislavery societies, and mutual aid associations. By the 1860s, in the wake of slavery's abolition and with a guarantee of citizenship, Black women spoke the language of equality, dignity, and humanity and insisted on political rights. They won some battles. Black women witnessed the adoption of two constitutional amendments—the Fifteenth in 1870 and the Nineteenth in 1920—that promised them the vote. But lawmakers did not keep these promises, leaving many women to make their way in the face of rampant voter suppression: poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation. The long road to the 1965 Voting Rights Act was paved with Black women's organizing and courage. The result brought Black Americans, men and women, fully into the nation's political culture for the first time. That victory set the stage for how Black women today have assumed leadership: casting ballots, driving voter turnout, holding public office, and laboring in the trenches of precincts and parties.¹³

The women of *Vanguard* built a movement for political rights that was never separate or for women only. Its foundation lay instead in the institutions they shared with men. Their politics

unsettled these spaces with debates over what sorts of power women could exercise, and women placed real value on electing a bishop, sitting as a convention delegate, controlling finances, interpreting the Bible, running for a board, or commanding the podium. These same contests provided a training ground. Women honed their ideas while practicing leadership, the art of persuasion, and the necessity of compromise. They shouldered responsibility for the collective. They stood up to men and also won them as allies. Some women did go on to take part in suffrage associations and women's clubs. But Black women never limited their work to a single issue. Winning the vote was one goal, but it was a companion to securing civil rights, prison reform, juvenile justice, and international human rights.¹⁴

Living at a crossroads, Black women developed their own perspective on politics and power. Their view was always intersectional. They could not support any movement that separated out matters of racism from sexism, at least not for long. Associations that asked Black women to set aside or subordinate one interest for another were never a good fit. They insisted, for example, that antislavery and women's rights were parts of one movement, and that civil rights included demands for women's liberty. Black women advocated for their interests as people doubly burdened by racism and sexism, and they reasoned that when society lifted them up as equals, everyone would rise. These insights led to a political philosophy rooted in a broad quest for freedom and dignity that extended to all of humanity.¹⁵

The trouble of racism is one facet of this story, but for the women of *Vanguard*, their encounters with slights, exclusion, derision, and even violence were not the whole of their politics. Racism was a given, a constant. Some women risked being rebuffed in the interest of working in coalition with white women. Other women had no choice but to sustain the wounds of prejudice when their work or travel forced degrading confrontations. But oftentimes, Black women, with plenty of work to do in their own communities with one another, stepped around or turned their backs on racism. If white Americans too often cast

a jaundiced eye upon Black women, it was not a look that they needed to return. Remaining at a careful distance from racism was essential to personal dignity and a self-defined approach to women's power.

The stories in *Vanguard* have often been overlooked. But not wholly so. Historians over the last half century have dug deep into African American women's pasts to recover their ideas, their organizations, and their distinct brand of politics. These efforts correct a record made more than a century ago by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, who dubbed themselves *the* historians of the early women's movement. Between 1881 and 1922, they published the six-volume, fifty-seven-hundred-page *History of Woman Suffrage*. But they told only one part of the story and in that relegated Black women to the margins. Later historians relied upon these same volumes, producing new studies that, regretfully, repeated old omissions.¹⁶

Vanguard corrects that record by retelling two hundred years of Black women's political history. It does not tell every story; no history can do quite that. But by recounting the lives of some of the many Black women who engaged in political fights, the picture of a whole comes into view. In some eras, Black women pursued power as singular, cutting-edge figures. At other times, they joined coalitions that included white women and Black men. Most often, Black women built political power in their own circles. There are as many stories as there are women, but those recounted in this book represent Black women's varied political lives and their many routes to the vote and beyond.

Black women left their own record, and *Vanguard* tells their stories from the traces they bequeathed to us. Their essays, speeches, letters, and testimonies provide a fresh vantage point. In these stories, the familiar may also be strange. Black women did not attend the 1848 women's convention at Seneca Falls, but at the same moment in church conferences, they demanded rights equal to those of men. Black women did not join the new women's suffrage associations founded after the Civil

War. Instead, they came together in churchwomen's societies to demand the vote and office holding in religious communities. Black women campaigned for the Nineteenth Amendment, but they did not celebrate long once it was ratified. They understood it was only a slim guarantee, and thus redoubled their efforts in a campaign that took them down a long road to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It was another women's movement, one that reflected Black women's distinct point of view.¹⁷

Terming Black women the "Vanguard" has a double meaning. Despite the burdens of racism, they blazed trails across the whole of two centuries. In public speaking, journalism, banking, and education, Black women led American women, showing the way forward. Some "first" Black women leapt out front because nothing less would get them where they aimed to go. Black women emerged from brutal encounters with enslavement, sexual violence, economic exploitation, and cultural denigration as visionaries prepared to remedy their own circumstances and, by doing so, cure the world.

As the vanguard, Black women also pointed the nation toward its best ideals. They were the first to reject arbitrary distinctions, including racism and sexism, as rooted in outdated and disproved fictions. They were the nation's original feminists and antiracists, and they built a movement on these core principles. They raised the bar high for all Americans and showed allies, among men and women, Black and white, how to work in coalition. Too often, they experienced disappointment. But undeterred, the women of *Vanguard* continued to reach for political power that was redemptive, transformative, and a means toward realizing the equality and the dignity of all persons.

ONE MORE STORY about Fannie Williams, my great-grandmother, remained untold in my family. I discovered it among some old newspaper clippings. Fannie completed her studies at Berea College in 1888, nothing short of a triumph. During commencement, President Edward Henry Fairchild remarked of Fannie:



*Fannie
Miller Williams*
(1864-1956)
MARTHA S. JONES

“In all of my experience of teaching for thirty-eight years, I have never had a better student than you. Remember that you are admitted to the circle of all those who have attained the title of Bachelor of Arts, and you will everywhere be welcomed within that circle by all, except a very few who are blinded by an ungodly prejudice.” With that, she was on her way to make good use of the talent and ambition that Berea had encouraged. Fannie soon headed her own classroom, assuming duties as a teacher, with fresh pedagogy and bright polish.¹⁸

Fannie also had acquired a taste for entertainment, or at least aimed to develop one. In 1889 she set off on a January evening to the local theater in Pulaski, Kentucky, just south of Berea. The schedule included a “free Indian show,” an evening of lectures on the history, culture, and medicines of Native Americans. Admission was gratis; the company earned its dollars by the sale

of ointments, pills, and other remedies. Fannie entered the hall without trouble. She surveyed the room and spied a seat that was to her liking. Perhaps she was feeling a sense of equality that her recent triumph at Berea had fueled. Maybe her mood was contrary, leading her to challenge the rules that told her she was less than. Fannie crossed the theater, approached a row designated for white patrons only and quietly took a seat. I can imagine her there as she smoothed her skirt, placed down her purse, folded her hands in her lap, and waited.¹⁹

Even before segregation became baked into the laws of Kentucky, theater operators patrolled the color line, on alert for those who might cross it. First, an usher noticed Fannie. He approached and, as Fannie explained, “went to her in a gruff manner and ordered her to move.” Immediately, a contest of wills flared: Fannie, with her sense of dignity and entitlement, on one side, and the usher on the other, adamant that a Black woman, even a respectable one, must be put in her place. Fannie ignored him and remained firmly seated, with her back erect and her eyes fixed straight ahead, until a local marshal arrived. He repeated the usher’s admonition. Fannie retorted: “She asked him politely to tell her why she was not allowed to sit where she was as she did not think she was harming anyone by sitting there.” Her words were both a query and a challenge.²⁰

What happened next might suggest that Fannie had studied law rather than classics at Berea. The marshal repeated his order: she was to move across the aisle to the “colored” section. Why was she being ordered to move? By what authority? By whose power? Papers later reported that Fannie denounced the marshal in “strong terms,” though she never devolved into the use of “indecent or profane language.” A confrontation of words turned physical when the marshal, fed up with Fannie’s challenge to his authority, “caught her roughly by the arm and led her to the door.” In the days that followed, officials charged her with disorderly conduct, a mark that might have threaten her future as a teacher. She sought advice from friends, who counseled that she pay the fine and costs to resolve the dispute. And she

did, though all the while maintaining that the blame lay with the men whose gruffness had provoked her flash of temper.²¹

Even today, my own temper boils when I imagine Fannie, fresh from her triumph at Berea College, being manhandled for taking her preferred seat in a theater. She might have believed that education, including the mastery of Greek and Latin, could exempt her from the color line. She may have hoped that class—her dress, deportment, and taste in popular entertainment—would insulate her from the degradations of Jim Crow. If she did, Fannie was wrong. Did she have a right to be a lady? Did she have a right in 1889 Pulaski, Kentucky, to don a fine dress, stroll the blocks to a public venue, take the seat of her choosing, and then be treated to an evening of learning and leisure? Could she expect an usher to offer her his arm or sweep her seat free of dust? Could she turn to a marshal as a safeguard against other men's gruffness? No. Racism was a brutal leveler that transformed a young woman's evening out into a contest over what rights Black women had, if indeed they had any at all.

This encounter fueled Fannie's work in the years to come. As a Black woman, her dignity and her survival depended upon securing political power. Fannie would endure many indignities across her lifetime, those that threatened her body as well as her soul. She would build for herself and other Black women the sorts of spaces in which they could learn, teach, organize, and be safe. She would link arms with white women when they shared her sense that American women, even after the Nineteenth Amendment, had a distance to go before they realized their full influence upon politics and policy. She shared with Black men a commitment to crushing racism—it was a burden that both sexes bore—even as the ways in which it undercut the fullness of womanhood were distinct. These were lonely and terrifying contests when they sprung up without warning in the aisles of a theater. But Fannie had friends, allies, confidantes, and advisors who shared her concerns and her aims. Yes, she was a suffragist. But such a label, ambitious as it might sound to our twenty-first-century ears, was far too narrow to capture her concerns, her activism, and her vision.

Chapter 1

DAUGHTERS OF AFRICA, AWAKE!

In 1827, any Black woman who considered stepping into the limelight of politics was on notice. She risked family, friends, and reputation. As the editors of the African American weekly *Freedom's Journal* put it: "A woman who would attempt to thunder with her tongue, would not find her eloquence increase her domestic happiness. A man, in a furious passion, is terrible to his enemies; but a woman, in a passion, is disgusting to her friends; she loses all that respect due to her sex, and she has not masculine strength and courage to enforce any other kind of respect."¹

For all the fury that ran through their writing, the men who ran the country's first Black newspaper knew that their words were too little and too late. In their midst were women who were coming out of slavery and servitude and into their own. Some felt called by God; others were raised to serve the collective good. All of them were prepared to push back against anyone who deemed them merely men's helpmeets. The daughters of Africa were awake and ready to break new ground.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION ushered in an antislavery moment in the United States. This war that transformed slaves into

soldiers also promoted revolutionary ideals about the equality of all. The conflict settled in 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris and an affirmation that the new United States was independent of British rule. Black Americans already aimed to test the principles so eloquently set forth in the Declaration of Independence. The wartime troubling of slavery's bonds meant that newly free Black people could claim a place in American political culture. Men and women of African descent, at liberty to work, build families, and chart their collective futures, posed the most vexed questions the young nation would have to answer.²

Abolition was not a distant aspiration. When Northern states began to make slavery illegal, African Americans did their part to encourage the change. In Massachusetts during the 1780s, for example, Quok Walker and Elizabeth Freeman were among those enslaved people who challenged their bonds in court, arguing that the state constitution guaranteed equal rights to all. They won; slavery in Massachusetts was abolished through a cluster of court decisions. In other states, notably Pennsylvania and New York, legislators adopted abolition laws that planned for slavery's demise gradually over time: abolition was achieved in 1838 in Pennsylvania and in 1827 in New York.³

Communities of free people grew out of this northern abolition. However, the meaning of freedom was not settled. Some political leaders foresaw a future in which the United States was a white man's country. They promoted *colonization*, schemes that aimed to remove or relocate former slaves from the United States to the Caribbean, West Africa, or elsewhere. Beginning in 1816, the American Colonization Society and its local affiliates raised funds, dispatched recruiters, outfitted ships, and founded colonies such as Liberia. They offered land and political rights to those Black Americans who agreed to leave the country. Few people accepted colonizationists' enticements. Instead, free men and women insisted upon staying in the United States to make their lives in the place of their birth.⁴

With freedom came mobility, at least as far as a coach, ferry, or simply two legs might go. Those who up and went often headed

toward something: a job, a loved one, or the streets of a fabled city. Others fled, leaving behind the lash, patrols, and men who believed them free in name only. Chance at a better life might have come in the form of another farm across the county, better wages at a workshop across town, possession of a small patch of dirt, or the warmth of a basement room with a door that shut out the world. For many former slaves, the best opportunities were in cities. In the growing urban spaces of the late eighteenth century lay the possibility of work for wages, a hard-knocks education, and, above all else, the safety offered by numbers.⁵

It is remarkable how quickly Black migrants began to remake cities in their own visions. Their food, clothes, ways of speaking, styles of dance, music, and general sociability became part of what Americans expected of cities. They became Bostonians, New Yorkers, and Baltimoreans, though often with a qualifier—Black, African, or colored—affixed. They began to build, first families and then quickly institutions that made up a new African American public culture. Churches, fraternal orders, mutual aid societies, political clubs, libraries, and guilds sprung up and took root in a way that signaled Black Americans were here to stay. They intended to be fully American.⁶

These beginnings were uneasy. Law and custom mixed with intimidation and violence to promote the racism that had been woven into the nation's fabric long before the heady years of the Revolution. City leaders closed doors, drew lines, and erected barriers that they hoped would lead free Black Americans to leave the country altogether. A debate brewed, one in which Americans sharply disagreed about the status of former slaves: If they were free, were they also equal? If they were citizens, did they also possess rights? How deeply and indelibly would the color line be etched into the life of the nation? Everyone heard these questions as clear as a church bell and as regular as hoofbeats on cobblestones. Black Americans set out to answer them, in word and in deed.⁷

The birth of Black political culture was linked to the troubles wrought by racism. The weight of discrimination was

counterbalanced by the pride of self-making. Black institutions boasted of their superior commitment to ideals such as equality. They held themselves up as beacons of the new nation's potential: it could reject the holding of persons as property and erase the color line from the landscape of freedom. Racism met its first endings among these communities of former slaves.⁸

Winning broader freedoms demanded backbreaking effort. Money was scarce, political power slight, and the visibility that came with public life attracted danger and even retribution from villains who hoped to keep former slaves subordinate. The effort required the contributions of all—men, women, and children—and their labors extended from digging trenches and laying bricks to raising preachers' salaries and teaching young pupils with too few primers or slates. Tensions within Black communities developed along lines of education, class, and status and most acutely between those who remained committed to demanding rights in the United States and those who took off for new lands—Haiti, Liberia, and Canada West—where they might find fewer obstacles on their road to freedom.

Political rights—the vote, jury service, office holding—were one key to winning lasting equality. Unable to make the laws that regulated their communities, Black Americans faced a disadvantage. Sometimes white lawmakers might favor them out of benevolence or self-interest. But African Americans did not write the laws that governed their lives. They had little say about how taxes were allocated, and struggled in courts to protect their property and persons. By the 1820s, local memories of the days when Black men had once voted had faded. States like New Jersey, Maryland, and New York had cut Black men's access to the polls, and new states like Ohio and Missouri made "white" a prerequisite for voting in their founding constitutions. The injustice of this shift was underscored when, at the same moment, more and more white men were voting than ever before: states lifted the property qualifications and literacy tests that had once kept many of them from the polls.⁹

Though marginalized, Black Americans did not abandon politics. By the 1830s, activists built a "colored" convention movement,

and though the term “colored” may strike twenty-first-century ears as racist, in the nineteenth century it was a preferred term among Black activists. The conventions brought together Black men and some women to debate the issues of the day and organize. The first gathering met in 1830 Philadelphia, where delegates from Maine to Maryland started a tradition that would continue for decades. Convention goers discussed big questions, including civil rights, the building of schools, and the value of every person’s labor. Nearby, in Black churches, faith blended with politics when congregations turned their sanctuaries into convention halls, debated church politics, and organized against second-class treatment in white-led houses of worship. These were the earliest years of radical abolitionism and Black Americans worked alongside white allies to bring about the immediate end to human bondage.¹⁰

Black women participated in this new public culture, but they faced narrow ideas about who they could be and what they could do. Most men expected women to assist with building the community while also remaining subordinate. Men welcomed women as helpmeets who saw to the material needs of ministers, delegates, and lecturers. They encouraged women to raise funds that built houses of worship, published meeting minutes, and kept newspapers afloat. Men also expected women to take charge of families, and ensure the well-being of children, elders, and the vulnerable. All the while, most Black women also worked, as laundresses, housekeepers, nannies, boardinghouse keepers, nurses, and seamstresses. They brought home critically necessary dollars and cents. Among them were women who yearned for more, women who wanted to lead.¹¹

Some women, at first just a few, began to question the limits imposed upon them, testing the waters. They did not aim to upset a fragile world, one in which everyone—men, women, and children—were bound together in the same struggle for spiritual, material, and political well-being. It was not yet time to speak about women’s rights, or anything as distant as the vote, when even few Black men were able to cast ballots. Still, some

women promoted the idea that their talents, their ambitions, and the needs of the community demanded that they also take control of podiums, pamphlets, and meeting halls.¹²

BLACK WOMEN'S SUGGESTION that they were more than helpmeets did not go over easily. People sparred verbally in church sanctuaries and meeting halls. Discussions erupted on street corners and at family meals. On the pages of Black newspapers, editors ensured that competing views about women, their purpose, and their power got a good airing. The printed word, whether read silently or out loud, knit together communities of Black Americans across far-flung towns and cities, and it reached the most rural outposts, even if that took a bit longer. Starting in 1827, the pages of *Freedom's Journal* served as a virtual town hall. There, African Americans discovered women who believed they should be part of community building and the quest for the equality and dignity that citizenship promised. They also learned that some leading men opposed any such change.

Anxiety about women leapt from the paper's columns as former slaves from Maine to Maryland and from New York to Pittsburgh opened *Freedom's Journal*. From their desks in New York City, the editors promoted literacy and civic education while condemning slavery and racism. The timing of its debut, spring 1827, was auspicious. New York planned to abolish slavery on July 4 of that year. The paper fancied itself a primer on many things, including how women should contribute to life in freedom. At least, that's what its editors hoped. Their views were conventional. In its earliest articles, *Freedom's Journal* painted a portrait of a well-ordered Black society in which men and women were guided by their so-called innate and differing qualities. The paper deemed women helpmeets who possessed grace, piousness, virtue, modesty, gentility, and peaceableness, qualities that the editors urged would counterbalance the wild excesses of men. In all things, however, women should remain subservient companions.¹³

The editors hoped that their words—set with the authority of type, printed with ink, and circulated on the pages of a respected newspaper—would carry weight. Women might then accept limits imposed upon them in streets, salons, and sanctuaries. Sometimes it worked. In 1828, men and women founded the African Dorcas Society to promote the education of New York City’s poorest Black schoolchildren. They named the society for a woman, Dorcas, who in the New Testament is celebrated for her good works and acts of love for the poor. But the founders put in charge an advisory board made up exclusively of men, including ministers and *Freedom’s Journal* editor Samuel Cornish. These men encouraged women’s work, but not their leadership.¹⁴

Just as often, however, Black women demonstrated how old ideas would not curb their public lives. Women zealously pursued educational opportunities. Among pupils at the New York African Mutual Instruction Society in 1828, for example, young women outnumbered men. Women also turned out at political meetings. At a New Haven, Connecticut, anticolonization meeting—organized to oppose migration to Liberia—Black women made up the majority of the crowd and even earned praise for their “spirit of enquiry.” But these same scenes dismayed others: If women dominated school desks or church pews, might they want to also command the podium and the pulpit?¹⁵

Women’s activism made the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* uneasy. It upset their vision for a male-led society. Studiously, they itemized for readers examples how women openly defied limits, discomfortingly so. Many offenders were white women, such as Frances Wright, the Scottish-born journalist, utopian, and anti-slavery figure; Harriet Livermore, the first woman to preach in the House of Representatives chamber; and a Mrs. Miler, who was noted as a Methodist preacher and “but 22 years of age.” The trouble extended beyond the United States. One report noted that as many as sixty Canadian women had voted in the fall of 1827, an alarmingly high number, according to *Freedom’s*

Journal. The paper overstated the quantity of ballots cast by women in Lower Canada—it was likely no more than three—but the exaggeration underscored how the specter of women at the polls unsettled the editors. Women gave men reason to patrol the boundaries of public authority.¹⁶

Suspicion surrounded Black women who rejected conventional roles. Commentators derided breaches of propriety, while praising those women who remained “modest and unassuming” and committed to the “gentler virtues” of their sex. *Freedom’s Journal* openly chastised its women readers, wagging a finger at those who risked sacrificing the privileges of womanhood. The editors’ words revealed an awkward truth. As Black communities faced the burdens of freedom, they depended on women’s work: Women raised funds and distributed essential goods. They built structures and paid salaries. They filled pews and benches and purchased newspapers and tracts. But what if women were not restricted to these roles? They might also upset a social order that men expected to govern.¹⁷

Women’s passions troubled men. So too did their words. When a correspondent to *Freedom’s Journal* we know only as Matilda took up a pen to write on women’s education, her tone was mocking and confrontational. She explained that the paper’s editors had overlooked this important subject and she challenged: “I hope you are not to be classed with those, who think that [women’s] mathematical knowledge should be limited to ‘fathoming the dish-kettle,’ and that we have acquired enough of history, if we know that our grandfather’s father lived and died.” Such thinking, Matilda asserted, was past its time: “We have minds that are capable and deserving of culture.” Women’s responsibilities included the raising of boys into men and shouldering a “duty to store their daughters’ minds with useful learning.” The editors offered no retort, leaving Matilda’s voice to stand alone.¹⁸

BLACK CHURCHES WERE places of spiritual refuge and sustenance, but organizing them involved politics. Church law structured

religious leadership. It set the terms of decision-making and detailed rituals. But even among those who shared a faith, disputes were common. Black Americans got caught up in disagreements over property, money, music, and who should hold the keys to the sanctuary. Always, these troubles revolved around power. They generated factions, schisms, and splits and exposed differences over what made Black churches distinct and necessary. Women also created friction when they made noise about how the role of helpmeet unfairly limited their power.

Jarena Lee, as she later came to be known, did not initially intend to upend power in her church. As a young woman, she first asked questions about her spiritual mission: the genuineness of her calling, the correctness of her biblical interpretation, and her capacity to convert souls. And yet she could not pose such questions without also bumping into the limits that womanhood placed on her purpose. Young Jarena, whose family name we do not know, came of age in a Christian world that believed in the perfectibility of human beings and the rejection of man-made distinctions between people. She underwent a conversion and arrived at a life-defining insight: she would give in to a calling from God and preach. Trouble arose, of course, when that divine purpose led Jarena to speak with authority on spiritual matters and do so in public. Since the 1760s, Black women who preached had provoked alarm about religious and sexual “disorder,” but generally these women did not challenge their formal subordination. When Jarena rejected all limits placed upon her work, she introduced something altogether new.¹⁹

Jarena lived a humble early life. She was born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1783, just at the end of the American Revolution. As best we can know, she was born free, even as slavery remained legal and not uncommon in the southern part of the state. Situated between New York and Delaware, New Jersey did not begin to abolish slavery until 1804, and some people would remain enslaved there until the post-Civil War abolition of 1865. For Jarena, being free did not mean that she was wholly at liberty. She was bound out as a servant at a young age, just

seven years old, robbing her of a childhood. Her liberation story began years later, at the age of twenty-one, when Jarena converted to Christianity. As an adult, she was excused from the harsh obligations of apprenticeship, and she was free, as an eager new Christian, to experiment with what it meant to be spiritually unbound.²⁰

Jarena struggled, and her troubles centered on the condition of her soul rather than on the status of her womanhood. Her religious journey went from self-doubt, despair, and contemplation of suicide to time spent searching for a home in the Presbyterian, Catholic, and Anglican faiths. Finally, she was moved to conversion in Philadelphia's young African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Signs that Jarena would not be a conventional adherent to the faith surfaced early on, first in her exuberant worship style—one that mixed prayer with passionate tears and even fevers—and then in her striving for sanctification, a perfection on earth that went beyond traditional Methodist teachings. Jarena was, from the start, ambitious, even excessive.²¹

In 1811, four or five years after joining the AME Church, Jarena “distinctly heard, and most certainly understood” a voice that insisted that she “go preach the Gospel.” She was being called, though she was not certain by whom. Perhaps it was Satan. She asked God for a sign, and witnessing a vision convinced Jarena that she was on a righteous path. Even while sleeping, she practiced, waking herself and her household with late-night preaching. Jarena wrestled with an urge to tell her local minister, Richard Allen, of her calling but then hesitated, a sign of just how inflammatory her ambition was. Not the first woman to speak publicly about the scriptures, she was among the very first to seek the formal approval of her church.²²

Thus began a many-decades-long fight for Jarena. And the stakes were high. The AME Church was navigating a delicate separation from the white-led Methodist Episcopal Church, which would not ordain Black ministers and bishops and refused to transfer the ownership of church property to Black congregations. The movement for an independent Black church was

centered in Philadelphia. It galvanized the city's growing free Black community that included veterans of the Revolutionary War and many people who had gained their freedom through gradual abolition laws. Allen, leader of Jarena's congregation, would go on to become the sect's head bishop. He was an experienced minister committed to safeguarding the future of his religious community.

Was Jarena, a preaching woman, an asset or a threat to this new Black Methodism? Allen initially tried to duck the question, doubting that Jarena's calling was genuine. The two went back and forth privately. Allen knew of another case, that of a Mrs. Cook of the Methodist Church, who had similar ambitions. Cook had been an effective exhorter—a religious speaker who did not interpret the scriptures—and had led class meetings during which new converts studied the Bible. Allen valued the talents of women like Cook and Jarena, but he doubted that church law permitted him to license them as preachers. He hoped that Jarena would accept a more limited role in which she preached occasionally with the permission of her local minister.²³

Jarena tried to live within the bounds of this compromise. She married AME minister Joseph Lee, whom she followed to his parish in Snow Hill, New Jersey. The town was not a good fit for the new Mrs. Lee, and she mourned the loss of her Philadelphia friends, who now lived ten miles away across the Delaware River. Lee was generally ill, and whether the cause was her body or her mind, or both, is hard to say. She bore two children and endured the loneliness and frustration that life as a minister's wife imposed. Then, six years into their marriage, Lee's husband died. Although she suffered, as she later recalled, she was also free to return to the spiritual "fire" that had been suppressed when she played the ill-suited role of minister's wife.²⁴

Lee returned to Philadelphia and Bishop Allen's sanctuary, which had become the leading house of worship in the new AME denomination. There, she hoped to find a middle ground that might fulfill her calling and at the same time keep the denomination from veering too far from the limits that