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COLUMBIA CITY OF WOMEN HONOREE

The Rollin Sisters



Frances, Charlotte, and Katherine Rollin grew up as free people of color in antebellum Charleston. They moved to Columbia after the Civil War and established a space for interracial dialogue about political and civil affairs during Reconstruction. They were among the first and most significant women suffragists in South Carolina during that era.

Columbia
City of
Women

Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

The Rollin Sisters



On January 23, 1871, Charlotte Rollin presided as chair of “a meeting for the permanent organization of the ‘South Carolina Woman Suffrage Association’” in the home of her sister, Frances Rollin Whipper, and brother-in-law, state representative William J. Whipper. Their younger sister, Katherine Rollin, oversaw the submission and adoption of a constitution, and together the attendees, which included Lieutenant Governor Alonzo J. Ransier and Secretary of State Francis L. Cardozo, read well wishes from Governor Robert K. Scott. The chapter was immediately endorsed in *Woman’s Journal* as aligned with the American Woman Suffrage Association, a single-issue organization founded in 1869 and led by Lucy Stone. For several years from their well-appointed home on Senate Street, the mixed-race Rollin sisters—Katherine, Charlotte, and Louise—hosted black and white Republicans and their wives, a race-mixing that scandalized the planter-class elites who found themselves outside of power for the first time. Yet even as the sisters came to figuratively embody the era of Reconstruction as one that created a new social and political order in South Carolina, they were also literally the bodies fighting for women’s rights, both black and white.

“

Washington[’s] Birthday. I am no enthusiast over Patriotic Celebrations as I am counted out of the body Politic.”

—Frances “Frank” Rollin, writing in her diary on February 22, 1868

The Rollin sisters’ ascent to political power started with Frances, born in 1845 and educated in Philadelphia. She, along with her younger sisters, Charlotte, Katherine, and Louise, were all born before the Civil War into an elite circle of Charleston’s free people of color, an existence defined simultaneously by wealth and property while still being denied of many rights and protections granted to white citizens. In 1867, Frances filed a complaint with the Freedmen’s Bureau against the captain of the steamer “Pilot Boy” for refusing her first-class accommodations on account of her race. He was fined \$250 and ordered to not discriminate again—a victory Rollin called “the first case for the contest for equal rights following the close of the war.”



Around this time, she met Major Martin R. Delany, M.D., the Union Army's highest-ranking black commissioned officer and later considered by many to be the "father of black nationalism." Delany offered Rollin financial support in exchange for writing his biography, and she moved to Boston later that year carrying manuscripts supplied by him. Over the course of eight months, she wrote, took in sewing (Delany's offer of assistance having not materialized), and socialized with the city's elite black citizens. Although she found herself courted by many men, including then-sophomore Harvard student Richard T. Greener, Frances would instead return to South Carolina after publishing Delany's biography under the nom de plume Frank A. Rollin. She accepted a clerkship with state representative William J. Whipper and married him six weeks later. Whipper's view of suffrage aligned closely with Rollin's. Less than a month after Frances Rollin privately lamented being outside the "body Politic," Whipper became the only representative to endorse the idea of women's suffrage at South Carolina's 1868 Constitutional Convention:

“

I wish to have the word “male” stricken out. Whether it be done or not; however lightly the subject may be treated; however frivolous you may think it, I tell you here that I know the time will come when every man and woman in this country will have the right to vote.”

*— Representative William J. Whipper, March 9, 1868
(Constitutional Convention of South Carolina)*

During Reconstruction, Frances and her husband, known collectively as “the Whippers” were fixtures in the capital city. In 1871, their home served as an initial meeting place for the planning and establishment of the South Carolina Woman Suffrage Association, of which Whipper served as an officer alongside his sisters-in-law. The group's other meeting space was the Rollin “salon,” a two-story residence at the southeastern corner of Senate and Sumter streets where Katherine, Charlotte, Louise, and their youngest sister, Florence, lived, entertained, and debated the future of South Carolina.

“

Their house is a kind of a Republican headquarters. They entertain very handsomely, and they are, as I said before, leaders of the ton here—that is, among a certain class. The Government meets at the Rollin house almost nightly, and in the parlors of that mansion much of the wisdom which controls our affairs is generated.”

— *Reporter for the New York Sun, recounts a conversation about the Rollin sisters in the March 29, 1871 issue.*

Like their eldest sister, Katherine, Charlotte, Louise, and Florence were born during the antebellum period, a time in which their parents were among the “colored elite” of Charleston, and privately educated. After the war, Katherine and Charlotte established a freedmen’s school in Charleston, but by 1869 both were employed as clerks at the State House. That year, national newspapers, including the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, began describing Charlotte as “an advocate of impartial suffrage” who had “delivered an address in the House of Representatives (before the judiciary committee) of this State, demanding suffrage for her sex.” (*Edgefield Advertiser*, September 1, 1869)

The sisters’ clerk positions were met with speculation in the political and social realm—specifically over the salary they received. Shortly after the official organization of the suffrage association, two New York papers published articles describing their salon and detailing Katherine and Charlotte’s perceived political machinations. The *New York Sun* included lengthy quotes from the sisters about corruption among officials at the State House, especially State Treasurer Niles G. Parker and Lieutenant Governor Franklin J. Moses, Jr. The *Charleston Daily* reprinted the *Sun*’s more salacious claims the following month, leading the sisters to issue an apology to Moses. The Rollins also agreed to meet with a reporter from the *New York Herald*. In the *Herald* article, the sisters moderated their attacks on Moses and others, but more importantly mounted a defense against recent accusations that they improperly received state funds on several occasions by providing the reporter with letters related to their employment.

“

And now I was face to face with the Madame de Tencin of South Carolina, whose power of persuasion in the lobby of a Legislature fully equals that of the redoubtable Barber, of Albany fame.”

— *Reporter for the New York Herald, recounts his meeting with Charlotte Rollin at her home in the June 13, 1871 issue.*

According to Charlotte, her family had “been misrepresented most atrociously by carpetbaggers and evil-minded negroes, and men of our own colored race, for whom we have labored, spoken and written, have never come forward to defend us as they should have done.” She used their suffrage work and association with Lucy Stone, the most prominent leader of the American Woman Suffrage Association, as proof that they were not “what mean carpet-bag white men, Southern rebels and treacherous and ungrateful negroes call us.” By then, Charlotte was the main voice for women’s rights in South Carolina, having organized the state chapter and then submitted the following letter to *Stone’s Woman’s Journal* earlier that year:

“

We ask suffrage not as a favor, not as a privilege, but as a right based on the grounds that we are human beings and as such entitled to all human rights. While we concede that woman’s ennobling influence should be confined chiefly to the home and society, we claim that public opinion has had a tendency to limit woman’s sphere to too small a circle and until woman has the right to representation this will last, and other rights will be held by insecure tenure.”

— Charlotte Rollin, “*Woman Suffrage Movement*,” *Woman’s Journal*, February 25, 1871

In 1872, the South Carolina chapter selected Charlotte to attend the national convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the South Carolina General Assembly voted to endorse a petition by the group to grant women equal rights, although no specific action was taken. This proved the pinnacle of achievement for women’s suffrage during Reconstruction. After their brother-in-law, William J. Whipper, lost reelection at the end of the year, the sisters lost their main source of support for suffrage in the legislature, and the political corruption of newly elected Governor Franklin J. Moses became the focus of local and national reporting.

Over the next several years, local newspapers reported primarily on the Rollins’ social activities, including an extravagant military ball and the inauguration ball in 1873, where one of the sisters appeared on the arm of the esteemed judge and then-Attorney General Samuel D. Melton, a decision the *New York Sun* called “interesting,” for a white man of his class, as it was a conscious choice to “fraternize socially with the class so lately regarded as chattels hardly possessed of souls.” (*Edgefield Advertiser*, April 3, 1873) In 1874, the *Anderson Intelligencer* reported that D. Appleton & Co. had engaged the sisters to write the biography of Governor Moses, who ended his term in disgrace at the end of that year and died in poverty after leaving the state in 1878.

At the height of Katherine and Charlotte Rollin’s political prominence, the planter class’s return to power seemed inconceivable. In the *New York Herald* article, they proclaimed that “the rebels will never get it back into their hands again while there are ninety thousand votes cast by the black race at our elections.” Just five years later, Democratic candidate General Wade Hampton III led a campaign of terror and ballot fraud to retake control of the state government. Republicans lost their political power over the next few elections, and the entire Rollin family eventually left the state, with Frances and her family moving to Washington D.C. and the other sisters moving to Brooklyn, where little is known about the rest of their lives. The suffrage movement in South Carolina remained largely dormant until 1890 with the establishment of the all-white South Carolina Equal Rights Association in Greenville. By then, the accomplishments of their black predecessors were dismissed as part of the larger narrative that labeled Reconstruction as a “radical” and “dark” time in South Carolina history. Today, they are rightly honored as pioneers in the fight for women’s equality in South Carolina.

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Columbia **City of** **Women**

OUR MISSION

We've come together to share the stories of Columbia's many strong, courageous, and driven women. Our mission is to connect Columbia residents of all backgrounds, and all gender identities, to the rich legacies of our all-too-often undersung women leaders, whose contributions are woven into the fabric of this city.

OUR STORY

Have you ever noticed that very few cities, streets, and statues are named for women? In Columbia, only 4 percent of our 145 landmarks are specifically named for women. Only one of the 41 streets in downtown Columbia is intended to recognize a woman — Lady Street — yet its name does not reflect the true recipient, Martha Washington. We believe in the power of moving through a city that recognizes women's achievements, which is why we're bringing forward the stories of our city's remarkable women.

OUR PARTNERS

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