

History Markers — 2012, D&C, “Black History month”

BLACK HISTORY MONTH » UNSUNG HEROES 2/24/12

Area native was trailblazer



A plaque stands outside the Brockport home of Frances Barrier Williams. Williams, an early civil rights leader in the Midwest, is at right. ANNETTE LEIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER (ABOVE); PROVIDED PHOTO (RIGHT)

Brockport's Williams was an advocate for black women

SEAN DOBBIN
Staff writer

The 1907 National American Women Suffrage Association conference had a more somber tone than most. It was the first meeting that the organization had held since the death of founder Susan B. Anthony, and many offered words of remembrance.

But only one of the eulogizers of the pioneering women's rights activist was black: Brockport native Frances Barrier Williams.

Williams, who was known as “Fannie” and was an advocate for the rights of black women, later wrote that being asked to speak at the conference was her “greatest

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Fig. 1. This clipping is moderately reduced in size by the same amount relative to the one on the next page. Text is readable by zooming in.

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Heroes

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moment of pride.”

I had been an active suffragette, and I was such an admirer of Miss Anthony. When women finally were able to vote 13 years later, I felt a moment of sadness that she could not have seen what had come of her years of work.

Williams would end up sharing a similar experience. She died in 1944, and wasn't around to see the great strides made in the civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s. But in her time spent in Chicago, she helped lay the foundation for many generations to come.

“She was probably the most prominent leader in the civil rights movement in the Midwest between 1890 and 1920,” said William G. Andrews, Brockport village historian emeritus.

“She didn't hesitate to take the initiative and stick her neck out in difficult situations.”

Before moving to Chicago, she spent her early years in Brockport, where the Barrier family was one of the only black families in the village.

Her father was the village barber, and was later a partner in a coal business, according to Andrews' research, and her family was also active in the local church, where they were the only non-white members.

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Obituaries & In Memoriams

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SPEECH TO NAWSA

In 1907, Fannie Barrier Williams was the only black person to eulogize Susan B. Anthony at the National American Women Suffrage Association's annual conference. Below is an excerpt from her speech.

“My presence on this platform shows that the gracious spirit of Miss Anthony still survives in her followers. ... When Miss Anthony took up the cause of women she did not know them by their color, nationality, creed or birth, she stood only for the emancipation of women from the thralldom of sex. She became an invincible champion of anti-slavery. In the half century of her unremitting struggle for liberty, more liberty, and complete liberty for negro men and women in chains and for white women in their helpless subjection to man's laws, she never wavered, never doubted, never compromised. She held it to be mockery to ask man or woman to be happy or contented if not free. She saw no substitute for liberty. When slavery was overthrown and the work of reconstruction began, she was still unwearied and watchful. She had an intimate acquaintance with the leading statesmen of the times. Her judgment and advice were respected and heard in much of the legislation that gave a status of citizenship to the millions of slaves set free.”

— Fannie Barrier Williams, Feb. 15, 1907

Source: *The History of Women's Suffrage, Volume V*, by Ida Husted Harper, and research from the Susan B. Anthony House.

She became the first black person to graduate from Brockport State Normal School, the forerunner of today's The College at Brockport.

We were probably a well-known family just for being black. Brockport didn't have many colored people. But my family was fortunate. We were accepted. Acceptance was something I did not experience in later years when I went south to teach. I was informed there that I was of an “inferior race.”

She was unable to accept the treatment she encountered when she

moved down south, and eventually moved to Washington, D.C., where she met her soon-to-be husband, Stephen Laing Williams, a lawyer.

They returned to Brockport, where they married in 1887, and then moved to Chicago, where Williams became a civil rights leader and helped organize the Black Women's Club movement.

She became famous nationally when she convinced The Chicago World's Fair, which was celebrating the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' landing in the new world, to include African-American affairs in its program.

Later, she helped found the nurses training school in the Provident Hospital, one of the first interracial medical centers in the United States, and regu-



Brockport historian emeritus William G. Andrews talks about Frances Barrier Williams. Williams was born and raised in Brockport and later returned to the village after her husband died. ANNETTE LEINSTAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

ABOUT THIS SERIES

February's Black History Month celebrations are rightly filled with stories of the lives of luminaries: W.E.B. DuBois, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. But black history in Rochester is defined by more than the great legacy of Frederick Douglass. Within Rochester's black community, countless unsung heroes have worked to improve life for all of us, regardless of race. And some continue to do so today. Every week this month, the *Democrat and Chronicle* will profile someone who made or is making history. Next week, we'll feature a story about Rodney Young, who has spent the last 12 years leading the United Way of Greater Rochester's African-American Leadership Development Program.

Click on this story at DemocratandChronicle.com to read the previous stories in our Unsung Heroes series: “Florence Brown's inspiration lives on,” which appeared in print Feb. 9, and the Feb. 17 story “Dianne Snowden Johnson takes ‘sweet’ road to inspire youth.”

larly traveled the country giving lectures about various civil rights issues.

After the death of her husband, Williams returned to Brockport in 1926, where she lived her remaining years. But despite her many accomplishments, Williams isn't particularly high on most lists of influential civil rights activists.

“It's funny that she could have been relatively famous in her own time and been forgotten since,”

said Mary Jo Deegan, a professor of sociology at University of Nebraska-Lincoln who compiled a collection of Williams' writings that was published in 2002.

Williams' writings were mostly published in hard-to-find black journals and newspapers, said Deegan, and generally, there isn't a tremendous amount of information on the black women leaders in the civil rights movement compared to their

ONLINE EXTRA

See a video interview with a local historian about Frances Barrier Williams.

male counterparts.

“There just isn't much out there,” said Deegan. “People can't know her if nobody's promoting her, or knows who she is and what she accomplished.”

But in recent years, thanks in part to the work of scholars and historians like Deegan and Andrews, Williams has gained some prominence. In 1998, the state designated her home on Erie Street as a historic location. Ruth Leistman, whose family purchased the home after Williams' death, has lived there for the past 66 years.

“She was a member of our church, so mom knew her,” said Leistman, 92.

Williams, who had no children, is buried in High Street Cemetery in Brockport.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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IMAGE NOTES

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PRODUCTION NOTES

2015.08.12

The clipping was lent to Norm Frisch for scanning
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2015.08.18

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2015.09.16

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GENERAL INFORMATION LINKS**New York State Historic Markers**

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Gen web

<http://www.mcnygenealogy.com/pics/index.php?category/83>