The year 1870 marked an important turning point in the history of women’s suffrage in the United States. The decades preceding 1870 witnessed the emergence of a women’s rights movement and women’s activism within the movement to abolish slavery. Women’s activism reached its zenith during the Civil War and Reconstruction period. Most women involved in these campaigns saw their own cause as interconnected with that of enslaved and, after emancipation, freedpeople. However, with the passage of the 14th and 15th constitutional amendments that enfranchised adult Black men, women’s suffragists divided into two groups: those who retained their commitment to abolitionist feminism and those who sought to fight for women’s rights by any means.
necessary, including an expedient repudiation of the abolitionist commitment to racial equality.

Women’s rights activists organized themselves into two competing suffrage organizations and, after 1870, continued their long battle for the vote. Many forms of subsequent women’s activism—in temperance, social reform, churches, and clubs—intersected with the suffrage movement, because prominent women in these endeavors were suffragists. African American women developed their own organizations and clubs to fight both for the franchise and against new forms of racial oppression after the end of Reconstruction. After the schism in the suffrage movement, African American women were the true inheritors of the legacy of intersectional abolitionist feminism, fighting simultaneously for Black and women’s rights. Even as suffragists drew on lessons learned from Reconstruction politics—the use of federal law and constitutional amendments to win rights—evocations of racist ideas and tactics by some of them would bedevil the suffrage movement.

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Week 1: Women’s Mobilization During the Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War and Reconstruction marked the high point of abolitionist feminism. Women campaigned for emancipation and Black rights, and northern women were active in behalf of the Union cause. In 1863, white and Black abolitionist feminists formed the Women’s National Loyal League, which sent thousands of petitions for emancipation to Congress. During the war, Black and white northern women joined freedmen’s aid and relief societies and became teachers in freedmen’s schools. Other women, such as Mary Livermore, worked for the United States Sanitary Commission and became suffragists after the war. Freedwomen in the South fought their enslavers, combated racial and sexual abuse, and sought to use the Freedmen’s Bureau to protect their rights in freedom. African American women became politically active in the Republican Party and Reconstruction politics even though they had no right to vote. Some of them, including the Rollins sisters of South Carolina, founded the first women’s suffrage organizations in the South.

Primary Sources:

Selections from Louisa May Alcott, Hospital Sketches (1863).
http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3837

https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofmee00wome/page/10/mode/2up
Selections from Mary Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford, CT, 1888).  
https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822020059424&view=1up&seq=1

https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/taylorsu/taylorsu.html


https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005789561

**Secondary Sources:**


**Suggested Assignments:**

Look at the digitized records of *The Liberator* (1860–1865), available from the Boston Public Library, to explore the following topics:

- The war work of abolitionist women
- The experiences of freedwomen during the Civil War
Speakers and writings by northern women during the war

**Week 2: The Emergence of the Suffrage Movement During Reconstruction**

During Reconstruction, abolitionist feminists formed the American Equal Rights Association to fight for Black and women's suffrage. A schism developed in the organization when a group of suffragists led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony decided to oppose the 14th and 15th Amendments (passed in 1868 and 1870 respectively), which gave Black men the right to vote. Stanton and Anthony partnered with racist Democrats who wanted to overthrow Reconstruction. Most abolitionist feminists supported the Reconstruction amendments and were shocked by Stanton and Anthony's expedient tactics. They called instead for a 16th Amendment that would enfranchise women. By 1869, the women's movement had split between abolitionist feminists like Frances Watkins Harper and Lucy Stone, who founded the American Woman Suffrage Association, and suffragists led by Stanton and Anthony, who founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. In the 1870s, Black and white suffragists from both groups would try to vote under the 14th Amendment.

**Primary Sources:**


Reconstruction Constitutional Amendments, 13th, 14th & 15th Amendments. [https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1524](https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1524)


Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Look through the digitized Blackwell Family Papers at Radcliffe’s Schlesinger Library and explore the personal and political partnership between Henry Blackwell and Lucy Stone in the suffrage movement.

Suggestions for Further Exploration


