

Activity 2: Exploring Diverse Perspectives Through World's Fair Speeches

Perspective 4: Fannie Barrier Williams



Frances “Fannie” Barrier was born free in Brockport, New York, in 1855. She had a comfortable upbringing, as her father owned real estate and his own business. Her family was one of only a few Black families in Brockport, but she associated with white elites and did not grow up experiencing direct racial discrimination. After graduating from Brockport State Normal School (now SUNY-College at Brockport) as the school’s first African American graduate, she taught at a Black school in Missouri. There, she witnessed the realities of “Jim Crow” racism, including segregation and violence, and chose to leave the South. She was later pressured to leave a music conservatory in Boston, where she was studying piano, because of the objections of white southern students. She went on to teach in Washington, D.C., where she met and

married future lawyer Samuel Laing Williams. The couple relocated to Chicago.

Women were excluded from representation on the main governing board of the World’s Columbian Exposition, but a Board of Lady Managers was given control over the Woman’s Building, the first building dedicated to women at a world’s fair. No Black women were appointed to the Board of Lady Managers. Outspoken suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were also passed over for appointments. Although they were not able to influence the content of the Woman’s Building, they were able to participate in the Congress of Representative Women, a week-long convention of around 150,000 women held on the fairgrounds in May. The Congress was sponsored and promoted by the Board of Lady Managers. Nearly 500 women from 27 countries gave speeches, including six African American women. Themes included education, science and religion, moral and social reform, civil law and government, and industries and occupations. Several speeches from women’s rights activists called for women’s suffrage and other social and political rights. Fannie Barrier Williams’ speech is excerpted below.

In addition to speaking at the Congress, Williams successfully lobbied for two staff appointments to go to African Americans. Williams herself was appointed Clerk in Charge of Colored Interests in the Department of Publicity and Promotions. The year of the fair, Williams helped found the National League of Colored Women. In 1894, she was nominated as the first Black member of the prestigious Chicago Woman’s Club. This proved controversial, and she wasn’t inducted until 1896.

Williams remained a prominent women’s rights and civil rights activist through much of her life. She passed away in 1944 at the age of 89.

Excerpts from Williams's Address

“Less than thirty years ago the term progress as applied to colored women of African descent in the United States would have been an anomaly. The recognition of that term to-day as appropriate is a fact full of interesting significance. That the discussion of progressive womanhood in this great assemblage of the representative women of the world is considered incomplete without some account of the colored women's status is a most noteworthy evidence that we have not failed to impress ourselves on the higher side of American life.

Less is known of our women than of any other class of Americans...

As American women generally are fighting against the nineteenth century narrowness that still keeps women out of the higher institutions of learning, so our women are eagerly demanding the best of education open to their race.

The exceptional career of our women will yet stamp itself indelibly upon the thought of this country.

American literature needs for its greater variety and its deeper soundings that which will be written into it out of the hearts of these self-emancipating women.

The great problems of social reform that are now so engaging the highest intelligence of American women will soon need for their solution the reinforcement of that new intelligence which our women are developing. In short, our women are ambitious to be contributors to all the great moral and intellectual forces that make for the greater weal of our common country.

If this hope seems too extravagant to those of you who know these women only in their humbler capacities, I would remind you that all that we hope for and will certainly achieve in authorship and practical intelligence is more than prophesied by what has already been done, and more that can be done, by hundreds of Afro-American women whose talents are now being expended in the struggle against race resistance...

The moral aptitudes of our women are just as strong and just as weak as those of any other American women with like advantages of intelligence and environment.

It may now perhaps be fittingly asked, What mean all these evidences of mental, social, and moral progress of a class of American women of whom you know so little? Certainly you can not be indifferent to the growing needs and importance of women who are demonstrating their intelligence and capacity for the highest privileges of freedom.

The most important thing to be noted is the fact that the colored people of America have reached a distinctly new era in their career so quickly that the American mind has scarcely had time to recognize the fact, and adjust itself to the new requirements of the people in all things that pertain to citizenship.

Thirty years ago public opinion recognized no differences in the colored race. To our great misfortune public opinion has changed but slightly. History is full of examples of the great injustice resulting from the perversity of public opinion, and its tardiness in recognizing new conditions...

If the love of humanity more than the love of races and sex shall pulsate throughout all the grand results that shall issue to the world from this parliament of women, women of African descent in the United States will for the first time begin to feel the sweet release from the blighting thrall of prejudice.

The colored women, as well as all women, will realize that the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a maxim that will become more blessed in its significance when the hand of woman shall take it from its sepulture in books and make it the gospel of every-day life and the unerring guide in the relations of all men, women, and children.”

Excerpts from “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation” by Fannie Barrier Williams, May 18, 1893, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/05/21/the-intellectual-progress-of-the-colored-women-of-the-united-states-since-the-emancipation-proclamation-may-18-1893/>.

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