

Fannie Barrier Williams



Fannie Barrier Williams (February 12, 1855-March 4, 1944) was an African American teacher, social activist, clubwoman, lecturer, and journalist who worked for social justice, civil liberties, education, and employment opportunities, especially for black women. A talented speaker, writer, and musician, she was welcomed in cultured white society in the North, but remained loyal to people of color, knowing that the advantages she enjoyed were not given to other blacks.

Early Life and Education

She was born in Brockport, New York, six years before the Civil War, in one of the few black families in town. Her father, Anthony Barrier, a barber and part-time coal merchant, was well-respected in the community and a long-time lay leader in the First Baptist Church. Her mother Harriet taught Bible classes and Fannie played the piano for Sunday services.



Brockport, New York 1860



New York State Normal School 1870

A bright, personable child, talented in both music and art, Fannie attended public school with her siblings Ella and George. Ella became a teacher and principal in Washington, D.C.; George was an inspector for the Detroit Board of Public Works and a leader in local politics. They were well-liked students who associated freely with white classmates. Fannie was unaware at the time of the racial prejudice that prevailed in other parts of the country, having experienced none in Brockport. Fannie graduated from the State Normal School (now SUNY-College at Brockport) in 1870, the first African American to do so.

When the Civil War ended, the Federal government established schools to educate newly freed slaves. Inspired by her parents' friend Frederick Douglass, the former slave and abolitionist who lived in nearby Rochester, and now more knowledgeable about the oppression of blacks, Fannie obtained a teaching position in the South. For the first time, she experienced the daily degradations—segregation, intimidation, and physical assaults—suffered by many African Americans. At first she tried to adapt to the dreadful conditions, but said in "A Northern Negro's Autobiography," 1904, "I had missed the training that would have made this continued humiliation possible."

She went to Boston to study piano at the New England Conservatory of Music, but was asked to leave because Southern white students objected to her presence. "I never quite recovered from the shock and pain of my first bitter realization," she wrote, "that to be a colored woman is to be discredited, mistrusted and often meanly hated."

Life in Chicago



Chicago, Illinois 1887

Fannie then went to Washington, D.C. to teach. She socialized with other educated blacks, studied portrait painting at the School of Fine Arts, and met S. (Samuel) Laing Williams, an outstanding African American law student. They were married in Brockport, New York, in 1887, and moved to Chicago where they became leaders in the African American community. Although housing was racially segregated, they made friends with white reformers, such as Jane Addams, founder of the Southside settlement, Hull House; Mary McDowell, the director of the University of Chicago Social Settlement; and meatpacker and philanthropist Philip D. Armour, who employed many black workers in his plants without discrimination.

The Williamses, who had no children, soon took up numerous projects. S. Laing was successful as a lawyer. He organized the Prudence Crandall Study Club, limited to 25 couples from the African American elite. Fannie was its director of art and music. With a generous donation from Armour, in 1891, the Williamses helped establish Provident Hospital. This had a bi-racial staff and clientele, and a nurses' training school for black students who were barred from all others.

Fannie and her husband joined All Souls (Unitarian) Church in Chicago. They may have first been attracted by the Abraham Lincoln Center, a reform settlement which the church sponsored. The minister was [Jenkin Lloyd Jones](#), a free-thinker, pacifist, activist for women and blacks' civil rights, and a founder of the World's Parliament of Religions. Fannie's friend, the Unitarian minister, Celia Parker Wooley, was a member.

Speaking Career

Williams came to national prominence at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Black women leaders had protested their exclusion from the fair's planning. To appease them, Williams was appointed to gather exhibits for the women's hall. More importantly, she presented two courageous and controversial addresses.

Her first speech, to the World's Congress of Representative Women, entitled, "The Intellectual Progress of Colored Women of the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation," Williams argued, before a mostly white audience, that black women were eager to gain the education and skills denied during slavery, were cheerful and hopeful despite the "distressing burden of mean and unreasonable discrimination," were hard-working in their determination to find jobs and support themselves and their families, and had come amazingly far in less than 30 years.

"Few of the happy, prosperous, and eager living Americans, can appreciate what it all means to be suddenly changed from irresponsible bondage to the responsibility of freedom and citizenship!"

While praising those who worked to uplift the downtrodden "colored women," she chastised privileged citizens who were "impatient with ignorance and poverty" and urged them to help rather than hinder the progress of those striving to better their lives, to judge individuals by their worth and not by race or custom. She also observed that black women were becoming interested in a variety of religious institutions "from the Catholic creed to the no-creed of Emerson."

In her second speech to the World's Parliament of Religions, published as "Religious Duty to the Negro," Williams excoriated the Christians who brought Africans to this country as slaves and preached a "false, pernicious, demoralizing Gospel" to make them docile and dependent. The masters dared not "open the Bible too wide," however, or the slaves would have recognized the hypocrisy of Christians committing atrocities against a defenseless people. She noted, however, that after Emancipation a number of white "heroic men and saintly women . . . believed in the manhood and womanhood of the negro race" and generously established schools, colleges, and churches in the South. She was grateful for "this significant change in sentiment," but concerned that Northern churches had sent "too many ministers who have had no sort of preparation and fitness for the work assigned them."

Williams challenged her listeners by asking, "What can religion further do to advance the condition of the colored people?" Her answer reflected Unitarian influence:

"More religion and less church. . . . Less theology and more of human brotherhood, less declamation and more common sense and love for truth. . . . The tendency of creeds and doctrine to obscure religion, to make complex that which is elemental and simple, to suggest partisanship and doubt in that which is universal and certain, has seriously hindered the moral progress of the colored people of this country." Because "in nothing was slavery so savage and so relentless as in its attempted destruction of the family instincts," she urged ministers and others to do less preaching and instead "open every cabin door and get immediate contact" with Southern blacks, teaching them the "blessed meanings of marriage, motherhood and family" and how a humane religion can impact their daily lives in positive, practical ways.

She also called it a "monstrous thing" that so many Evangelical churches closed their doors to African Americans. "It should be the province of religion," Williams said, "to unite, and not to separate, men and women according to the superficial differences of race lines." In the audience sat the charismatic, 75-year-old Frederick Douglass. Moved by her address, he rose and praised the remarks of this "refined, educated colored lady," saying that "a new heaven is dawning upon us." After the success of these orations, she became a nationally-known writer and lecturer, who sometimes included a piano concert as part of her program.

In her 1895 talk to African American women in Memphis, Tennessee, "Opportunities and Responsibilities of Colored Women," Williams encouraged them to help themselves and each other to the utmost of their abilities, rather than depend on white benevolence. Their religion, she said, should "stand more for love than doctrine, more for human worth than church name. . . . What men and women do, rather than what they say or profess, shall be the standard of religion." She urged them to have sympathy for the most disadvantaged in their community, to set up projects such as day nurseries for mothers who worked full-time, to take pride in their race and gender, and be "self-respectful, ambitious, aspiring for all that is best in human life."

Other Achievements

A year earlier, Williams was nominated by several white friends, including Wooley, to be a member of the prestigious Chicago Woman's Club. Although she would be the first black woman in the 800-member organization, she expected no opposition. To her dismay, a vocal minority fought her application for 14 months, drawing national media attention. Not wanting to offend her friends, Williams resisted the pressure to withdraw her name and was eventually voted in by a decisive majority—the group's only African American for the next 30 years.

Williams established clubs to help black women, especially those who emigrated to Northern cities with insufficient knowledge and few resources. In 1893 she helped found the National League of Colored Women. In 1896 this joined other organizations to become the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The local clubs, over 200 from many states, provided child care centers, classes, employment bureaus, and savings

banks. Williams believed that African American women needed to band together to gain confidence, to protect each other "against the libelous attacks upon their characters," and to teach literacy and domestic and job skills. Williams was a lead organizer for the 1899 NACW convention held in Chicago.

S. Laing Williams was a long-time friend of Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, who advocated vocational training for Southern blacks. The Williamses emphasized the value of higher education, but also believed that working-class people needed jobs, decent places to live, and help with daily survival. Fannie defended Washington's methods and also urged home economics classes for women. In the preface to his 1907 biography of Frederick Douglass, Washington paid tribute to S. Laing and Fannie Barrier Williams for their "incalculable service in the preparation of this volume." Because of their close relationship with both Douglass and Washington, some have speculated that the Williamses ghostwrote the book.

During this time, the African American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois severely criticized Washington for making an accommodation with Southern white supremacy, thus limiting the education and aspirations of intelligent, talented black youth. The Williamses joined the DuBois campaign to attack racial discrimination and lynching and were early members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909. As they, however, believed the two views on education need not be in conflict, they maintained cordial relationships with both men.

In 1905, with Wooley, who became the director, Williams helped create the Frederick Douglass Center in Chicago, an integrated social settlement. She also helped establish the Phyllis Wheatley Home, a place for young black women to stay, be protected, and find employment when they first moved to the city. The center inspired copies in other urban areas. In addition, she was active in the movement to gain legal rights and the vote for all women. When Susan B. Anthony died in 1907, Williams was the only African American woman to give a eulogy at the National American Women's Suffrage Association convention. She also gave eulogies for Philip D. Armour in 1901 and Celia Parker Wooley in 1918.

After her husband died in 1921, Williams continued her activist work. In 1924 she was the first woman and the first African American to be appointed to the board of the Chicago Public Library. Because of declining health, in 1926 she returned to live with her sister Ella in their family home in Brockport (163 Erie Street, now a New York state historical site). She took care of Ella, who became blind, until her own debilitating stroke led to her demise. Ella died a year later. The sisters and their parents were buried in the High Street Cemetery in Brockport. Their brother, George, had died in Detroit in 1907.

Her Legacy

For her impassioned work for African American causes, Williams was esteemed by black communities across the land. Because of her genteel manner, organizing talents, and vivacious personality, she was accepted by many Northern white social reformers. Being light-skinned eased her way. Williams recognized the exceptional privileges she experienced as a black woman in her day, but she wrote at the end of her autobiography, "Whether I live in the North or the South, I cannot be counted for my full value." Her heart ached for the bigotry and barriers that confronted African Americans, especially the women whom she considered to be the most oppressed. She dedicated herself to aiding and uplifting those in need, improving interracial relations, and working for justice and equality for all.

Source: From the biography of *Fannie Barrier Williams* written by Cathy Tauscher and Peter Hughes in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society.