

‘We the ladies ... have been deprived of a voice’: Uncovering Black Women’s Lives through the Colored Conventions Archive

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In narratives and archival records white writers often distort or construe Black women to fit prevailing myths and stereotypes. White Northerners’ travel narratives, for example, reveal how they marvelled at seeing real-life mammies, and even those disturbed by the system of slavery capitulated to denigrating representations. In Frederick Law Olmsted’s *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, he comments on mulatto girls with ‘*spying, secretive, and counsel-keeping expression*’ and joyful, mammy-like Black women.¹ Court documents involving contraband Black women during the Civil War reveal how their alleged crimes were seen as proof of their inferior nature; they are, therefore, reduced to familiar stereotypes.² In these published testimonies and archives, Black persons’ subjectivity — how they felt, envisioned freedom, and imagined its opportunities — is lost. There is a wealth of white-produced archives and historians such as Wendy Warren and Catherine A. Stewart have expertly centred race by reading against the grain.³ But with the advent of open access platforms, scholars today are presented with an opportunity to easily mine a Black-produced archive through the Colored Conventions minutes.

The conventions were a series of state and national meetings held by free, self-emancipated, and fugitive African Americans all over the United States in the nineteenth century. The Colored Conventions Project (CCP) has collected and transcribed hundreds of records about the Colored Conventions movement and made them available to the public. The project

¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; with Remarks on their Economy* (London: Sampson Low; New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), pp. 18, 135, emphasis in original. I would like to thank Pier Gabrielle Foreman for her continued support and mentorship as well as Alexis Wolf for inviting me to contribute to this journal.

² I have recently mined the Court Martial Case Files at the National Archives and Records Administration, finding that most of the Black women and girls summoned to military court in the Civil War were found guilty of petty and serious crimes with poor evidence. See Court Martial Case Files, RG 153.

³ See Wendy Anne Warren, “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England”, *Journal of American History*, 93 (2007), 1031–049; Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

was the brainchild of Pier Gabrielle Foreman and her then students James Casey and Sarah Lynn Patterson. What started as an idea in a graduate class in the University of Delaware six years ago is now an easily accessible digital collection that compiles minutes, newspaper articles, bibliographies, and interactive exhibits. I joined the project in 2015 as a graduate student and found my place among a diverse group of students, librarians, and faculty members. My research goal was to highlight Black women's contributions during the movement's crucial first years. For this reason, I built an exhibit that focuses on Black women who were not mentioned in the minutes but whose livelihoods supported the conventions — boarding-house hostesses, bakers, and so forth — who spread the word, welcomed delegates, and provided spaces for political discussions. In the process, I realized that the 'scarcity' of records about Black women's lives is a matter of perception. While such an archive is not as abundant as we often hope, this does not render our task as researchers impossible.

Black Philadelphians held the first convention in 1830 to discuss subjects such as education, emigration to Canada, land ownership, and their conditions in the United States. Many conventions soon followed, producing records scattered around the country but which are currently available at the CCP's website. The archive of the Colored Conventions is vast; apart from the minutes and newspaper reports, correspondence from delegates and other Black activists also reveals the breadth and reach of the movement. Though male-dominated for most of its life, the Colored Conventions movement grappled with issues concerning women. Briefly recorded moments when Black women asserted their place at these conventions are not negligible; rather, they are rich sites where their subjectivity emerges, and from which we can reconstruct their lives.

Here I address how we can centre Black women using records that relegate their voices to the periphery. In particular, I explore how convention minutes reflect these women's cumulative efforts to privilege their concerns, such as equal education. While white societies and institutions imposed monumental barriers against Black women, it is important to note that they also faced challenges within Black circles. As Deborah Gray White writes, 'The impossible task confronts the black woman. If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of a woman traps her.'⁴ Within the Colored Conventions archive are moments where Black women refused to let the 'myth of a woman' ensnare them; this archive consequently indexes the slow erosion of the imperatives of separate spheres. Transgressing their place as supporters of their husbands and other male relatives, Black women emerge in this archive as antebellum feminists who were pushing forth progressive — and for the time — radical ideas about gender.

⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. edn (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 28.

From its inception, the Colored Conventions movement was preoccupied with political and economic uplift and self-help, but delegates imagined these within the domain of Black men's responsibility. Education, they deemed, was crucial to attaining their aims. In 1831 delegates collaborated with white abolitionists to build a manual labour college for Black men. They agreed upon New Haven, Connecticut as a prime location believing that its 'inhabitants are friendly, pious, generous, and humane'.⁵ When New Haven's white residents found out about the plan, they promptly held a town meeting and resolved to do all in their power to prevent the establishment of a Black college. A white mob attacked Black residences in New Haven, effectively discouraging any attempt to build such a school.

Less than two years later, it became clear that Connecticut was not a place where Black education could thrive. When Prudence Crandall allowed Sarah Harris, a young Black woman, to enrol in her school in Canterbury, white parents pulled out their daughters. Crandall decided to reopen it as a 'high school for young colored ladies and misses'.⁶ The state of Connecticut responded with highly restrictive 'Black codes', prohibiting anyone from teaching persons of colour from out of state, which accounted for a lot of Crandall's students. The delegates at the 1834 Colored Convention in New York — likely aware of Crandall's arrest and subsequent trial — applauded her 'devotion to the education of female colored youth; and we do most cheerfully commend her to the patronage and affection of the people of colour at large'.⁷ This was the first time that the Colored Conventions movement broached the subject of women's education.

When Crandall's school was forced to close, one of its students, Julia Williams, moved to Noyes Academy in Canaan, New Hampshire. Not much has been written about Julia Williams and she is often only noted as Henry Highland Garnet's wife. Both Williams and Garnet attended Noyes, from which they had to flee when a white mob attacked the school and dragged the building to the swamp using almost a hundred oxen. Williams's experience with racial violence would inform her activism and beliefs. When Henry Highland Garnet shocked several delegates at the 1843 Troy Colored Convention with his radical speech, 'An Address to the Slaves of the United States', no one suspected Williams's hand in its composition. She left no personal writings but newspaper correspondence regarding the conventions give us insight into her unconventional beliefs. When abolitionist

⁵ *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour* (Philadelphia: [n. pub.], 1831), p. 6, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/72>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

⁶ 'High School for Young Colored Ladies and Misses', *Liberator*, 2 March 1833, p. 35.

⁷ *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour* (New York: [n. pub.], 1834), p. 18, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/276>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

Maria Chapman heard about the address, she accused Garnet of being swayed by white radicals. Garnet defended himself, claiming he did not receive the “*counsel*” of some anglo-saxon’, but rather from his own wife.⁸ Although women were yet to be allowed as delegates, Williams’s veiled radical voice found its way to the convention floor. Her desire for urgent action likely stemmed from the repeated violence she witnessed and experienced as she sought education.

By the late 1840s the tide of the women’s rights movement was making its way into the Colored Conventions movement. Prominent Black figures such as Frederick Douglass, Jermain Loguen, and William C. Nell attended the predominantly white women’s rights conventions in New York and later attended Colored Conventions, advocating for gender equality. But as Black women found at the 1849 Columbus State Convention, the movement was not yet fully ready to accept gender equality. The minutes briefly record what must have been a tense moment when women attendees threatened to leave the convention by submitting their own resolution:

Whereas we the ladies have been invited to attend the Convention, and have been deprived of a voice, which we the ladies deem wrong and shameful. Therefore, Resolved, that we will attend no more after to-night, unless the privilege is granted.⁹

Though some male delegates opposed their participation, the women were eventually invited back.

Jane P. Merritt, whose husband served as a delegate, submitted this dramatic resolution. In so doing, she, along with the other women, made clear that they did not attend only as appendages to their husbands but rather as individuals who were fashioning an activist role for themselves. Apart from the minutes of the 1849 Columbus convention, documents recording Merritt’s activism are yet to be found, but Carolyn King and Dr Erica Ball’s CCP exhibit uncovers parts of Merritt’s personal life and the anti-slavery efforts with which she was likely involved. Indeed, the Colored Conventions archive is replete with Black women whose works have gone unrecognized. With women present, male delegates were compelled to consider the challenges they faced. Although the men ridiculed Frederick Douglass, with whom many of them disagreed, they eventually passed a resolution condemning the school that segregated his daughter Rosetta Douglass from the rest of her class. Women attendees fought to bring to

⁸ Henry Highland Garnet, ‘A Letter to Mrs Maria W. Chapman’, *Liberator*, 8 December 1843, p. 193, emphasis in original.

⁹ *Minutes and Address of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio* (Oberlin: [n. pub.], 1849), p. 15, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/247>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

light the impediments to Black female education. Unknown Black women like Merritt emerge from the Colored Conventions archive as early feminists, who audaciously challenged the movement's male-centric vision.¹⁰

As historians we may feel uncomfortable with reading nineteenth-century women through records of/about their husbands or other male relatives. As in the case of Julia Williams Garnet, Black male leadership often eclipses Black women's labours. However, the Colored Conventions minutes allow us to see their dynamic activism as independent persons, which is why the CCP highlights their work in various stages of their lives.¹¹ The 1854 National Emigration Convention in Cleveland broke ground as forty women attended as delegates (*Fig. 1*). Among them was Amelia Freeman, whom scholars often note only as the sister-in-law of Mary Ann Shadd, the first Black woman newspaper editor in North America. Historians often refer to her as Amelia Shadd and privilege her activism as a married woman. However, at the time of the Emigration Convention, Freeman had not moved to Canada or married Isaac Shadd.¹² Her delegacy suggests that she had been active in the emigration movement even before her marriage. Rendered invisible in many abolitionist circles and women's rights groups, Black women took a forefront role in the emigration movement.

Indeed, emigration served as a platform for Black women to assert themselves as activists in their own right, and the Colored Conventions minutes reveal how they embodied female leadership. Mary Miles Bibb served as vice president at the 1854 convention only three weeks after her husband's death. She and Henry Bibb were prominent community leaders in Canada and ran the paper *Voice of a Fugitive*. The convention record is one of the few documents testifying to Miles Bibb's autonomy. Shadd's opinion of the Bibbs is also illuminating: as Jane Rhodes notes, Shadd believed '[Miles Bibb] to be the controlling influence in his life'.¹³ Though the minutes do not record what Bibb said, an Ohio newspaper reports that she made remarks about Canada West, the condition of Black persons in the United States, and the objects of the convention even before Martin R.

¹⁰ During the proceedings, delegates ridiculed a convention report Frederick Douglass and Martin R. Delany previously published, claiming it was merely a synopsis (pp. 13–14).

¹¹ The Colored Conventions Project requires all national teaching partners who are creating exhibits with their classes to research and include Black women and to centre their contributions.

¹² Amelia Freeman (not to be confused with Mary Ann Shadd's sister Amelia Cisco Shadd) was an Oberlin College-educated teacher born to a prominent activist family in Pittsburgh. She moved to Chatham, Canada in 1856 and shortly after married Mary Ann Shadd's brother.

¹³ Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 48.

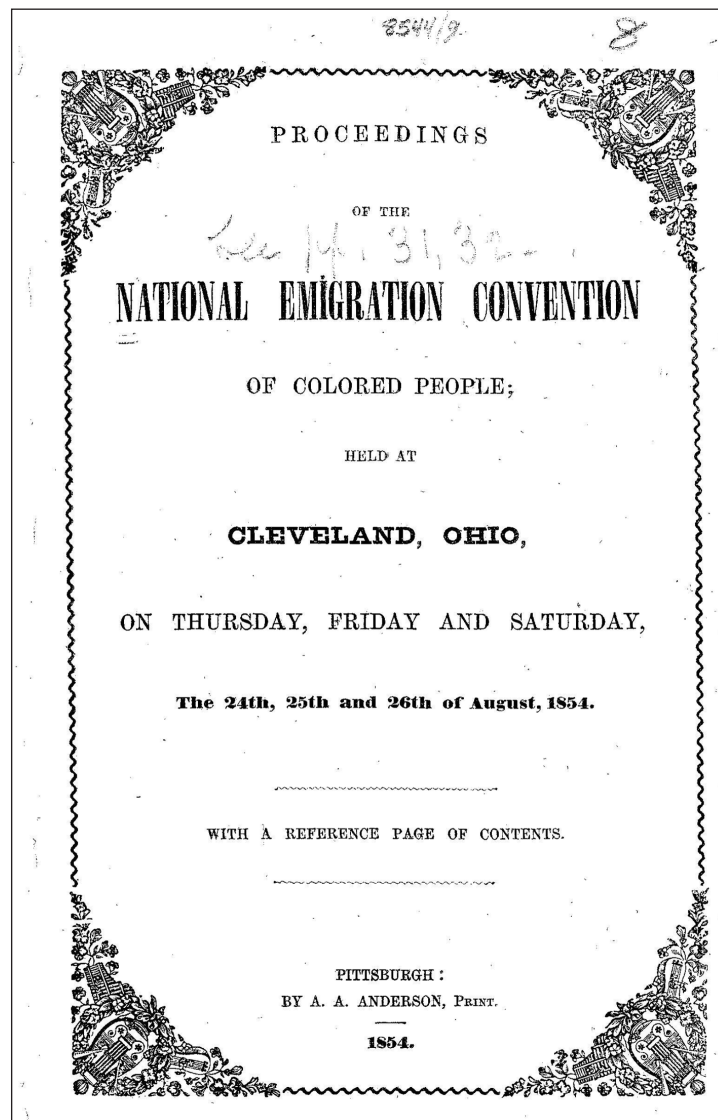


Fig. 1: Cover of the minutes of the 1854 National Emigration Convention, which had the highest number of women delegates among all conventions. <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/314>>.

Delany proposed a resolution of condolences for her loss.¹⁴ At the convention, Miles Bibb attended not as a grieving widow but as a woman activist prepared to promote her cause. By bringing together minutes, newspaper

¹⁴ 'Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention', *Summit County Beacon*, 30 August 1854, p. 2.

reports, and biographies in one digital platform, the CCP illuminates Black women's travel circuits and activities. We thus see Miles Bibb, whose life remains understudied, as a transnational and incredibly prolific activist.

As teachers who struggled to provide learning to Black children in the United States and to gain education for themselves, Freeman, Miles Bibb, and Shadd knew the barriers to Black female education, and the minutes of early conventions show how delegates failed properly to acknowledge this key issue. Although they fashioned themselves as emigrationists, for these women education was always at the core of their activism. Shadd often argued for equal education for men and women in her newspaper *Provincial Freeman* and called for women's independence (Rhodes, p. 92). And, as Afua Cooper argues, 'teaching remained the centre of [Miles Bibb's] "public" life.'¹⁵ Freeman, on the other hand, promptly resumed teaching and started her own school in Canada once she moved. While many male-led conventions strategized towards 'the elevation of the free coloured man in the land of his nativity',¹⁶ Black women emigrationists in 1854 resolved that 'the work of elevation among us cannot be complete until the education of our sons and daughters [...] have been fully accomplished'.¹⁷ The discussion on emigration was often framed in a masculinist discourse, but within convention minutes we can see how Black women emigrationists reframed it to represent women. They consequently presented a different kind of feminism — one that emphasized self-reliance, education, and the community. Though also invested in the fight for voting rights, their activism did not chiefly focus on self-uplift through suffrage.¹⁸

The Colored Conventions archive also shows how Black women were defining their public roles and countering slavery's potent myths. While slavery's visual culture represented them as mammies, jezebels, and chattel property, on the convention floor they presented themselves as eloquent and modest speakers who embodied precise control over their voice and every move. When Mary Ann Shadd gave a speech at the 1855 National Colored Convention, even her detractors could not deny her oratorical skills:

¹⁵ Afua P. Cooper, 'Black Women and Work in Nineteenth-Century Canada West: Black Woman Teacher Mary Bibb', in Afua P. Cooper and others, *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 143–70 (p. 160).

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People* (Pittsburgh: [n. pub.], 1854), p. 20, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/314>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

¹⁸ Black women would bolster their advocacy for women suffrage causes after the Civil War. Mary Ann Shadd Cary joined the National Woman Suffrage Association in the 1870s and supported women both in Canada and the United States.

She is a superior woman; and it is useless to deny it; however much we may differ with her on the subject of emigration [...] the House was crowded and breathless in its attention to her masterly exposition of our present condition.¹⁹

Although Shadd's delegacy was tensely debated before being accepted, her assertive presence changed the milieu of the convention.

It is no coincidence that the 1855 convention also marked the first time that delegates included women's trades in its statistical records and acknowledged their role in the marketplace. The terseness of the records about Black women's delegacy, speeches, and trades reminds us that there was a resistance against centring their voices. Indeed, male speakers' addresses are better recorded and they are often named. In contrast, many women attendees are rendered anonymous or simply referred to as 'ladies'. Though they seem insignificant, these short lines still provide us with a view of 'ordinary' Black women's anti-slavery efforts.

Many women attendees, married and unmarried, sustained the movement through money donations, presenting themselves as agents with economic power. In an 1850 convention, 'the Ladies attending the Convention proposed to defray the expenses of the house',²⁰ and in 1856, the 'Ladies of A.M.E. Church' donated five dollars to help with the cost of renting a hall and publishing the minutes.²¹ Women attendees gave donations even after spending their own hard-earned money to travel to the conventions.²² During the 1858 Cincinnati convention, delegates decided to form an anti-slavery society and Frances Ellen Watkins [Harper] was among those who donated a large sum. Like Shadd and Bibb, Watkins had been tirelessly travelling across the north-east when she attended the convention. Given women's efforts to support the Colored Conventions, it became increasingly difficult for male delegates to overlook their investment in the movement and their right to participate in it.

In 1864 Edmonia Highgate was invited to speak at a Colored Convention in Syracuse, New York. The convention president proudly

¹⁹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 9 November 1855, p. 3.

²⁰ *Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio* (Columbus: [n. pub.], 1850), p. 15, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/248>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

²¹ 'Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men', *Liberator*, 15 February 1856, p. 28.

²² Lucy Stanton [Day Sessions], believed to be the first African American woman to graduate from college, attended the 1851 Columbus convention shortly after finishing her studies. She and Mary J. Hopkins, also a single woman at the time, pledged money for the cost of publishing the convention minutes. See *Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio* (Columbus: [n. pub.], 1851), p. 15, in *Colored Conventions* <<https://coloredconventions.org/items/show/249>> [accessed 22 October 2018].

introduced her to the audience: ‘You have your Anna Dickinsons; and we have ours. We wish to meet you at every point.’²³ This was a far cry from the numerous discouragements male delegates tendered to women attendees in previous years. Male-centric practices continued to exist, however; as with the speeches of the women that came before her, Highgate’s address was not recorded in the minutes but only briefly mentioned. Nevertheless, those few lines strongly suggest a cultural shift within the movement: women need not fight for their place at the pulpit.

As I study and read through the Colored Conventions archive, I could not help but note a pattern discernible today. Five years ago, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded Black Lives Matter. In 2015 Kimberlé Crenshaw spearheaded the Black Girls Matter campaign to highlight the overlapping inequalities that young women of colour face, which is often obscured by the public’s focus on Black male victims. As the world’s largest sporting brand sponsors Black activist and athlete Colin Kaepernick, it reminds us that the face of Black activism is that of a man — much like it had been in the nineteenth century. But its voice also belongs to Black women who, like their foremothers in conventions, compel us to think about the intersection of sexism and racism. Although not thoroughly recorded, Black women’s moments of resistance in the Colored Convention archive testify to a feminist tradition, one that continues to animate today’s movements.

²³ Here convention president J. Sella Martin compares Highgate to well-known orator, abolitionist, and women’s rights advocate Anna Elizabeth Dickinson. See *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men* (Boston: Rock and Ruffin, 1864), p. 14, in *Colored Conventions* <<http://coloredconventions.org/items/show/282>> [accessed 22 October 2018].