

Task 2: Fannie Barrier Williams Case Study: Biography

Directions: Independently read the biography. Answer the corresponding questions.

Fannie Barrier Williams

African American social activist Fannie Barrier Williams was a powerful orator and organizer. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, she was an effective and respected advocate on behalf of women and African Americans. Williams was considered someone who could bridge the divide between the two groups.

Early Life

Frances Barrier was born on February 12, 1855, in Brockport, New York, near Rochester. Her father, Anthony Barrier, a barber and coal merchant, was a well-respected member of the community and a lay church leader. Her mother, Harriet, taught Bible classes. The Barriers were one of one of the few black families in the community.

Williams received her early education in local schools, and in 1870 became the first African American to earn a degree at the State Normal School (now part of The College at Brockport, State University of New York; also known as SUNY Brockport).

After graduation, Williams traveled to the South to work as a teacher. Her experience there during the Reconstruction era was eye-opening, exposing her for the first time to degradation, intimidation, and physical assaults—experiences common to Southern black people. She then moved to Boston intending to study piano at the New England Conservatory of Music, but she was asked to leave after Southern white students objected to her presence.

Two Important Speeches

Leaving the conservatory, Williams went to Washington, D.C., to teach. There she met Samuel Laing Williams, whom she married in 1887. The couple moved to Chicago, where they became friends with reformer Jane Addams. Samuel started a law practice, and Williams became active in the local community.

In 1893, she spoke at the World's Columbian Exposition, a World's Fair and cultural event in Chicago. Given responsibility for putting together African American exhibits for one of the exhibit halls, she also gave two important speeches.

In one speech, she presented a vision for black women's intellectual promise. In the second speech, she called on religious people to serve the black community. She called out the many evangelical churches that refused to accept black members, while also noting the role that Christians had played in bringing slaves from Africa to the United States.

African American icon Frederick Douglass witnessed the speech, and his subsequent praise, coupled with the positive audience response, established Williams as a major voice for late 19th-century black women. A tireless activist, later that year she helped found the National League of Colored Women¹, and in 1896 she helped found the National Association of Colored Women.

Chicago Activism

Deeply involved in the Chicago community, Williams and her husband helped establish Provident Hospital in Chicago in 1891. A trailblazing institution, Provident Hospital had not only a biracial staff and clientele, but also provided nursing training for black women denied such opportunities in the city's other facilities.

In 1894, Williams was nominated for membership in the prestigious Chicago Woman's Club, but she was accepted only after a contentious 14-month battle. She was the club's first black member, and its only one for 30 years.

In 1905, Williams helped create the Frederick Douglass Center, an integrated settlement house in Chicago. Williams was also instrumental in the establishment of the Phillis Wheatley House, a place where young black women could find shelter and support as they looked for employment.

This transition facility proved to be a model, with additional ones cropping up in other urban areas. Despite the fact that her husband was a longtime friend and associate of Booker T. Washington, in 1909, Williams helped Washington's rival, W. E. B. Du Bois, found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Williams was also active in the women's suffrage movement (the struggle to gain women the right to vote), with her stature made evident when she was selected to give a eulogy for Susan B. Anthony at the 1907 National American Woman Suffrage Association convention.

In her later years, Williams focused more on her writing. She was the first woman and the first African American to serve on the board of the Chicago Public Library. Some of her most important writings were published in *The New Woman of Color: The Collected Writings of Fannie Barrier Williams, 1893–1918*.

In 1926, she moved back to her hometown of Brockport to nurse her sister Ella, who had become blind. Some 18 years later, Williams herself suffered a debilitating stroke and died in Brockport on March 4, 1944 at the age of 89.

Link: <https://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/2157012?terms=national+association+of+colored+women&sTypeId=2>

Discussion Questions:

1. What was Fannie's early life like?
2. How did her life change after graduating from college?
3. Describe the two important speeches given by Fannie Barrier Williams. How did Williams use these speeches to call for both Women's Suffrage and Civil Rights reform?
4. Describe the goals of the NACW, the club founded in part by Fannie Barrier Williams.
*See footnote for information regarding the NACW.
5. How did Fannie Barrier Williams positively impact the Chicago community?
6. Fannie Barrier Williams was asked to give a eulogy for Susan B. Anthony. What does this suggest about her role in the Women's Suffrage Movement?

¹ The purposes of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) are philanthropic and educational, but it has also supported a number of reform issues, including women's suffrage.

The NACW, founded in 1896, resulted from the merger of the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the Colored Women's League. Mary Church Terrell was NACW's first president. Throughout its history, the NACW's has provided job and

child care training, worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, and raised money for schools and scholarships. It has also worked to advance women's rights and civil rights.

NACW still exists, under the name National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, but its membership has declined significantly.

National Association of Colored Women. (2020). In *American History*. Retrieved from <http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/253523>