

Making Strides | The Rollin Sisters

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Photo courtesy of [Historic Columbia](#).

Frances, Charlotte, Katherine, Louisa and Florence Rollin lived prosperously in South Carolina during the era of slavery. Born “into an elite circle of Charleston’s free people of color, [their] existence [was] defined simultaneously by wealth and property while still being denied of many rights and protections granted to white citizens.” [i] After the Civil War, Frances, Charlotte and Katherine “moved to Columbia and established a space for interracial dialogue about political and civil affairs. They were among the first and most significant women suffragists in South Carolina during that era.” [i]

Frances Rollin

“The Rollin sisters’ ascent to political power started with Frances, born in 1845.” [i] She most notably won one of the earliest Civil Rights lawsuits in 1867 when she was denied access to a first class cabin of a steamship traveling between Beaufort and Charleston. Frances filed suit against Captain W.T. McNelty, and he was found guilty of discrimination on the basis of race. Captain McNelty was fined \$250 and ordered to not discriminate again. “The only one of the sisters to marry, Frances wed William J. Whipper, an influential Black legislator, [in] 1868. Whipper became the Rollin sister’s biggest ally in the pursuit of women’s suffrage and frequently aided in their efforts.” [ii]

Charlotte "Lottie" Rollin + Katherine "Kate" Rollin

In 1867, after receiving insufficient funding, Kate and Lottie’s plan for opening a school for Black children in Charleston was unsuccessful, and they instead “moved to Columbia where they established their base for political activity.” [ii] In Columbia, they both taught in Freedmen’s Bureau schools, and by 1869, were employed as clerks at the State House. “That year, national newspapers, including the Anti-Slavery Standard, began describing Lottie as ‘an advocate of impartial suffrage’ who had ‘delivered an address in the House of Representatives (before the judiciary committee) of this State, demanding suffrage for her sex.’” – she was the first Black woman ever to do so. (Edgefield Advertiser, September 1, 1869) [i]

“In 1870, Lottie was elected secretary of the South Carolina Woman’s Rights Association. She then went on to spearhead the creation of a South Carolina chapter of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), corresponding personally with the organization’s president, Lucy Stone.” [ii] Kate served as the organization’s secretary. “In 1872, the South Carolina chapter selected Lottie to attend the national convention of AWSA, and the South Carolina General Assembly voted to endorse a petition by the group to grant women equal rights, although no specific action was taken. This proved the pinnacle of achievement for women’s suffrage.” [i]

[i] The Rollin Sisters. (n.d.). Retrieved August 10, 2020,
from <https://www.columbiacityofwomen.com/honorees/rollin-sisters>

[ii] (2020, July 30). Rollin Sisters. Retrieved August 10, 2020,
from <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/rollin-sisters/>

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