

**Making the Most of “the Grandest Opportunity:” the Impact of the 1893 Columbian
Exposition on the Black Women’s Club Movement¹**

Sania Edlich



A flag from the National Association of Colored Women’s Club (NACWC) with their motto.²

¹ “The Appeal to the Representative Negro Women of the United States,” *Boston Courant*, October, 1891, quoted in Ann Massa, “Black Women in the ‘White City’,” *Journal of American Studies* 8, no.3 (December 1974): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553128>.

² “Banner with motto of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs,” unknown artist, 1924, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2010.2.1abc.

The founding of the National Association for Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) in August 1896 marked the establishment of the first national organization for African American women.³ The NACWC's motto was "lifting as we climb," affirming the Association's goal of elevating not just itself, but the whole African American community following the Civil War. The NACWC's spirit of uplift, while having arisen out of the period of Reconstruction, was also due to African American women's activism against being excluded from the Woman's Building in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. White women leading the Woman's Building did not let African American women showcase their industrial progress in efforts to conform to the Exposition's white-, male-centered definition of progress. Their successful efforts to exclude Black women had an unforeseen result. Far from discouraged, Black women united their existing local clubs into the powerful National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC). The NACWC allowed conformity to the Exposition's goals of progress to outlast the Exposition itself by taking on its definitions of progress and turning them into outreach to the African American community.

The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, hosted in Chicago, was a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas, and the industrialization of the United States.⁴ Exhibits from Western countries highlighted men's achievements as they focused on industrialization, seen as men's work. Feeling left out of this male-centered display of progress, many wealthy white women from across the United States successfully advocated for the establishment of the Woman's Building. Its goal was to showcase the products of white women's labor. The Board of Lady Managers, consisting of around 117

³ Anna Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," *Illinois Historical Journal* 88, no. 1 (1995): 35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40192873>.

⁴ Kristy Maddux, *Practicing Citizenship: Women's Rhetoric at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2019), viii.

white women, led the Building and its exhibits.⁵ However, the Exposition being white male-dominated made it so that African American women had to fight not only against sexism but also racism.

The layout of the Exposition excluded people of color and marked them as primitive.⁶ The Exposition grounds were split into two sections: the White City and the Midway. The Midway, far from the White City, housed human zoos containing African and Asian people.⁷ Exhibits in the Midway did not just deny people of color displays of their advancement. They denied people of color their humanity. By contrast, the White City housed exhibitions from Western countries showcasing industry and democracy.⁸ In effect, the Midway marked the opposite of the white advancement displayed in the White City.⁹ The contrast between the Midway and the White City laid out a progression from “barbarism” to Western “progress.” The Midway was a line that led up to the White City, sitting at the top of an evolutionary chain (see Figure 1).¹⁰ Thus, the Exposition’s layout made it clear that progress was a white achievement. Yet it was not just the Exposition’s layout that subjugated people who were not white men.

African American women took the possibility of leading the Board of Lady Managers as an opportunity to build on the work of smaller African American women’s organizations from the

⁵ Regina Megan Palm, “Women Muralists, Modern Woman and Feminine Spaces: Constructing Gender at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition,” *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 2 (2010): 126, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40801929>.

⁶ In this essay, I use the term ‘person of color’ to be consistent with the terminology of the sources that I have used to write this essay. However, I want to recognize a shift in academic language to describe people of color in a way that is independent of whiteness and empowering through the use of the word ‘people of the global majority.’ See: “Global Majority,” Cambridge Dictionary, May 17, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/global-majority>.

⁷ Kristy Maddux, “Racial Uplift,” in *Practicing Citizenship: Women’s Rhetoric at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2019), 91, 51, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=e089mna&AN=2154227&site=eds-live&custid=s6535938&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_C.

⁸ Maddux, “Racial Uplift,” 91.

⁹ Palm, “Women Muralists, Modern Woman and Feminine Spaces: Constructing Gender at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition,” 139.

¹⁰ Hermann Heinz, *Souvenir Map of the World’s Columbian Exposition at Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance* (Chicago, 1893), Chicago Historical Society, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10610.html>.

Civil War and Reconstruction. During the period of enslavement through the Civil War, mainly only free African American women could form more established social welfare organizations, making their existence relatively small.¹¹ Throughout Reconstruction, Black communities faced urbanization and declining social services.¹² In response, Black women formed organizations to provide where the government did not. One example was the Daughters of Zion of Avery Chapel in Memphis, an organization of African American women. They voted in 1867 to hire a physician to treat church members free of charge due to a lack of medical care available to them.¹³ This group was one of the hundreds of Black women's organizations that sprung up between 1863 and 1893. With this previous experience running organizations, many African American women saw the Woman's Building as an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to lead. Josephine Ruffin, an African American publisher, protested that "years after years, Southern [white] women have protested against the admission of colored women...because our reputation has only been tried by individual work."¹⁴ To Ruffin, Black women had experience in smaller organizations, but they had not had the opportunity to show their skills in large organizations. To do so, she suggested, African American women could lead the Woman's Building. An African American women's church group expressed the importance of leading the Woman's Building, calling working on the Board "the grandest opportunity."¹⁵ Despite being left out of the Exposition's definition of progress, African American women understood the importance of leading to prove their progress.

¹¹ Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women," *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 2 (April 1974): 158, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717327>.

¹² Anne F. Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2210662>.

¹³ Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," 7.

¹⁴ Josephine Ruffin, "Address of Josephine St. P. Ruffin, President of Conference," in *Lifting as They Climb* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1996), 17–19, <http://archive.org/details/liftingastheycli0000davi>.

¹⁵ Ann Massa, "Black Women in the 'White City'," *Journal of American Studies* 8, no.3 (December 1974): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553128>.

Black women were not alone in this pursuit, as white women viewed the Exposition as an important opportunity to prove their leadership capabilities. White women, particularly in the South, formed organizations during the Civil War. Many white women had worked for the United States Sanitary Commission to raise money for their husbands who were away at war, and they led more established organizations.¹⁶ Following the Civil War, white women were eager to continue showcasing their leadership. The opportunity to independently stage the Woman's Building was the perfect opportunity. In a letter, Bertha Honoré Palmer, the president of the Board of Lady Managers, repeatedly described leading the Board of Lady Managers as "the great opportunity."¹⁷ This phrase echoes the same language that African American women used. Palmer's statement suggests that she understood the importance of the Woman's Building in showing white women's leadership capabilities against the 208 male Exposition commissioners. Thus, she was wary about protecting this opportunity for white women. Board members knew that the Exposition rested on a white supremacist definition of progress. Therefore, while trying to appease the white male Exposition commissioners, white Board members excluded African American women.

White women's justification for excluding African American women suggests that white women conformed to the Exposition's definition of progress to establish their leadership. Bertha Palmer argued that she was willing "to appoint a national representative from the Negro women, and only refrained from doing so because they were quarrelling so among themselves."¹⁸ Palmer's statement had some truth to it. African American women, in their efforts to combat their exclusion,

¹⁶ Virginia Grant Darney, "Women and World's Fairs: American International Expositions, 1876-1904" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1982), 10, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/ddbd1623b1152dd264b617579369e6f5/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>.

¹⁷ Gayle Gullett, "'Our Great Opportunity': Organized Women Advance Women's Work at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," *University of Illinois Press* 87, no. 4 (1994): 261, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40192854>.

¹⁸ Bertha Palmer, "Palmer to Logan," October 11, 1891 quoted in Massa, "Black Women in the 'White City,'" 329.

led initiatives that were not always in accord. The two petitions that Black activists submitted differed in their approaches: one asked for segregated exhibits, and the other asked for racially integrated ones.¹⁹ Yet there was also disunity among white women. Before the Exposition, multiple groups of white women fought to lead the Woman's Building: the Queen Isabella Association and the Chicago Women's Department.²⁰ Therefore, it does not seem that divisions were the main concern to Bertha Palmer when excluding African American women.²¹ Thus, the Board's reason for excluding Black women seemed less to do with factions and was an opportunity for white women to conform to the Exposition's white-centered definition of progress. African Americans saw the hypocrisy of Palmer's justification and would combat this exclusion by conforming to the Exposition's definition of progress.

During the Exposition, African American activists led efforts to conform to the Exposition's definition of progress to be respected as advanced. Mary Logan, representing an African American women's church group, presented a list of resolutions to the Board. One resolution, to "demonstrat[e] the progress of the colored women since emancipation and [to show] to those who are yet doubters ... that the colored women have and are making rapid strides," "request[ed] the World's Columbian Commission to establish an office for a colored woman."²² This resolution suggests that African American women wanted to showcase their progress since emancipation just as white people showcased their industry. African American women portrayed their advancement as on par with that of white people. A successful case of African American

¹⁹ Paddon and Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," 23.

²⁰ Palm, "Women Muralists, Modern Woman and Feminine Spaces: Constructing Gender at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition," 125.

²¹ Gullett, "'Our Great Opportunity': Organized Women Advance Women's Work at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," 261; Palm, "Women Muralists, Modern Woman and Feminine Spaces: Constructing Gender at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition," 125.

²² *Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers of the World's Columbian Commission* (Chicago: Rand and McNally, 1891), 118, http://livinghistoryofillinois.com/pdf_files/Official%20Manual%20of%20the%20Board%20of%20Lady%20Managers%20of%20the%20Worlds%20Columbian%20Commission.%20Including%20Board%20Minutes.pdf.

women fighting for their place within the Exposition did eventually come after months of agitating, and African American women set up an exhibit on the second floor of the Woman's Building. African American women displayed work by Black typists and sculptors, bookbinding done by African American women, and an award given to an African American nurse in New York.²³ This display was similar to the ones in the White City: it showed African Americans' use of technology. Just as Western nations exhibited their art and technology, such as typewriters, African Americans did the same. Indeed, African American women held up and conformed to the examples of progress from the White City.

African Americans conformed to the White City's standards of progress also through culture. To do so, many African Americans agitated against the Commissioners of the Exposition. The Commission responded to this agitation by naming August 25, 1893 "Colored People's Day."²⁴ Frederick Douglass, along with many prominent African Americans, celebrated its establishment. The African American planning committee of "Colored People's Day" pushed to "[m]ake the day a credit . . . let the thousands of white people see a refined, dignified, cultured audience of Afro-American."²⁵ African American newspapers proclaimed as a success this day's displays of "refined" Black music, art, and culture; for them, it showed African American culture at the same level of sophistication and advancement that the Exposition exhibited white culture.²⁶ The overwhelming amount of African American support for this day suggests that a large portion of the African American community wished to show the refinement of African American culture and industrial progress to earn respect within the Exposition.

²³ Paddon and Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," 28-29.

²⁴ Claudine Raynaud, "African American Women's Voices at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair," 155.

²⁵ *Daily Inter Ocean*, August 22, 1893 quoted in Paddon and Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," 32.

²⁶ Paddon and Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," 32.

A majority of African Americans preferred to conform to the Exposition's definition of progress than to fight against it. Taking the Exposition as an opportunity to educate an international audience about the oppression of African Americans, Ida B. Wells, along with Frederick Douglass and Ferdinand Lee Barnett, co-authored a pamphlet titled "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition" to be distributed throughout the Exposition. This pamphlet opposed how the Board of Lady Managers excluded African American women from leading and exhibiting. However, Wells' approach did not receive support from much of the African American community. This lack of support was illustrated by the fact that Wells struggled to raise funds from the African American press to print the pamphlet, and thus, she had to distribute it late, weeks into the Exposition.²⁷ A large reason why many African Americans did not support Wells' approach was that her pamphlet exposed the degradation that African Americans faced instead of their advancement. African Americans' lack of support for Wells' approach suggests that many African Americans preferred to conform to the Exposition's definition of advancement by showing African American innovations rather than crying out for aid. Although to varying degrees, a large portion of African Americans understood the power of displaying their progress in combating their exclusion.

The formation and goal of the National Association for Colored Women's Clubs show that African Americans' responses to their exclusion carried into the period after the Exposition. Observing that a lack of unification was the foundation for their exclusion, many prominent African American activists understood a need to present a unified front for their activism. In this spirit, many African American activists argued that uniting African American women's groups would prevent exclusion similar to the one they experienced throughout the Exposition. Thus, Black women consolidated the two largest African American women's groups, the National

²⁷ Rudwick and Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition," 356.

League of Colored Women and the National Federation of Afro-American Women, into the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) in 1896, just three years after the Exposition began. The NACWC was the first national organization for African American women.²⁸ The goal of the NACWC was to "secure harmony of action and cooperation among women," ensuring that disunity was not a reason for their exclusion again.²⁹ There is a striking similarity between the reason for African American women's exclusion from the Exposition and the goal of the NACWC. This similarity reveals the long-lasting impact of African Americans' desire to conform to white peoples' definitions of progress from the Exposition.

Although it may seem that the Exposition was the sole cause for unifying Black women's clubs, it is important not to undermine the organizations of Black women that existed before the Exposition; it becomes apparent that the Exposition was a catalyst that increased the urgency for the consolidation of Black women's clubs. The formation of the NACWC came from the consolidation of the National League of Colored Women and the National Federation of Afro-American Women.³⁰ Without the consolidation of many African American women's groups into these two large groups before the Exposition, the formation of the larger NACWC would not have been possible. However, the Exposition increased the urgency among prominent African American activist groups to unify their clubs after having faced the consequences of appearing disorganized. This urgency explains why the NACWC formed just three years after the opening of the Exposition. Not only did African American women's exclusion from the Woman's Building

²⁸ Gullett, "Our Great Opportunity': Organized Women Advance Women's Work at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," 261.

²⁹ National Association of Colored Women Constitution, art. II, quoted in Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 1 (1982): 26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717758>.

³⁰ Gullett, "Our Great Opportunity': Organized Women Advance Women's Work at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," 261.

catalyze the unification efforts of future African American activism, but it also informed their goals.

Conformity to the Exposition's definition of cultural progress carried on to the period after it and into the work of the NACWC. Josephine Ruffin, mentioned previously, argued that white Board members excluded African American women "on the ground of the immorality of our women."³¹ Not letting this accusation go unchallenged, African American women showed that they, too, were capable of progressing morally and culturally. Helping to prove this was the NACWC, which was founded to help African Americans "rais[e] to its highest plane, home, moral, and civil life."³² There is a similarity between the accusation from white Board members and the NACWC's constitution. This similarity suggests that the NACWC's goal was in part a reaction to how Black activists attributed their exclusion to their perception as lacking morals, as Josephine Ruffin pointed out. The NACWC took action by reaching out to African American women. In conventions for African American women following the Exposition, Mary Church Terrell, a founder of the NACWC chose topics such as "Modesty in Manners and Dress," "Mothers and Children," and "Woman and the Home."³³ These topics reflect an effort to instill the ideas of familial morality within the African American community as a means of uplifting. The founding motto of the NACWC, "lifting as we climb," creates the same vision that the layout of the Exposition did of linear progression. Yet the NACWC allowed for the transcendence of the boundaries of "barbarism" from the Exposition and allowed African American women to cross into the upper levels of progress.

³¹ Ruffin, "Address of Josephine St. P. Ruffin, President of Conference," 17–19.

³² NACWC's Constitution in Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," 26; Ruffin, "Address of Josephine St. P. Ruffin, President of Conference," 17–19.

³³ Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," 25.

African Americans' activism throughout the Exposition of 1893 in response to their exclusion can be seen as a failure due to the lack of success in placing an African American woman on the Board of Lady Managers. But the rapid consolidation and organization of Black women's clubs offer another view. African American women did not work against their discrimination just within the Exposition. Instead, they took the reasons for their exclusion and used them to strengthen the Black women's club movement by forming the National Association for Colored Women's Clubs. This view of how the Exposition impacted the unification of African Americans' activism highlights the impact that it had not just within the Black women's club movement or the 1893 Exposition but also beyond.

On a larger scale, the unifying impact of the 1893 Exposition on women of color reverberated internationally. The Exposition was home to numerous conferences, giving rise to international women's conferences that allowed women of all races to attend.³⁴ An African American woman at one of these conferences remarked that “[African American women] need women from each one of these groups to join with us in solving the problem of the women of the darker races of the world.”³⁵ Her statement suggests a sense of a universal identity of being a woman of color, which was founded not just upon skin color but also upon racial discrimination. This identity spanned the conference, as she suggested. Thus, the Exposition's impact on the unification of women of color extended beyond the U.S. and into the international sphere, creating a larger, global activist base for women of color.

³⁴ Gullett, “‘Our Great Opportunity’: Organized Women Advance Women's Work at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893,” 272.

³⁵ Elisabetta Vezzosi, “The International Strategy of African American Women at the Columbian Exposition and Its Legacy: Pan-Africanism, Decolonization and Human Rights,” in *Moving Bodies, Displaying Nations: National Cultures, Race and Gender in World Expositions 19th to 21st Century* (EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2014), 79, <http://hdl.handle.net/10077/10424>.

Appendix



Figure 1. A visitor map of the Exposition of 1893, showing the strip on the left, the Midway, and the largest section of the Exposition, the White City, which is on the right.³⁶

³⁶ Heinz, *Souvenir Map of the World's Columbian Exposition at Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance*.

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