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WILLIAMS, FANNIE BARRIER

February 12, 1855–March 4, 1944

JOURNALIST, SOCIAL REFORMER, CIVIC LEADER, CLUBWOMAN

Fannie Barrier Williams, the second daughter and the last of three children of Anthony J. and Harriet (Prince) Barrier, was born in Brockport, New York. Her parents, as well as her grandparents on both sides of her family, were freeborn.

Anthony J. Barrier, a modestly prosperous barber who periodically supplemented his income moonlighting as a coal merchant, was able to purchase a home and provide his family with a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. A deeply religious and public-spirited man, he was a respected leader in the local white Baptist church, in which his family members were the only black members, and he was an active participant in the civic affairs of Brockport. Anthony and Harriet Barrier were a fairly educated couple who enjoyed "good books and the refinements of life" (Williams, "Autobiography," 91) and introduced their children to both.

Fannie Barrier received her early education in neighborhood schools, and she completed the academic and classical program at the State Normal School in Brockport in 1870. Following graduation, in keeping with her desire to do something important or extraordinary, Fannie Barrier joined the army of northern teachers who went to the South during Reconstruction to educate freedpeople.

Born and raised in an overwhelmingly white community in which she suffered little discrimination, Fannie Barrier was ill-prepared for the scalding racism and discrimination that she encountered in the South. These experiences provided a rude awakening to what it meant to be black and female in the South and crystallized for Barrier the fundamental issues related to the African American's struggle in the United States.

Fannie Barrier had some ability as a painter, and during her tenure in the South she decided to develop that talent. She succeeded in persuading a white art teacher to give her instruction, but since a condition of her admission was that she be screened off from the other students, she refused to attend. Instead, Barrier returned North, enrolling at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Once again her ambitions and aspirations were obstructed by what she termed "the tyranny of a black complexion" ("Autobiography," 92). When some white students objected to her attendance, the principal advised Barrier that her presence imperiled the interests of the institution. Subsequently, Fannie Barrier found a teaching position in Washington, D.C., and entered the School of Fine Arts to perfect her skills as a portrait painter.

While living in Washington she met S. Laing Williams, a native of Georgia who held a political appointment in the U.S. Pension Office and who was a law student at Columbia University (later George Washington Law School). After graduating from law school with honors and completing several graduate courses, he married Fannie Barrier in 1887 in the home of her parents in Brockport, New York. The newlyweds moved to Chicago, where S. Laing Williams was admitted to the Illinois bar. With the assistance of Fannie Barrier Williams, who retired from teaching after her marriage, S. Laing Williams was able to establish a thriving legal practice.

The Williamses, who had no children, found their niche in Chicago's close-knit black community and joined the Unitarian All Souls Church of Jenkin Lloyd Jones. They became active in the civic life of the city and leaders in the struggle to uplift their race. Shortly after their arrival in Chicago in 1887, S. Laing Williams organized the Prudence Crandall Study Club, an elite literary society that limited membership to twenty-five and attracted some of the city's most socially prominent African Americans. Fannie Barrier Williams served as the head of the club's art and music department. She also aided her husband with other organizations that he founded and cofounded, including the Hyde Park Colored Voters Republican Club, the Taft Colored League, and the Black Diamond Development Company. She became actively involved in various aspects of the women's and social reform movements in Chicago and used her influence and associations in the interests of the disadvantaged. To this end she worked with groups regardless of color, and she had a degree of success in improving the lot of the downtrodden and in finding good employment for a few black women. Fannie Barrier Williams was an active member of the Illinois Woman's Alliance, an association of almost all Chicago women's organizations, and between 1891 and 1894 she held almost every office including vice-president and secretary. In 1894 she became the head of the Alliance's Committee on State Schools for Children.

When the Williamses arrived in Chicago, there was no hospital at which a black doctor held a regular staff appointment or had the privilege of performing operations, and none received black patients on an equal basis. In 1890 Emma Reynolds, a young black woman, was denied admission to every nurses' training school in the city because of her race. Reynolds's story, so similar to her own experiences, struck a responsive cord in Fannie Barrier Williams. Under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, Chicago's black community reacted to this incident by initiating a drive to create an interracial hospital. Out of her friendship with Dr. Williams and her interest in providing employment opportunities for black women and improving social services in the black community, Fannie Barrier Williams became a major force in the movement that culminated in the establishment of Provident Hospital and Training School in 1891. While the hospital served black and white patients, Williams advocated that the Training School for Nurses admit only black women. "There are other training schools for white women, but none at all for colored women. Why let white women take any of the few places we'll have open" (quoted in Hendricks, "Fannie Barrier Williams," 1261), she argued.

In 1904 the Williamses were instrumental in the founding of the Frederick Douglass Center, an experimental residential and recreational center designed to promote better race relations. Fannie Barrier Williams became one of the directors of the center in 1905 and supported the institution financially over the years. The Williamses were also long-standing members and supporters of the Abraham Lincoln Center, a social welfare agency sponsored by their church.

Williams was thrust into the national limelight in the early 1890s. As part of the planning for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, in 1890 the Fair Commission appointed a Board of Lady Managers whose task it was to approve applications for ex-

hibition space in the women's pavilion. The conspicuous absence of African American women on the board or any provision for the inclusion of exhibits from black women infuriated a large segment of Chicago's black female population. An ad hoc group of black women presented to the Board of Lady Managers a resolution requesting that an office be established to collect exhibits from American "colored" women. The Fair Commission refused to create the suggested office; but as a conciliatory gesture, it agreed to appoint a black woman to assist in supervising the installation of exhibits in the Woman's Building. Fannie Barrier Williams, who was very well known by many of the prominent white women associated with the exposition, was the commission's choice for the position. She later served as secretary of the art department of the woman's branch of the congress auxiliaries for the fair and was invited to deliver two addresses at the Exposition.

Fannie Barrier Williams's first presentation, "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation," was given before the World's Congress of Representative Women in May 1893. A few months later she was one of five African American women to address the World's Parliament of Religions—her topic, "Religious Duty to The Negro."

Williams, an eloquent, impassioned, and forceful speaker, was soon in great demand as a lecturer. Between 1893 and 1908 she traveled extensively, speaking before women's clubs and other organizations. Williams was an accomplished musician, and she sometimes supplemented her lectures with concerts. Williams was also a reporter for the *Women's Era*, *New York Age*, and *Chicago Record-Herald*. Moreover, she was a frequent contributor to other newspapers and journals, and her articles appeared in several books. Williams assisted her husband with most of his scholarly works and also ghostwrote Booker T. Washington's biography of Frederick Douglass.

Williams was nominated in 1894 for membership in the all-white Chicago Women's Club (after 1895 the Chicago Woman's Club) by ELLEN HENROTIN, CELIA WOOLLEY, and Grace Begley. The resulting controversy over Williams's race received national attention. After fourteen months of bitter wrangling, in 1895 she became the first, and for thirty years remained the only, black member of the Chicago Woman's Club. During the same year she served as one of the National League of Colored Women's delegates to the Second Triennial Session of the National Council of Women held in Washington, D.C. She represented Illinois at the First Congress of Negro Women, which met in conjunction with the Cotton Exposition in Atlanta. There she presented a paper at the Frederick Douglass Memorial Service at which Booker T. Washington gave his historic "Atlanta Address." In fact, the influence of Washington's ideas on Williams's thinking was evident in her speeches and writings as early as 1896. Over the years the Williamses became close personal friends of Booker T. Washington and his family.

Williams played an active role in the black women's club movement in Chicago and in the founding of the National League of Colored Women (NLCW) in 1893. She was also instrumental in the establishment of the NLCW successor in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The Ida B. Wells Club, organized in September 1893 and

named after its founder (see IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT), was the first black women's club organized in Chicago, followed by the Phyllis Wheatley Club in March 1896. Williams was a founding member of the Phyllis Wheatley Club, and she served as a teacher in the day nursery begun by the club in 1904. When this group opened the Phyllis Wheatley Home for Girls in 1908, Williams became a member of the board of directors, serving as its corresponding secretary. The club and home were named after the African American poet, who spelled her name Phillis Wheatley. When NACW held its first national meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1897, ELIZABETH DAVIS, president of the Phyllis Wheatley Club, extended an invitation to the NACW to hold its 1899 national meeting in Chicago.

In February 1898, the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church called together a number of women interested in "improving social conditions" in Chicago's black communities, "advanc[ing] neighborhood fellowship, and "lend[ing] a hand to the unfortunate and those who need the active sympathy of earnest women" (Williams, "Chicago Report"). To this end the Chicago Women's Conference was formed. The work plan for this organization was developed by an Executive Committee, and Fannie Barrier Williams was elected head.

Williams and her husband increasingly became involved in national affairs. After Booker T. Washington founded the National Negro Business League in 1900, S. Laing Williams became a prominent member and was elected registrar for the league in 1901. Williams became an active supporter of the league, assisting her husband and presenting papers at the 1902 and 1904 annual conventions. When Washington's supporters assumed control of the Afro-American Council, a national civil rights organization, in 1902, Williams was elected corresponding secretary of the organization, succeeding Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Following her husband's appointment as assistant U.S. attorney in 1908, Williams wrote and lectured less often. After Woodrow Wilson's election in 1912, Booker T. Washington's influence in the White House declined and S. Laing Williams lost his government appointment. The Williamses became more active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Fannie Barrier Williams engaged extensively in the woman suffrage movement.

After S. Laing Williams's death in 1921, Williams curtailed many of her activities. However, when Mayor William Hale Thompson appointed her to the Chicago Public Library Board in 1924, making her the first Black and the only woman on this policy-making body, she accepted. Williams served on the board from 1924 to 1926. When declining health forced her to resign, she moved back to her family's home in Brockport, New York. There she lived with her sister, Ella B. Barrier, until she died of arteriosclerosis at the age of eighty-nine.

Fannie Barrier Williams devoted her life's work to eradicating sexism and racism in the United States and to promoting social reforms that would enhance the well-being of the American people. Williams was an educated middle-class black female reformer, and her experiences were, in many respects, representative of African American women who came to the forefront of the struggle for gender and racial justice in the nineteenth century. At the same time, certain aspects of her life were unique to a small and often neglected segment of that population. Recog-

nizing this distinction, Williams suggested in 1904 that "no one but a colored woman, reared and educated as I was, can ever know what it means to be brought face to face with conditions that fairly overwhelm you with the ugly reminder that a certain penalty must be suffered by those who, not being able to select their own parentage, must be born of a dark complexion" (Williams, "Autobiography," 91).

Sources. There are Fannie Barrier and S. Laing Williams files in the Booker T. Washington Papers and materials on Williams in the Mary Church Terrell collection, both at the Library of Congress. Her columns in the *Women's Era*, the *New York Age*, and the *Chicago Record-Herald* as well as her articles in *The Voice of the Negro* are useful. The National Association of Colored Women's Papers are available on microfilm at the National Archives for Black Women's History, National Council of Negro Women, Washington, D.C.; they include Williams's "Chicago Report," 1899, reel 16. Williams's "A Northern Negro's Autobiography" appeared in the *Independent*, July 14, 1904. A general chronology of her life is provided in Wanda Hendricks, "Fanny Barrier Williams," BWA. Other writing by Williams include the following: "Social Bonds in the 'Black Belt' of Chicago," *Charities*, October 1905; *The Colored Woman and Her Part in Race Regeneration* (1900, reprinted 1969). Also see Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (1895); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (1967); and Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (1996). For an in-depth discussion of Fannie Barrier Williams and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, see Ann Massa, "Black Women in the 'White City,'" *Phylon*, Winter 1965.

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