

## *The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Civil War*

Civil War historians, particularly those interested in women's experiences, stand to learn a great deal by taking a new look at old sources. Among these are the minutes of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS), housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> PFASS's minutes document the society's monthly meetings and provide a rather comprehensive list of the work the women did. The minute books record what the group accomplished between meetings, organizational correspondence, and the activities of individual members. Because the group did not disband until 1870, the minutes hold potential for scholars seeking to understand the still unexplored experiences of women of color during the Civil War and Reconstruction and how this novel group of women sought to shape the political events of the day.

An early women's abolitionist group, organized in 1833, the PFASS was the first such society to be racially integrated. For thirty-seven years, this small group of black and white women in Philadelphia worked closely together to lobby for abolition, to provide support for fugitive slaves, and to work on behalf of civil rights. Of the twenty-nine original PFASS members, at least nine were women of color: these included Margaretta, Charlotte, and Sarah Forten; Harriet Forten Purvis; and Grace and Sarah Douglass. These women worked alongside white luminaries such as Lucretia Mott and Sarah and Angelina Grimké.<sup>2</sup>

On January 8, 1863, the society's recording secretary described the women's "unutterable joy and gratitude" with President Lincoln for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. The women of PFASS took heart that they had had a hand in making this day possible. But the minutes make clear that the women did not believe that their work was done. With the outcome of the war still very much uncertain, they shifted their

<sup>1</sup> The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, Minutes 1833–1870, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter PFASS Minutes). The PFASS records are part of the Historical Society's much larger Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) Papers. The PFASS was an entirely separate organization, but the PAS Papers include the records of many related organizations, such as the PFASS. The PFASS records include correspondence files as well as minutes, though only the minutes survive for the Civil War years. Some correspondence has been incorporated into the minutes.

<sup>2</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 77.

focus to Union victory and supporting people of color in their transition from slavery to freedom. For example, the minutes reveal that once the War Department authorized the recruitment of black soldiers, the PFASS raised money and supplies to support the United States Colored Troops (USCT) training at Camp William Penn. By fall 1863, PFASS women expanded their work to supply freedmen's schools and Washington's contraband camps. In October, the women decided that "the books belonging to this Society now at the Anti-Slavery Office, be distributed to the different colored camps and schools for colored children."<sup>3</sup> With each expansion of its work—from abolitionism to helping fugitive slaves to supplying the USCT to providing education materials to contraband camps—the PFASS expanded its fundraising activities correspondingly.

The records also indicate the women's strong opposition to a proposed state law that would have prohibited black immigration to the state. Confident in their political influence, PFASS women addressed a letter to the Pennsylvania legislature insisting that, "[t]he Phila. Female Anti Slavery Society respectfully remonstrates against the adoption of a law to prevent the migration into this state, of colored persons, or any other class of unoffending people, and earnestly beseeches you today to save the state from the disgrace of such an unconstitutional and inhuman enactment."<sup>4</sup> This and other such letters demanding equal treatment for Pennsylvanians of color recorded in the minutes document the women's growing confidence in their political voices.

After the war ended, the women of the PFASS celebrated the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, again with some satisfaction in the part they had played in the momentous event. But, acutely aware of the harsh realities of poverty and racism in the City of Brotherly love, the women of the PFASS turned their efforts toward securing legislation that would secure equal rights for people of color. Toward that end, the women of PFASS dedicated their final five years to securing suffrage for black men. In September 1865 the women refocused their goals to "demand, constantly, the suffrage for the emancipated slave, as the only security of any real liberty for him."<sup>5</sup> Until the passage of the

<sup>3</sup> PFASS Minutes, Oct. 12, 1863.

<sup>4</sup> "Legislative Acts or Legal Proceedings," *Patriot*, Jan. 22, 1863; Judith Giesberg, *Pennsylvania and the Civil War*, Pennsylvania Historical Association Series (University Park, PA, forthcoming 2012), chap. 4; PFASS Minutes, Feb. 11, 1863.

<sup>5</sup> PFASS Minutes, Apr. 13, 1865.

Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, and the group's formal disbanding, PFASS minutes reveal that this interracial group of women was uniquely dedicated to securing political rights for black men as the surest way of securing civil rights for all people of color. As other groups abandoned the push for suffrage for black men in favor of white women's right to vote, PFASS women stayed committed to constitutional rights for black men. Additionally, the records at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania allow us to follow the lives of these politically active women as they became involved in streetcar desegregation protests, fundraising fairs, and freedmen's education, all the while instructing sitting congressmen in Harrisburg and in Washington as to the rights of people of color and freedmen.

Although the women members of the PFASS belonged largely to Philadelphia's elite, these sources allow historians to pose many questions about race relations and interracial cooperation during the Civil War. To what extent did the interracial membership of PFASS translate into a meaningful cooperation between women? What can the minutes teach us about the daily lives of black and white women in Philadelphia during the war? How did women without political rights act nonetheless towards political ends? A second look at the PFASS records promises to enrich historical understanding of Northern women's role in Civil War-era politics and may shed light on the everyday lives of women of color during the war years. The unique interracial nature of the group and the complete set of records it left behind make the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's PFASS collection a historically significant Civil War gem.

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