

Florence Spearing Randolph:

A Life Committed to Gender and Racial Equality



Florence Spearing Randolph 1919

Florence Spearing Randolph (1866-1951) was a suffragist, minister, missionary and African American women's club leader. Her achievements spanned a wide range of religious and social activism, yet this accomplished woman is little known.

Florence Randolph was born in Charleston, S.C., to a prosperous family. Her parents and grandparents had escaped the horrors of being enslaved and grew up as free Blacks. She graduated from a Charleston teacher training school, but chose to become a dressmaker. In 1885, she joined her sisters in Jersey City, N.J., where she could command higher wages and escape the repression of the Jim Crow South. In Jersey City, she met and married Hugh Randolph, a Pullman Company cook. They had one daughter, Leah Viola.

Active at her local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, Randolph became interested in the ministry, embarking on an intensive study of the Bible under the guidance of a Greek and Hebrew scholar.

During the late 1880s and 1890s, she found her political voice by joining the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). After she watched the police haul a drunken young man from a saloon, she recalled, an encounter with a White WCTU member "*marked the beginning of fourteen years of real missionary work among those who suffer from strong drink and from poverty.*"

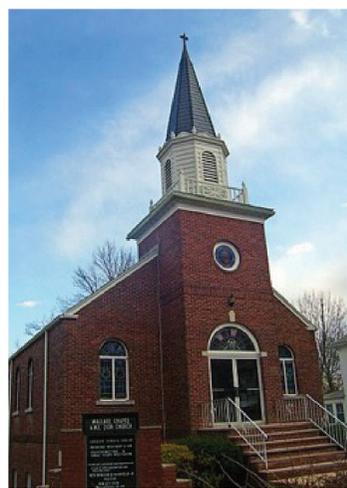
As an organizer and public speaker for the WCTU, she was zealous in her opposition to racism and sexism. She promoted women's suffrage and also dedicated herself to missionary work.

Her reputation as a compelling public speaker spread and Randolph was invited to address both Black and White congregations. In 1898, she was admitted to the New Jersey Conference of the AME Zion Church, though the presiding bishop and other ministers were opposed to appointing a woman.

Equally important was her leadership in the African American women's club movement, a potent force for helping Black women improve their lives and communities. In 1915, Rev. Randolph helped to organize the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (NJFCWC). On behalf of the federation, she appealed directly to President Woodrow Wilson, asking him to address the issues of race rioting, the sexual assault of Black women, and lynching, which took the lives of more than 4,000 African Americans across twenty states between 1877 and 1950.

She imbued the federation with a commitment to improve Black lives. Politically savvy and resourceful, she urged club members to find ways to help shape more equitable policies. She also urged federation members to reach out to White women and work with them on issues of concern to all women.

An ardent suffragist, Rev. Randolph was a member of the executive board of the New Jersey State Suffrage Association and spoke before the state legislature in 1915 on behalf of the 19th Amendment.



Wallace Chapel, Summit, NJ

In 1925, she was appointed pastor of Wallace Chapel in Summit, N.J., and became the first African American woman to study theology at Drew University.

Rev. Randolph also advocated for greater scholarship and knowledge of African American history. She supported the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and under her

tenure the NJFCWC was one of the first organizations to proclaim the significance of African American history.

Florence Spearing Randolph died in 1951. Throughout her long and remarkable life, she used the bully pulpit and her energy, commitment, and organizational skills to combat racism and sexism and help those in need.

