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CONTENTS:

ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

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"THE REMARKABLE MISSES ROLLIN": BLACK WOMEN IN RECONSTRUCTION SOUTH CAROLINA

WILLARD B. GATEWOOD, JR.*

In *The American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events for the Year 1867*, there appeared this brief reference: "In August a captain of a steamboat was tried before a post court at Charleston [South Carolina] and condemned to pay a fine of $250 for refusing a first class passage to a colored woman, in violation of Section 8 of General Orders No. 32."[1] The military order issued on May 30, 1867, explicitly prohibited any discrimination "because of color or caste" in public conveyances on all "railroads, highways, streets and navigable waters."[2]

The "colored woman" who filed charges against the boat's captain was Frances Ann Rollin, one of five sisters who reputedly were among the most influential lobbyists and power brokers in South Carolina during Reconstruction. Frances would marry William J. Whipper, an attorney and influential legislator from Beaufort County, in 1868. The other four — Katherine, Charlotte, Marie Louise, and the much younger Florence, all unmarried — lived in Columbia, where they presided over a salon known as the "Republican headquarters" of the state.[3]

By 1871 the reputation of the "Misses Rollin" was sufficiently well known to arouse the interest of journalists who covered Reconstruction in South Carolina for northern newspapers. In the spring of that year, two New York newspapers, *The Sun* and the New York *Herald*, published lengthy interviews with the famous sisters living in Columbia. The two interviews contained virtually identical information and concluded that the sisters did, in fact, figure prominently in the political and social life of the state. Both newspapers were at the time unsympathetic to the "new order" in South Carolina and depicted the Radical Republican regime there as a

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[1]*The American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events for the Year 1867* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1870), p. 697.

[2]Ibid., p. 694.

[3]On Frances Ann Rollin and her sisters, see an article by her great-granddaughter, Carole Bovoso, "Discovering my Foremothers," *MS* IV(September 1977), pp. 56-59; Gerri Major, *Black Society* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1976), p. 178; for two diametrically opposed interpretations of the Rollin sisters, see Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), pp. 351-353, and Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Black Power U.S.A.: The Human Side of Reconstruction* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 317-323.

The bicentennial year was also marked by a special exhibition at the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston. Favorable weather that spring of 1941 attracted throngs to Charleston's famous gardens. Middleton Place was applauded by a spread in *The New York Times Magazine*. National magazines ran features. Even the movie industry brought Paulette Goddard for scenes in *Reap the Wild Wind*. And the great terraces absorbed it all with comely dignity.[58]

That year's celebration was a milestone in a continuum. Gardens won't wait. Pringle and Heningham annually ordered new supplies of azaleas, spirea, and camellias. They cut the forest back; they created the New Camellia Garden, propagating new varieties. Within a decade the nursery was a flourishing business, including on its plant list sixteen *Camellias Middletonii*, "the finest of the Middleton strain." And, extending the boundaries, they planted the bamboo grove and defined the Cypress Lake.[59]

But the contribution of that generation was drawing to an end. In 1957 a young student at Yale, looking forward to the June recess, wrote his grandparents: "My intense thought is of the happiness of returning home to Middleton Place."[60] In little more than a decade, he was himself the man in charge; and in the next few years he and his young family brought renewed vigor to its custodianship. Preservation, yes; but innovation also in the challenge of Middleton Place as a statement for the public. A whole new chapter on the basics of plantation self-sufficiency was described with the reactivation of the stableyard with hands-on demonstrations.

The Middleton Place Foundation in 1974 established a custodial trust which owns and administers the property as a not-for-profit effort. With the mutation from private plantation to public landmark had come a whole set of sophisticated new questions: what new maintenance solutions, what period to establish for the restorations of the grounds, what would be the role of natural areas? Today, 110 acres constitute a National Historic Landmark.[61]

Fifty years ago the citation of the Bulkley Medal recognized 200 years of enduring beauty. Gardens are not static: no other year had the same silhouette of tree-line, the same seasonal coincidence of bloom. To the potentially one hundred thousand visitors who will come to Middleton Place this anniversary year, 1991, it might seem to be a garden oblivious to change. But even with its cumulative variations, it constitutes one of the most authentic natural museums we shall ever see.

[58]*The New York Times Magazine* , March 23, 1941; Stoney, "Art Gallery Opens Exhibit," Charleston *News and Courier*, April 15, 1942.

[59]Pringle and Heningham Smith, notations, early 1950s, MPA.

[60]Charles H. P. Duell to Pringle and Heningham Smith, April 1957, MPA.

[61]*Middleton Place* (1976), pp. 33-43; Lytle, "Middleton Place," p. 787.

combination of villainous whites and ignorant "sambos," but they took a far more favorable view of the Rollin sisters.[4]

In view of the political and racial prejudices of *The Sun* and *Herald* correspondents, the accounts of their interviews with the Rollin women must be read with caution. Obviously they made much of opinions expressed by the sisters regarding individual politicians that coincided with their own. Both reporters were impressed by the Rollins' knowledge of Republican politics in the state and by the frankness with which they discussed individuals and policies. But even more impressive were the women themselves—their culture, sophistication, appearance, and aggressiveness in behalf of civil rights that embraced all women as well as black males. By their responses to questions, it was abundantly clear that these sisters did not conform to white stereotypes of either the benighted black or the freedman blindly loyal to the Radical government. As *The Sun* and *Herald* reporters were well aware, the Rollin women represented a segment of the black population with which neither was familiar; they were upper-class persons of color whose sense of social elitism was equalled only by their commitment to civil rights and service to the race.[5]

The *Sun* reporter became interested in the Rollin sisters as a result of a conversation with a white friend in Columbia who told him, "If you want a thorough posting upon political affairs in South Carolina you must call on the Rollins." The friend explained that they were "the *elite* of our colored society," and in their house "much of the wisdom which controls our affairs is generated." No less than the *Herald* reporter later, the *Sun* correspondent manifested great interest in the complexion of the Rollin sisters. When he inquired whether they were "highly colored," his friend described them as "a most beautiful chocolate" and as well-educated and entertaining "young ladies" who were extraordinarily well informed on the inner workings of Radical Republican politics. "They know it all," he explained. The correspondent's friend claimed that when the sisters arrived in Columbia, they were "very poor" but that they were soon living in a style that required considerable wealth. To explain this sudden transformation in circumstances, he claimed that "they all have their hands in the state treasury." According to him, William J. Whipper, the husband of Frances Rollin, and George McIntyre, a white state senator from Colleton County and the fiancé of Charlotte, secured them government jobs and generally looked after their welfare. Such information convinced the correspondents that they must

[4]See *The Sun* (New York), March 29, 1871; New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871, for the Rollin interviews; a survey of both *The Sun* and *Herald* for 1868-1871 indicates their approach to the Radical regime in South Carolina; see also Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962).

[5]*The Sun*, March 29, 1871; New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871.

interview the "remarkable Misses Rollin" whose political activism had caused them to be known as Catherine de Medici, Charlotte Corday, and Louisa Mulbach.[6]

The northern journalists came away from their interviews convinced that they had glimpsed an aspect of Afro-American life and Reconstruction that did not conform to their preconceived notions about blacks. The sisters were indeed educated, well informed, independent-minded, and "ravishingly beautiful" — "the belles of Columbia." Their home was a commodious, well-appointed house located in a fashionable residential section near the state capital building. Both correspondents were impressed by its double parlors, exquisite furnishings, tasteful paintings, plush carpets, and extensive library. They were even more impressed by the charm, wit, and scintillating conversation of Katherine (Kate), Charlotte (Lottie), and Marie Louise Rollin (Louise), who proved to be as knowledgeable about literature and current events in the world as about Republican politics in South Carolina.[7]

Both reporters, after interviewing the Misses Rollin, concluded that the public perception of their role in politics was essentially accurate. The *Herald* representative compared it to that played by Madame Roland, Madam de Tencin, and other women of "tact, pluck, education and experience" who in times of "transition and chaos" in the past had "always governed masses of men." It was not especially remarkable, in his view, that South Carolina should have its "feminine celebrities" in the turbulent era of Reconstruction, but what was noteworthy and indeed symptomatic of the revolutionary changes occurring in the postwar South was that these celebrities were not "of the orthodox and Caucasian shade of skin." As later chroniclers noted, they presided over "a sort of mulatto *salon*" where "white and dusky statesmen" mingled freely and "wove the destinies of the Old Commonwealth." *The Herald* correspondent believed that he "had accidentally discovered" a stratum of Afro-American society "but very little known in the South and rarely heard of in the great free North."[8] The *Sun* representative who often reported on Radical Republican politics under the headline, "Southern Vultures," fully agreed with the assessment of his contemporary. In summarizing the interview with the Misses Rollin, he wrote: "Their manners were refined, their conversation unusually clever and their surroundings marked them as ladies of keen taste and rare discernment. But for their color they might move in the highest circles of Washington and New York Society."[9]

[6]*The Sun*, March 29, 1871.

[7]Ibid.; New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; see also Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie After the War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), pp. 356-357.

[8]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871.

[9]*The Sun*, March 29, 1871.

THE "PLUCK," POLITICAL ACTIVISM, and social prominence of the Rollin sisters generated much exaggeration and so many fanciful tales that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. They were born in Charleston, the daughters of a free couple of color who belonged to the city's antebellum "colored aristocracy." At the apex of the well-developed class structure that existed among Charleston's free people of color were a few families who, often related by blood or marriage, owned considerable wealth and property including slaves. This fair-complexioned elite was relatively well educated despite legal restrictions against black schools, possessed their own literary and social organizations, and adhered to a code of strict decorum and social etiquette. Representative of this group was the Brown Fellowship Society which was established in 1790 and open only to lighter-skin "free brown men."[10]

Almost nothing is known about the mother of the Rollin sisters except that she was a free person. Their father, William Rollin, was of "French extraction, a descendant of one of the proudest and most honored families of St. Domingo." A staunch Roman Catholic, he insisted that his daughters receive a French education. Frances Rollin, the oldest child, born in 1844, attended a parish school in Charleston conducted by "an old French family." She later recalled that she was "lisping French" long before she could speak English. William Rollin was a wood-and-lumber dealer who owned slaves and valuable real estate. Regardless of legal limitations on travel by free people of color, he annually went north "to buy goods" for his business. His wood-and-lumber yard had extensive contracts with the city of Charleston and provided employment for numerous Irish laborers, many of whom were Rollin's "church friends." Notwithstanding political restrictions imposed on free blacks, the Rollin girls grew up "in an atmosphere charged with exciting politics" because of their father's influence with Irish voters. "And though denied the right to vote himself," Frances Rollin observed, her father "was much sought after by candidates who wanted the Irish vote." In return for Rollin's influence in securing such support, successful candidates "looked after his interest." Writing in 1901, Frances Rollin looked back upon her youth with a great deal of nostalgia. She grew up in Charleston when free people of color were "at the zenith of

[10]Information on Charleston's antebellum free black community is found in Marina Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973); Bernard E. Powers, Jr., "Black Charleston: A Social History, 1822-1885" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1982); E. Horace Fitchett, "Traditions of the Free Negroes of Charleston, South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History* XXV(April 1940), pp. 140-152; Robert L. Harris, "Charleston's Free Afro-American Elite: The Brown Fellowship Society and the Humane Brotherhood," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 82 (October 1981), pp. 289-310.

their prosperity." Enjoying the advantages open only to those of that particular group of antebellum blacks, she reached maturity in the immediate postwar era when the goal of full racial equality appeared, however fleetingly, to be within reach.[11]

William Rollin was determined that his daughters would not grow up uneducated. Once his oldest daughter had completed the curriculum offered by private schools and tutors in Charleston, he was intent on sending her to a boarding school in Paris. But having been taken with Philadelphia when she accompanied him on a buying trip north, Frances prevailed upon him to let her attend school in that city. In 1859 arrangements were made for her to live in Philadelphia with the family of Morris Brown, a musician whose father, a famous churchman, had fled Charleston in the wake of the Denmark Vesey affair. Enrolled in the two-year "Ladies Course" at the Institute for Colored Youth, an institution founded by Quakers, Frances Rollin moved among the most highly educated black elite in the country. Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, who had studied at Yale, was principal; her classmates included young men and women who later achieved distinction in various professions. Two teachers who exerted especial influence upon her were cousins Sarah Mapps Douglass and Grace A. Mapps, whom she appropriately described as "pioneers of high culture," but who were also active in the anti-slavery movement. It is conceivable that in Philadelphia Frances Rollin became acquainted with the Whippers, the family of her future husband. Soon after the fall of Charleston, she returned home and taught for a time at a school established by the Freedmen's Bureau.[12]

Less is known about the education of the other Rollin sisters. All apparently had access to whatever private educational opportunities, including tutors, were available in Charleston. Louise attended "a convent school" in Philadelphia, and two others, Charlotte and Katherine, enrolled in the normal school established in 1861 by Dio Lewis, a Harvard graduate and innovative educator. It was in Boston, Katherine Rollin remarked, that she and her sister "drank in those principles of liberty that are now so dear to us." At least the four oldest daughters possessed what would be described as a solid literary education. As the *Herald* reporter noted in 1871, they were thoroughly familiar with the literary classics and their salon in Columbia contained an impressive array of handsomely bound novels and

[11]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," biographical notes for proposed "Encyclopedia of the Colored Race by Daniel Murray," Daniel Murray Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; this typewritten, sixteen-page document includes two lengthy letters from Frances Rollin Whipper providing data on her family and career; see also Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1985), pp. 157, 198.

[12]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

volumes of poetry. Journals and magazines concerned with contemporary affairs, such as *The Atlantic*, were also much in evidence in their drawing rooms. Furthermore, their conversation indicated that they had read the works in their ample library.[13]

William Rollin apparently suffered serious economic losses in the Civil War. Despite these reverses, Katherine Rollin assured the *Herald* reporter that she and her sisters were "comfortable." Following Emancipation, she and her sister Charlotte, with the help of James Lynch, a missionary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church sent south by the Baltimore Conference, opened a school for freedmen in Charleston. Presumably one of the reasons for their initial presence in the legislative halls in Columbia was to secure state support for the cost of conducting this school. All the while, the oldest Rollin daughter, Frances Ann, taught first in a school conducted by the Freedmen's Bureau and later in one sponsored by the American Missionary Association.[14]

While teaching in Charleston, Frances Rollin first encountered Major Martin R. Delany, formerly of the 104th U.S. Colored Troop, who was an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau throughout most of its existence in South Carolina. It was Major Delany who came to her aid when she filed the official complaint charging that her civil rights had been violated.

Refused first class passage on the steamer *Pilot Boy* from Charleston to Beaufort, Rollin filed the complaint against its captain, W. T. McNelty, charging that he had violated Military Order thirty-two, Paragraph eight, issued earlier by Major General Daniel E. Sickles. Arrested and tried before a military court, the captain was found guilty and fined $250.[15] During the course of this proceeding, which Rollin believed to be "the first case of the contest for equal rights following the close of the war," she met Major Delany who provided her with support and counsel. Learning of her aspirations for a literary career, he persuaded her to undertake the writing of his biography.[16]

Provided with hundreds of documents and a promise of financial

[13]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; on Dio Lewis's school see Paul Monroe, ed., *A Cyclopedia of Education* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912), Vol. 3, pp. 680-681.

[14]On William Rollin's financial condition at his death, see estate documents dated 1880 in the William J. Whipper Papers within the Leigh Whipper Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; "Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984), pp. 265, 366; Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 200.

[15]John S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1905), p. 67.

[16]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

assistance by Delany, Rollin moved to Boston in the autumn of 1867, where she remained for eight months working on the Delany biography. Having visited Boston before the war with her father on one of his "buying trips," she had acquaintances in the city. When the promised financial help was not forthcoming, she was forced to supplement her income by sewing. Even so, she attended the theatre and lectures, including those by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Dickens, visited libraries, and participated in a wide variety of other cultural and religious activities. She not only came to know William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and other white anti-slavery leaders but she also counted among her acquaintances black intellectuals such as Richard Greener, a student at Harvard, and William Nell, the historian.[17]

Rollin finished the manuscript and delivered it to the highly respected publishing house of Lee and Shepard which published it in 1868 under the title *Life and Public Services of Major Martin R. Delany.* Convinced that the public was not prepared to accept a work by a black woman, the publishers listed the author as Frank A. Rollin. Frances Rollin apparently agreed; her family and closest friends called her by the nickname Frank.[18] Even Daniel Murray, an assistant librarian of Congress and well-known black man in Washington, for years assumed that "Frank Rollin was a white man who had seen some profit, prospectively in exploiting the career of the colored Major."[19]

When Frances Rollin returned to South Carolina in 1868, she secured a position as clerk or copyist in the office of William J. Whipper, state representative from Beaufort County. A lawyer and the son of a well-to-do Pennsylvania lumber dealer and anti-slavery leader, Whipper had a stormy tenure as a non-commissioned officer in the Union Army prior to settling in South Carolina. A conspicuous figure in Radical Republican politics in the state, he served as a member of the constitutional convention in 1868 and was a member of the state house of representatives from 1868 to 1872 and again in 1875-1876. Frequently charged with political corruption, he had a reputation for gambling, drinking, and high living. As often out of office as in, he quarrelled with his Republican cohorts, black as well as white, led the impeachment effort against Governor Robert K. Scott, and ultimately broke with his law partner and political ally, Robert Brown Elliott. An eloquent advocate of equal rights, Whipper played an important role in the intra-

[17]Frances Rollin's diary that includes her stay in Boston is printed in Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, pp. 455-461, hereafter cited as "Rollin Diary."

[18]Ibid.; see also Bovoso, "Discovering My Foremothers," p. 56.

[19]Frank A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and of Abandoned Lands and Late Major 104th U.S. Colored Troops* (Boston, Mass.: Lee and Shepard, 1883); "Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

party strife that plagued Radical Republicans in Reconstruction South Carolina.[20]

Frances Rollin had been acquainted with Whipper before her departure for Boston and apparently returned to South Carolina largely as a result of his promise of a job in his office. Whipper's wife had died the previous year in 1867. Following a six-week courtship, he asked Rollin to marry him. She at first delayed giving him an answer and went to Charleston to discuss the matter with her parents. Her father raised strenuous objections to the marriage in a discussion with her that lasted "from dusk till nearly midnight." His principle objection, she noted in her diary, was that "it was too soon."[21] But there may well have been other reasons. Charlotte Rollin later told the *Herald* reporter: "In fact, our family never condescended to notice such small people as Elliott and Whipper, although Whipper married our sister Frances. They are both negroes and our family is French."[22] Clearly, antebellum class divisions among blacks did not suddenly disappear with Emancipation. The old, freeborn mulatto elite in Charleston that included the Rollin family remained deeply conscious of its special status and traditions. Distinguished by culture, "previous condition," and often color, these "colored aristocrats" adhered to a system of values and behavior that also separated them from the black masses. While they joined other blacks in the pursuit of political and economic goals that would promote "the progress of the race," distance and exclusivity characterized their social life.[23]

WHATEVER HER FATHER'S OBJECTIONS or the opinions of her sister, Frances Rollin married William Whipper on September 17, 1868, and

[20]On Whipper's family and career see Major, *Black Society*, p. 177; Richard McCormick, "William Whipper (1804?-1876)," in Rayford Logan and Michael Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1982), p. 643; Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 76, 104-105, 185, 189; for information on William and Frances R. Whipper by an adopted son see Demps Whipper Powell, "A Providential Revelation, Relationship with the Whipper Family," in Leigh Rollin Whipper Papers; *The Sun*, December 7, 1871.

[21]"Rollin Diary," pp. 367-368.

[22]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; Lerone Bennett in his *Black Power*, pp. 322-323, cautions against placing too much emphasis on Rollin's statement that her family was French, but it should be noted that a few months earlier she was quoted by another correspondent (*The Sun*, March 29, 1871) as making an almost identical statement.

[23]See Fitchett, "The Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina," pp. 139-151; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Aristocrats of Color: South and North, the Black Elite, 1880-1920," *Journal of Southern History* 54 (February 1988), p. 5.

immediately became deeply involved in his political career. She edited the Beaufort *Tribune*, her husband's press organ, and wrote occasional pieces for other newspapers under a *nom de plume*. Frances Whipper later referred to the era from 1868 to 1876 as "prosperous and happy" years in her life. Often in Columbia, especially when her husband was in attendance at legislative sessions, she spent time with her politically active sisters who held clerkships in various state agencies and undoubtedly became a participant in their salon. Frances Rollin Whipper was her husband's "most trusted aide in his political battles and like the Duchess of Marlborough the last to acknowledge defeat." When Whipper on occasion chafed under his wife's "guardianship," she would reply: "You may be a wiser and better politician, but I fancy my womanly intuition can read more accurately the signs of the coming storm than all your weatherwise experiences." Her role as Whipper's principle confidante and adviser was generally known, and they were referred to as "the Whippers." Therefore, as Frances Whipper later observed: "When the 'sceptre departed from Judah' following the election of 1876, I reaped no little share of the bitterness displayed by our vindictive and victorious enemies."[24]

Her sisters Charlotte and Katherine were aware of their own reputation as lobbyists and political brokers — a reputation that many whites considered at best unsavory. "We are accused of lobbying and buying negro Senators' and Representatives' votes at fifteen dollars a head and selling them again," Katherine Rollin told the *Herald* reporter. "It would be useless to deny such absurd rumors, and we do not seek publicity in the newspapers...." All kinds of rumors circulated about the extent to which the sisters enriched themselves at state expense. One accusation claimed that Adjutant General Franklin Moses had "fixed" a claim of theirs for $1,309 for teaching school, while another maintained that Katherine Rollin had been appointed a major in the state militia and received a major's pay, a charge apparently based on the fact that both sisters were for a time clerks in the militia enrollment office. "Our family," Charlotte Rollin declared, "has been misrepresented most atrociously by carpet-baggers and evil-minded negroes, and men of our own colored race, for whom we have labored, spoken and written, have never come forward to defend us as they should have done." Regardless of the misrepresentations, the *Herald* reporter maintained that the sisters' effectiveness in the lobby of the state legislature equalled that of A. D. Barber, a famous contemporary lobbyist in New York associated with "Boss" William Tweed's political machine.[25]

From the beginning of Radical Reconstruction until the return of the

[24]"Rollin Diary," p. 368; "Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

[25]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; see also Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina*, p. 67; *The Sun*, March 29, 1871.

Democrats in 1876, the four oldest Rollin sisters were conspicuous figures in the official social life of Columbia. It was a time, one sister recalled, when blacks "mingled on equal terms with the controlling white element," and despite ludicrous caricatures of these biracial social functions by Democratic editors, they were "conducted in a manner that suffers nothing by comparison with similar functions in Washington official life."[26] The beauty, grace, and elegant attire of the Rollin sisters invariably attracted attention at such social affairs. At a military ball in 1871, for example, "the Misses Rollin attracted more attention than any of the other ladies in the room," especially Charlotte who appeared on the arm of Senator McIntyre.[27] But as Charlotte Rollin emphasized in her interview with the *Sun* reporter, she and her family were discriminating both in their choice of acquaintances, black and white, and in the invitations to social functions that they accepted. Deeply conscious of the antebellum status of the Rollin family and its possession of "the best blood of South Carolina," she made it clear that she and her sisters were not inclined to associate with either lower-class whites — "scamps" — or "ignorant colored people." Especially concerned about "the antecedents" of those with whom they chose to socialize, she emphasized that their "company" was selected on the basis of an individual's integrity, deportment, education, and sophistication rather than his or her race or color.[28] Hence they had "repelled the social advances" of some of the white carpetbaggers because they lacked what the Rollins considered the prerequisites for entry into polite society.

The Rollin sisters, along with the Wilders, Cardozos, Bosemans, Ransiers, and others of the black social elite, were frequent guests at the Executive Mansion, especially during the administration of Governor Robert K. Scott, a "carpetbagger" from Ohio and former Freedmen's Bureau official, whom Charlotte Rollin described as "a noble man" and her sister, Frances, as "one of the manliest specimens of white officials." They also agreed that his wife was a "whole-souled" woman who, like her husband, was "as thoroughly free of colorphobia as one was likely to find anywhere." That the Scotts "recognized culture and refinement without regard to color," one of the sisters recalled, was what made them special among white officials.[29]

Frances Rollin recalled one occasion during an unusually lavish social function in the governor's mansion: There appeared an uninvited "old negro couple" dressed in the cast-off finery of their employers. He wore an

[26]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

[27]*The Sun*, April 15, 1871.

[28]Ibid., March 29, 1871.

[29]New York *Herald.*, June 13, 1871; "Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

ill-fitting costume that looked as if it might have been in style in the colonial era, while his obese wife was conspicuous by her "red bandanna head-dress and white cotton gloves." The fashionably attired, sophisticated black guests, including the Rollin sisters, were taken aback by the presence of these intruders. "A more grotesque minstrel picture could scarcely be imagined," Frances Whipper observed. Governor and Mrs. Scott "quickly took in the situation," concluding that the couple had been sent by "their Democratic employers to throw ridicule on the occasion." Convinced that any attempt to expel the man and "his dame" would be grist for the Democratic press, the governor treated them graciously and saw that they were provided ample refreshments. They "left soon after being fed."[30]

If the correspondents of *The Sun* and *Herald* were led to believe that Charlotte, Katherine, and Louise Rollin would provide candid assessments of Republican politicians during their interviews, they could scarcely have been disappointed. The sisters were extraordinarily explicit in pointing out the vices as well as the virtues of such individuals, if the published accounts of these interviews reflect any degree of accuracy. Clearly Governor Scott was their favorite. Lottie Rollin showed the *Herald* reporter the national Republican ticket that she proposed for 1872. It read: "FOR PRESIDENT — R. K. Scott of South Carolina, FOR Vice-President — Charlotte Rollin of South Carolina." While the so-called ticket was largely facetious, it revealed her commitment to full suffrage and political rights for women. Another white Republican official upon whom the sisters heaped praise was Senator McIntyre of Colleton County, who, according to press reports, was first engaged to be married to Charlotte and later was a suitor of Katherine. When the *Herald* correspondent visited the Rollin home, he counted six portraits of McIntyre scattered about the drawing rooms, including a porcelain painting by Katherine. In the sisters' view, "the best of the colored legislators is Mr. Hayne," presumably referring to James N. Hayne, a free-born mulatto and former Freedmen's Bureau teacher from Barnwell County.[31]

No less candid were their comments about those Republican officials for whom they had low regard. White carpetbaggers such as F. Frank Whittemore, Joseph Cress, and John B. Dennis were, according to the Rollin sisters, men of questionable virtue and mediocre ability. They pronounced another carpetbagger, State Treasurer Niles G. Parker, a thief who attempted to explain his sudden wealth by periodically claiming he had come

[30]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

[31]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871, and see also *The Sun*, March 28, 1871; it is conceivable that the sisters were referring to Charles D. Hayne, the brother of James N. and a member of St. Peters' Roman Catholic Church in Charleston where the Rollin family had undoubtedly been communicants; see Lawrence C. Bryant, *Negro Lawmakers in the South Carolina Legislature, 1868-1902* (Orangeburg, S.C.: n.p., 1968), pp. 4-5.

into an inheritance. "Every six months or so," Charlotte Rollin declared, "Mrs. Parker loses a maiden aunt who leaves her a large sum of money." But the sisters reserved their most acid comments for Franklin J. Moses, Jr., a native white South Carolinian and so-called "scalawag" whom they characterized as a thoroughly unscrupulous opportunist ostracized by both respectable whites and blacks. In their view, he was the worst "scamp" of all, followed closely by Robert Brown Elliott, the black politician born in England who claimed to have attended Eton. The Rollin sisters questioned his claim to such an illustrious background and considered him "as mean as Moses." Nor did their brother-in-law, William J. Whipper, escape censure. Katherine Rollin criticized Whipper for his willingness to cooperate with the likes of Moses, Elliott, and other politicians of their ilk.[32]

The *Sun* reporter concluded that the Rollin sisters were not only deeply concerned about the corruption of many of the leaders of the Radical regime, but they were also keenly aware of the internal struggle within the party. This struggle, in their view, was only partially along racial lines, between white carpetbaggers and scalawags on the one hand and black politicians on the other. Rather, the Rollin sisters tended to see it as a struggle between men of integrity and corruptionists. The corruptionists included blacks as well as whites, who abused their position and power at the expense of the black masses. With something less than the confidence that they had exhibited in discussing other subjects, they assured the *Sun* correspondent that the political "scoundrels" would ultimately be driven from office by those, presumably Republicans, who would "exert every effort on behalf of equal rights for our race."[33]

THE ROLLIN SISTERS WERE NOT ONLY INTERESTED in securing "equal rights" for blacks; they were also in the vanguard of those in South Carolina seeking equal rights for women. "We all believe in women's rights," Charlotte Rollin told the *Herald* reporter, "and have had the assistance of the best and purest, and not the noisiest, of our sex."[34] As early as March 1869, Charlotte appeared before the state house of representatives to plead for women's suffrage. Her argument was that since the Constitution did not define voters as males, women had as much right to vote as men. In discussing the women's suffrage issue the following year, Charlotte Rollin remarked:

[32]*The Sun*, March 29,1871; New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; the politicians described by the Rollin sisters are treated throughout Francis B. Simkins and Robert H. Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932) and Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

[33]*The Sun*, March 29, 1871.

[34]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871.

> We ask suffrage not as a favor, not as a privilege, but as a right based on the grounds that we are human beings and as such entitled to all human rights. While we concede that woman's ennobling influence should be confined chiefly to the home and society, we claim that public opinion has had a tendency to limit woman's sphere to too small a circle and until woman has the right of representation this will last, and other rights will be held by insecure tenure.[35]

Because of the sisters' activities in behalf of women's rights, journalists sometimes compared them to Victoria Claflin Woodhull, a radical feminist in New York, and referred to them as "the Woodhulls of South Carolina."[36]

The Rollin women won support for their campaign from the wives of several prominent Republican officials. The wife of Governor Scott joined their crusade as did several well-known black women including Mrs. A. J. Ransier, whose husband was lieutenant governor and president of the state senate, and the wife of Robert C. DeLarge, a well-to-do legislator from Charleston. In addition, William J. Whipper used his influence in behalf of women's rights. Having enlisted the support of some of the most influential male Republicans, black and white, the Rollin sisters called a "Woman's Rights Convention" in Columbia that met on December 20, 1870. Charlotte Rollin, who appeared to have been the principal organizer, served as chairman of the convention, while her sister Katherine was secretary. Governor Scott accepted the honorary post of president. Among the male vice-presidents were Whipper, Senator McIntyre, and Attorney General Daniel H. Chamberlain. Few, if any, state officials were as vocal in support of women's suffrage as Chamberlain. Notwithstanding the impressive number of male Republican officials who endorsed the women's rights movement, Charlotte Rollin was by no means oblivious to the opposition from blacks as well as whites. Undaunted by such forces, she nonetheless continued to champion the issue.[37]

Shortly after the convention, the Rollin sisters applied for and received a charter for a South Carolina branch of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The organization's president, Lucy Stone, counselled

[35]"Woman Suffrage Movement," *Woman's Journal* 2 (February 25, 1871), p. 59.

[36]New York *Times*, April 3, 21, 1869; *The Sun*, April 5, 1872.

[37]Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda J. Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881-1922), Vol. III, pp. 828-829; on William J. Whipper's support of women's suffrage, see Alrutheus A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), pp. 141-142; D.H. Chamberlain to the Editor, January 23, 1871, *Woman's Journal* 2 (February 4, 1871), p. 33; "D.H. Chamberlain to the Woman Suffrage Association of South Carolina," ibid. (March 25, 1871), p. 95.

Charlotte Rollin to proceed with organizing a branch of the AWSA in South Carolina and not to be discouraged by the opposition. "Remember," she wrote, "that what the press tries to do against you is really for you in the end." Stone promised to come to South Carolina "at some future time if I can."[38] In response to a call signed by "many women," a meeting held in Columbia in February 1871 officially launched the South Carolina Woman Suffrage Association. The Rollin sisters played significant roles in the new organization, and Charlotte was chosen a delegate to the national convention of the AWSA in 1872.

In the meantime, Lieutenant Governor Ransier, undoubtedly at the urging of his wife and Charlotte Rollin, assured Lucy Stone that he would "do all in my power" to secure the enactment of a women's suffrage bill in the legislature. McIntyre, Hayne, Whipper, and others associated with the Rollin sisters recommended in 1872 that the state constitution be amended to provide for women's suffrage. The measure prompted heated debate and even touched off a fist fight in the legislature. Its defeat dealt a severe blow to the efforts of the Rollin sisters and their colleagues. The women's rights movement proved to be short-lived, swallowed up by the rapidly changing political drama in South Carolina. Not until the 1890s, in a wholly different political and racial context, was the suffrage crusade revived.[39]

THE COLLAPSE OF THE RECONSTRUCTION REGIME in South Carolina destroyed the environment in which the Rollin sisters had functioned and flourished. Five years before the return of the Democrats to power, Charlotte and Katherine Rollin had assured the *Herald* reporter that the "rebels" would never regain control of South Carolina so long as "there are ninety thousand votes cast by the black race at our elections."[40] They seemed convinced that the new order inaugurated by Reconstruction was permanent. But such assertions may well have lacked conviction because Katherine and Charlotte Rollin also made known their intention of leaving the South. They informed the *Sun* correspondent in March 1871 of their plans to settle in the North in order to escape the Ku Klux Klan which would surely "visit Columbia before long, and when that terrible time comes we

[38]Lucy Stone to Charlotte Rollin, January 9, 1871, in New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871; see also Katherine Smedley, "Martha Schofield and the Rights of Women," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 85 (July 1984), p. 195, 195n; Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978), pp. 27, 37.

[39]Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 366n; A. J. Ransier to Lucy Stone, Febrary 27, 1872, in *Woman's Journal* 3 (March 2, 1872), p. 68; "Woman Suffrage in South Carolina," ibid. (March 9, 1872), p. 74; *The Sun*, April 5, 1872; Smedley, "Martha Schofield and the Rights of Women," p. 195.

[40]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871.

must be away from here." They indicated a preference for establishing their new home in Brooklyn near the church of Henry Ward Beecher, the well-known Congregationalist clergyman for whom they had high regard because of "the great service he has done us." Beecher's "service" obviously referred to both his anti-slavery and women's suffrage activities.[41] By June 1871, when the Rollin sisters were interviewed by the *Herald* reporter, they merely alluded to their plans to travel in the North. "This is all we can say," Katherine Rollin declared.[42] Ultimately Charlotte and Louisa Rollin, along with their mother, did move to Brooklyn.[43]

No less than her sisters in Columbia, Frances Rollin Whipper was aware of the political danger signals, indicating changes detrimental to the interests of blacks in South Carolina. As the wife of the flamboyant Whipper, the so-called "Thad Stevens" of the state house of representatives, she had first-hand knowledge of the intra-party struggles and "well-laid schemes" of the Democrats that together contributed to the demise of Radical Reconstruction. Following the collapse of the Republican government, Whipper attempted longer than most of his black contemporaries to hold on to power. In 1882 he moved to Washington where he practiced law for a little more than two years while Frances held a clerkship in the General Land Office. By that date five children had been born to the Whippers. The three who survived — two daughters, Winfred and Ionia Rollin, and a son, Leigh Rollin — attended public schools in Washington. In 1885 Whipper returned to South Carolina and re-entered politics, a move that his wife, who remained in Washington with the children, considered extremely unfortunate especially for the welfare of the family. He ran for county judge in 1888 and as a result of a contested election, waged a lengthy, though ultimately futile, struggle to assume the office. One of his last elective offices was as a delegate to the constitutional convention of 1895, which, despite his plea for black civil rights, inaugurated a system of segregation and disfranchisement.[44]

All the while, his wife and children lived in Washington. She continued to aspire to a literary career and occasionally published articles and essays. Her biography of Delany was reissued in 1883 with additional new material. When the Democrats assumed control of the White House in 1885, she

[41]*The Sun*, March 29, 1871.

[42]New York *Herald*, June 13, 1871.

[43]Information provided by Frances Rollin Whipper's great-granddaughter in a letter from Ione to the author, October 30, 1989.

[44]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers; *Circulars to the Public, Beaufort County Jail, South Carolina,* dated January 23 and 28, 1889, signed by William J. Whipper, Benjamin Harrison Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; George B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), pp. 81, 84, 85, 89.

lost her $900 a year job in the land office, but with the return to power of the Republicans four years later, her "venerable friend" Frederick Douglass, then recorder of deeds of the District of Columbia, employed her as a clerk in his office. Frances Whipper ended her "connection with official life in Washington" in 1893 when Grover Cleveland again entered the White House.[45]

It is uncertain what if any employment she had between 1885 and 1889, but somehow she managed to keep the children in school and to send them to Howard University. To make ends meet she secured loans from Whitefield McKinlay, a native of Charleston, who operated a prosperous real estate, loan, and insurance business in the District.[46] One writer has suggested that she remained in Washington because she had wearied of her husband's profligate ways.[47] Such may well have been the case, but in 1901 when she reflected on her life with William J. Whipper, she expressed only admiration, describing him as a man of great ability and courage who led the fight for equal rights in South Carolina. Sometime after the mid-1890s poor health prompted Frances Whipper to return home to South Carolina. She did so fully aware, in her words, of "the terrible blight Tillmanism like a pall cast over this fair land." She died in Beaufort on October 17, 1901, a few weeks before her fifty-fourth birthday.[48]

Frances Rollin Whipper admitted near the end of her life that she had failed to achieve many of the goals she had set for herself. When in 1901 Daniel Murray requested of her a biographical sketch to be included in his proposed "Encyclopedia of the Colored Race," she responded: "I thank you sincerely that you deem me worthy to be inscribed among those who have contributed to the progress and uplifting of the race. I have always classed myself among those who never reached the mark they had in sight...."[49] In view of such convictions about herself, Frances Whipper would undoubtedly have taken great pride in the achievements of her children who, in their respective professions, attained goals that eluded their mother. Winfred Whipper had a long and productive career as a school teacher; Ionia Rollin Whipper, who, after teaching for a time in Washington's public schools, acquired a medical degree from Howard University, labored for more than forty years to improve the health of poor blacks and established a home for unwed mothers in Washington; Leigh Rollin Whipper was a distinguished

[45]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers; *Official Register of the United States, July 1, 1883* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), p. 552.

[46]F.A.R. Whipper to Lonnie [?], December 23, 1899; F.A.R. Whipper to Lonnie [?], November 8, 1900, both in Whitefield McKinlay Papers in Carter G. Woodson Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[47]Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 461.

[48]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.

[49]Ibid.

stage and screen actor who died in 1975 at the age of ninety-nine. Their careers, no less than that of their mother, demonstrated a strong commitment "to the progress and uplifting of the race."[50]

For a brief moment following the end of the Civil War, conditions existed that allowed educated and talented black women such as the Rollin sisters to become activists in behalf of their race and sex. Fully aware that Reconstruction, especially the Congressional or Radical phase, was for them often a "perilous" and "stormy period," the sisters nonetheless looked back on the era with great pride and no little nostalgia, for they were, in Frances Whipper's words, "a part of that wonderful drama."[51]

[50]Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 461; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Ionia Rollin Whipper, 1872-1953," in Logan and Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, pp. 642-643; Bovoso, "Discovering my Foremothers," pp. 57-59.

[51]"Frances Ann Rollin Whipper," Murray Papers.