

(Information compiled by Sharon Wylie from <http://uudb.org/articles/fanniebarrierwilliams.html>.)

Fannie Barrier Williams was an African American teacher, lecturer, activist, and journalist in the late 1800's and early 1900s. She was a Unitarian.

Williams and her husband lived in Chicago, where they were leaders in the African American community. Williams became the director of art and music for an African American Study Club, and together with her husband helped to found Provident Hospital, which exists to this day. The hospital had black and white staff and clientele, and a nurses' training school for black students.

Williams attended All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago, where she met Celia Woolley, a white woman who would become a lifelong friend. Woolley invited Williams to join the exclusive Chicago Woman's Club, and both were surprised when other members claimed the inclusion of a black

woman would “defile” the organization. After a year of heated debate, Fannie Barrier Williams was voted into the Woman’s Club by a decisive majority. She would remain the group’s only African American member for the next 30 years.

Around this same time, Williams also began to gain attention for her controversial speeches. As someone with access to white audiences, she used that privilege to speak forcefully about issues of importance to African American women.

At the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, she criticized Christians for their complicity with slavery, including their use of the Bible to support slavery. She called for religion to take an active role in improving conditions for African Americans. She also argued to the World's Congress of Representative Women, a mostly white audience, in favor of education and training for Black women. These speeches made Williams a nationally known writer and lecturer.

Williams' successes and accomplishments are lengthy. She helped found what would become the National Association of Colored Women. She helped create the Frederick Douglass Center in Chicago, an integrated social center that offered educational and cultural programs to the local community.

She helped establish the Phyllis Wheatley Home, a place for young black women to stay, be protected, and find employment when they first moved to the city. She was active in the movement to gain legal rights and the vote for all women. When Susan B. Anthony died in 1907, Williams was the only African American woman to give a eulogy at the National American Women's Suffrage Association convention. Williams was a founding member of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and she helped found the Chicago Urban League.

What moves me about her life's work is that she used what power and privilege she had to fight the social injustices

around her. She had the courage to stand before white audiences and name the injustices she saw. She could have used the privilege of her education and financial security to live a life of genteel ease, but instead she chose to work tirelessly for social reform.