

Ye Gave Them a Stone: African American Women's Clubs, the Frederick Douglass Home, and the Black Mammy Monument.

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the institutionalization of disfranchisement and segregation and the surging popularity of the Lost Cause, a movement to honor the Confederacy, led African Americans who recognized the power of public image to attempt to take control over their public representations. This article examines the ways in which African American clubwomen rejected the message of African American contentment in slavery and continued inferiority implicit in a proposed monument to honor the Black Mammy

in Washington DC, and, through the purchase and restoration of the former home of Frederick Douglass, negotiated an alternative public identity for African Americans that focused on African American history, heroism, and respectability. African American women wanted to turn attention away from their service in white homes to their lives in their own homes as wives, homemakers, and mothers. Clubwomen's attention to public representation was an important foundation for their social welfare work.

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Early in 1923, Senator John Williams of Mississippi proposed a bill to the United States Senate on behalf of a Richmond, Virginia chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), requesting a site in the nation's capitol for "the erection as a gift to the people of the United States . . . a monument in memory of the faithful colored mammies of the South." African American men and women across the nation were horrified at the proposal for a Mammy statue. Clubwoman and race leader Mary Church Terrell wrote that if it were built, "there are thousands of colored men and women who will fervently pray that on some stormy night the lightning will strike it and the heavenly elements will send it crashing to the ground."¹ African American clubwomen had such a visceral reaction to the idea of a national monument to Mammy because they understood the link between public monument, public image, and civil rights. A monument to Mammy would have diluted the brutal reality of slavery, and by emphasizing Mammy's relationship to her white charges, displaced African American motherhood, a critical component of black women's strategy of claiming citizenship through achieving respectability.

In the early twentieth century, the institutionalization of disfranchisement and segregation led to what is often referred to as the "nadir" of



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