PRESS RELEASE

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6,000 African American Women Suffragists Who Voted 100 Years Ago Make History
Antioch Missionary Baptist Church and The Heritage Society unveil the trailblazing voting history of African American Women

Houston, June 2: On Friday, May 28, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Houston Freedmen’s Town Conservancy, Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, Houston Alumnae Chapter Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and The Heritage Society, gathered at Antioch Park in Downtown Houston to honor the impressive turnout of African American suffragists who voted on November 2, 1920. Special guest speakers who made the exciting historical revelations included Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, Mayor Sylvester Turner, and Harris County District Clerk Marilyn Burgess.

“The Houston Suffragists Project uncovered the story of how Houston women went to court challenging the Texas Constitution’s Jim Crow poll tax,” The Heritage Society’s executive director, Alison Bell said. “The suffragists’ victory resulted in an outpouring of 6,000 African American women and 8,000 white women voting in the first federal election after the ratification of the 19th Amendment.”

“Three African American women were on the ballot in 1920, and on Sundays in the Black churches, women taught each other how to vote,” the Houston Suffragists Project member, Rae Bryant said. “The Antioch Church women are a big part of this amazing civil rights story.” Bryant is also a volunteer curator for The Heritage Society’s suffrage exhibit “Houston Women Cast Their Ballots: Celebrating 100 Years of the Right to Vote!” which is available by virtual tour.

“With our church located in the center of Freedman’s Town, we served as an integral community center in 1920,” Pastor Lou McElroy of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church said. “As the first African American church in Houston that was built and owned by former slaves in 1866, many of those members were still alive and put their lives on the line in the fight for women’s rights. It is in that same historic spirit in 1920 that we continue to advocate for women’s rights,” Pastor McElroy, co-host of the event, added.

“This unique suffragist story of Harris County Women from nearly 101 years ago gives us encouragement to continue fighting for our right to vote under challenging circumstances, which women and minorities once again face in Texas and throughout the country,” The Heritage Society’s board member Martha Whiting-Goddard said. “We were excited to recognize the past accomplishments of local women
in Harris County and Texas, which provide us with the hope and determination to see our voting rights battles through, both now and in the future.”

The program started with co-hosts Pastor Lou McElroy, of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, and Minnette Boesel, Volunteer Board President of The Heritage Society, introducing singer Sheryl Brady of NACW who sang two songs “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” an early 20th century African American gospel and “We Come this Far by Faith” by Albert A. Goodson, composed and written in 1956. Both songs became important civil rights songs in the 1960s. Meta-Four Poetry Slam Team’s leader Katrina Machetta followed and recited Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird”.

After a prayer from Whiting-Goddard, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee poignantly spoke on suffrage, legislation, women’s history, and the distinguished African American women leaders who were at the event. Harris County District Clerk Marilyn Burgess followed with the historical facts surrounding 1920’s victory for Houston suffragists. Mayor Turner then took the stage and credited the suffragists for the reason why he was there on the stage as Houston’s Mayor, and had the crowd energetically chanting why voting matters. Other government officials who attended were Council Member Edward Pollard, District J; Council Member Robert Gallegos, District I; Harris County Clerk Teneshia Hudspeth; and Commissioner Rodney Ellis, Harris County Precinct One’s Jennifer Russell.

Mayor Sylvester Turner issued a Proclamation that May 28, 2021 be proclaimed as Houston Black Suffragists Day officially making the event part of Houston history! Certificates of Recognition were issued to the Sponsors and Honorees by Commissioner Rodney Ellis of Harris County Precinct One. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee presented a Congressional Recognition - from the 18th District of Texas to The Heritage Society on the occasion Celebrating 6,000 Harris County African American Suffragists Who Voted 100 Years Ago.

Next, honorees and sponsors were acknowledged as follows: Georgia Nolan, Past Texas State President, Chairperson NACW and Past President of Houston Chapter; Eileen Lawal, Board of Directors President of Houston Freedmen’s Town Conservancy; Zion Escobar, Executive Director of Houston Freedmen’s Town Conservancy; Pastor Lou McElroy & Jackie Bostic-McElroy of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church; Patricia Howard, President of Women’s Ministry of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church; Camilla Jackson, Chair for Trustee Board of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church; and Jona Sargent, Chapter President of Houston Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Most importantly, the descendants of the suffragists who made history in Houston 100 years ago attended. Sister suffragists, Olivia E. (Kilpatrick) Turner and Evelyn Kilpatrick were represented by Beverly Woods, Allyson Woods, and Jordan Woods. Pauline Garza Patten was represented by Thelonious Kizzie Washington. Nobia Franklin was represented by Ronald Jemison Jr. and his daughter. Pinkie Yates was represented by Martha Whiting-Goddard, Jacqueline Whiting Bostic, and Jacqueline Bostic McElroy. The Bernardo De George Store, the place where Freedmen’s Town voted, was represented by Michaelene "Miki" Lusk.
Organizations who cheered in the crowd were Houston League of Business and Professional Women; Deborah Moncrief Bell of Houston Women’s Group; National President of National Women of Achievement April Jackson Banks; and Jarmese Roberts Morris, President of the Missouri City Chapter of Links, Inc.

Priscilla T. Graham, an author and a photographer on Houston history was front and center taking pictures of the event and also educated attendees on Downtown Houston neighborhood history at Connally Plaza. Graham is also a guest speaker at The Heritage Society’s LIVE! with Mister McKinney of Historic Houston and a member of The Heritage Society.

Educators who supported the event were Dr. Annie Johnson Benifield, Chair, Social Sciences Professor of Political Science; Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences (ABSS) Lone Star College-Tomball and Phyllis Earles, a University Archivist at Prairie View A&M University Houston who is also a member of The Heritage Society.

Donors and contributors who made the event possible included Dessert Gallery Bakery and Café, Aztec Events and Tents, 99 Cents Only Stores, Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, Houston Suffragists Project, Texas Southern University Police Department in Partnership with the Community, Houston Police Department, SP Plus Corporation, HTV Houston, and DJ Nicky Nice.

As the ceremony’s finale, Bryant concluded the celebratory speech at Antioch Park. Attendees who were wearing ‘suffragist white’ and purple attire to honor the NACW, the original African American women’s suffragists’ organization, formed a procesional. Attendees carried purple and white frilly scepters from the church to The Heritage Society and ended the celebration with a tour of the suffrage exhibit at The Heritage Society’s museum.

More about The Heritage Society: The Heritage Society, a 501 (c)(3) organization, tells the stories of the diverse history of Houston and Texas through collections, exhibits, educational programs, film, video, and online content. Founded in 1954 by a number of public-spirited Houstonians to rescue the 1847 Kellum-Noble House from demolition, The Heritage Society has since saved an additional nine historic buildings, moved them from various locations to join the Kellum-Noble House in Sam Houston Park, and restored them to reflect their respective eras. These 10 buildings, along with the museum gallery, serve as historic reference points and exhibition spaces for more than 23,000 artifacts that document life in Houston from the early 1800s to the mid-1900s. To see a 2021 calendar of events, head here. For more information about historic home tours, please contact info@heritagesociety.org.

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Suggested hashtags: #HoustonHistory #WomensHistory #BlackHistory #FourthWard #VotingHistory #FreedmensTown #HistoricChurch #DowntownHouston #WeAreDowntownHou #VisitHouston #museum #tours #AntiochChurch #AntiochChurchMBC #AntiochHouston #TheHeritageSociety #WomenInGovernment #VotingMatters