

HRC Honors Frances Thompson, a Black Transgender Hero

by [HRC Staff](#) • February 22, 2021

Post submitted by Violet Lhant, HRC Public Education and Research Coordinator

This post is the first of a two-part series focusing on Black History Month through the lens of Black trans women. Part Two follows below.

Content Warning: The following post contains descriptions of historical violence.

This Black History Month, the Human Rights Campaign affirms its stance that LGBTQ history and Black history are inextricably linked. In fact, the intersection of Black and transgender liberation in America can be traced to centuries past. In acknowledgement of our Black LGBTQ ancestors, we are highlighting Frances Thompson, an incredible American who is believed to be the first transgender person to testify before Congress.

Thompson was a formerly enslaved Black woman who lived in Memphis, Tennessee, after the Civil War. On May 1, 1866, an event known as “[The Memphis Massacre](#)” occurred when white police officers harassed a group of Black men, women and children who were holding a street party. The group included Union Army veterans, and many refused to obey unjust orders to disperse. When police attempted to arrest the veterans, three days of violence broke out as white terrorists killed Black people, raped Black women and set fires to Black homes and businesses.

The toll of the attacks was devastating: an estimated 46 Black people were killed, many more became victims of assault and robberies and a series of arsons led to the destruction of four Black churches, four Black schools and 91 other dwellings. During the attacks, Thompson and her friend Lucy Smith were raped by members of the white mob. In the aftermath, a Congressional committee was formed to investigate the massacre, and Thompson was invited to testify.

In a conversation with transgender activist and scholar Susan Stryker, [historian Channing Joseph recounted Thompson’s testimony](#). He called Thompson “one of the linchpins in getting the political will together to pass legislation to protect the civil rights of newly emancipated Black people and also to bring political will behind Reconstruction after the Civil War.” The aftermath of the Memphis Massacre and the [New Orleans Massacre of 1866](#) led to a repudiation of President Andrew Johnson’s attempts to deny civil rights for Black Americans. Instead, support for “Radical Reconstruction” boomed, leading to the Reconstruction Acts, the Enforcement Acts and the Fourteenth Amendment, which

together extended citizenship, civil rights and political representation to Black Americans.

Unfortunately, [Thompson's story did not end there](#). In 1876, 10 years after the Memphis Massacre, she was arrested on charges of “crossdressing.” Her transgender status was subsequently discovered and opponents of Radical Reconstruction used her identity to discredit not only her testimony, but the early civil rights movement. Thompson was imprisoned, forced to wear masculine-presenting clothing and was abused while part of the city’s chain gang. Upon her release, she suffered dysentery and died a few months later.

Thompson’s fate mirrors the transphobic violence incarcerated Black trans women still face today. This is seen in cases like [Lea Rayshon Daye](#), a Black trans woman who last year left a letter detailing the horrible conditions of her imprisonment before her unjust death. Incarcerated trans women, many of whom are charged for [consensual sex work](#), are often placed in [men's prisons](#) where they experience high rates of sexual assault from the other inmates and retaliation from correctional officers.

Thompson’s story is a lesson for our times. In 2021, [Black Americans are still subject to systemic racism and police brutality](#). Last year, HRC recorded [a record number of violent fatalities of transgender and gender non-conforming people](#), the majority of them Black trans women. Attempts to curb Black political power have also taken the form of attacks on the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That’s why we must ensure the passage of [the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#), which would restore the Voting Rights Act and prevent voter discrimination.

Thomson’s story is one of many early transgender stories Stryker recounts in HBO’s “The Lady and the Dale.” ([Watch HRC President Alphonso David’s interview with Zackary Drucker, the filmmaker behind the docuseries](#).)

HRC is dedicated to advancing full, intersectional liberation. That’s why this Black History Month we choose to honor Frances Thompson, a Black transgender hero who fought for a more just, more equitable and more emancipated America.

Spotlighting the Intersection of Black and Transgender Identities

by [Tori Cooper](#) • February 23, 2021

This post is the second of a two-part series focusing on Black History Month through the lens of Black trans women – Part One is above.

As we honor Black History Month, the Human Rights Campaign is committed to and focused on racial justice, equity and inclusion and combatting discrimination in all forms. The past year has brought the consequences of unchecked racism into sharp focus, which in so many ways aligns and intersects with the experiences of the transgender community.

In 2020, [HRC tracked a record number of violent fatal incidents against transgender and gender non-conforming people](#), the majority of them Black trans women. This is the result of misogyny, racism and transphobia that is deeply rooted in society; we must work to end the stigma of being Black and trans and combat this epidemic of fatal violence.

As the Director of Community Engagement for HRC's Transgender Justice Initiative, I'm determined to end this appalling epidemic of anti-Blackness and anti-transness. When HRC started the Transgender Justice Initiative, we committed ourselves to improving the lives of the multiply-marginalized: those who have intersectional identities and are most impacted by the intersectional discrimination of our society. We engage in organizational support by hosting justice and advocacy summits in several cities to connect local and national trans activists to share ideas and make valuable connections. Through our [small grants program](#), we awarded \$30,000 nationally in the form of thirty \$1,000 grants to community members advancing transgender justice initiatives. To address the economic fallout caused by COVID-19, we also partnered with Destination Tomorrow, the Bronx's LGBTQ center, to create a [\\$10,000 COVID-19 relief fund](#).

The intersection of the Black and transgender experience is one that I know well. In fact, attending an HBCU was one of the major keys to establishing my own identity as a proud Black trans woman. During my first week on campus at Norfolk State University, I spent an hour sitting in front of the library watching all of the incredible, brilliant, colorful and diverse Black people that I would come to know over the next few years. It was such an eye opening experience to realize that there isn't any one way to be Black, and that I didn't have to conform to anyone's expectations of Blackness. How someone chooses to express their race, their gender, their sexuality — it's all personal! This safe space gave me the opportunity to explore by piercing my ears and trying on new clothes. Nobody looked at me like I was doing something wrong. Despite our difference, we all want to be a part of a welcoming Black community.

We know that trans history is a critical part of Black history. Consider [William Dorsey Swann](#), a Black man who endured slavery and lived through the Civil War and its racist aftermath. In the 1880s, Swann became the first American activist to lead a queer resistance group and the first known person to dub himself a “queen of drag” — or, more familiarly, a drag queen.

My favorite Black queer icon is [Sylvester](#), known to many as “The Queen of Disco.” Although he identified as a man, he found community among Black drag queens and trans women. Sylvester’s bold, gender non-conforming fashion and singing made him into a star. Listening to his music and watching him on TV allowed me to feel at home in my own identity. Sylvester died tragically of AIDS, but his story lives on as an extraordinary representation of the Black queer experience.

Without the exceptional contributions of Black LGBTQ people, LGBTQ rights in America would not be what they are today. The best way to honor this legacy is to build upon it and to continue pushing for full, intersectional liberation. In 2021, HRC’s Transgender Justice Initiative will further its commitment to supporting the Black trans community, including a stronger focus on HIV work. We’re starting with [a partnership with Gilead](#) to provide a \$3.2 million grant to support communities disproportionately impacted by the HIV epidemic in the United States, particularly communities of color. This year, we’re also working on many more initiatives focused on equity and inclusion.

True liberation requires all of us to be united in defeating oppression. None of us can be free until all of us are free. This Black History Month, we’re reminded of the invaluable work of our Black, queer ancestors and of the important work still yet to be done.