

“We are not that sort of women”: The Life and Testimony of Frances Thompson during the 1866 Memphis Massacre

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INTRODUCTION

Frances Thompson was a formerly enslaved trans Black woman who lived in Memphis, Tennessee during the May 1866 Memphis Massacre. The significance of the Memphis Massacre is that it played a vital role in challenging Congress to uphold the Constitution by passing legislation among the debates surrounding the meaning of freedom and rights of citizens. During the three-day massacre, May 1-3, 1866, Thompson and several other Black women experienced sexual violence at the hands of angry white mobs. In the aftermath of the massacre, Thompson was invited to testify in front of Congress to recount her experiences of being sexually abused by white mobs. While her testimony makes her arguably the first trans person to testify in front of Congress, it also served as a linchpin that set off a series of legislation enacted to protect the rights of newly freed people.

It also set off a series of responses from the conservative press, which sought to undermine white southern brutality against African Americans, especially against Thompson whose body was deemed undesirable as it did not conform to their idea of womanhood. After her testimony to Congress, Thompson was arrested and imprisoned for defying anti-cross-dressing laws. This further provided the conservative press with ammunition to double down on its attacks of Thompson, labeling her a liar and criminal. As historians have worked to highlight the historical, political, and cultural significance of the Memphis Massacre as well as the larger importance of Reconstruction, the story is still very much untold.



FRANCIS THOMPSON, THE MEMPHIS NEGRO WHO LIVED FOR TWENTY YEARS AS A WOMAN.

SIGNIFICANCE

While the conversations around the Memphis Massacre and Reconstruction focus on issues of race and politics, the historiography that has emerged since the early 2000s, centered on the racial violence and meanings of citizenship, specifically that of Black men as they were granted the right to vote with the ratification of the 15th Amendment, thus giving them full permission to participate in the political arena. Any discussions of the gender moved Black women from the margins of the discourse to the center; however, the limitations of these narratives largely excluded the lived experiences of gender nonconforming women. Historians have begun to challenge the ways in which gender and sexual violence have been discussed. Hannah Rosen’s *Terror in the Heart of Freedom* highlights the gendered violence during Reconstruction and the media’s responses to it. Tera Hunter’s *To Joy My Freedom* explores the lives of Black women in the south following the Civil War and how they shaped freedom for themselves in response to white America’s desire to keep them in domestic servitude and Black America’s determination to live their lives in ways that would be acceptable to white America. One of the pioneering works to explore race and sexual violence in the press is Sharon Block’s “Rape and Race in Colonial Newspapers, 1728-1776.” She explores how the intersection of gender and race determined how one was profiled in the press. For example, Black men were labelled rapists whether they committed crimes or not and white men were not labelled as such, even when they perpetuated such crimes. White women were always believed when they spoke of being subjected to sexual violence while Black women were not. This laid the foundation for Black and white sexuality for the next century. With this book chapter, I intend to fully explore the political implications of Thompson’s gendered nonconformity. The life and experiences of Frances Thompson is an important example of individuals living at the intersection of race, class, and gender play an integral role in helping to shape how we understand and tell our history. Thompson’s experiences challenges scholars to break away from the rigid boundaries of heteronormative southern Black women’s histories and tell new stories and contribute to the historiography in new and innovative ways.

IMPACT ON INSTRUCTION

In my courses (African American Histories, Queer Histories, History surveys, and Public Histories) I always include the lived experiences of historically oppressed people. My scholarship, much like this book chapter, continues that work. Publishing this book chapter on the life of a transgender person during Reconstruction provides opportunities to keep students engaged on recent trends in histories. It keeps me up on the trends in my fields of history. While I often teach courses such as African American History, I often update the readings and assignments to keep the course innovative. As each semester pass, the historiographical record is constantly being updated. In response to this, my scholarship keeps up with the research, and I make sure that my curriculum keeps up with current historical trends. Also, considering the current political climate, we discuss how this affects our work in education as well as the importance of engaging with various technologies while they are available to us.

DISSEMINATION

The book volume will be published through Bloomsbury Press for 2027. I plan to submit proposals to the following upcoming conferences, UNC Asheville Queer Studies Conference (North Carolina), 4th International Conference on LGBT Studies (Dublin, Ireland) and Queer History South 2026 (virtual). I will be submitting an entry for Frances Thompson to the Tennessee Encyclopedia as she has been left out of conversations of Tennessee’s history, Reconstruction history, southern history, and Black women’s histories. There are plans for the volume contributors to host panels and book talks following publication.

