

Building a bigger table for Women's History Month

By Laura D. Hill
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It is only fitting that Women's History Month, a time to pause and celebrate the accomplishments of women, kicked off with a history-making event. On March 7, Jennifer McClellan became the first Black woman from Virginia to be elected to the U.S. Congress.

During Women's History Month, the history buff in me often leads me to reflect upon challenges faced by women, which dates back to the roots of our nation.

Pocahontas, the brave Powhatan girl who brought food to sustain Virginia's early colonists, worked to foster peace between her people and the colonists. In 1616, Pocahontas traveled to England with her husband, John Rolfe, where she met King James I and served as an ambassador for her people.

Then, there's the adventurous spirit of Mistress Forrest, the first English woman to arrive in the Virginia colony. Accompanied by her maid, Anne Burras, she came to be with her husband in 1608. During this time, women were treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, during the starving period, winter of 1609-1610, a 14-year-girl was dismembered and cannibalized after she died.

I am inspired by the resilience of Angelo, the first documented African woman, who was captured and brought to Jamestown in chains in August 1619, where she was sold to Capt. William Pierce. Little did she know that the knowledge, skills and labor of her descendants would generate the wealth to help build a new nation.

There are a myriad of issues impacting women today, including glass ceilings, gender pay gaps and adverse working conditions. However, the most pressing issue is the battle for the right to exercise control over our own bodies.

In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that ruled against state laws that banned a women's right to choose to have an abortion. Some opponents argue that there is now more regulation of a woman's uterus than gun control laws.

Recently, a Duke University study revealed that an abortion ban would increase pregnancy-related deaths for all women, yet African American women would experience the greatest increase.

Despite the myriad of challenges impacting women today, women find a way to rise above seemingly impossible obstacles to become history makers! On Feb. 19, more than 2,000 people gathered at William & Mary's Kaplan Hall to watch the first African American NCAA women's gymnastics team, from Fisk University, compete against the W&M women's gymnastics team.

I have the opportunity to partner with several unsung heroes right here in the Historic Triangle who are working toward racial reconciliation, equity and justice, such as:

Jody Lynn Allen, who leads William & Mary's Lemon Project, which is committed to truth-telling and reparative acts to address W&M's roughly 170 year history of slavery.

Ti’Juana Gholson, who supports Black-owned businesses through her Make ‘Ur Merch, a merchandising co-op that U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine toured earlier this month. She also operates TAG Consulting LLC and Maximized Life Coaching & Mentoring.

Connie Matthews Harshaw presides over Let Freedom Ring Foundation, which chronicles and preserves the nearly 250 year history of Historic First Baptist Church.

Jessica Sapalio leads WJCC Community Coalition for Social Justice to foster racial justice initiatives within the criminal justice system. The coalition supports police reform and voting rights restoration.

Antonia Saunders and **Johnette Weaver** lead Williamsburg Action, a racial justice advocacy group that launched the Black Concierge, a referral program that helps people identify and patronize Black-owned businesses.

Rebecca Paris Vinroot chairs the Greater Williamsburg-Trauma Informed Community Network, which consists of local organizations that are committed to cultivating a more trauma-aware community.

Jacqueline Williams, the founder of the Village Initiative for Equity in Education, produces an annual equity report to address racial disparities in WJCC schools.

Admittedly, there are many more women who are deserving of recognition this Women’s History Month, but I have already exceeded my column’s word limit.

When we come together to build a more just and welcoming community, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org.