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THE UNTOLD STORY OF
Women of Color
in the League
of Women Voters

CAROLYN JEFFERSON-JENKINS

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Carolyn Jefferson-Jenkins

Foreword by Gracia Hillman



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This book is dedicated to the thousands of women in the “fight” whose names will never be known, but whose contributions have made progress possible. To those individuals who supported, encouraged, and facilitated the participation of women of color in the League of Women Voters of the United States.

Especially to my grandmothers, Barbara Ester Dean Williams and Ellen Zimmerman, and my mother Lillian Zimmerman Jefferson.

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Foreword

The Untold Story of Women of Color in the League of Women Voters contributes a wealth of information to the historical context of the League of Women Voters. It is a story that needs to be told as the league prepares to celebrate its centennial. Dr. Jefferson-Jenkins's enduring dedication to the league and her unique perspective on the organization are buoyed by her commitment to inform about the many women of color who were then, and are today, equally committed to the organization. In a broader context, these heroic women made enormous contributions to the struggle for the voting rights of all women, even as their right was simultaneously denied.

Earlier in her career, Dr. Jefferson-Jenkins was the principal author of *One Man, One Vote: The History of the African-American Vote in the United States*, a book published by the League of Women Voters of Cleveland (Ohio) Educational Fund. That was my first introduction to Dr. Jefferson-Jenkins. Among the book's accolades was recognition that it was important to tell the story of how America had struggled to overcome the injustices of denying the right to vote to African Americans. The Cleveland League was congratulated by elected and public officials and academics for publishing the story. The year was 1991, and I had just been appointed as the first African American executive director of the League of Women Voters of the United States and its Education Fund. I remember thinking at that time that the Cleveland League had sent a strong signal to its sister leagues and indeed the country about the value of publishing the story and the long list of impressive African American political achievements. It was my honor to serve as executive director, and the Cleveland League's signal gave me a sense of comfort in my new role. Fast forward to today, it is of no surprise that Dr. Jefferson-Jenkins had the foresight and determination to tell the stories of the remarkable women of color who are unveiled in this book so that they will be recognized

during the centennial commemorations of the Nineteenth Amendment and the league.

I dedicated most of my career to protecting voting rights in America and waging voter education campaigns to increase voter registration and turnout. I invested heavily over the years to achieve progress and positive outcomes for unfettered modern-day voting rights, including equal access to the ballot and full participation in electoral processes, as well as for opportunities to achieve elected office. It started with my community organizing efforts in the early 1970s to get a recalcitrant city clerk in Massachusetts to agree to bring the voter registration books out of city hall and into public housing community centers—not a simple thing to achieve at that time. Of no surprise, the diverse task force that worked on this effort was comprised of about ten strong-willed women. We were white, African American, and Puerto Rican and spanned an age range from twenty to sixty. There was a local league in that city, but it chose not to participate. Our endeavor was successful, and for the first time in that city, a barrier to voter registration had been lifted for dozens of citizens.

It was not until my voting rights-focused career segued into the national nonprofit sector in Washington, D.C., that I was exposed to the racial tensions within the women's movement, created by presumptive leadership, lack of transparency, and limited inclusion. Regrettably, in the 1970s and '80s, many of the white women who led advocacy organizations took umbrage at attempts to discuss what could and should be done to ease, if not eliminate, the racial tensions internal to the women's movement. Nor did they want to examine and discuss exactly what about the history of their respective organizations contributed to the long-standing disquietude. That was then. This is now. Racial tensions persist. Let's tell the story and have the conversations.

The struggle to overcome political racial injustices rendered on African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans by the hindrance of their right to vote and fully participate in electoral matters continues today. For the most part, the hindrances are politically ill-willed efforts to abridge the right to vote of certain Americans, but it is the "struggle" to render, brand, and accept these efforts as political injustices that prevents the eradication of the abridgement. For numerous reasons, leadership in America seems to have a difficult time wrapping its mind, conscience, and heart around the notion that forward progress is best achieved in a full historical context. In July 2018, Brent Staples of *The New York Times* editorial board wrote an opinion titled "How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women." He highlighted findings from the research of others that exposed biting racism within the women's suffrage movement. It was an

eye-opening zinger that laid down a marker for those organizations and public officials that were preparing to commemorate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment. The league took heed from Mr. Staples's article and vowed to America that it "will do better." To Dr. Jefferson-Jenkins's credit, she began researching and writing this book a few years before Mr. Staples's op-ed because she knew there was a story in the league's history that needed to be told. America will be well served if all who organize Nineteenth Amendment commemorative events, and especially the league, include the living women and families of those no longer alive who are mentioned in this book and of others they discover from their own research.

Topics of race, gender, inclusion, and presumptive leadership are discussed but remain difficult conversations. Long-standing organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, have an opportune time right now to be forthright thought leaders for these difficult conversations. Such conversations are opportunities to listen and learn, and while there may be moments of discomfort and robust debate, they do not have to be unpleasant or divisive. Even a cursory examination of the histories of these organizations reveals that they have firsthand experience from which to create the platforms for these conversations.

The Untold Story should be required reading for historians and political scientists who seek to inform about the historical struggles for universal voting rights in America. It should be required contextual reading for thought leaders and practitioners who are engaged in electoral processes and have opportunities to archive complete, inclusive, and factual information about everyone who was similarly engaged in protecting democracy. And perhaps most importantly, it should be required reading for all girls, so that they will come to know the names of unrecognized and forgotten women of color who toiled in the political vineyards to create the pathway for women to be full participants in today's electoral processes. I say this knowing that the protection of democracy and universal suffrage requires a never-ending commitment to justice and inclusivity.

Gracia Hillman,
Former Executive Director, LWVUS and LWVEF
Commissioner, U.S. Election Assistance Commission
Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues,
U.S. Department of State

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To the historians whose books introduced me to black women's history and taught me about the influence of history on the present and future—particularly, the scholarly studies of Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Dr. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn.

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A particular thanks to all of the local and state leagues who hosted me during my tenure as president and allowed me to share my vision of the league.

Special thanks to the League of Women Voters of Greater Cleveland, Ohio, who gave me my league roots; to the Leagues of Colorado, who gave me my league wings and supported and encouraged me through challenging times; to my new league family in North Carolina who is giving me my league landing and helping me to make new league memories.

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And last, but not least, my deepest gratitude is reserved for members of my family and friends who have been with me through every step of this journey.

Introduction: More Than a Footnote

History enthusiasts know that the most important part of history is the story. They also know that any organization that endures for a hundred years certainly has a story to tell. This is especially true of a grassroots membership organization such as the League of Women Voters of the United States. From its twentieth-century characterization as a “mighty political experiment” designed to help twenty million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters, to its twenty-first-century mission of “Making Democracy Work®,” the league remains one of the nation’s most important citizen advocacy and education groups at the local, state, and national levels since its founding in 1920. It is a force to be reckoned with because of the efforts of *all* who have contributed to its success.

Why this story? Why now? If women have received almost no mention in most history books, women of color have received even less or are virtually invisible, their story relegated to the footnotes. The same is true of the published histories of the League of Women Voters. At each historic milestone, another portrayal of the league is written. February 14, 2020, marks the centennial of the founding of the League of Women Voters and the next major opportunity to recount a more inclusive and comprehensive history of the organization. To celebrate the league’s endurance is to celebrate its unabridged story. The unabridged version must tell of the contributions of women of color who affiliated or attempted to affiliate with the league so that it becomes part of the mainstream narrative.

Given the league’s rich heritage and the complexity of the organization, it is clear that no one book or historical account can comprehensively convey the organization’s successes, failures, and limitations in its relationship with women of color. But what is also clear is that in its hundred-year history, countless women of color made noteworthy contributions to the women’s suffrage movement and its legacy organization, the league. Their story deserves to be told. Their contributions to the organization

should be elevated to the main narrative, not just gleaned from the content of the footnotes that accompany it.

The Untold Story of Women of Color in the League of Women Voters goes beyond being a revisionist history and moves readers closer to the goal of a complete history of the league. The story it tells helps us understand the dynamics of the league as it struggled at the intersection of gender and race. It complements existing league histories and represents this rarely exposed internal organizational struggle. *The Untold Story* is an account of how the evolution of the league's principles, policies, and practices affected the women of color who chose membership in the organization as well as the leaguers who supported them. It is a story of individual and organizational resistance, resilience, and renewal that began with the original suffragists and whose relevance continues today.

Winning the vote for women required seventy-two years of advocacy, but for most women of color, it required an additional forty-five years with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This need for additional advocacy parallels the internal struggles of the league in addressing integration and full participation of women of color in its membership. It would take seventy-eight years from the league's founding to elect a woman of color as national president, ushering in what was to be a new chapter for the organization in 1998. At its hundred-year anniversary in 2020, women of color in national leadership will still be regretfully underrepresented.

The Untold Story is not intended to criticize the league but to honor those women who tried to hold the organization true to its principles yet who are virtually invisible in its mainstream historical accounts. Because its emphasis is on actions or inactions occurring at the national level, this story is intended to motivate local and state leagues to conduct their own research and enhance this account with their own histories.

In compiling this story, I had no idea how little I knew about the complicated involvement of women of color in the league's history and how their influence formed the foundation for my election as the first and only woman of color to have served as national league president in the organization's hundred-year history. My examination of existing histories left me wondering if the entire story of the league was being told. As I attempted to better understand the relationship between the women upon whose shoulders I stand and the league, I was struck by the omission of any discussion of the internal organizational struggles with race and the external influence of race on decision-making, as well as the minimal mention of the important influence of these women in the main narrative. By focusing on the footnotes of these histories, however, I learned of the

resilience of women of color in the struggle for full inclusion and acceptance of the value that they brought to the organization. Their story reveals the tension between their desires to be fully recognized members of the league and advocate for the issues unique to navigating both gender and race and the league's practices that precluded such inclusion.

Telling the story of women of color in what history considers a "white women's" organization allows for an analysis of the organizational dynamics in the context of changes in the broader society that reinforced the inclusion or exclusion of these women at different chapters in league history. Their story exposes the strategic choices the league made between principle and practicality and the choices women of color made to unite with and influence change from within the organization. By calling attention to this history, I hope to move the conversation from the practical, why the league initially encouraged the participation of women of color in activities in "their" communities while excluding them from full membership and participation in the organization, to principle, the need to prioritize their inclusion as an integral part of the future.

The League of Women Voters is more than the sum of its parts. Celebrating the accomplishments of *all* members and supporters in recounting league history is important. Embracing the hard and often painful aspects of the organization as it struggled with its relationship with its members of color, however, provides a more comprehensive accounting. Although *The Untold Story* emphasizes action taken at the national level of the league, as a federated membership organization, local and state leagues were impacted by these decisions. In practice, however, individual local and state leagues often took action on membership issues for women of color when the national league did not. Much of that rich history still resides in the archives of state and local leagues.

Every story, every woman of color discussed in this book is exceptional and representative of the hundreds of women who, over the past one hundred years, have contributed to the league's enduring legacy at the local, state, and national levels. These women have often been marginalized, placed in the footnotes of league history. This failure of historians to acknowledge the contributions of people of color to society shaped my perceptions for years. I recognize that whatever I accomplished in the League of Women Voters was because of the efforts of those women who came before me, both black and white, who challenged the league to be true to its principles. I have been the beneficiary of so much that I feel I have a responsibility to push the league's thinking and ignite further action to preserve and celebrate the totality of the league's heritage. Now, as a former national president, I have a platform to ensure that for future

generations, this oversight does not persist in League of Women Voters' history. Otherwise, the story of the league is incomplete.

League History: Another Perspective

The history of the League of Women Voters is a paradox. It is a story of controversy, compromise, and collaboration. It is a story of strategic choices and recurrent themes, with organizational decisions based on the facts as leaders understood them at the time. Those choices, which reflected how the organization addressed issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, continue to define the organization today. The relationship of the league with its members of color has been an interesting study in contrasts between principle and practicality. *The Untold Story* presents a snapshot of this organizational dynamic at specific moments in the league story.

Current histories of the league devote minimal attention to the nexus between the contributions of women of color to the organization and their fight *within* the league for equal status. The courage that it often took for these women, both black and white, to fight for the league to be true to its principles is central to any narration of the league story. Women of color who chose to participate in the League of Women Voters did so for a variety of reasons. Like other leaguers, they represented a wide range of views on issues. Women of color rejected all attempts to have their membership defined solely by race. These courageous women, whose stories are as complex as the organization itself, just wanted to be league members, to advocate for and educate on the issues they were passionate about. They understood both the power of the league to shape the political conversations in the nation and the importance of their contributions as members to strengthen the organization.

The league's history has seldom been fully researched. Current league histories focus primarily on program issues and organizational impact in influencing legislation. Minimal research has been compiled on specific women who have been associated with the league, particularly women of color. When the main narrative of these histories is viewed through "rose-colored" glasses, touting only triumphs, it obscures the fact that league members of color often had a different experience in the organization—a parallel experience that needs to be examined.

The primary histories of the League of Women Voters, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters, 1920–1970*; *For the Public Record: A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters*; and *The League of Women Voters Through the Decades*, contain only cursory discussions of the

dynamics of gender and race, with most explanations appearing in the footnotes.

In preparation for the league's fiftieth anniversary in 1970, an April 1968 press release promoted a history of the league written by Dr. Louise Young, a league member, researcher, and historian. Prior to that point there was no general history of the League of Women Voters of the United States. Dr. Young's version provides a foundation for the inclusion of the contributions of all women in any subsequent history of the league.

Dr. Young proposes to portray the league as a microcosm of the politically responsible and responsive women in American society, claiming that by "learning to politicize their social role, league members have set an example for all."

Dr. Young also hopes to make clear that "living, breathing individuals accomplished the recorded deeds"—not the league as an institution—and to stress that the history of an organization is primarily the essence of innumerable biographies.¹

In preparation for the league's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1995, Nancy Neuman, league president (1986–1990) wrote in *The League of Women Voters in Perspective: 1920–1995*, published by the LWVEF, that recounting league history and accomplishments "gives us many reasons to be proud of our past and yet challenges us to create our own future."² President Neuman's combined national-level league experience and academic expertise provided a unique perspective of the organization, representing the organizational dynamics using a broader social history context. She stated in her introduction:

This publication is a tribute to the thousands of women whose contributions made the LWV a powerful American institution and to contemporary league leaders for enriching that heritage.³

Consistent with other league histories, however, it does not mention the struggles of women of color *within* the organization or the organization's struggle with the tension between gender and race.

Other works that trace the organization's history include *Forty Years of a Great Idea* (1960), a pamphlet published by the League of Women Voters, and Marguerite Wells's "A Portrait of the League of Women Voters at the Age of Eighteen" (1938). In her general introduction to *Papers of the League of Women Voters 1918–1974*, Susan Ware states: "The League of Women Voters offers a rich and complex institutional history, with each

decade bringing new challenges as well as continuing responsibilities.⁷⁴ Using these works as the basis for viewing league history, it becomes evident that there is much more to be learned about the league through a review of its documents, convention minutes, presidents' speeches, national publications, information from local and state leagues, and the still-to-be-told stories of its members.

Each attempt to tell the league's story brings forth little-known facts and less-recognized power players. Each interpretation adds a different perspective. As early as 1938, Marguerite Wells, national league president (1934–1944) affirmed the need for the league to take a more objective view of its history.

The truest portraits may be those done by sympathetic artists. But the candid camera also has its uses. Poses from which the most may be learned are those which catch the subject at unbecoming angles. Let us turn, therefore, from the composite portrait done by League admirers to snapshots of the League taken by its own members, officers, program chairmen, members and ex-members of boards. . . . Faithful are the wounds of the candid camera.⁵

League Principles and Race

From its inception, the league's principles were often at odds with its action and/or inaction in addressing the issue of race in society and in the organization. In 1912, W. E. B. Du Bois, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), publicly challenged the reluctance of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the league's predecessor, to accept black women. In an attempt at appeasement, the NAWSA invited him to speak at its next convention and published his speech as a pamphlet. Despite these gestures, NAWSA continued to minimize the role of black suffragists. History records that it accepted some black women as members and some black societies as auxiliaries, but its general practice was to ignore or reject such requests. This was partly because attitudes of racial superiority were the norm among white Americans of that era and partly because NAWSA believed it had little hope of achieving a national amendment without at least some support from Southern states that practiced racial segregation.⁶

Carrie Chapman Catt's pronouncement, as president of NAWSA, at its fiftieth convention in St. Louis, Missouri, in March of 1919, did nothing to change the philosophy toward the acceptance of women of color into

the newly formed League of Women Voters: “I propose the creation of a league of women voters to finish the fight and aid in the reconstruction of the nation.” The philosophy to “finish the fight” did not make a distinction between the Nineteenth Amendment—white women’s rights—and the fact that black women faced an additional challenge, that of racial segregation. A series of actions and public statements by national league leaders illuminate this disparity.

In her book *The Ladies Have Spoken: Recurring Tensions in the Discourse of the Presidents of the League of Women Voters: A Thesis*, Eleanor Ray Osborn reviewed league presidents’ speeches through 1994. She found that “tracing these value tensions determines if an organization has maintained, altered, or discarded its founding values and, as a result, changed its mission.” Osborn’s research reveals that although the league was subject to external influences and many social changes as well as internal operational adjustments, the organization had adhered to its founders’ values.

In 1923, Maud Wood Park, the first president of the League of Women Voters, described the league as an “everywoman’s organization,” despite the fact that organizational documents reveal that the league made a strategic choice to shrewdly discourage the inclusion of women of color in its ranks. Understanding the structure of the league adds valuable insight into its functioning. The league’s stated mission, values, and principles do not distinguish between white women and women of color, but in practice, the acceptance of women of color was not universally applied.

The principles are “concepts of government” to which the league subscribes. According to the LWVUS bylaws, the principles serve two functions: 1) authorization for adoption of national, state, and local program (Article XII); and 2) a basis for taking action at the national, state, and local levels (Article XII). The League of Women Voters is organized to parallel the three levels of government: local, state, and national. Bylaws are the fundamental rules by which the league governs itself. They include

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS MISSION

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.¹

1. League of Women Voters. <http://lww.org>.

rules that the organization considers so important that they cannot be changed without prior notice to members and the vote of a specified majority.

The first three articles of the national league bylaws state the league's name, present the league's policy and purpose, and define membership in the league. Individual leagues may decide what to include in the remaining articles of their bylaws, provided those laws reflect democratic procedures. The federated structure of the organization provided the opportunity for national leaders to allow flexibility to state and local leagues to deal with the issue of race and membership. Although the bylaws did not exclude women of color as members, what happened in practice in local and state leagues was quite different.

While there is some evidence that conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion occurred each decade, the most robust conversations about race, from a national leadership perspective, took place during three periods of league history: the 1920s–1930s, when the reality that black women were still prohibited from the benefit of women's suffrage required local and state leagues to ask for guidance from the national leadership; the 1950s–1960s, when integration and other civil rights issues became a priority national conversation that the league could not ignore; and the 1990s–2000, as major demographics shifts began to impact the nation.

Convention 1946 was a monumental turning point for the league: changing its name from the National League of Women Voters to the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) and changing its focus from national leadership to its grassroots membership. The new emphasis on the league as a membership organization, however, did not address the internal challenges of women of color for equal membership status. League documents indicate that discussions about the need for greater diversity of membership were occurring behind the scenes in each of the three periods where there was the most activity around the issue taking place, often with the national leadership referring issues back to the state and local leagues as required by the 1946 change in organizational structure. The parallels between league changes regarding integration and societal changes regarding integration are mentioned in the league's recorded history only as they have an impact on changes in league programs.

Unfortunately, simply espousing diversity does not change the culture of an organization. In the case of the league, cultural change occurs only when an issue becomes an organizational priority. Convention speeches and other correspondence indicate that Percy Maxim Lee (1950–1958), league president during the second most pivotal time for change in the

league, was not shy about discussing issues of race, within a certain context. Lee was also concerned about making the league leaner and more efficient.⁷

Racial tensions ran high throughout this period as integration became a mandated way of life in many parts of the country. Lee acknowledged the extent of such feelings in 1958 when she said that “racial conflicts are as old as man [sic] . . . [because] man is his own worst enemy.” She was undaunted by the scale of this problem preferring to look upon the “growth and changing patterns of life” as common to everyone and offering “the League unparalleled opportunities of service and creative leadership.”⁸

As the league continued through the subsequent civil rights era of the 1960s and into the twenty-first century, every decade saw the league wrestle with when, where, and how to address the issue of race both in society and in the organization itself. Until Convention 2016, women and men (since 1974) who were citizens and at least eighteen years old could join the league as voting members. Associate (nonvoting) membership was available for younger people and noncitizens. At Convention 2016, the minimum age for membership was changed to age sixteen. The delegates to that convention felt the need to change the league’s membership requirements to promote diversity and inclusion and reflect the current demographics of the nation. League membership should reflect the society in which we live. With the surge in league membership that occurred in 2018, it is my hope that the league’s new focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion will again make this a league priority, one that will fundamentally and forever alter the core of the organization.

Focus and Structure of the Book

According to historians of the women’s movement, little research has been done on the League of Women Voters independent of its impact on the women’s suffrage movement. The research that does exist has been completed in the fields of political science, business, and women’s studies. Most of it focuses on the formation of the league and how women traditionally used the organization as preparation for entering politics. *The Untold Story* adds a different dimension to league history by focusing on the story of the evolving relationship between the League of Women Voters and its members of color, as well as of the strategic choices the organization’s national leaders made to engage in, ignore, or remain silent on issues surrounding the unique position of these women to navigate

gender and race. To provide context, this book analyzes convention records, speeches, newspaper articles, correspondence, photographs, drawings, and first-person accounts from the rich collection of LWWVUS papers housed in the League of Women Voters office in Washington, D.C., and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

The Untold Story is structured around organizing themes that show the progression of the ideological relationship between the League of Women Voters and its members of color, emphasizing its policies and practices, symbols, and messages. Chapter titles are chosen to disclose the philosophical shifts in attitude at each stage of the organization's evolution. It should be noted that this book represents my interpretations of league dynamics at the national level through twenty-first-century eyes. The content within each chapter is chronological, but the book itself is not. Each chapter is self-reliant and can be read independently of the others.

Chapter 1, "Lest We Forget," reminds us that the league must not forget its past as a prelude to its future. This chapter synthesizes the existing histories of the league, identifying themes and providing context for subsequent chapters. It discusses the history of the tension between suffragists and abolitionists and its lasting effect. It cites some of the omissions in existing histories of the league. It focuses on the need for a comprehensive history, one that highlights the strategic choices the organization made and how those choices shaped the league. This chapter reveals that women—and men—of color have always been a part of the suffrage movement. It affirms that we—women of color—were there too! Our story must be told.

Chapter 2, "To 'Finish the Fight,'" focuses on the league's founding and the dissonance between its principles and practice related to integration in society and in the organization. It examines league culture, membership, and opinion on issues of the day and the resultant strategic choices league leaders made regarding membership for women of color. It analyzes the long-term impact of these decisions on the organization. To "finish the fight" and embrace the league as an "everywoman's organization" appeared to be more rhetoric than reality for women of color. It describes the establishment, development, and impact of the Special Committee on Negro Problems and what happened at the national level of the organization that set the tone and policy for local and state affiliates. It highlights the exchanges of the women who participated in this league initiative.

Chapter 3, "For the Sake of the Cause," examines why women of color sought membership in the league despite often being discouraged from joining. It examines the paradox of the organization's attempt to reconcile

changes in society and changes in the league. It investigates the league's restructuring in 1946 and the tension that arose from the changes being advocated. It notes the absence of a national presence of women of color in the league, when there was no such absence in other national grassroots organizations. It discusses the dual involvement of black leaguers in other organizations, such as "colored women's clubs," which had the same mission, vision, and purpose as the league. It frames the league's choices in the environment of national civil rights legislation that prohibited segregation. It highlights the sense of hope that women of color had that through their participation, the league would be true to its principles.

Chapter 4, "The Lessons of the Hour," relies on correspondence received by the national leadership and reports of the Special Committee on Inter-Racial Problems to illustrate how the action and/or inaction of the league served to continue the controversy between league principles and practice. This controversy, collaboration, and compromise allowed the league to operate on parallel tracks with its members of color.

Chapter 5, "Through Amber-Colored Glasses," is a tale of two realities and addresses the fragile balance women of color had to maintain in order to participate in the organization, resulting in a parallel experience. It focuses on the realities as these women navigated the nexus of race and gender in the organization and in society. It cites turning points in league history on issues of race and addresses the resilience of women of color in making sure that they were not invisible. It concentrates on equal rights versus equal opportunities and black women's understanding that they could not view the league through rose-colored glasses because they were being viewed through a color lens themselves.

Chapter 6, "The League Way," reflects an organizational identity crisis and covers how the league's organizational focus changed, particularly during the 1960s. This decade presented the biggest challenge to "the league way," as more women of color saw the benefit of belonging to the organization and as changes in society illuminated league inconsistencies in principle and practice. This chapter reviews the league in transition at its fiftieth anniversary and its seventy-fifth anniversary. It communicates the league's move toward a global agenda and its numerous diversity campaigns. It cites turning points in league history and explains that leaguers of color knew all was not perfect with the organization but hoped that their inclusion would bring about needed change.

Chapter 7, "The Weight of History," focuses on the pressures inherent in breaking racial barriers and affecting change in an entrenched organizational culture. It explores external societal challenges the organization faced entering the twenty-first century and the impact those challenges

had on the internal operations of the league, leading to my election and reelection as the first—and by the hundredth anniversary, still the only woman of color to serve as national president in league history. It discusses how the league chose to address the perception of the organization, as identified in its numerous self-studies, as a middle-aged, well-educated, middle- to upper-income white women's organization. It tackles the debate of whether my election as president reflected an evolution or revolution for the organization. The section "A Matter of Principle" emphasizes the renewed discussions on the fidelity of league organizational values and principles in a changing national demographic landscape and contemplates membership belief in the league and its ability to remain relevant. Additionally, it features excerpts from my major addresses to league membership on the possibilities for the organization to be both inclusive and impactful.

The epilogue, "Moving Forward—The Unfinished Fight," brings the story full circle. It summarizes the hundred-year evolution of the League of Women Voters and its relationship with its members of color, both failures and successes. It honors the contributions of these women to the organization. It explores the hopes, dreams, and possibilities of the organization as it moves forward in the twenty-first century. It considers what is next for the organization as it reinvents itself to remain relevant and continue to have purpose. It concludes that in order to remain relevant and find its purpose, the league must continue to prioritize diversity in its membership. It emboldens the organization to "finish the fight."

As a grassroots membership organization, the league has a history that is enriched by the stories of its members. Unfortunately, the majority of the league's papers remain uncatalogued, and pertinent historical documents that *are* catalogued are often incomplete and housed in multiple locations. Furthermore, the availability and accessibility of historical information about the league are dependent on the filing systems of its leaders and staff or on who was charged with recording the league's actions on various issues at the time. Experiences differ in leagues by geographic region, membership size, and history of outreach. Each state and local league has its own history of how it addressed issues of race and when and how women of color participated. Local and state leagues have enormous resources in their state archives and university historical societies. Many of the materials produced by its national office, as well as by its state and local chapters throughout the United States, pertain to the league's positions on issues rather than on how the league relates to the larger membership. Therefore, we may never know if a given study or

action ever led to the league's taking a position on a related matter, and if so, what position and when.

Throughout the book, references to women of color reflect the language of the times. Thus, the terms *colored*, *Negro*, *Afro-American*, *African American*, *black*, and *women of color* appear in accordance with accepted usage at the time.

Conclusion

The capacity to tell stories is what keeps history alive. All stories have settings, characters, plots, and endings. But, for the League of Women Voters of the United States, there is an opportunity for a new beginning. As I thought about the approaching centennial of the founding of the League of Women Voters, I wondered what I could do to help ensure that this organization with which I share pride in accomplishments lives up to its principles, changes with the times, and remains the voice for citizens and force for change it envisions itself to be. And so, I decided to write this book, realizing that we, league members and leaders, can better understand and appreciate ourselves if we know the story of *all* the women who made significant contributions to the history of the league.

The current feminist movement still has a lot of work to do in terms of white women recognizing the very layered (intersectional) experiences of women of color, especially black women.⁹

The hundredth anniversary is the perfect opportunity to bring to life the untold story of the contributions of women of color, to move their story from the footnotes and into the mainstream narrative.

When the league is at its best, it is a powerful membership organization; when it is anything less, it is less. Adding the stories of the unique challenges of league members of color does not take away from anyone else's story, but adds to the might of the league story. I hope that *The Untold Story* evokes deep emotion: sadness, wonder, joy. I hope it helps the next generation see the value of belonging to organizations that may not initially appear inviting. I have had a great experience in the league, and by telling its unabridged story, I want to honor the organization to which I choose to devote my time and energy.

The League of Women Voters of the United States was born from the struggle for the right to vote. We—women of color—were there, too! From the beginning! Our voices as women of color must be heard in