

# Beatrice Jackson Conway

1895-1923

## *Commemorative Essay by Lucy Rogers, Tarrytown Sleepy Hollow High School, May, 2018*

*A Tarrytown-based singer, suffragette, and civil rights activist, Beatrice Jackson Conway was a soloist in the choir at the Mother Zion A.M.E. Church in Harlem. She was a leader of the Empire State Federation of Colored Women's Club and an election poll watcher at a Harlem school for the Woman Suffrage Party of New York County.*

### **Beatrice Jackson Conway**

Mohandas Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Ms. Conway embodied his philosophy by working past her disadvantages as a black woman in the early 20th century to make the changes she knew were necessary. She was born in August of 1895 and died at the young age of twenty-seven in 1923 from complications during childbirth. She fought tenaciously for women’s right to vote and for civil rights while facing the stigma of being a woman of color, and she did not seem afraid to say or do what was right even if it meant being alone. Ms. Conway was well-known for her contributions to the arts, women’s rights, and civil rights in this country.

Among other credits to her name, Beatrice Conway was celebrated so much for her singing as a soloist in the choir at the Mother Zion A.M.E. Church in Harlem that the Negro Singing Society appointed her as their secretary. An event in which she performed was a “high class concert & drama.” The event was advertised in a flattering flyer: “Miss Beatrice Jackson of Tarrytown, one of New York’s favorite sopranos...will appear with others on this occasion.” This flyer is a prime example of the respect Ms. Conway earned for herself as a singer. Beatrice Jackson Conway valiantly strived for women’s suffrage in the early 20th century. A member of the Woman Suffrage Party of the County of New York, she was appointed on October 8, 1917 to be the election poll watcher for the party at a school in Harlem, an exceptional achievement for a woman of color at that time. According to her great nephew, Roger S. Glass, it was a turning point election which helped women gain their right to vote on August 18th, 1920 (Glass) (History.com Staff). Ms. Conway was not afraid to speak out and let her voice be heard in the face of gender inequality, and because of her fearlessness she made a significant difference in the progress toward women’s suffrage (Glass). She felt injustice in her country and acted on that feeling in a way that made waves in history.

Beatrice Jackson Conway also showed great courage with her civil rights activism, repeatedly defending her race in several different cases. For example, in an article she wrote for the Tarrytown Daily News, Ms. Conway discussed the difference between racial equality under the law and real non-discrimination of black people. She said that black people have the right to vote, but “the negro is never thought of until election” (Conway). She explained that black people are disregarded and not respected until they are expected to vote on important issues like women’s suffrage. She also remarked, “There is only one thing that keeps the negro down, the color of his skin.” She argued that black people aren’t excluded from the opportunities that white people have because they are not as competent; instead, black people are excluded because of the color of their skin (Conway). Another time when Ms. Beatrice Conway defended her race was when she represented the Colored Women’s Club at a meeting with the board for the movie *The Birth of a Nation*. This movie “breeds antagonism against the colored race and wherever it has been shown there has been trouble,” as William F. Kingsland from the Colored Protective League argued. At the meeting, the Colored Club asked that the president of the board cut two particularly antagonizing scenes, if not call off the movie entirely. Some members of the Colored Club seemed satisfied with this compromise, but Beatrice Jackson Conway spoke up, demanding that the movie be called off entirely because she didn’t think cutting two scenes out would help. The newspaper recalled her argument: “the picture would start trouble among the children and the after-effects would be very bad, and she did not see how cutting out two scenes in the picture was going to help any.” While others were trying to compromise with the board, Ms. Conway saw that a proper solution to this issue could not be found that way, and she spoke her mind even if it meant she stood alone.

Beatrice Jackson Conway saw changes that needed to be made in her society and she put in all her effort to aid in those changes. As a black woman, she faced disadvantages, but she still took a stand against injustice. Tarrytown should be proud to honor her as a vital part of its hi

Glass, Roger S. “Paying Tribute to a Remarkable and Talented Aunt.” *Momma Addie's Children*, 12 June 2017, roger-glass.com/?p=249.

History.com Staff. “19th Amendment.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2010, www.history.com/topics/womens-history/19th-amendment.

*Additional information was retrieved from newspaper articles on file at the Historical Society.*