

August 21, 2019

Dear Pam Elam and Coline Jenkins,

As civic activists in New York City's public history community and as scholars of race and of women's suffrage, we request that the redesign of the suffrage monument in Central Park be a transparent, inclusive, and carefully-considered process.

Given your goal to celebrate the centennial year of the nineteenth amendment and given the substantial public funding you are receiving, we commend your organization for changing its thematic scope to consider black figures whose work was often marginalized or maligned by white suffrage leaders. Yet, if the proposed solution is to adapt the proposed monument to include Sojourner Truth, it is critical that you now include the voices whose critique culminated in the decision to redesign.

If Sojourner Truth is added in a manner that simply shows her working together with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Stanton's home, it could obscure the substantial differences between white and black suffrage activists, and would be misleading. While Truth did stay at Stanton's home for one week to attend the May 1867 meeting of the Equal Rights Association, there isn't evidence that they planned or worked together there as a group of three. Additionally, even at that time, Stanton and Anthony's overall rhetoric comparing black men's suffrage to female suffrage treated black intelligence and capability in a manner that Truth opposed. May 1867 was a single moment in time, and this moment, purportedly depicted in the redesign, ignores the historical context of the struggle over the fifteenth amendment. Subsequently, the activists' statements and actions diverged fundamentally. We must also stress that Sojourner was a unique individual who spoke her own words; she did not read words written by others.

We believe that there may be elegant ways to memorialize the full scope of the suffrage movement to incorporate these challenging differences, but they will require careful consideration, explicitly including black community voices and scholars of this history. It is unlikely that there will be multiple opportunities to create a public monument to Sojourner Truth, and, if your proposed solution is necessary, this one chance to honor her legacy deserves careful consideration with broad input.

We ask that you not rush this process, and certainly not rashly propose another design. Without careful consideration, your decisions might repeat the mistakes that led to these circumstances.

Sincerely,  
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