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**Feminism Before It was Fashionable: Women's
Athletics at Select Historically Black Colleges**

This research examines the similarities and differences between the athletic programs at southern women's colleges and southern historically black colleges, with a specific emphasis on southern black women's colleges. Only two black women's colleges have continued to exist in the South today – Spelman College and Bennett College. Spelman is located in Georgia

within close proximity to two white women's colleges. Bennett College is located in North Carolina, also near two white women's colleges. Spelman stands alone as the only historically black college that originated and continues to serve African American women at the baccalaureate level. Bennett began as a coeducational college, changing to a junior college for women and finally evolving into a four-year woman's college. The fact that these two colleges represent the only remaining black women's institutions of higher learning becomes significant in the athletic pathways they choose to follow.

Athletics provide a microscopic view of life and societal demands on women historically, and southern women experienced this to a greater extent than the remainder of the United States. The role of the southern women was and to a great extent remains heavily influenced by the church and her predetermined function within the family. Within these constraints, the South provided little tolerance for white women who wished to step outside traditional behavior. Athletics in women's colleges of the South remains decades behind programs in other parts of the country.

However, it is to the athletic opportunities presented to African-American women at single sex colleges that this research looks for evidence of societal differences. African American collegiate women were at best tolerated but most often invisible to southern society. In contrast to the white women's colleges, African American women heeded a different voice. These women attended women's colleges not to find husbands or become more refined, but to provide an income for their families. For this reason, those who attended black women's colleges saw little economic benefit in becoming involved in athletics. It is not that black society objected to competition for women. It was in reality an economic factor. Work and a career was a necessity for black women. The value of athletics to leadership and relaxation was overshadowed by financial demands.

Once the black women's colleges were able to convince their students of the value of athletics, finding competition was difficult. Cultured white women surely did not engage in extra mural athletic competitions and any sporadic events would not include black women. This situation encouraged black women's colleges to align more closely to the coeducational historically black colleges than to the nearby white women's colleges.

Coeducational black colleges did sponsor teams and were willing to travel to their poorly endowed sister schools. Athletically, the two types of colleges that served African American women should have followed the same pathway, but this was not the case.