The closest Rebecca Howard ever came to political power in her lifetime was when she hosted territorial legislators and President Rutherford B. and Mrs. Lucinda Ware Hayes at her Pacific House Hotel in Olympia. It was unimaginable at the time that African American women would serve in elective and appointive positions in state and local government.

While there was an active suffrage movement in Olympia and elsewhere in the territory, neither Rebecca Howard nor any other woman voted in the territory during her lifetime. Her participation in activity outside of her home was limited to business, St. John’s Episcopal Church, to which she was a generous donor and hostess to itinerant priests, and patronage of the Temperance newspaper, *The Echo*.

Whatever hopes she may have had regarding the elevation of her status after the Civil War were dashed when the 14th Amendment passed in 1867 restricted the right to vote to black and white men. Rebecca Howard died in 1881. Two years after her death Washington women gained the right to vote, serve on juries and hold office. Unlike the earliest such proposal introduced in the first legislative session in 1853 which would have enfranchised only white women, this law had no such restriction, and for the first time, African American women voted in an election in Washington.

Women enjoyed the vote for just a few years before the territorial supreme court rescinded this right on a technicality concerning the title of the act. Undaunted, women continued the campaign for full rights as citizens. Whether they were actively involved or passive observers, the call for women’s rights was embraced in one way or another by African American women throughout Washington. In 1898 Mrs. Alice Carter lived in the coal mining town of Franklin. Her parents’ generation had been forbidden by law to learn to read and write. With a rudimentary education and embrace of the ideals of women’s equality she wrote a letter to Governor John R. Rogers addressing other matters. Part of her letter, however, makes clear that African American women valued the idea of equality for women. It stated in part: "I am a Woman…and I stand for Woman rites (sic)."

In the early 20th century African American newspapers steadfastly supported the effort. The *Seattle Republican* newspaper and its associate editor, Susie Cayton, were loyal advocates of temperance and suffrage, as was the *Tacoma Forum* which was published by Ella Ryan and her husband, John, who later served in the Washington State Senate in the 1920s.

In the fall of 1909 Washington voters passed a suffrage bill giving the right to vote to women, but excluding Indians who were not taxed. African American women considered passage of this law a victory for the assertion of their rights.

In the cities during the first quarter of the 20th century African American Women’s Political and Civic Alliances kept their members abreast of political issues and encouraged active participation in the political process. With their new found power they lobbied legislators or legislative bodies on issues ranging from introduction of an anti-lynching law to anti-miscegenation legislation with mixed results. Within two years after women first cast
their votes, Dorothy Coates Kincaid served as a juror in Spokane, one of the earliest African American women to do so. In 1914 Alice Presto’s bid for state senator, although unsuccessful, brought her acclaim in African American communities around the state.

The extent to which African American women participate in politics and political office today was inconceivable to pioneer women like Rebecca Howard. Marjorie Pitter King’s appointment to complete the term of Representative Ann O’Donnell in 1965 was followed by the first elected African American woman, Peggy Joan Maxie, who served six terms in the Washington State House of Representatives. Vivian Caver was appointed to complete the unexpired House term of former Governor Gary Locke. She was succeeded by Dawn Mason who was elected in 1995. At present Rosa Franklin, the first African American woman to serve in the Senate, is now in her sixth year of service as a Washington State legislator. Her first term was in the House. More than two dozen other African American women have served in offices ranging from Federal district Court judge to local school boards.

NOTES

Ms. Mumford, a resident of Seattle, has a B. A. from the University of Washington and has authored several publications and participated in several projects about Black history in Washington.