

HARD WORK AND HOPE: HONORING EARLY WASHINGTON WOMEN SUFFRAGISTS

By Michelle Stillings, DSHS, ICSEW Communications Subcommittee Member

August 26 marks the 104th anniversary of the certification of the 19th Amendment to the US constitution, which granted women the right to vote. The language is brief, but powerful:

“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”

The 19th Amendment would not have passed without the hard work and hopes of early women’s suffrage supporters in the 19th century. Generations of suffragists lectured, lobbied, marched, wrote, and practiced civil disobedience to achieve what many considered to be the radical change of allowing women the right to vote.

In Washington, women fought for 50 years to gain the vote. They wrote petitions, lobbied the legislature, published suffrage newspapers, delivered speeches and so much more. Washington women won the right to vote several times, only to have it taken away again. Each time, the early suffragists remained hopeful and persisted on. Unfortunately, few early suffragists lived to see the Washington state (1910) and national (1920) voting victories.

Early Hopes

The first American Women’s rights convention was held in Seneca, New York in 1848. It resulted in 68 women and 32 men signing the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which was based on the *Declaration of Independence*. Catharine Paine Blaine was one of the signers, and she brought her progressive ideas west to Seattle in 1853. Her Methodist minister husband, David Blaine, founded the first church in Seattle and Catharine was the first teacher and school administrator. When they first arrived in Seattle, the Blaines stayed with the Dennys.

In 1854 Washington legislator Arthur Denny introduced women’s suffrage legislation in the Territorial Legislature. Washington nearly became the first territory to grant women the right to vote, but the proposal was defeated by a single vote. The Territorial Legislature soon after mandated that “no female shall have the right of ballot or vote.”

When the Civil War ended in 1865, women’s suffrage supporters had high hopes. Women had served at all levels of the abolitionist, temperance (from alcohol), and other progressive movements. They hoped to gain the vote as a reward for their hard work, but that did not happen on either the state or national level. Language in post-Civil War laws gave federal rights to formerly-enslaved males, while women were left out of voting (15th Amendment) and equal protection under the law (14th Amendment).

The Mercer Girls: Leaving New England for Opportunities in Washington

There were few women in Washington Territory in the early years, when the ratio of males to females was nine to one. It was a difficult life in a primitive environment.

To attract more women to Washington, University of Washington president and Territorial legislator Asa Mercer traveled to Lowell, Massachusetts twice (in 1864 and 1866) to seek out women who were willing to leave the comforts of a New England home to start anew in the fledgling settlement of Seattle.

Most of the women who joined Mercer were no longer employed by the textile mills that relied on Southern cotton and had few prospects of jobs or marriage, due to the high rate of Civil War casualties. Mercer required that they pay their own passage, which was a lot of money to muster. (The travel fee was \$250 then, now equivalent to about \$5000.)

Many of the 'Mercer Girls' became teachers and then wives, and they brought suffrage hopes with them. Some of the many activists included Mehitable Haskell Lord, who was the niece of a well-known abolitionist and suffragist, Hitty Haskell. Mehitable was one of the founding members of the Olympia club, which was established by suffragists. Annie Conner Hartsuck was another founding member of the club.

Elizabeth "Lizzie" Ordway joined Susan B. Anthony in forming a Female Suffrage Society and presenting women's suffrage issues to the legislature in Olympia. In 1881 she became the superintendent of Kitsap County schools and a school on Bainbridge Island was named after her.

Anna Peebles became the corresponding secretary for the Equal Rights Association of King County in 1884. She also served on the Washington Equal Suffrage Association advisory committee from West Seattle during the 1909-1910 state suffrage campaign. She lived to see Washington women gain the vote, although other suffragists were not so lucky.

Washington Women Gain the Vote

The Olney sisters came by wagon from Iowa to the Washington Territory in 1852 and advocated for progressive causes. They were abolitionists who also wanted women to be able to vote.

On June 6, 1870, Charlotte Olney French cast the first vote by a woman in a Washington Territorial election at Grand Mound, in Thurston County. After debating with the election judges, she was allowed to cast her vote along with six other women at the Grand Mound precinct. Their suffrage arguments were based on recently-enacted legislation that had stricken the word "male" from the voting law.

A few miles north at the Black River precinct, eight women got the news that women had voted, and they also voted, for a total of 15 approved ballots by women. Mary Olney Brown and others tried to vote in Olympia, but were turned down by the election judges.

As Mary recalled later, "I was looked upon as a fanatic, and the idea of a woman voting was regarded as an absurdity."

Suffragists still persisted. In 1871, Susan B. Anthony and Abigail Scott Duniway led a crusade through the territories of Washington and Oregon and helped form the Washington Woman Suffrage Association. The Olney sisters engaged in intensive lobbying, including a territorial petition drive.

Then the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1874 that women were citizens, but voting was not a right of citizenship and, therefore, women had no right to vote.

Women Lose the Right to Vote – Again and Again

The Washington Territorial Legislature voted to give women full voting rights in 1883, which included the right to serve on juries. Women voted for only four short years, but they turned out to vote in greater proportion than men. In both Seattle and Olympia in 1884, women voted out corrupt city administrations, and they helped to pass restrictions on alcohol sales and gambling. The liquor lobby fought hard to revoke their voting rights.

In 1887, a Tacoma gambler who had been convicted of swindling by a jury that included women appealed, and claimed that women had no right to serve on juries – or even to vote. In their decision overturning women’s suffrage, the Territorial court said the proper sphere of women was in the home and out of civic life, not voting and not serving on juries. They quoted from the 1874 Supreme Court decision, “The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life.”

Another law allowing women to vote was passed in 1888, but that was also overturned. Washington became a state the very next year, yet women still had no right to vote.

Suffragists eventually were able to push a bill through the state legislature in 1897, on a two-thirds vote. When handed to the governor for signature, it was noticed that the bill had been replaced with a dummy document. Anti-suffragists had apparently stolen it.

Laura Hill Peters found the real bill and gave it to the governor, who signed it and sent it on to the voters. It was rejected by all-male voters 30,540 to 20,658.

Women Win the Right to Vote – Finally

After the turn of the century, following another major campaign for suffrage, Washington became the fifth state in the nation to acknowledge voting rights for women. Fittingly, the 5th Amendment to the Washington State Constitution was finally approved in November 1910. It included the following language:

“There shall be no denial of the elective franchise at any election on account of sex.”

Ten years later, after another incredible struggle, women won the right to vote nationally with passage of the 19th Amendment. Few of the early suffragists, who had worked so hard and hoped so much, were still alive to celebrate.

Today, women can honor their 50 years of hard work and hope by voting.