



## **Women in VT Politics: During and Post Suffrage 1840-1940**

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From 1840 to 1940, Vermont women struggled to gain equal political footing with their male counterparts, slowly making an impact on the politics of the state along the way.

Women's journey towards equality in Vermont began in the 1840s and early 1850s with the efforts of Clarina Howard Nichols. Her writings and subsequent testimony before the state legislature placed her in the middle of the growing struggle for women's rights and made her one of Vermont's pioneers in that struggle. Though Nichols' efforts did not immediately create the results she had hoped for, they sparked a movement in Vermont to increase the rights of women. While this effort was cooled both in Vermont and nationally by the Civil War, it would pick up momentum again in the late 1860s with the very real possibility of Vermont women gaining the right to vote.

After a Council of Censors voted positively in 1869 to include an amendment to the Vermont Constitution giving women full suffrage, to be voted in at the Constitutional Convention of 1870, the state saw tremendous effort by advocates in support of the amendment. However, after spending almost a year trying to influence popular opinion, the amendment was badly defeated at the Convention.

While this setback slowed the suffrage movement, it did not destroy it. In 1880 Vermont women finally begin to see change with a new law passed by the legislature giving tax-paying women the right to vote and hold office in school districts. With the establishment of the Vermont Woman Suffrage Association (later changed to the Vermont Equal Suffrage Association) in 1883, a statewide organization now existed and continued to push for female suffrage. The efforts of group members like Annette Parmelee and her determination guaranteed that the woman suffrage issue would remain a much debated topic in the newspapers and legislature. Efforts further paid off in 1900 with the passage of a law allowing women to serve as town treasurers, town librarians, and notaries public.

By 1917, support could no longer be contained and Vermont women gained the right to vote in municipal elections, providing the turning point for women to implement real change across the state. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920 gave Vermont women and their sisters nationally full suffrage in state and national elections and also the right to serve in local and national governments.



The first woman in Vermont to take advantage of these new rights was Edna Beard of Orange. After humble beginnings as a teacher, Beard went on to serve as school superintendent and later town treasurer in Orange before becoming the first woman ever elected to the Vermont House of Representatives in 1921 and in 1923 the first to be elected to the Senate. In 1923 she was joined in the State House by four female representatives.

A number of other women also took advantage of their new found rights during the first twenty years after the Nineteenth Amendment. They came from different backgrounds, but many thrust themselves directly into politics right from the home. These Vermont women were every bit as much and in many cases more active in their participation in the legislature than their female counterparts across New England, as Vermont had the second highest number of legislators during this time in New England, second only to New Hampshire. Women serving in both

the Vermont Senate and House of Representatives were very active in legislation in this period as well, and many took the opportunity to serve on various legislative committees, serving in positions ranging from chair to clerk.

The participation of female legislators increased with the creation of the Vermont Order of Women Legislators, or OWLS, in the late 1930s. The OWLS provided woman legislators, past and present, with a place to gather, share ideas, and continue to work toward improving and protecting issues of importance to them.

Much of the legislation passed by women in the House and Senate between 1920 and 1940 focused on what could be considered issues of the hearth - protecting families and women, children and minors, and schools. A number of bills were introduced by women in these categories and passed into law over the twenty year span. Some years proved more fruitful than others for legislation introduced by women, but the overall impact was important in helping to shape and protect the state of Vermont.

During this period, women's impact on the state was not huge, but through small steps they were able to have an influence. Through their continued efforts and struggles, they slowly gained more and more voting rights throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once able to vote, however, women did not vote as a bloc, instead sticking to party loyalties, but they did make their voices heard on occasion. In some cases, the impact was immediate, as evidenced by the municipal elections of 1918 in which the female vote helped change many of the Vermont's cities and towns that had held a local liquor option into dry towns.

Their impact as voters was largely limited beyond this, but their impact as state legislators helped to bring about slow but important change by focusing their efforts on areas of the state and its citizens that had been largely overlooked by the previously all male legislature. Families were better protected, as were the rights of children and minors. A focus on education led to better support of schools and school transportation.

These changes did not occur overnight, taking decades to slowly evolve and continuing long after 1940. However, women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Vermont began the path to better equality for all Vermonters.