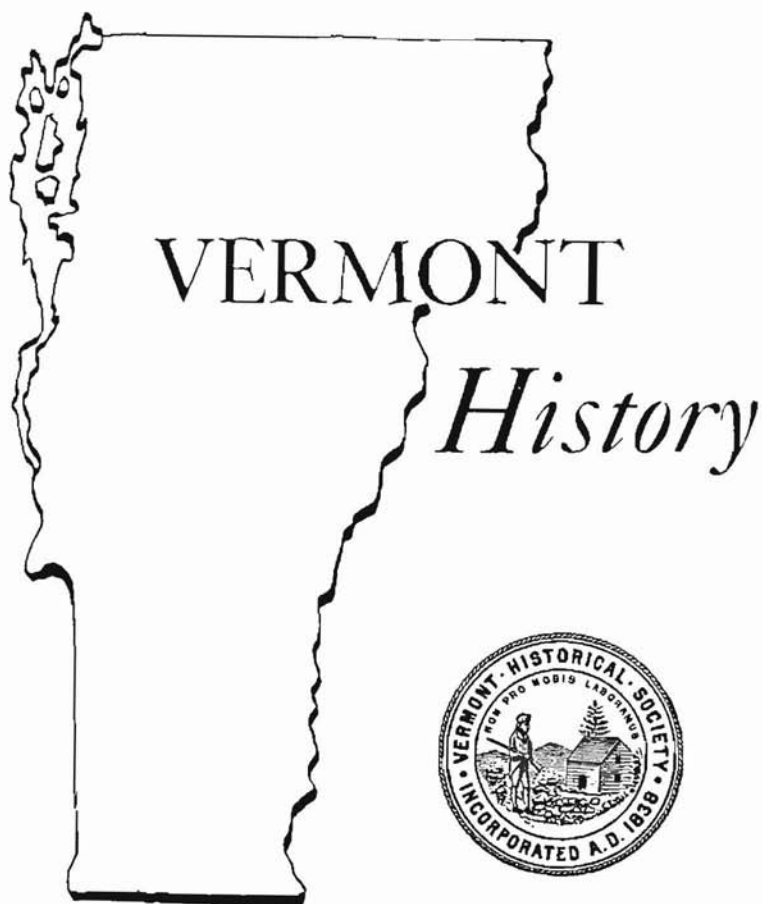


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... Beginning in 1883, Vermont suffragists "no longer asked for a constitutional amendment granting full voting rights to women, but rather for partial or municipal suffrage"

The Drive for Women's Municipal Suffrage in Vermont 1883-1917

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

On a cool September evening in the year 1883 a group of curious citizens gathered in the Congregational Church of Cambridge, Vermont, to hear a lecture on temperance and woman suffrage. That morning, according to one observer, had witnessed much discussion of the forthcoming lecture among the townspeople. Apparently the most heated exchange took place between a henpecked, old husband and a young girl who wanted her "rights." The former declared unequivocally that "it was of no use for women to go against the Bible. The sacred book says that woman shall be subject to the man." The girl then inquired if his wife was subject to him. "If it says so in the Bible," she taunted, "you ought to make it so." At a loss for a reply the old man retreated "ignominiously," saying that he would talk to her no more.

The audience that gathered that evening to hear Hannah Maria Tracy Cutler speak appeared very satisfied with both her manner, "eminently refined and ladylike," and the conservative tenor of her words.¹ For nearly two weeks Mrs. Cutler had lectured nightly in different towns throughout Vermont. She had been sent by the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), whose headquarters were in Boston, to resume the organized drive to secure the ballot for women in Vermont.

By 1880 Vermont was the only state in New England without an active suffrage association,* but this absence did not mean an absence of efforts

*There had been such an association for a brief time after the campaign of 1870, but it had not been active for some years.

toward giving women the vote. In 1872, only two years after the overwhelming defeat of a proposed constitutional amendment granting full suffrage to women,² two measures went before the Legislature in Montpelier. One gave tax paying women the right to vote in school district meetings; the other granted them full suffrage. Neither bill passed, but the school measure lost in the Senate by only one vote, and even in the House, support for suffrage was far greater than in 1870.

Yet outspoken advocates of the reform were apparently few and far between in the Green Mountain state. According to Harvey Howes, the lone legislator who supported the woman suffrage amendment in 1870, no organized effort was being made to "advance the cause." He claimed that he had to depend to a large extent on the *Woman's Journal*, the official organ of AWSA, for any information on the subject, an indication perhaps that the local papers largely ignored the issue.³ Yet judging by a number of letters published in the *Journal*, the campaign of 1870 generated a considerable interest, and here and there one could find loyal supporters of the cause.

If woman suffrage was not exactly a popular reform in Vermont, temperance was becoming increasingly so, and by the 1870's public opinion considered it an acceptable cause for women to espouse. Essentially conservative in its aims, the drive to curb drunkenness - unlike the one to give women the vote - posed no threat to the traditional wisdom that woman's place was in the home. On the contrary, it was precisely to make family life more decent that Frances Willard, the leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), had joined the prohibitionists and formed the Prohibition Home Protection Party in 1882. (It changed its name to the National Prohibition Party in 1884.) One of the many goals of this new political organization was woman suffrage. Unlike many other temperance women, Miss Willard firmly believed that once women gained political power, they would help to enact new laws to curb intemperance. Vermont already had a law which prohibited the sale and manufacture of intoxicating liquors, but the goal of the measure was to abolish public drunkenness, and it did not prevent individuals from importing or brewing their own liquor. Though Vermont may not have had a saloon problem similar to Massachusetts and other industrial states, there was plenty of illegal liquor available, and from the 1870's on female temperance societies sprang up all over the state. The work women did for this public cause helped to make their appearance in public places respectable. By 1880 the sight of a woman on the lecture platform no longer presented the anomaly it had only a few years earlier.⁴

Increasingly Vermont women became open-minded on the question of suffrage; the annual meeting of the WCTU state chapter in 1879 unani-

mously resolved that "the Christian women of Vermont ought to have more influence and power in suppressing intemperance; and as an indirect means to that end, we will petition the next Vermont Legislature to allow us to vote for school committees, hoping thereby that we may be able to place temperance textbooks in our public schools."⁵ The following year, 1880, saw the passage of an act enabling taxpaying women to vote and hold office in school districts. The newspaper discussion of the measure made no mention of WCTU support, but the petition obviously made a difference.

Encouraged by the passage of the school suffrage measure, AWSA arranged for a series of meetings to be held in Vermont in the summer of 1881 to muster support for further suffrage legislation. Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Henry Blackwell, all prominent members of AWSA and familiar faces from the campaign of 1870, addressed a series of meetings in Rutland, Burlington, Montpelier and St. Albans. A resident of Cambridge, Vermont, reported back to Boston that the meetings, though sparsely attended, were helpful, but he feared that "the masses of women were not yet sufficiently aroused to the clear self-assertion of their own equality of rights."⁶

Meanwhile, Vermont newspapers engaged in considerable discussion of the success of the school suffrage measure. The opposition made a concerted effort to emphasize the small number of women who had actually voted in school elections.⁷ Their claim that the sparse turnout indicated how little interest Vermont women had in the privilege of voting probably had merit, as many were indifferent. Yet only taxpaying women had the right to vote, and since the husband usually held family property, not many women could take advantage of this new law. If few women attended school meetings, already by 1882 twenty-seven towns in the state had chosen women as school superintendents.⁸ Furthermore, some towns had quite good turnouts by women for meetings.⁹ Perhaps they found safety in numbers.

It was precisely to overcome the attitude of indifference and to help generate support for reviving the Vermont Woman Suffrage Association that the AWSA sent Hannah Tracy Cutler to campaign in the state in the early fall of 1883. Though an active member of AWSA since its founding in the late 1860's, Mrs. Cutler was less strident than the other leaders of the association. The themes of her lectures were as likely to focus on temperance or religious questions as on woman suffrage.¹⁰ After Mrs. Cutler had been in the state for some weeks, Maria Hidden, an active Vermont suffragist, reported the progress of her campaign to the *Woman's Journal*: "Everywhere she had been kindly received and has been enabled to arouse and interest the people to a consideration of the subjects she presents . . . in such a manner which does not offend the most conservative."¹¹

Unlike the out-of-state suffragists who had invaded Vermont in 1870, Mrs. Cutler no longer asked for a constitutional amendment granting full voting rights to women, but rather for partial or municipal suffrage which would allow women to vote in town meeting, and which, like school suffrage, would be obtained by a simple legislative act. In the early 1880's AWSA, encouraged by the support for suffrage in the legislature of its home state, Massachusetts, decided to launch a nationwide drive for the passage of the reform through the normally more liberal state assemblies rather than risk the popular referendums required for ratification of constitutional amendments.* Its promoters regarded municipal suffrage both as an entering wedge to full voting rights and as a means for improving municipal conditions. According to the leaders of AWSA, women were particularly suited for this kind of suffrage; Lucy Stone called it "enlarged housekeeping."¹² Surely they, as well as men, could fight for urban improvements and solutions to the liquor problem.

Vermont towns, of course, were not strictly comparable to cities like Boston. Vermont had no hordes of impoverished immigrants crowded into filthy slums and ruled by corrupt city bosses. Yet if Vermont provided less excuse for mounting an army of women housekeepers to clean things up, the very absence of a large foreign population which, experience had shown, largely opposed giving women the vote, made the prospects for the passage of suffrage legislation in Vermont far more promising than in the more industrial states of New England.¹⁴

Mrs. Cutler's lecture tour culminated in early November, 1883, with a convention in St. Johnsbury. Once more Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell and Julia Ward Howe travelled from Boston to attend the two days of meetings. The St. Johnsbury convention drew up articles of a state association, elected officers, and adopted a series of resolutions which together provided arguments for mounting the municipal suffrage drive. Starting from the basic premise which proclaimed suffrage a right which belonged to all citizens, the resolutions then defended municipal suffrage on the grounds ~~that~~ taxation without representation was "indefensible oppression." The resolutions concluded that "since all reforms are in a measure experimental and must from their nature be brought about gradually and by the strengthening and education of public sentiment," what better way to begin than by granting women partial suffrage.¹⁵

The executive committee of the Vermont Woman Suffrage Association (VWSA) met for the first time in January, 1884, and announced plans for the coming year. Mrs. Cutler was authorized to continue lecturing; literature was to be circulated; parlor meetings held; and, most important of all, they would petition the Vermont Legislature for municipal suffrage.

*It was generally assumed that state legislators took a more liberal attitude toward woman suffrage than their constituents.¹³

In late May, 1884, Maria Hidden, the newly elected president of VWSA, could report to the annual meeting of the New England Suffrage Association that twenty-nine towns in Vermont had been organized for suffrage work. She was particularly gratified by the number of "Christian people" who "are in sympathy with us." Not only did several ministers support the cause, but also Mrs. Hidden was happily "surprised to find that so many of our temperance women were with us." She reasoned that WCTU members came to favor suffrage for "No sooner do they make a special effort for the suppression of intemperance than they are brought face to face with the fact that all their efforts to save men or to accomplish any good are being hindered for lack of power. Thus they are being led to desire the ballot. The enemy are beginning to see what a dangerous organization this [the WCTU] is, and are saying it is but a stepping stone to suffrage."¹⁶

By no means did all of the members of the WCTU support extending the ballot to women, and some questioned the methods employed by temperance women to obtain signatures for suffrage petitions. One reader of the Vermont *Chronicle*, Mrs. Bushee, complained of an approach at home by a fellow Union member, one who in the spring of 1884 handed her two papers. One contained a list of WCTU members, which her visitor smilingly admitted Mrs. Bushee did not need to sign as she was already on it. The other was the suffrage petition to be presented to the Vermont House at its biennial session the following November. Mrs. Bushee reflected for a moment: "Ought I? Do these women whose names are on this paper realize . . . that they are imposing upon themselves an *obligation* if this petition becomes a law?" She then handed back the paper unsigned.

In her letter to the *Chronicle* describing this incident, Mrs. Bushee concluded by cautioning other women to think carefully before signing such a petition. Espousing a commonly held philosophy of the era, she admonished the *Chronicle's* readers that "When God created them male and female he gave to woman the greater power through her spiritual capacities. To man he gave those special powers which pre-eminently qualify him to govern, and in woman's constitutional limitations in this direction lie the secret of her special spiritual power and personal influence."¹⁷

Despite the warnings of women like Mrs. Bushee, a total of 3,178 petitioners gave their names in support of municipal suffrage. On Saturday, November 22, 1884, when the bill was introduced in the Vermont House, five speeches were made in its favor and only one in opposition. This so encouraged the supporters of the measure that they attended the Monday morning session confident of success. While the suffragists had rested over the weekend, however the opposition had "sowed tares," as Maria Hidden put it, with the result that on Monday numerous speeches opposed the bill,

and the legislators defeated it 113 to 69. One opponent, a Mr. Bassett of Rutland, objected to giving the ballot to "such a dangerous class as the women of Vermont."¹⁸

The leaders of AWSA, far from being discouraged about the vote, claimed the bill had done remarkably well considering it was the first time municipal suffrage for women had ever come up in the Vermont Legislature. Full of optimism regarding the success of a similar measure in the legislative session of 1886, the Vermont Suffrage Association, with the support of AWSA, was soon hard at work. They organized local committees in twenty towns, thousands of leaflets were distributed, and lecturers continued to tour the state on behalf of both temperance and suffrage.¹⁹ The Orleans County *Monitor* reported in the early spring of 1886 that "quite a number of women are going up and down the country agitating the female voting matter Certain talking, masculine women, who care a great deal more about notoriety and the opportunity of getting themselves on the platform, than they do about their children, their homes and their legitimate business, will always be found to expatiate on woman's enthrallment and her woes and miseries; but all of this is nonsense. When the women of Vermont really want the right of the ballot, male voters will be pleased to hear from them."²⁰

The insistence on the part of a number of newspaper editors, legislators, and other influential Vermonters that women didn't want the vote and that men would not give it to them until they did was an argument which would be repeated over and over again for the next thirty-five years, as long as the suffrage question continued to be debated in the state. The argument had a certain validity, as the indifference of most Vermont women at this time indicated. Another rationalization of opposing suffrage was the supposed threat it posed to the harmony of family life. Most Americans in the nineteenth century, and Vermonters were no exception, defined woman's proper sphere as the home and held it dangerous both to the family's welfare and her own for her to go to the polls. Furthermore, it was commonly argued, the promoters of suffrage had an exaggerated idea of the power of the ballot to remedy moral and social evil. "Women's true sovereignty," wrote one opponent of suffrage, "is to correct evils by their spiritual and moral sway which is far more effective than either the ballot or legislation."²¹

The unofficial alliance between suffrage and temperance also attracted opponents as there were many who quite rightly saw the danger of treating the two causes as identical. "The question of female suffrage involves many other considerations than that of its application to the matter of temperance," wrote the editor of the *Chronicle*, "and to treat the two as identical is to ignore the facts of the case, and we fear is likely to react unfavorably upon



The Women's Christian Temperance Union photographed in Newfane in 1910.

the proper influence of women for temperance." Questioning the wisdom of the WCTU in alienating the support of its members who "doubted the expediency of female suffrage," the *Chronicle's* editor also wondered aloud if tying the temperance issue to suffrage was really better in the long run than presenting the latter on its own merits.²² Such criticisms proved valid as time would show. The close association of the two causes did not in the end benefit either. Women probably would not have gained the ballot sooner if the temperance issue had been kept out of the way, but tying the two issues together did alert the liquor lobby, both in Vermont as elsewhere, to the fact that if women were given the vote, anti-liquor laws would quickly follow.

The supporters of suffrage were elated when, on November 3, 1886, a municipal suffrage measure passed the House by a vote of 135 to 89. *The Rutland Herald* voiced no surprise that Vermont should lead the way in this reform:

From the division of its population among small clusters of villages and the absence of large cities, the state is particularly adapted to test the result of woman suffrage, and fewer objections can be raised by the opponents of the system. If women will not interest themselves in the government of these well-regulated and orderly communities, and be active in promoting good order and good morals where the population is small and subjected to but little change in comparison with the transient and irresponsible residents of the large cities, they certainly will not do this where the conditions are altered. But that they will do this is a belief that is gaining ground and is likely to be proved by actual experiment.²³

Although the editors of the *Herald* and others, who found Vermont as promising a state as any to begin experimenting with giving women the vote, were probably correct, their optimism was premature as the measure lost in the Senate by eight votes. Some claimed that the bill never really had a chance of passing and that the favorable vote in the House represented no more than a "complimentary formality."²⁴

"Vermont came so near," Lucy Stone wrote a friend after hearing of the Senate vote.²⁵ AWSA had bombarded the legislators with pamphlets, hoping to make the Green Mountain state the first in the East to come out for municipal suffrage. But another group was also at work in Montpelier. In 1886 the Boston anti-suffragists, led by Mrs. Charles Homans, also watched the progress of the measure. Alarmed by its passage in the House, they quickly dispatched William H. Sayward to lobby against the bill in the Senate. Mrs. Homans later claimed that woman suffrage would have passed in Vermont "but for our opposing hand."²⁶

Friends of suffrage were optimistic that victory would be theirs in 1888. Even the *Burlington Free Press*, which until this time had shown little interest in the reform, admitted early in November that indications pointed strongly to passage of municipal suffrage.²⁷ Various factors encouraged this optimism. At the Vermont Republican Convention in April the party had endorsed woman suffrage, albeit in somewhat equivocal language. It agreed to welcome women to an equal participation in government whenever "they give earnest of their desire in sufficient numbers."²⁸ Republican preponderance in the Vermont Legislature and the fact that of the thirty senators, eleven had voted for suffrage in the past two sessions added some substance to the Convention's rather lukewarm support. Finally, the Speaker of the House, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and even the Governor were all known suffragists.²⁹ Another Burlington newspaper, sanguine about the prospects of the bill, claimed that "if women are not given suffrage at this session it is sure to come at no distant day."³⁰ Meanwhile, the alliance between the suffragists and the supporters of temperance grew even stronger, and the new prohibitionist party in Vermont formed in the summer of 1888 not only enjoyed the backing of the women of the WCTU, but also of a number of leading suffragists as well.

The municipal suffrage bill had no sooner come on the floor for discussion on the morning of November 15 when it became obvious to the packed gallery, many of whom were women eagerly anticipating victory, the measure was doomed to fail. The first warning note came when the supposedly friendly Judiciary Committee reported the bill unfavorably, making it quite clear that in their view women belonged at home, that politics would do them more harm than good, and that most of them did not want the vote anyway. A long morning of discussion followed with



Sign on building in Grafton photographed in 1890 promoted women's suffrage.

speeches defending and opposing the measure. Then came time for the vote. One woman burst into tears as the calling of the roll indicated the strong sentiment against the bill. By the time the last names of the members had been called out many of the women had left the hall. The final count showed only 37 for woman suffrage and 192 against it; the bill had lost ground.³¹

Such a heavy loss was very dispiriting to the supporters of suffrage. Ascribing their overwhelming defeat to Republican resentment of WCTU support for the prohibition party, the suffragists refused to admit the real reason for the measure's failure: the majority of legislators did not want to give women the vote and did not think women needed the additional burden and responsibility.

After the disastrous defeat of 1888 the leaders of VWSA decided to change their approach. They began to place less emphasis on suffrage as a means to reform and concentrated rather on promoting the ballot as a right belonging specifically to those women who paid municipal taxes and who should, therefore, have some say in the use of their money. The Association declared this position the least they could ask for and petitioned the Legislature in 1890 for "an act giving taxable female citizens a right to vote in town, village and fire district meetings."³² Although they still considered municipal suffrage as an entering wedge to full voting rights for

women, VWSA hoped by this means to destroy the old argument which opposed giving women the ballot as long as the majority of women did not want it. For, argued a defender of the bill in the Legislature, "when a taxpayer, although a woman, does ask for representation, though she be alone in her request, the question in considering which our forefathers spoke of 'tyranny' comes home to us and we cannot dodge the issue."³³ But the Legislature, nevertheless, dodged the issue, repeating the old excuse that the bill would have passed easily had there been any indication that women wanted the vote.³⁴

The next twenty years witnessed the same story told over and over again at each session of the Legislature. Every two years, until a bill granting municipal suffrage to taxpaying women finally passed in 1917, the measure was regularly introduced in one or both houses, sometimes summarily dismissed with little or no debate but more often provoking lively discussion. Six times between 1888 and 1917 a bill granting tax-paying women the vote in town meeting passed one branch of the Legislature only to be defeated in the other.

In 1892 the House decided to flatter the several hundred women visiting the Legislature on "Ladies Day" and passed a suffrage bill by a handsome margin. Two weeks later the Senate killed the same measure. In 1896 the situation reversed itself; the Senate passed the bill and left it up to the House to kill it. Rumors abounded that one house would consent to give women the vote as long as the other agreed not to.³⁵ The parliamentary tactics used to defeat municipal suffrage became repetitious. Amendments, which removed the property clause, subjected the measure to a popular referendum, or allowed women to be elected to town and city offices would provoke objections on a variety of grounds. Some legislators would pretend that an amendment did not go far enough, others that it went too far. Those who opposed giving women the vote often pretended that the bill as amended was not satisfactory and voted against it, thereby appearing to favor suffrage when in fact they did not.³⁶

Meanwhile statewide support for suffrage did not appear to gain much ground. The membership of VWSA peaked in 1896 with 276 members, only 50 more than they had back in 1884. The number of signatures on petitions to the Legislature sometimes went as high as 2500, sometimes as low as 1500, but not until the second decade of the twentieth century did they surpass the peak of 3500 achieved in 1886. The suffragists made some progress in persuading organizations throughout the state to come out in favor of the franchise. Methodists and Free Baptists gave their official support in 1890, and in 1892 the St. Johnsbury Grange passed a resolution to aid the suffrage cause. But these were small victories.

In the nation as a whole, suffragists characterized the years between 1896 and 1910 as "the doldrums."³⁷ There had been scattered victories in the eighties and nineties, but they could count no new suffrage states after 1896 when the election of McKinley as President marked the end of the reform era of the late nineteenth century.

Laura Moore, the indomitable secretary of VWSA, reported at the annual meeting in 1897 that the "hard times which have borne heavily upon all reforms" had affected the suffrage cause "most seriously." Membership plummeted from 237 to 151 in only one year. The single "cheering feature of the work" was that the old guard of the association still held "the fort, and like an army of invincibles, they stand to-day with God for the right, counting all seeming defeats as only deferred victories."³⁸

Membership in VWSA declined until it reached a low of eighty-eight in 1900 when the numbers began slowly to rise once more. A few, stout-hearted suffragists, like Miss Moore, continued to gather petitions for the biennial sessions of the Legislature, and municipal suffrage bills were introduced with their accustomed regularity. In 1903 the Orleans County *Monitor* criticized Miss Moore and her associates for "constantly petitioning the Legislature for equal suffrage" and insisted that the suffragists should discontinue agitating the question "until they have a large majority of their sex strongly in favor of the movement." Miss Moore replied that petitioning the Legislature was not only a legal and effective way to promote suffrage but also the most educational.³⁹ Certainly one of the few encouraging signs that the drive for suffrage had promoted some change in the status of women in Vermont was the slowly increasing number of women in public office.⁴⁰ A law passed in 1900 allowed women to serve as town treasurers, town librarians, and notaries public.

The momentum of the municipal suffrage drive began to pick up in 1910. On October 26, Mrs. Annette Parmalee of Enosburg Falls, a noted suffragist who had been entertaining the Legislature for the past several sessions with her witty and convincing arguments in support of the reform, spoke for nearly an hour before the House committee considering the question that year. Mrs. Parmalee insisted repeatedly in the course of her address that she did not ask for universal suffrage but simply for the right of taxpaying women to have a voice in how their money was spent. She praised the efforts of the "No Vote, No Tax" League of Chicago, which encouraged women to refuse to pay their taxes so long as they were denied the ballot and urged Vermont women to do the same.⁴¹

Miss L.J.C. Daniels, a large property owner in Grafton and an enthusiastic supporter of "votes for women," apparently took Mrs. Parmalee's words to heart and began a personal campaign in support of municipal suffrage by

**IN ALL EQUAL SUFFRAGE
STATES AN AVERAGE
OF 83 1-3% OF
WOMEN VOTE**

**"WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE
HOME." YES, BUT HOW ABOUT
WOMEN WHO MUST WORK
TO HAVE A HOME**

Placards prepared by the Women's Suffrage Association of Vermont and New Hampshire for the 1912 Vermont State Fair.

town officials tried to attach some of her bank stock, she refused to sign for its release. The *Woman's Journal* happily noted that the affair had led to an unusual amount of suffrage discussion in the state and had stimulated more interest in the subject than ever before. Miss Daniels apparently enjoyed herself thoroughly, "far more than the perplexed [town] officers." According to the *Journal*, the tax collector in Grafton owned no property himself and was behind on his house rent.⁴³

Miss Daniels' single-handed effort to bring municipal suffrage to the Green Mountain state apparently did succeed in arousing the interest of other Vermont women. At the next session of the Legislature in 1912-1913, Mrs. F.S. Rastall of Manchester presented 2,200 signatures on a petition for woman suffrage, claiming that two-thirds of the property in her home town belonged to women and almost all the rest to non-residents. Yet the men of the town, who decided how the tax money was to be spent, she noted, used it all for commercial purposes. The women, Mrs. Rastall argued, would surely have seen to appropriating at least part for "measure tending to the betterment of town and village." She characterized the present system as a "hold up," since women were taxed but had no voice in the expenditure of the money taken from them. Mrs. C.S. Van Patten of Burlington echoed Mrs. Rastall's sentiments: "The woods are full of women just like me," she told the legislators. "We want to vote on the spending of our taxes."⁴⁴

The drive to secure municipal suffrage for women continued in Vermont long after it had been abandoned in some of the larger, more industrial states in favor of presidential suffrage or amendments to state and federal constitutions. In Massachusetts, for example, the powerful opposition of labor and the Democratic Party to a reform which they associated with the prohibition movement necessitated such a shift early in the twentieth century. But neither the Democratic Party nor the unions presented particularly powerful forces in Vermont. Nor did the suffragists have much to fear from business and industrial interests, which in the larger, richer states associated the reform with the crusade to improve the working conditions for women and children.

Meanwhile among women themselves suffrage gradually became a popular cause in Vermont as elsewhere in the country. In 1914 the General Federation of Women's Clubs, a powerful but conservative organization with a huge middle-class membership, came out in favor of giving women the ballot. As William O'Neill has pointed out, by 1915, "the problem was no longer one of making woman suffrage respectable and of educating women to desire it. Instead it was a matter of finding ways to translate womanly enthusiasm into political pressure."⁴⁵

**GROWTH OF THE
WOMAN SUFFRAGE PARADE**

YEAR	No. OF MARCHERS
1910	300
1911	3,000
1912	15,000
1913	?

**IN AUSTRALIA SINCE THE WOMEN
GOT THE VOTE THEY HAVE
REDUCED THE INFANT
DEATH-RATE ONE HALF**

Placards prepared by the Women's Suffrage Association of Vermont and New Hampshire for the 1912 Vermont State Fair.

By 1915 the final push to secure suffrage was in full swing. In Washington, D.C., Alice Paul and her Congressional Union Party pursued a militant approach and ran a highly publicized campaign to obtain a federal suffrage amendment. In New York City, Carrie Chapman Catt, installed as the new president of the old National American Woman Suffrage Association,* put her organizational talents to work for the reform on both the national and the local level. Each state was given a particular assignment. Those with full suffrage - five states including California and Washington - were organized to push for a federal amendment; others were encouraged to amend their state constitutions; still others, like Vermont, were to continue working for partial suffrage if that offered the most promising course.

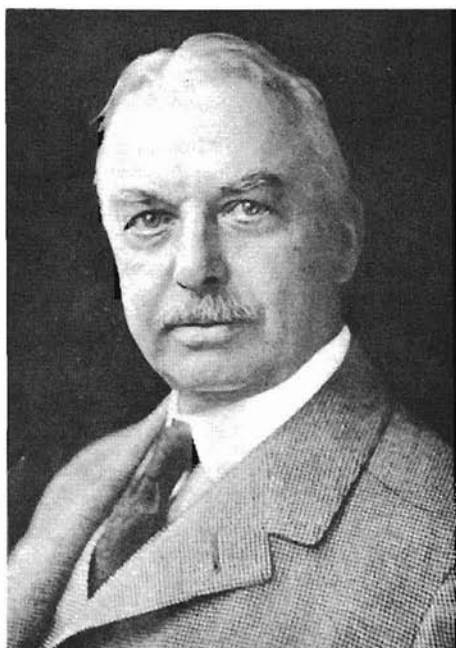
In the 1916-1917 session of the Vermont Legislature no fewer than six separate measures relating to woman suffrage came before the House and Senate. For a time it looked as though municipal suffrage was doomed for failure. On February 27 a House committee reported unfavorably "an act allowing women to vote in town meetings." The anti-suffragists had sent a large delegation to Montpelier to fight the measure, and discussion was heated if inconclusive. The bill was reintroduced on March 8. This time various efforts were made to amend it. The opponents of the measure made their final plea that if woman suffrage bills must be passed, they should be submitted to a referendum, either to the women of the state or to all the voters. Not yet sure of the extent of their following, the suffragists opposed putting the matter before the people. Fortunately, however, all attempts to amend the measure failed, and it finally passed by a bare majority of six. Municipal suffrage had an easier time in the Senate, though one Senator, the Reverend Mr. Leach of Montpelier, could not resist one final stab at the reform. Women, he said, should not be burdened with the ballot. Furthermore, he claimed his wife would vote against him on some issues and thus cancel his vote.⁴⁶ Despite Leach's sophistry and similar objections, the bill passed the Senate on March 21; on March 30 the governor signed it into law.

Thus Vermont became the first state in New England to do more than allow women to vote in school elections. Rhode Island followed quickly, however, by passing a presidential suffrage bill in April. Meanwhile news of victories in the rest of the country came in almost daily. The most encouraging of all was the success of a referendum on full suffrage in New York.

If Vermont enjoyed a brief reign of glory as a pro-suffrage state, her reputation was soon tarnished. In 1919 a presidential suffrage bill passed both houses of the Legislature, but Governor Percival Clement refused to

*The two national suffrage organizations had joined forces in 1890.

*Governor Percival W. Clement
(1919-1921)*



sign it on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. In early 1920 when the nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution was making the rounds of the states for ratification, Vermont came under considerable pressure to become the thirty-sixth and final state to ratify. Again Governor Clement refused to cooperate and resisted efforts to make him call a special session of the Legislature. Vermont women waited for the supreme law of the land to grant them the vote.

NOTES

¹*Woman's Journal*, September 29, 1883, p. 305.

²For discussions of this particular woman suffrage campaign in Vermont see T.D. Seymour Bassett, "The 1870 Campaign for Woman Suffrage in Vermont," *Vermont History*, 14 (1946), 47-61; and Deborah P. Clifford, "An Invasion of Strong-minded Women: The Newspapers and the Woman Suffrage Campaign in Vermont in 1870," *Vermont History*, 43 (1975), 1-19.

³*Woman's Journal*, May 5, 1872, p. 139.

⁴*Ibid.*, October 24, 1874, p. 344.

⁵*Ibid.*, October 4, 1879, p. 320.

⁶*Ibid.*, June 3, 1882, p. 173.

- ⁷*Burlington Free Press*, February 23, 1883, p. 2; and *Woman's Journal*, May 27, 1882, p. 166.
- ⁸*Woman's Journal*, July 1, 1882, p. 206.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, July 22, 1882, p. 225.
- ¹⁰Edward T. James, (ed.), *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1954.)
- ¹¹*Woman's Journal*, November 3, 1883, p. 351.
- ¹²Lois Bannister Merk, "Massachusetts and the Woman Suffrage Movement," Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1958, revised 1961, p. 60.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 202.
- ¹⁵Pamphlet containing Minutes of the Woman Suffrage Convention held at St. Johnsbury, Vermont, November 8 and 9, 1883, in *Woman Suffrage Scrapbook*, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont.
- ¹⁶*Woman's Journal*, March 9, 1884, p. 77; May 31, 1884, p. 177; and June 7, 1884, p. 182.
- ¹⁷*The Vermont Chronicle*, May 9, 1884, p. 1.
- ¹⁸*Woman's Journal*, December 6, 1884, p. 396.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, February 28, 1885, p. 72.
- ²⁰Quoted in *Woman's Journal*, March 6, 1886, p. 76.
- ²¹*Chronicle*, May 9, 1884, p. 1.
- ²²*Ibid.*
- ²³*Rutland Herald*, November 4, 1886, p. 2.
- ²⁴Clipping from *Boston Herald* in *Woman Suffrage Scrapbook*, Vermont Historical Society.
- ²⁵Merk, "Massachusetts and the Woman Suffrage Movement," p. 202.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ²⁷*Burlington Free Press*, November 1, 1888, p. 1.
- ²⁸*Woman's Journal*, April 21, 1888, p. 127.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, October 20, 1888, p. 331.
- ³⁰Quoted from *Burlington Independent* in *Woman's Journal*, November 10, 1888, p. 355.
- ³¹*Rutland Herald*, November 6, 1888, p. 1; and *Burlington Free Press*, November 16, 1888, p. 5.
- ³²*Journal of the House of the State of Vermont, 1890*, p. 196.
- ³³*Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ³⁴*Rutland Herald*, November 13, 1890, p. 2.
- ³⁵*Burlington Free Press*, November 28, 1892, p. 4.
- ³⁶*Ibid.*
- ³⁷Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States*, (1959, Rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 256.
- ³⁸Pamphlet containing report of annual meeting of the Vermont Woman Suffrage Association, 1897, in *Woman Suffrage Scrapbook*, Vermont Historical Society.
- ³⁹*Woman's Journal*, July 26, 1903, p. 240.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, July 13, 1901, p. 223.
- ⁴¹*Burlington Free Press*, October 27, 1910, p. 1.
- ⁴²*Woman's Journal*, January 13, 1912, p. 13.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, January 13, 1912, p. 13 and November 18, 1911, p. 361.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, December 28, 1912, p. 413.
- ⁴⁵William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America*. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 167.
- ⁴⁶*Woman's Journal*, March 24, 1917, p. 67.