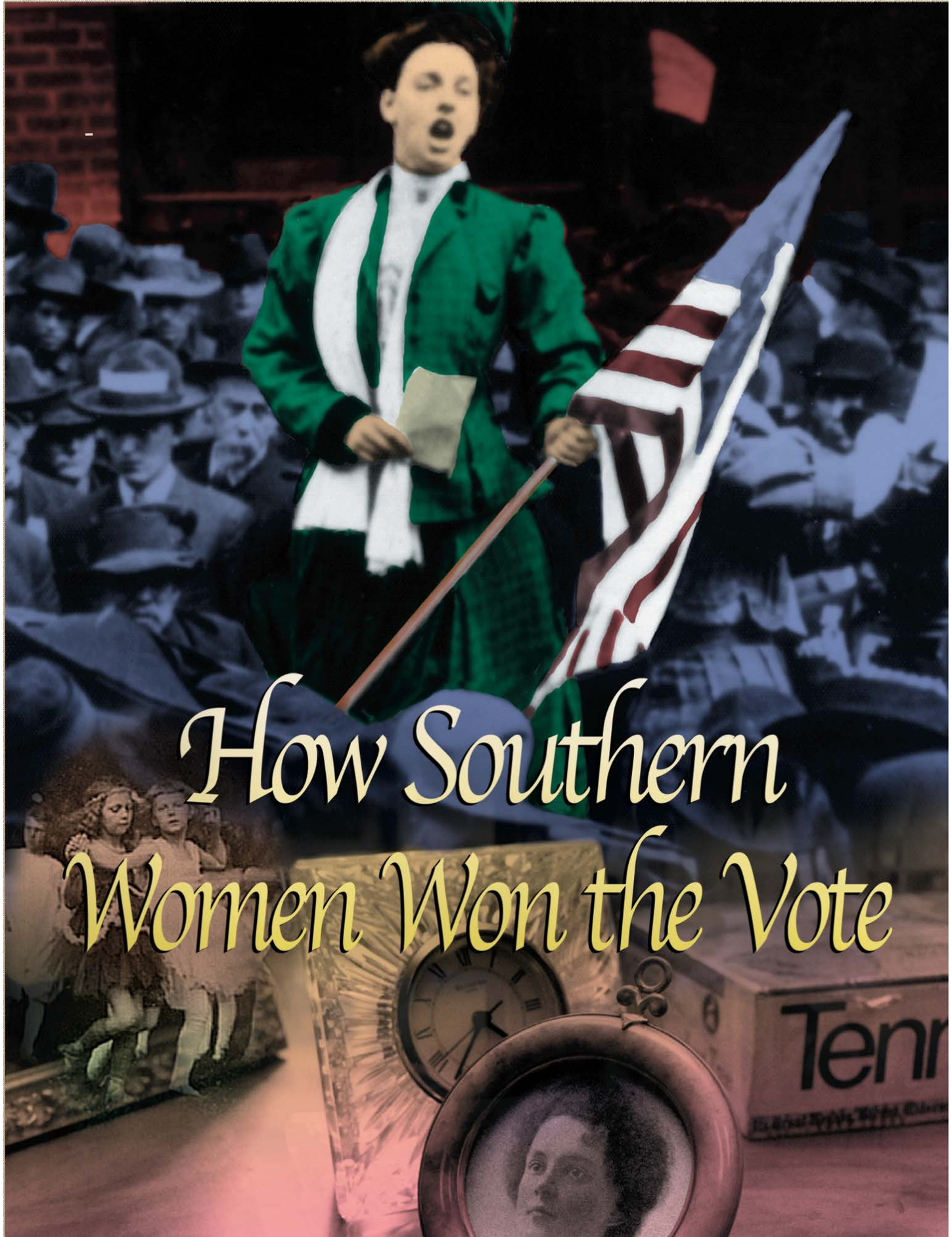

How Southern
Women Won the Vote

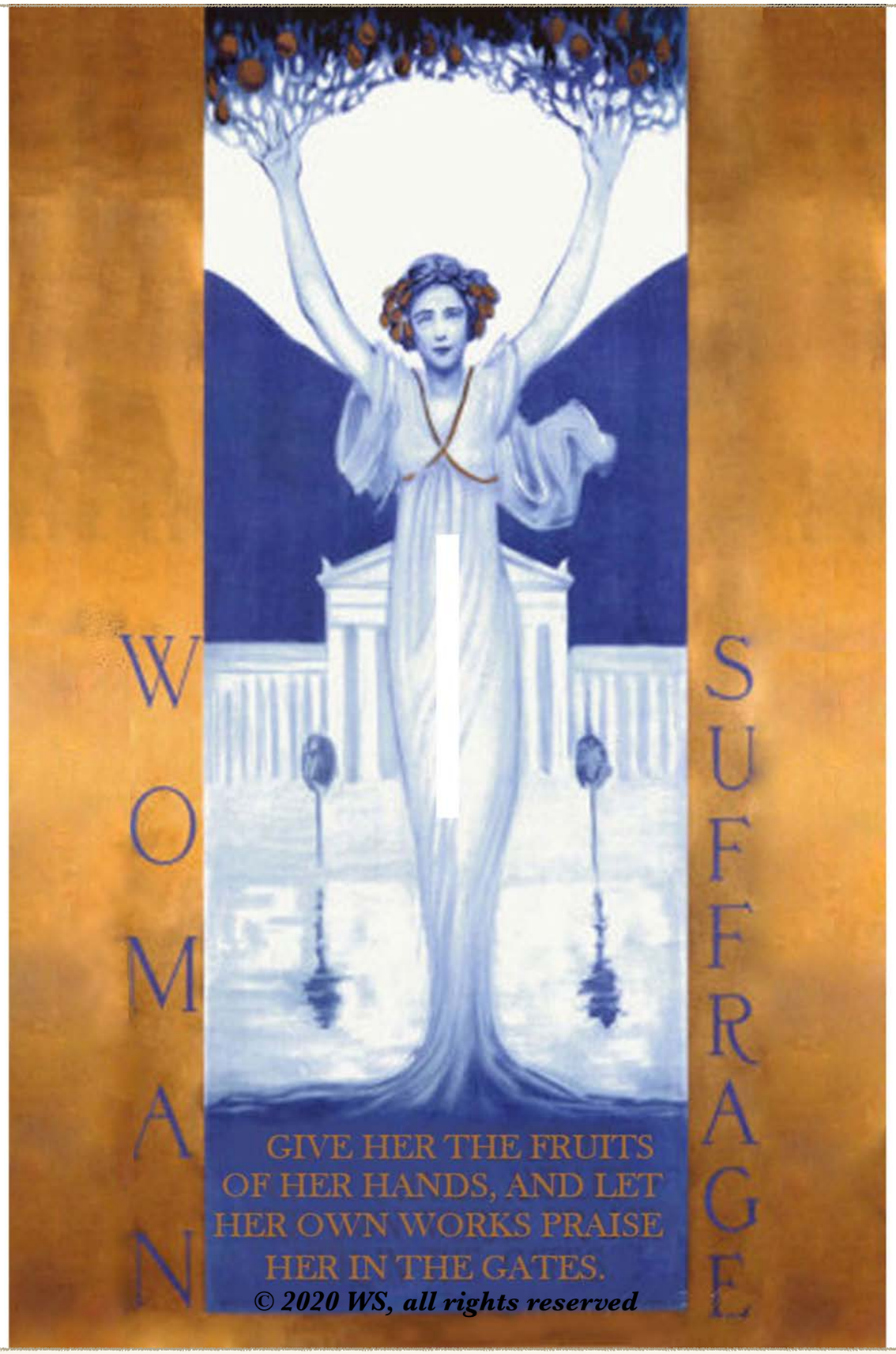
HOW SOUTHERN WOMEN WON THE VOTE

Essay written by Dr. Carole Bucy

Images, text, audio and video selections arranged by Candace Corrigan

Images courtesy of

The Tennessee State Library and Archives
The East Tennessee Historical Society, McClung Collection
U.S Library of Congress
Memphis Public Libraries
Collections of Wanda Sobieski
Collections of Dr. Carole Bucy
Collection of Nathan and Mary Moran
Ossoli Circle
photographs of John Seward
colorizations by Jeanne Kahan, Abbey Battey
& Candace Corrigan



Section 1

The Quest for Equality

" If only these young women knew..."

https://vimeo.com/428662256

Twenty years before Tennessee became a state, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, who was then in Philadelphia as a member of the Continental Congress and admonished him to as she put it...

"Remember the Ladies." she wrote," in the new code of laws... I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."- Abigail Adams

Smoky Mountains

Women who crossed the mountains with their families and settled Tennessee did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms that the men enjoyed when Tennessee became a state in 1796. They did not have that which Abigail Adams demanded: a voice in the making of the laws they were obliged to obey. Although the Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal", women had no guaranteed political rights. One of the chief rights denied to women was the right to vote. Only white adult men who owned property could vote after the American Revolution.

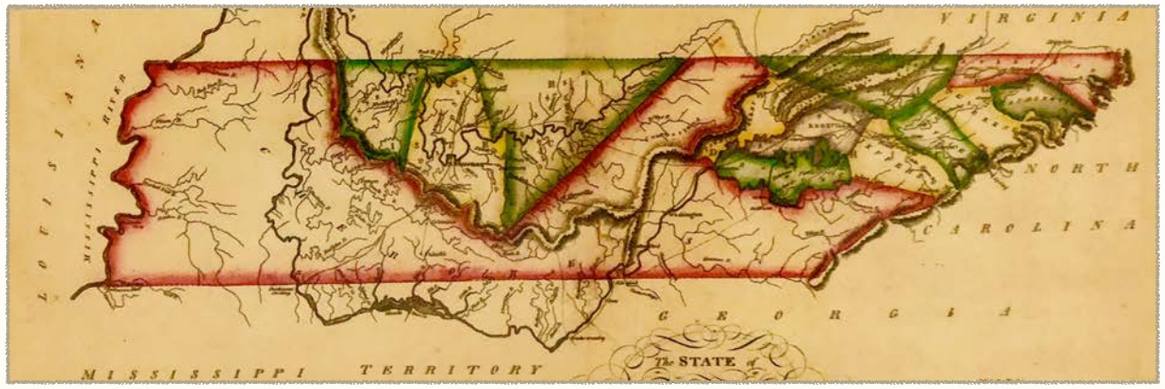
After the American Revolution, the Constitution gave the states the right to decide who could vote. The states gradually abolished the requirement that men must own property to vote, but still did not give women the right to vote. Abigail Adams' husband, John became the second President of the United States, but she could not vote for her husband when he ran for the office of President. Neither could Tennesseans Rachel Jackson, Sarah Childress Polk, nor Eliza McCardle Johnson.

Rachel Donelson Jackson

Sarah Childress Polk

Eliza McCardle Johnson

Women came across the mountains to establish homes and settled Tennessee as partners with their husbands. Like Native-American women who were already living in Tennessee, these women had many responsibilities. Pioneer women worked on farms and took care of their families. Women often taught their own children to read and write when there was no school available. Women worked at home.



Map of Tennessee c. 1800 showing routes taken by settlers

image courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

18th century re-enactor

Cherokee re-enactors

As cities and town developed in Tennessee, men began to work in occupations in these urban areas. The women continued to work at home, but the status of the woman of a family generally declined as husbands began to earn wages in trades. Women were responsible the food for the family and prepared all meals. Women made clothing for the members of their families and took great pride in their skill with thread and needle.

18th century re-enactor and her daughter

log cabin with spinning wheel

Dutch style American needlework table cover 1789

Women provided care and assistance to help the needy in their communities as towns developed in Tennessee. As early as 1817, the women of Nashville had organized the Female Bible and Charitable Society of Nashville, which was the city's first welfare organization. These women provided services for the sick and the needy of Nashville. Similar groups began to organize in cities across the state. Women from individual religious congregations formed organizations to minister to those in need. In the 1850's, Jewish women of Memphis formed the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society to provide social services for the poor of the city. Still, these women could not vote.

After the Civil War, women continued to work in groups to provide solutions to problems. The female network that had begun before the war in churches and synagogues spread as women became interested in issues concerning the quality of life in their cities.

illustration of women at political meeting in 1880's

Elizabeth Avery Meriwether

In Memphis, in 1876, years before any state suffrage organizations were formed in Tennessee, Elizabeth Avery Meriwether rented the Memphis Theater and held a public meeting to discuss women's rights. More than 500 women attended. She led a delegation of women to ask the Memphis School board to give women teachers the same pay for teaching as male teachers. She believed that women should have "equal pay for equal work." Although Elizabeth Meriwether moved away from Memphis, her ideas spread across the state in a variety of ways.

Section 2

National Suffrage Leaders

"Forward out of error, leave behind the night
Forward out of darkness, forward into light
Burns the fiery pillar at our army's head
Who should dream of shrinking by our captain led?
Thither, onward thither, through the toil and fight
Forward into triumph, forward into light"

Processional by anonymous suffrage club
early twentieth century

https://vimeo.com/415969947

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and child

Lucretia Mott

Section 2

National Suffrage Leaders

Women would work together for 72 years to win the right to vote. The revolution that would eventually take place was largely fought with words and not arms. The origin of the women's rights movement is commonly dated from 1848, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and about 300 others women and men met in Seneca Falls, New York and drew up the first public protest in America against women's political, economic and social inferiority.

Mott, a Quaker minister, spoke forcefully both for woman suffrage and the abolition of slavery. The people attending this convention adopted a Declaration of Sentiments that called for women to have equal rights with men. The declaration stated that "all men and women are created equal."

The quest for woman's rights emerged primarily from their experiences in reform movements, especially abolition. The American Anti-Slavery Society, led by William Lloyd Garrison, had welcomed women into its ranks and introduced them to politics. Fervent campaigners like Lucretia Mott (founder of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society) and Mrs. Stanton (whose husband was a prominent abolitionist) served as organizers and lecturers. Their activism provoked disputes about women's role in public life. In city after city, they were harassed and physically attacked for engaging in an activity many Americans considered shocking and indecent. Certain of the righteousness of their actions, these women began to question whether they should continue to accept a restricted role in society.

The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840 by Benjamin Robert Haydon

The pivotal moment for them came when the American delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention arrived in London to find that the women delegates among them were excluded from participation. Mrs. Stanton and Mrs. Mott decided that it was time to fight for the rights of women. Accordingly, they called the meeting at Seneca Falls.

Sign in Seneca Falls, New York

Life-size bronze statues at the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, NY

The delegates at Seneca Falls based their program directly on the Declaration of Independence. Among their declared principles was "that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." They added, however, a denunciation of the "absolute tyranny of men over women" and presented resolutions demanding equal rights for women in marriage, education, religion, employment and political life.

Throughout the 1850's, national women's rights conventions were held annually, as were numerous local and regional meetings. At these conventions, women promoted a diverse reform program including: establishing the right of married women to control their own property and earnings; guaranteeing custody of children in the event of divorce; ensuring women's rights to sue or testify in court; and above all else, winning the vote for women. The right of suffrage was acknowledged to be "the cornerstone of this enterprise" because it did not seek to protect a woman, but rather to place her in a position to protect herself.

Mrs. Stanton prophetically warned, the fight would not be easy.

"Depend upon it," she wrote, "this is the point to attack. The stronghold of the fortress. The one woman will find the most difficult to take; the one man will most reluctantly give up...[But] have it we must.... Use it we will."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton mid 19th century

Gains were limited in the period before the Civil War, but the meetings and publicity widened the women's participation. Still, it took a long time for women's rights to win any popular support, even among women. Most people, male and female, supported female domesticity and separate spheres for women and men.

Nonetheless, the movement soon attracted one of its most gifted leaders, Susan B. Anthony. A member of a Massachusetts Quaker family, Anthony had participated in moral reform and abolition. She had lectured on antislavery and religion and had recently resigned a teaching position in a bitter protest over discrimination against women. Her experience in reform had taught her, as she put it, "the great evil of woman's utter dependence on man for the necessary means to aid reform movements." She was arrested in 1872 and fined for voting illegally in New York.

At this time, suffrage was a radical idea. Many people believed that women were less able to make political decisions than men. Many people who were opposed to women voting believed that it would destroy American family life, but many people simply did not think. They accepted things as they were without questioning whether what they did was right or wrong.

Susan B. Anthony

https://vimeo.com/412823121

video of theatrical presentation of Susan B. Anthony's Trial for attempting to vote 1873

Susan B. Anthony

Susan B. Anthony forged an enduring friendship with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the two leaders had a remarkable working relationship. While Mrs. Stanton was a gifted writer and a charismatic lecturer, Anthony was a consummate organizer and dedicated herself to creating an enduring feminist organization. The two established the National American Woman Suffrage Association (called NAWSA for short) with the motto:
"Men their rights and nothing more; Women their rights and nothing less."

Working first to promote reforms in her home state of New York, Anthony set up a network of female political "captains", one in each of the state's counties. This network of women secured, time and again, thousands of signatures on petitions. This model of organization eventually was duplicated in every state.

It took six years of county canvasses, petition campaigns and memorials to the legislature for the feminists to secure the first comprehensive reform in women's legal status in New York state. They won full property, parental and widow's rights, but not enfranchisement, not the ultimate prize, the vote.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Soon after, the Civil War intervened and the women suspended their activities on their own behalf and concentrated on the war effort and working to secure the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. Stanton and Anthony organized a massive petition drive that collected almost 400,000 signatures in support of that Amendment, which passed in 1865.

These women then combined their demands for woman suffrage with Black suffrage, believing that their male collaborators would support universal adult suffrage in the 14th Amendment. The Radical Republicans then in control of Congress were fearful that the link with woman suffrage would weaken the chance for passage of the amendment. As one leader told the women, "One question at a time. This hour belongs to the Negro." It was the 14th Amendment that wrote the word "male" into the Constitution for the first time and, in effect, sanctioned the denial of suffrage to women.

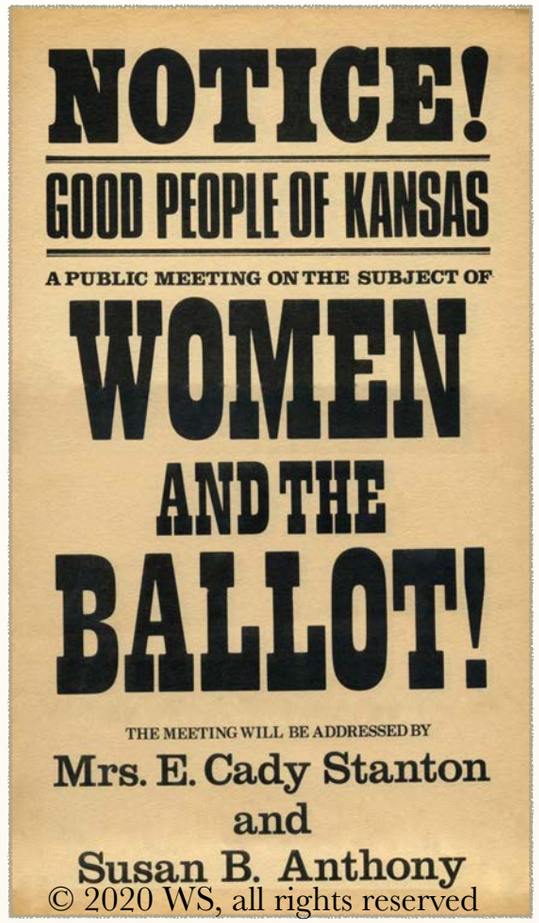
Disappointed but not discouraged, Stanton and Anthony concluded that feminists should develop a program independent of any political party and they threw their efforts into obtaining suffrage for women in the states.

Magazine illustration depicting a suffrage rally

Over the next few decades Anthony and Stanton launched numerous state campaigns, securing thousands of signatures on petitions, traveling over immense distances in bad weather and with dreadful transportation, speaking again and again before voters and legislators. Anthony drafted the Suffrage Amendment and introduced it in Congress in 1879. From that time forward, it was introduced in every session of Congress until it finally passed both Houses of Congress in 1919. Ridicule and defeat after defeat rewarded their efforts.

Winning the Vote, a vintage suffrage song

https://vimeo.com/414120265



Advertisement for Kansas Suffrage Rally

After the first state referendum in Kansas in 1867, which failed, 55 more such popular votes on state woman suffrage amendments took place over the next 50 years. By 1910, after a total of more than sixty years of agitation, the women's rights movement had few victories - among them were several states that gave women greater control over their property, but women could vote in only four sparsely populated western states (Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Idaho).

Goin' to the Polls, a vintage suffrage song

https://vimeo.com/365178887

Suffragist asking for donations c.1900

During the intervening period, changes were taking place in American society that made the later triumphs possible. Those changes were taking places across the United States and they were taking place in Tennessee. The major context for the reinvigoration of the suffrage movement in the decades around the turn of the century was the tremendous expansion of women's reform activities.

The New America, a vintage suffrage song

https://vimeo.com/444031114

The temperance and suffrage movements gained support in Tennessee. Many reformers believed that the "petticoat vote" (votes of women) would improve the tone of politics. Political reform was a major dimension of the progressive era, and the suffragists continually maintained that women having the right to vote would aid the reformation process and purify politics. When the anti-suffragists said that women should stay home and clean house, Ladies Home Journal responded,

"They can, and they will… Let them shake the dust off from a few of our political fixtures and see what is underneath. Let them drive the rats out of the public pantry…Will American women clean our political houses for us? Heaven speed the day when they begin!" The legislative hall would be "made clean" when woman is allowed to exercise that God-given right of equal suffrage.

Illustration c. 1915

Her First Vote

Section 3

The Setting in Tennessee

an excerpt from

How Southern Women Won the Vote

" They hoped that state was Tennessee"

https://vimeo.com/422267088

Photo c. 1908 by Lewis Wikes Hines

By 1900, women made up one-fifth of the work force of Tennessee. Many worked as domestics in private homes and many worked in the textile mills that were built in small towns across the state after the Civil War. The jobs in the mills were "sex segregated" with women hired only for the most unskilled jobs. Women and children worked as spoolers, feeding yarn into a high-powered, quick-whirling machine, and retrieving it once it had been wound. Some mills hired entire families - mothers, fathers, and children - who together could earn just enough to keep them working. Married women who worked in the mills had a second full-time job. In addition to working in the mills, they cooked, cared for children, and maintained their individual households. Often these women worked 10 to 12 hour days in the mills where working conditions were dirty and dangerous.

Studies of working women at the turn of the century show that women received one-half to one-third the wages of working men. A seamstress in a mill might earn $6.00 per week, compared to a male cutter's $16.00. Even when men and women performed the same job, women were paid considerably less. Employers justified unequal pay, claiming that the salaries of women were a second or supplementary income in their households.

Photo c. 1908 by Lewis Wikes Hines

Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls

https://vimeo.com/353153956

Middle and upper class women in Tennessee followed the efforts of women in the Northeast and created an extraordinary number of socially conscious, all-female organizations. The first women's club in Tennessee was the Ossoli Circle founded in Knoxville in 1885. The women present at Mrs. Lizzie Crozier French's first meeting of the group determined that the group should not be called a club since the term "club" could be interpreted to be exclusive. They preferred to use the term, "circle", which they believed to be more inclusive and less threatening to the men.

Ossoli Circle emblem

The Query Club of Nashville followed that same year. By 1890, Memphis had two women's clubs, the 19th Century Club and the Women's Club of Memphis and in 1892, Kosmos was founded in Chattanooga. By the turn of the century these women's clubs were appearing in every town across Tennessee. Their activities ranged from study and sociability to larger national reform organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Young Women's Christian Association.

These groups had different purposes and different constituencies, but they were alike in that they were free of male control and were assertive about women's capacity to do more than men expected of them. They developed techniques for encouraging women to gain wider interests and new skills. Eventually these new skills involved politics.

WCTU silk embroidered banner c. 1900

The WCTU, for example, concentrated on anti-liquor laws and municipal reform. They emphasized the necessity of political action to eliminate the evils of alcohol and clean up corruption in government. It followed, fairly logically, that to really make a difference, women needed the vote.

I am a Suffragette

https://vimeo.com/416747162

Elizabeth Lyle Saxon

Another Memphis woman, Elizabeth Lyle Saxon (1832-1915), an ardent suffragist, became vice-president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890, but suffrage organizations in Tennessee were unable to continue. Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt visited Memphis in 1895 and spoke in the lecture hall of the Young Men's Hebrew Association. During the early years of the 20th century, Memphis was the only city in Tennessee that could sustain a suffrage organization.

Memphis Suffrage Parade photo courtesy of Memphis and Shelby County Room Memphis Public Libraries- image has been altered from the original

" Glory Hallelujah, Our Cause Is Marching On."

https://vimeo.com/417323234

Children's suffrage parade

Suffrage Parade

English suffragist Annie Kennedy

https://vimeo.com/419737907

When Nashville women founded a suffrage club in 1911, attention to the movement grew and the number of suffrage leagues rose across the state from 5 to 75. The Tennessee suffragists created a statewide organization and worked to increase public awareness on the issue.

Program cover for the National Suffrage Convention, 1914

" If you give yourself to a noble Cause, give yourself while you can."

Dr. Anna Howard Shaw

https://vimeo.com/409354710

The coalition of women supporting suffrage was a fragile one. The state organization split into two separate organizations in 1914 over a disagreement as to whether the national convention should be held in Nashville or in Chattanooga. It was held in Nashville at the Ryman Auditorium with Anna Howard Shaw presiding and Jane Addams in attendance. Pro-suffrage speakers drew large crowds.

Pro suffrage political cartoon

When the United States entered World War I, Tennessee suffragists temporarily abandoned their efforts for suffrage and focused their energies and organizational skills on the war effort. They organized themselves across Tennessee through the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense selling bonds, saving food, and providing support for the troops. In Nashville, women worked at the Old Hickory Powder Plant which later became the DuPont Plant of Old Hickory.

World War I poster

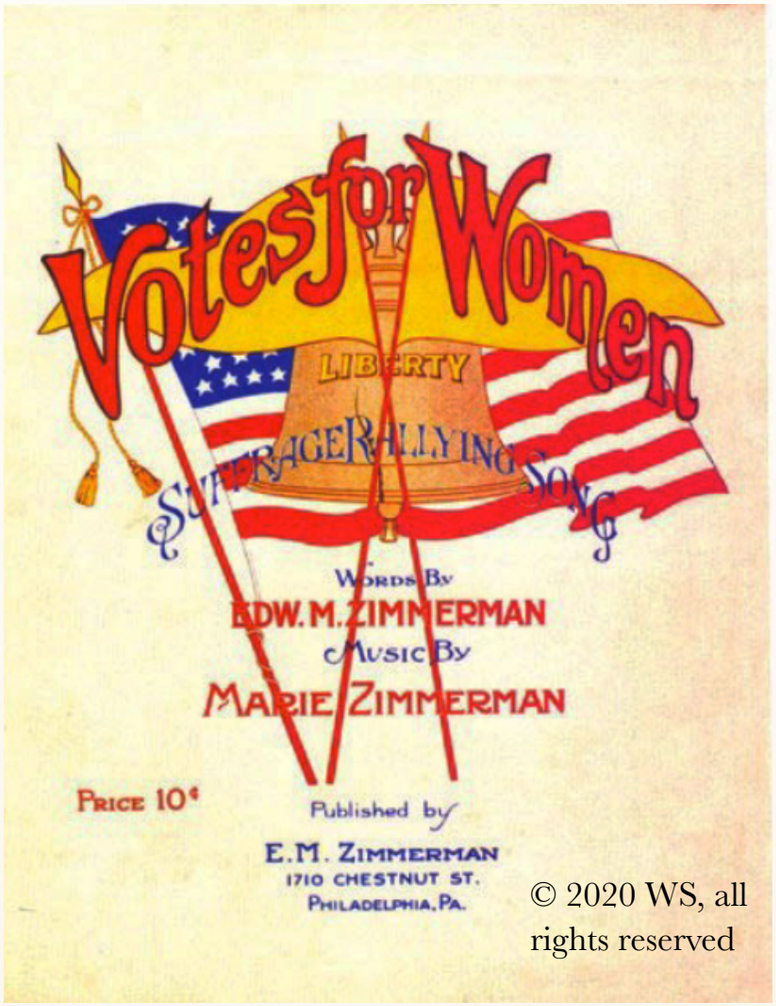
With women already in the work force, World War I created new opportunities. As in the Civil War when the men of Tennessee had left to serve in the army, women took their places in the labor force. Women worked during the war in Tennessee factories supporting the war by assembling explosives, armaments, machine tools, and automobile and airplane parts. Many additional women were hired in the textile mills to produce uniforms for soldiers.

World War I poster " The Three Suffrage Graces"

"Every man who loves and reveres his mother and his country should idolize, if he worships at all, the three graces

- Suffrage, Preparedness and Americanism"- Nell Brinkley

The two groups worked separately for four years, and reunited in 1918 under different leadership at the end of the war. Actually, the split did not hurt the cause. The two organizations competed heavily and the numbers within each group grew dramatically. Women who wanted to vote as well as women who opposed voting held rallies, printed pamphlets, and wrote strong editorials for Tennessee's newspapers.

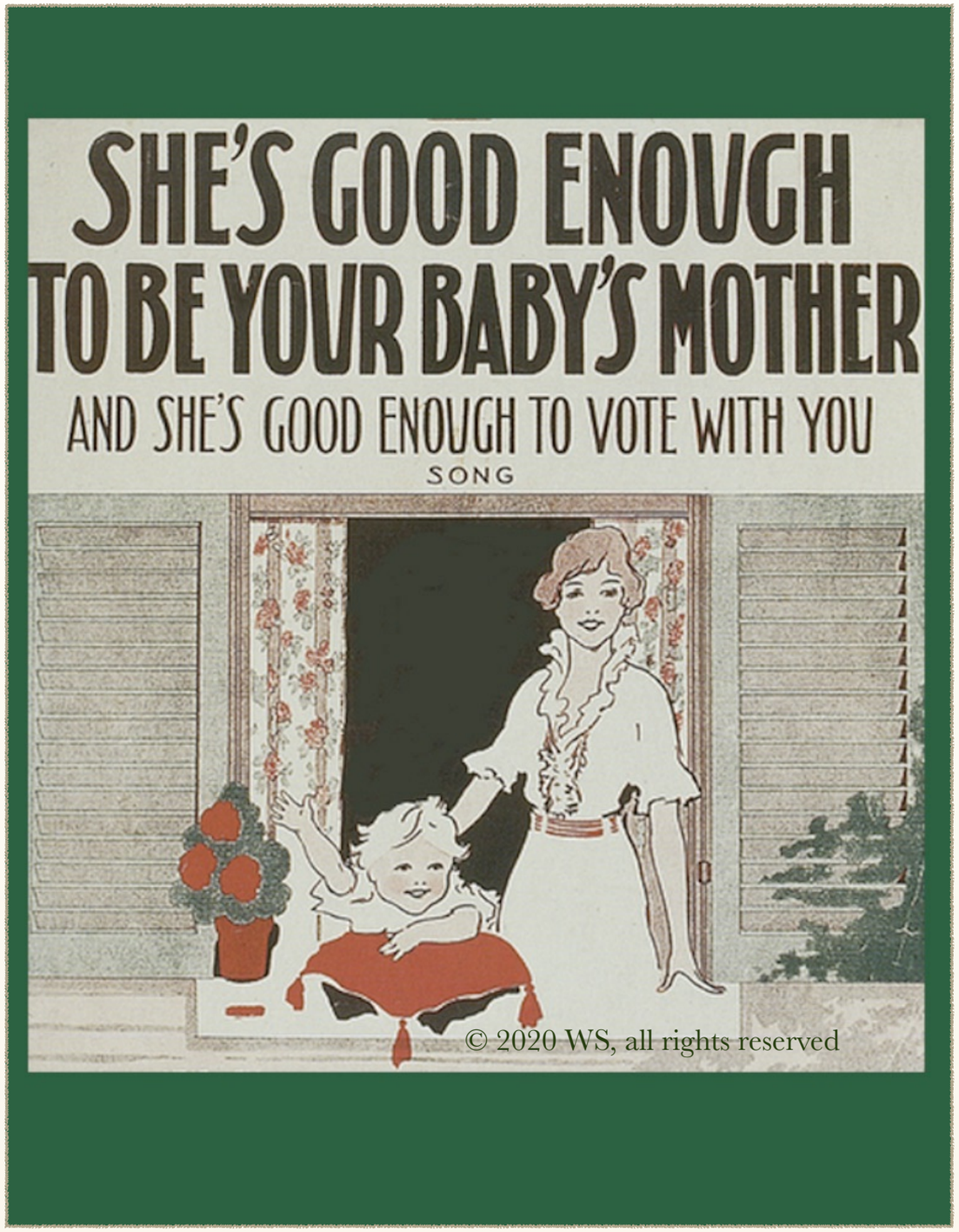


Sheet Music cover " Votes for Women"

https://vimeo.com/409594621

In the years that followed World War I, women began to work together for equality. Women realized that real, substantive change in society would only occur when everyone participated in the political process. When women came to realize how society could be changed, every county of Tennessee became organized for suffrage.

Signing up voters

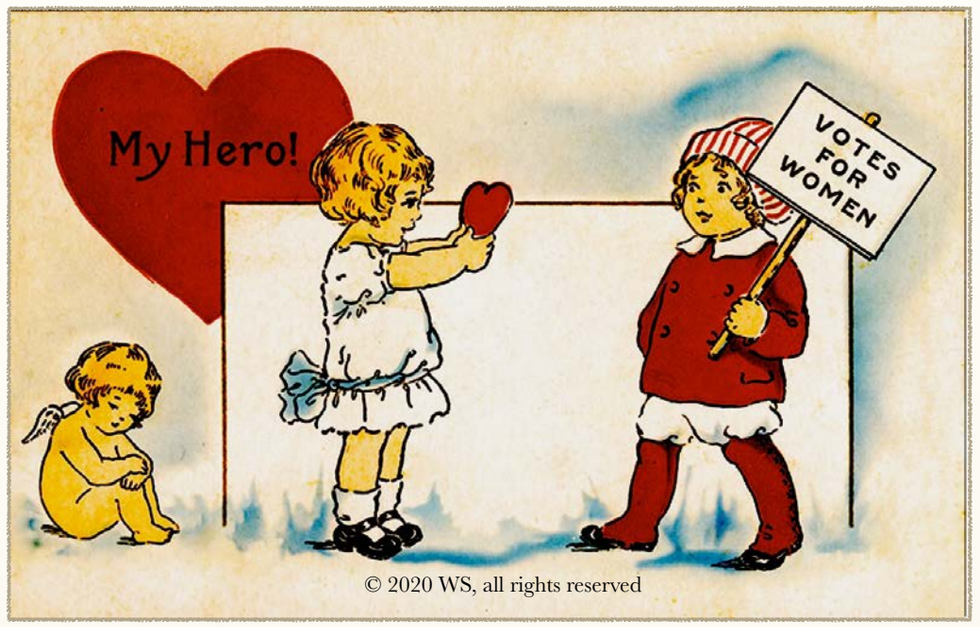


Sheet Music Cover for
" She's Good Enough to Be your Baby's Mother "

https://vimeo.com/420664799

"Votes for Women" and "No Taxation without Representation"
were heard across the state from Memphis to Nashville and
from Knoxville to Chattanooga.

Suffrage cartoons used as postcards



Fannie Moran Ezzell

Used with permission from the collection of Nathan and Mary Moran

Fannie Moran Ezzell described the women of Tennessee who were the suffragists:

"Like most Southern women, I was born and bred in the briar patch of politics. From childhood, we women of the South breathe an atmosphere of political interest, more or less intense....No shirkers or slackers among the suffragists of Tennessee! When we asked a hundred women to the capitol, 200 came, then more and more...."

Nashville Suffrage Parade

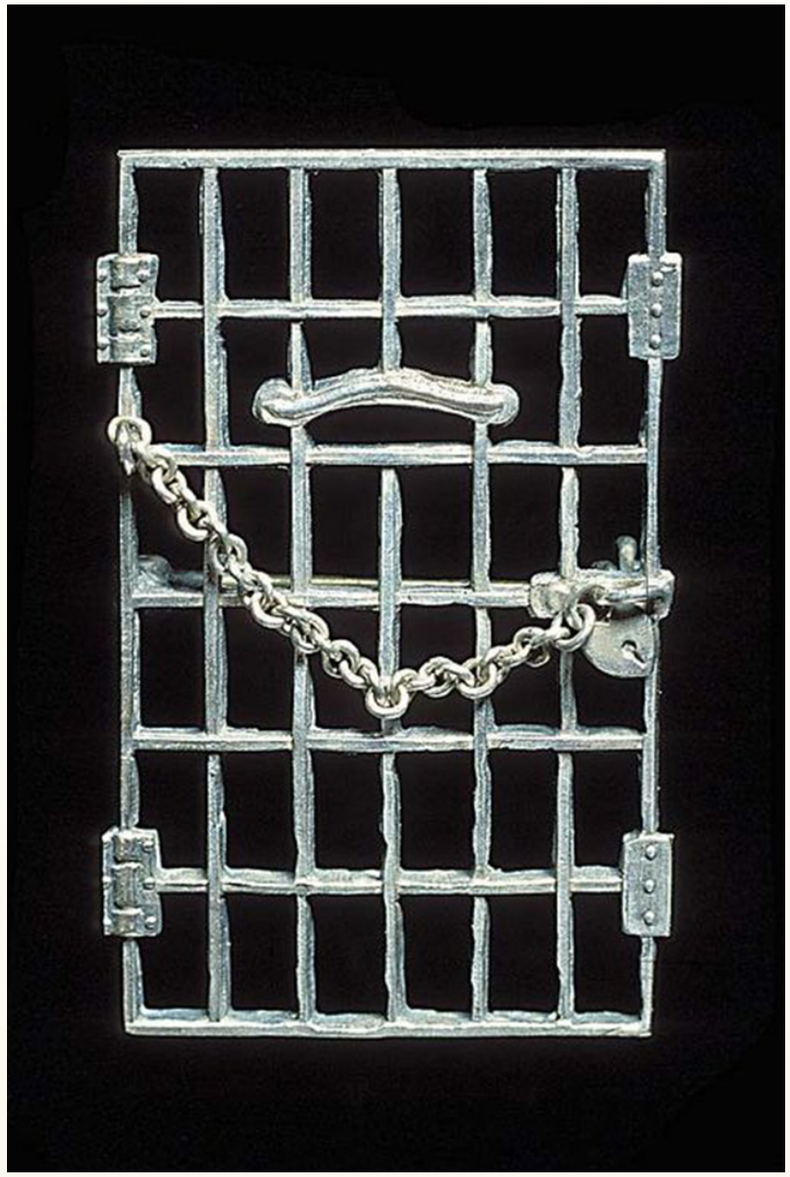
Carrie Chapman Catt

On the national level, Carrie Chapman Catt, who had worked with Susan B. Anthony, assumed the leadership of NAWSA in 1916. Catt was a take-charge person and she had a "winning plan for suffrage", which she launched with a great deal of fanfare. It was a tightly centralized, coordinated effort to put pressure on legislators to secure the suffrage state by state.

Alice Paul

Another band of women, smaller in number but bolder in tactics, led by Alice Paul broke off from NAWSA to form the National Woman's Party. They decided that too much time was being wasted on state efforts. A more effective policy, they thought, was to focus on Washington and a constitutional amendment. Alice Paul had been to Great Britain to participate in their woman's suffrage campaign, and she adopted their confrontational techniques, but being a Quaker, she rejected violence. It was necessary, Paul argued, to get people's attention - she did that very well.

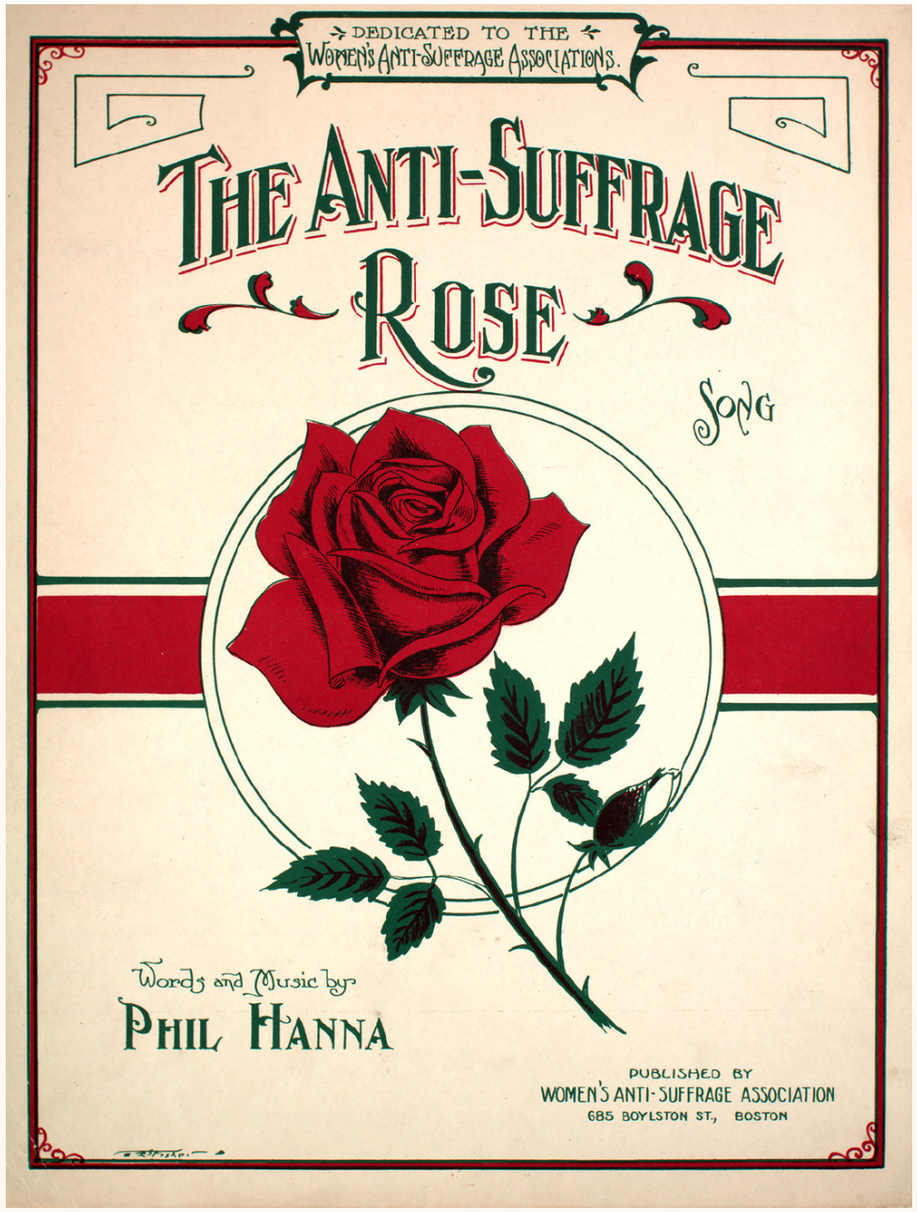
Sue Sheldon White



Pin given by Alice Paul to all National Woman's Party activists who were arrested and jailed for protesting in favor women's rights to vote.

The National Woman's Party, which included Tennessean Sue Shelton White,kept silent vigils at the White House gates, and even burned an effigy of President Wilson in Lafayette Park. They were hauled to jail where they went on hunger strikes. Their arrests and stories of their treatment certainly attracted attention, and some sympathy. At the same time, they also attracted the anger of more conservative women who considered them unladylike and provocative.

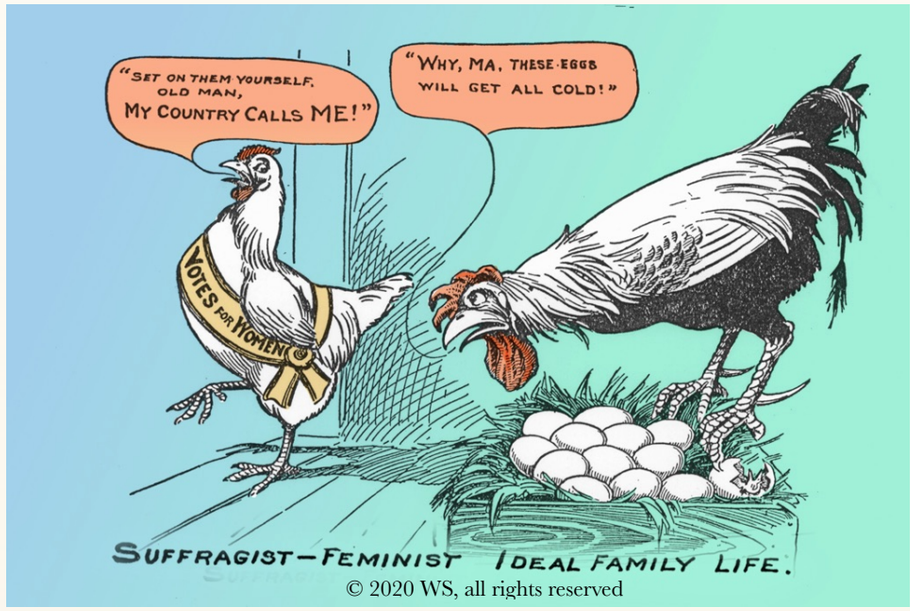
The radicalism of Alice Paul and her associates made the President and the Congress nervous about what they might do next. In comparison, Mrs. Catt's suffragists suddenly looked much more reasonable to government leaders.



Anti- Suffrage music 1915

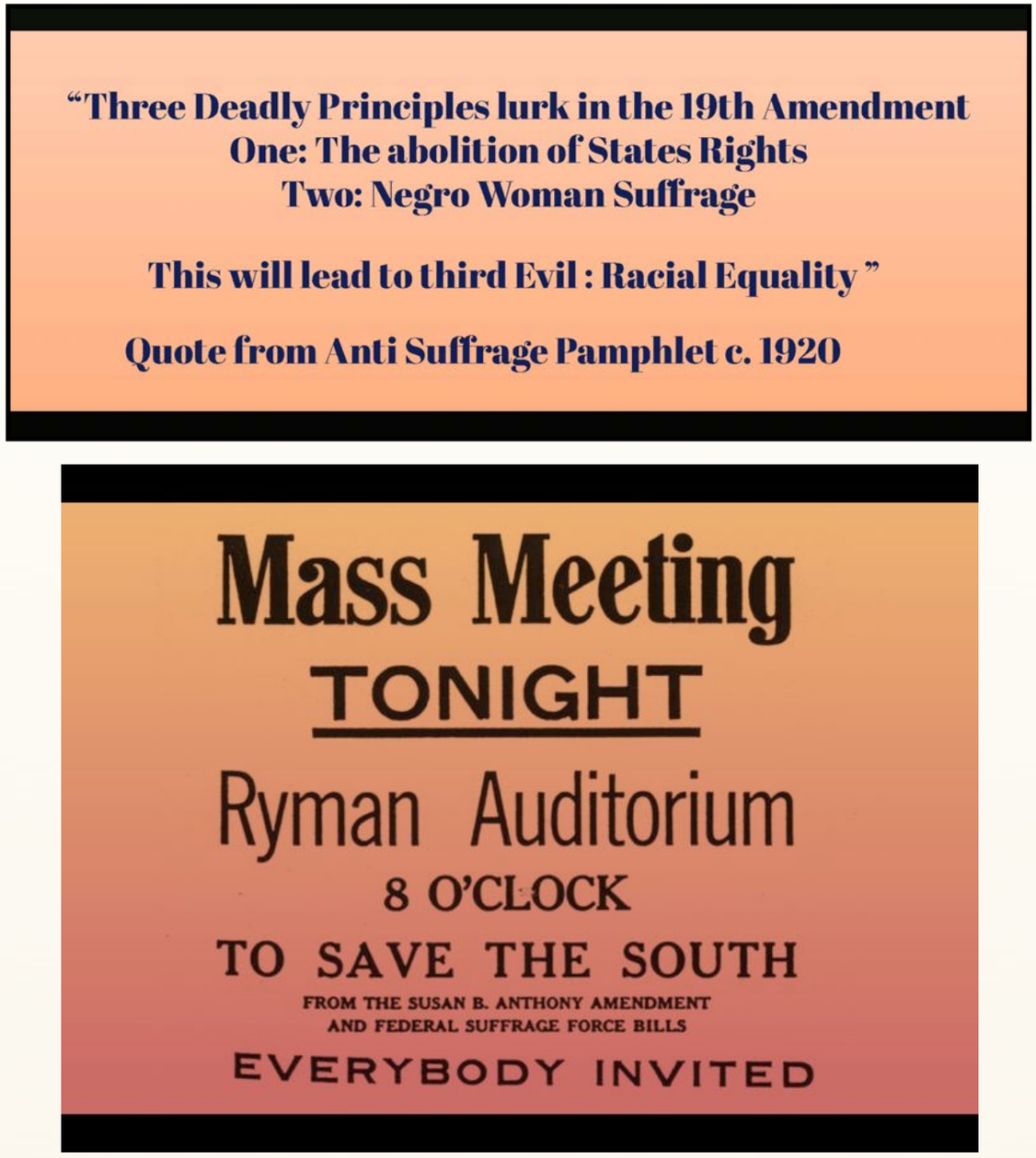
https://vimeo.com/396819470

It is important to note that some women, as well as men, did not want the right to vote. These women held traditional beliefs about the differences between men and women and the superiority of women's moral "influence" over political power, as well as fears for traditional family life and male authority. Anti-suffrage sentiments ran the gamut from self-serving to highly moral.



Anti-Suffrage cartoons

From the start, the suffragists fought the widespread fear that women voting would destroy family life. Newspaper editors portrayed "suffs" as spinsters and "she-males" with hen-pecked husbands. Cartoons with unflattering caricatures of the suffragists appeared in newspapers across the country.



Nashville Poster in July 1920

Ida B. Wells

The race issue was a complex problem for suffragists and anti-suffragists alike. The anti-suffragists openly opposed giving women the right to vote because it would give black women the right to vote as well. The prospect of black women's enfranchisement threatened to upset racial segregation and disfranchisement of black male voters.

Suffrage had the potential to lead to demands for racial equality that most white Tennesseans were not willing to consider at this time. The race issue divided white and African-American suffragists from each other. Ida B. Wells of Memphis became a national leader and was well known around the country.

What was known about the suffragists, was that they were committed to issues such as health, education, and the protection of mothers and children. They would not have the same party loyalty that males did. Women were interested in reform.

Political cartoon in Nashville paper c.1914

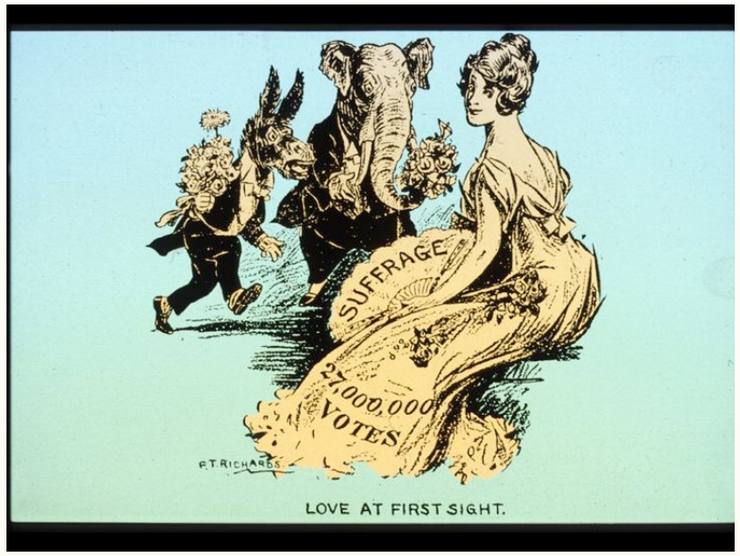
When the war ended, Mrs. Catt seized the moment to petition President Wilson to support woman suffrage on the reasonable argument that women deserved a reward for their service in the recent war. President Woodrow Wilson urged Congress to pass a woman suffrage amendment with that same rationale, that women had been vital to winning the war.

Suffrage Cartoon showing Woodrow Wilson's endorsement

On to the States

https://vimeo.com/422493440

It proved to be a winning argument. By June 1919, the amendment had passed both houses of Congress and was ready to go to the state legislatures for ratification. In order for women to vote, 36 of the 48 state legislatures had to ratify the amendment. Thirty-six separate state legislatures had to be convinced - once again- to vote in favor of woman suffrage.



Political cartoons 1920

Political cartoons 1920

Tennessee Passes Limited Suffrage

https://vimeo.com/422603583

Fortunately, many of these states had groups of highly organized women poised for the battle. They began sending out telegrams urging governors to call special sessions to ratify the 19th amendment. By this time, it was summer and most had adjourned. The suffragists thought it was imperative to secure passage as quickly as possible. By Susan B. Anthony's birthday, February, 1920, 32 states had ratified. Then Oklahoma, West Virginia and the state of Washington ratified.
Where was number 36?

Now six states, all southern, had already rejected the amendment. Only seven states had not yet acted. Tennessee was among the seven, but Tennessee was a question mark. A border state, Tennessee had close southern ties, but she had also previously granted women voters partial suffrage - allowing them to vote in presidential and municipal elections - it was the first of the old Confederacy states to do so. It was at this point that a voice could be heard in Tennessee,
"Let us be the Perfect 36".

Women at political celebration in Knoxville, 1920

The Tennessee suffragists had worked valiantly to raise public awareness across the state after the war, throughout 1919 and 1920 even though few believed that the Tennessee General Assembly would vote on the amendment. Strong leadership came from the major cities: in Nashville, Anne Dallas Dudley, Catherine Kenny, Kate Burch Warner; in Memphis, Lulu Reese, Mrs. C. B. Allen, Mrs. Samuel J. Ellis, Charl Ormond Williams; in Chattanooga, Abby Crawford Milton, Margaret Erwin Ford; and in Knoxville, Lizzie Crozier French and Mrs. T. P. Miller.

Friendly Farmer: Can I give you girls a lift?
Suffrage Leader: You can sir, by voting for the Cause.
Magazine illustration c.1919

Suffrage Parade

" They begin to see how they need the vote..."

https://vimeo.com/359908257

Suffrage parade members and their signs

Few, if any, women's causes or associations of that period had as broad an appeal or included as many constituencies as suffrage. Jewish and Catholic women joined women from most Protestant denominations. Women of color, organized in their own church societies and social clubs, added their profound concern for the power of the vote.

These women, and many others spoke in public at meetings in town squares and labor halls, marched in parades, wrote newspaper columns, convinced more and more women, and above all lobbied the men in the legislature. They made Woman Suffrage the question of the hour, one that had to be addressed.

Poster for March on Washington

The race issue was a complex problem for suffragists and anti-suffragists alike. The anti-suffragists openly opposed giving women the right to vote because it would give African American women the right to vote as well. The prospect of this threatened to upset racial segregation and disfranchisement of African American male voters.

Suffrage had the potential to lead to demands for racial equality that most white Tennesseans were not willing to consider at this time. The race issue divided white and African-American suffragists from each other.

On May 18, 1920, the Tennessee Equal Suffrage League had its final meeting, Tennessee suffragists were already looking toward the future when women did have the right to vote. As the suffragists gathered in Nashville to replace the suffrage league with the League of Women Voters, they were confident that the amendment would pass, but few had any thought that Tennessee would vote on the amendment.

After hearing speeches from representatives of the Democratic and Republican parties, Frankie J. Pierce, an African American Nashville woman, addressed the meeting, "What will the negro woman do with the vote?" she asked the suffragists. "We are asking only one thing - a square deal." Mrs. Pierce had worked with the Negro Woman's Reconstruction League for the establishment of a state vocational school for girls. She reminded the suffragists of the needs of African American women. "We want recognition in all forms of this government. We want a state vocational school and a child welfare department of the state, and more room in state schools."

African American Women and Suffrage

https://vimeo.com/427473192

Frankie Pierce

The effort of Tennessee women to ratify the 19th Amendment marked an important step in cooperation among women. African-American women joined with other women from various religious and ethnic groups to work together for ratification. This was an important milestone in cooperation in a society that was completely segregated in 1920.

Governor Albert Roberts

Where is the 36th State?

https://vimeo.com/426788339

When the Tennessee suffragists began to call for ratification in May, 1920, the General Assembly had already completed its business for the year and was not in session. The Tennessee suffragists called for the Governor to call a special session. Governor Roberts was facing a difficult and uncertain re-election in his own party's August primary.

President Woodrow Wilson

"Be good to Tennessee, Mr. Wilson"

https://vimeo.com/426820510

After receiving a telegram from President Woodrow Wilson saying, "It would be a real service to the party and to the nation if it is possible for you... to call the special session of the Legislature of Tennessee to consider the Suffrage Amendment." Governor Roberts announced that he would call the special session right after his primary.

August, 1920- Nashville Tennessee

Nashville Postcard, Summer 1920

The suffragists went to work -making personal calls on every man who would be coming to Nashville on August 9, 1920 for the special session.

Carrie Chapman Catt

https://vimeo.com/427186995

The Last Battle

https://vimeo.com/427198063

Carrie Chapman Catt, the national leader of the suffrage association, arrived in Nashville in mid-July to provide additional leadership and moral support.
She came for a week and stayed seven.

Political cartoon, August 9, 1920

Tennessee's traditional factionalism seemed to forebode trouble for the suffrage vote. First, there was the east-west division going back to the Civil War - western Tennessee had favored secession while east Tennessee had not wanted to secede and indeed, Tennessee had been the first to vote to re-enter the Union. Then there was the rural-urban split between the large cities of Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga, and what were then called the "red handkerchief boys" from the hills and hollows. There was also the wet-dry split which seemed to cut across the grain of all the other divisions. The Drys favored suffrage because they believed women would vote for prohibition. Many of the suffragists had been temperance workers. The liquor interests funded the antis.

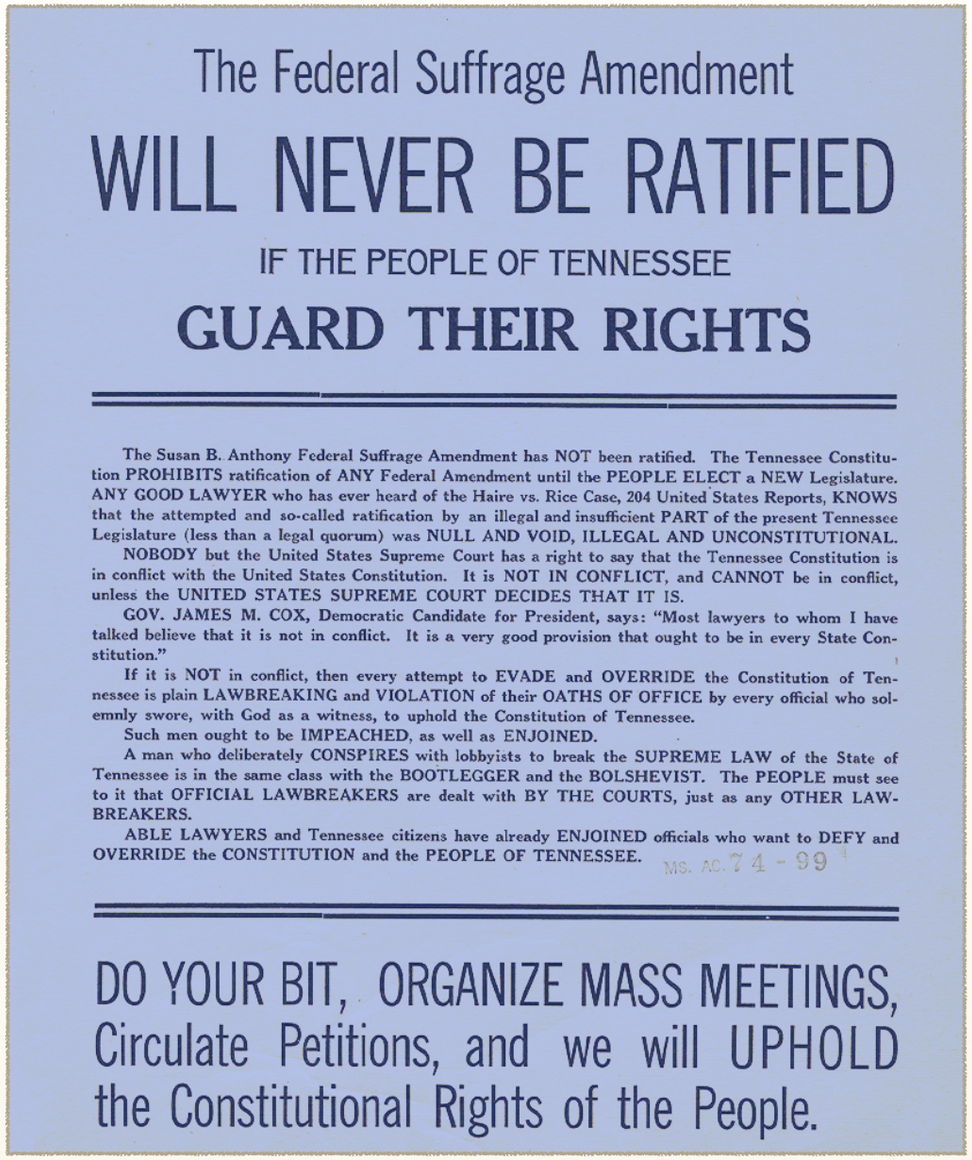
Another significant factor were the railroads and major industries, who, it was rumored, were not eager to have to "buy" any more votes. If the new women voters turned out to be corruptible, they would cost a bundle. If they did not, then that was even worse - they could not be controlled at all.

The War of the Roses

https://vimeo.com/427556382

The suffragists adopted the yellow rose as their symbol - and passed them out to mark their supporters. With the anti-suffragists wearing red roses, the debate quickly became known as the War of the Roses.

When the members of the General Assembly arrived in Nashville, the stage was set for what would be one of the greatest dramas in Tennessee history.



The Federal Suffrage Amendment

WILL NEVER BE RATIFIED

IF THE PEOPLE OF TENNESSEE

GUARD THEIR RIGHTS

The Susan B. Anthony Federal Suffrage Amendment has NOT been ratified. The Tennessee Constitution PROHIBITS ratification of ANY Federal Amendment until the PEOPLE ELECT a NEW Legislature. ANY GOOD LAWYER who has ever heard of the Haire vs. Rice Case, 204 United States Reports, KNOWS that the attempted and so-called ratification by an illegal and insufficient PART of the present Tennessee Legislature (less than a legal quorum) was NULL AND VOID, ILLEGAL AND UNCONSTITUTIONAL.

NOBODY but the United States Supreme Court has a right to say that the Tennessee Constitution is in conflict with the United States Constitution. It is NOT IN CONFLICT, and CANNOT be in conflict, unless the UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT DECIDES THAT IT IS.

GOV. JAMES M. COX, Democratic Candidate for President, says: "Most lawyers to whom I have talked believe that it is not in conflict. It is a very good provision that ought to be in every State Constitution."

If it is NOT in conflict, then every attempt to EVADE and OVERRIDE the Constitution of Tennessee is plain LAWBREAKING and VIOLATION of their OATHS OF OFFICE by every official who solemnly swore, with God as a witness, to uphold the Constitution of Tennessee.

Such men ought to be IMPEACHED, as well as ENJOINED.

A man who deliberately CONSPIRES with lobbyists to break the SUPREME LAW of the State of Tennessee is in the same class with the BOOTLEGGER and the BOLSHEVIST. The PEOPLE must see to it that OFFICIAL LAWBREAKERS are dealt with BY THE COURTS, just as any OTHER LAWBREAKERS.

ABLE LAWYERS and Tennessee citizens have already ENJOINED officials who want to DEFY and OVERRIDE the CONSTITUTION and the PEOPLE OF TENNESSEE.

MS. AC. 74 - 99

DO YOUR BIT, ORGANIZE MASS MEETINGS, Circulate Petitions, and we will UPHOLD the Constitutional Rights of the People.

Anti-suffrage broadsheet, 1920

Josephine Pearson

https://vimeo.com/428080066

There was significant opposition to suffrage in Tennessee. If women voted, the balance of power in Tennessee would be disrupted and, after all, many of the suffragists had been temperance workers. The anti's, as the opponents were called, were led by Miss Josephine Pearson, a former girls' school headmistress from MontEagle, who was said to have promised her mother on her deathbed, that "should the dreaded Susan B. Anthony amendment ever come to Tennessee", she would do whatever she could to stop it.

Miss Pearson arrived in Nashville wearing a cluster of three red roses symbolizing her rank. Writer Louise Davis said that "no three-star general ever wore his stars more proudly." Davis described Pearson as a "melodramatic woman, swathed in Victorian sentimentality". "Emerging from a plump little pincushion of a world - all tufted and velvet and soft - she rose to new heights or oratorical power when she spoke to the Tennessee Senate and 'seemed to hear my voice through the Capitol Dome!'

Magazine cartoon 1920

Newspaper cartoon August 1920

Newspaper account of the Tennessee Senate Vote

The Senate passed the amendment by a comfortable margin on August 13. Mrs. Catt wrote back to Washington,

"We are now one half of one state away from the final victory."

Suffrage Supporters on the day of the Senate Vote

35 and 1/2 States

https://vimeo.com/428136043

Tennessee political cartoon, August 1920

In the Tennessee House, numerous delays occurred to stall the amendment.

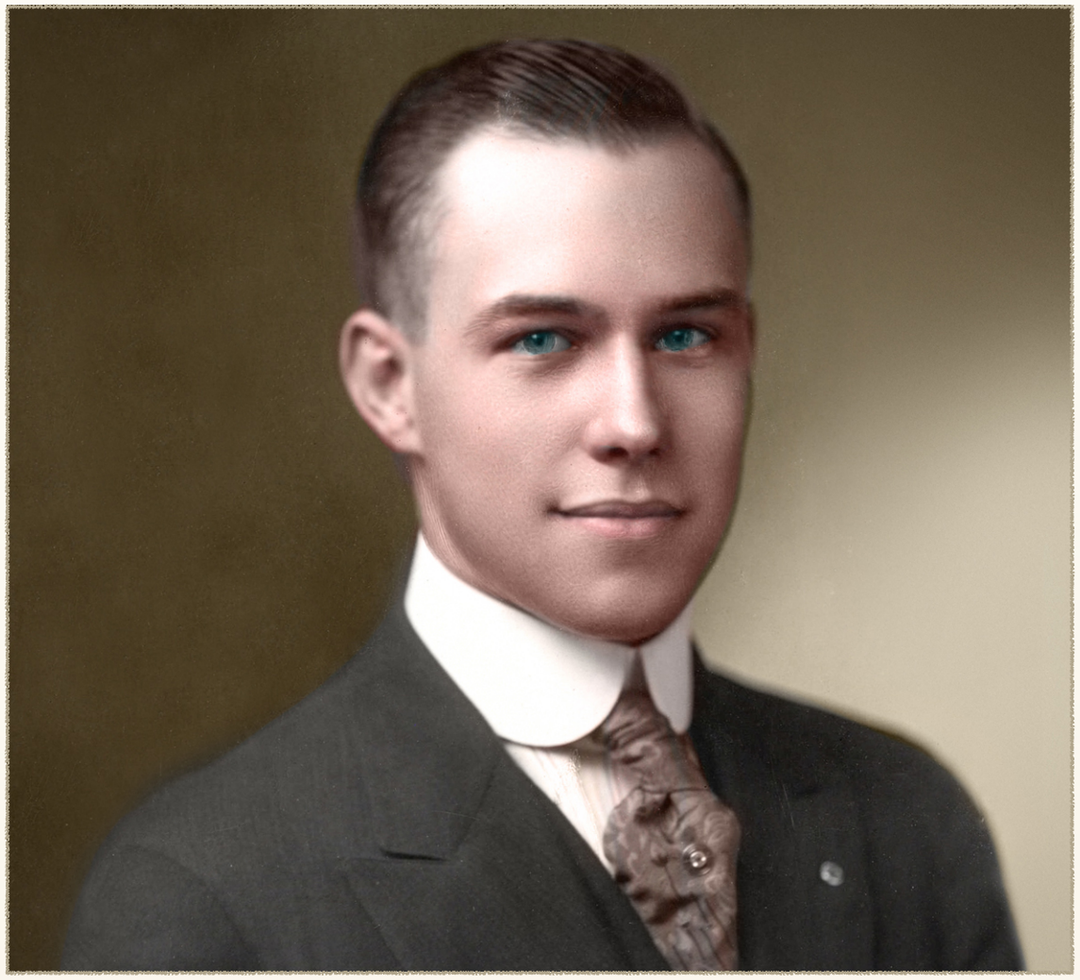
The Tennessee House of Representatives Chambers

"And oh, the things that were said on the floor of that Legislature"

https://vimeo.com/428162656

Finally, on August 18, when the House prepared to vote, it appeared to the suffragists that there was a very uncertain tie. As the suffragists counted their votes, they believed that the House was evenly split between those supporting suffrage and those opposing the amendment.

After a vote to table the amendment failed, Speaker of the House Seth Walker of Lebanon began to call the roll for the amendment. The sixth name was that of Harry Burn, the youngest member of the House at 24, a Republican from Niota, Tennessee Harry Burn wore the red rose of the anti-suffragists on his lapel as he stood and quickly cast his vote.



Tennessee House of Representative, Harry Burn 1920

The Final Vote

https://vimeo.com/428309712

When Harry Burn's "Aye" was heard in the House Chamber, the suffragists realized that they could win. Harry Burn's one vote made the difference. The vote was 50 to 46. It seems that his mother back home had been reading the newspapers about the debate. So she wrote her son a note:

Dear Son: Hurrah and vote for suffrage! I notice some of the speeches against. I have been watching to see how you stood but have not noticed anything. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification.

Your Mother

Young Harry Burn, whose decision had won voting rights for some 27 million women, was called upon to explain himself when the assembly reconvened the next day. He rose in the House chamber and said,

"I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."

Harry T. Burn

Burn had made up his mind that if the measure required only one extra vote, he would give it. After several unsuccessful attempts were made to stall the vote, the vote was taken. That letter was in Harry Burn's pocket and on his mind when he cast the decisive "aye" vote for ratification. Women had won by two votes, 49 to 47.

Seth Walker, the Speaker of the House, later changed his vote to "Aye" in a constitutional maneuver to attempt to have the amendment reconsidered, but the amendment had passed and the vote stood. Tennessee had become the 36th and deciding state.

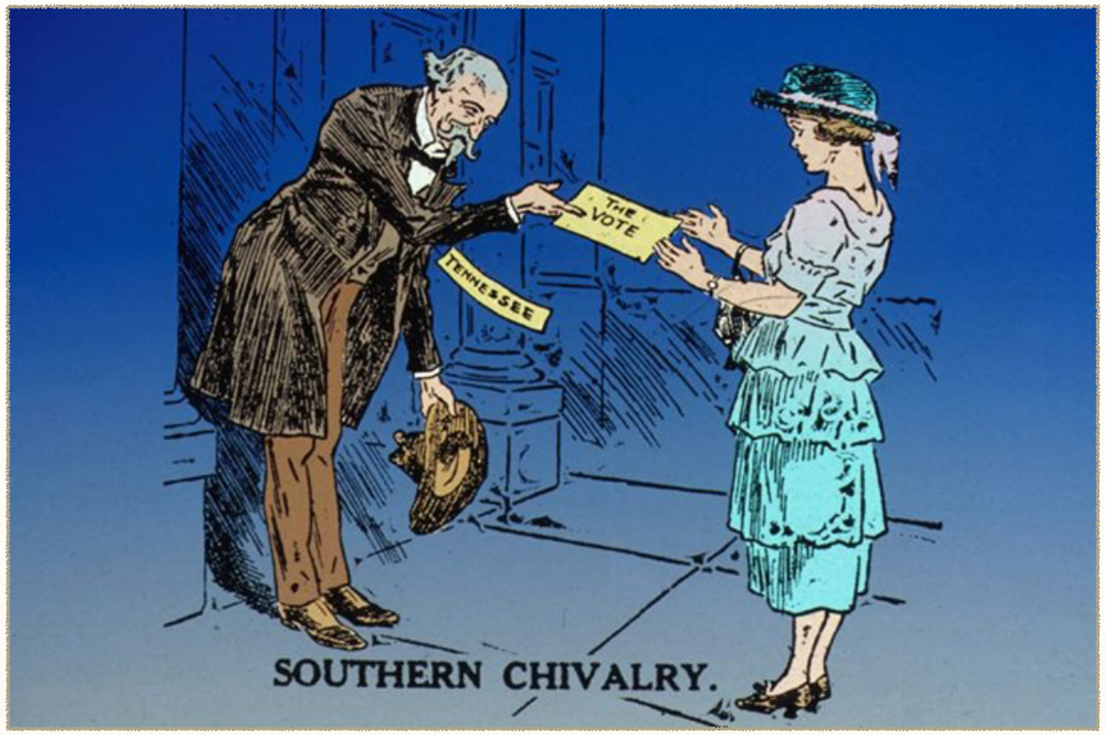
The amendment was signed by Governor Roberts on August 24 and then sent to Washington for the final signature, that of the secretary of state. He signed the amendment as soon as it arrived, before breakfast on August 26, and after over 72 years of effort, women in every state could now vote.

Febb Burn 1920
So Hurrah, Son, and Vote for Suffrage

https://vimeo.com/317290621

Governor Roberts Signing the 19th Amendment

Tennessee Suffragists, 1920



Political Cartoon, 1920

The 19th Amendment became a reality. Tennessee took its place in history as the "Perfect 36," the last state needed to make woman suffrage the law of the land. Women could now vote in Tennessee as well as across the United States.

Women Celebrating the vote in 1920

Finale

https://vimeo.com/428543937

After the passage of the amendment, the fragile coalition of women supporting suffrage again splintered. Women did not agree on what should be done after suffrage. Many wanted complete equality for women while others wanted to see special legislation passed that would protect women and children.

Many of the suffragists became frustrated and disillusioned after the elections of 1920. Carrie Chapman Catt had believed that if suffrage could be passed, within ten years, half of the U. S. Senate would be women. This did not happen. Women did not flock to the polls to vote and did not run for office. Anne Dallas Dudley became involved in Governor Roberts' campaign for re-election as governor and he lost.

The struggle for women's rights in Tennessee and across the nation continued.

-essay written by Dr. Carole Bucy

Tennessee Suffragists *Section 4*

The Woman Citizen Magazine,1920

Anne Dallas Dudley Nashville (1876-1955)
https://vimeo.com/476352931

Anne Dallas Dudley was the daughter of a socially prominent Nashville family who became a leader in Tennessee and the nation in the cause for women's voting rights. Married to Guilford Dudley, one of the founders of the Life and Casualty Insurance Company, she was the mother of two children when she became involved in suffrage. Mrs. Dudley was described by those who knew her as "beautiful, strikingly beautiful" and she had a certain charm and graciousness that were effective in counteracting the opposition to suffrage.

After joining a local suffrage association, she was elected president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association and then served as a national officer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

Anne Dallas Dudley and her children

Many of the women who had worked for the the right to vote were stereotyped as mannish, childless radicals who were attempting to destroy the American family. The circles in which Anne Dallas Dudley moved frowned upon the idea of women voting, yet Mrs. Dudley became a tireless worker, campaigning throughout the state, organizing suffrage leagues, and speaking across the United States. AnneDallas Dudley's two children were frequently present in photographs as they led suffrage parades across Nashville. A photograph of Mrs. Dudley reading with her two children was widely circulated with suffrage publicity materials. These photographs were a deliberate effort by the suffragists to counteract the negative portrayal of women supporting suffrage. Under the leadership of Anne Dallas Dudley, suffrage became more acceptable and more women joined the movement. Abby Milton of Chattanooga and Catherine Kenny of Nashville worked closely organizing the statewide effort.

As president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association, Mrs. Dudley brought the national convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to the Ryman Auditorium of Nashville. Mrs. Dudley believed that the convention proved to be the turning point of the movement as Tennesseans were able to see and hear women from across the nation address the convention. As a national officer, Anne Dallas Dudley spoke before Congressional committees and traveled across the United States urging the passage of the amendment. She was well-known as a speaker who could handle the arguments of the anti-suffragists.

In the summer of 1920, prior to Tennessee's vote on the amendment, Anne Dallas Dudley attended the Democratic national convention in San Francisco as a delegate-at large where she made a seconding speech for one of the candidates. As she walked across the podium to make her speech, the band began to play "Oh, You Beautiful Doll!". She was the first woman delegate-at-large to the convention.

After the passage of the amendment, Anne Dallas Dudley continued her involvement in political affairs, working as a volunteer for Governor Roberts in the fall of 1920 in his unsuccessful re-election bid.. Although Mrs. Dudley was never active in the newly created League of Women Voters, she continued working with other women and organized the Woman's Civic League of Nashville, an organization of the "housekeepers of Nashville" who wanted to assist the "city fathers in the municipal house-cleaning." They described their group as a "banding together of women of the city to make it a better and healthier city to live in...." Some thirty-five years before the passage of Metropolitan government for Nashville this group wanted to see an end to the overlapping of city efforts and wanted to educate the
public about health issues. In the 1930's, Mrs. Dudley served as the president of the Maternal Welfare Organization of Tennessee. This group brought birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger to Nashville in 1938 in an effort to increase public awareness on the importance of birth control.

Dedication of the Anne Dallas Dudley fire engine

Throughout her life, Anne Dallas Dudley worked tirelessly for those things in which she believed. She is an excellent example of a person who was not afraid to speak out for her beliefs.

Lizzie Crozier French, Knoxville - (1851-1926)

https://vimeo.com/323317298

Lizzie Crozier French had been married only two years when her husband died leaving her to raise their son. With her sisters, she founded a girls' school in Knoxville, the East Tennessee Female Institute and she became involved in women's causes. After attending meetings of the Sorosis Club in New York City in 1885, Mrs. French returned to Knoxville where she organized the Ossoli Circle (named after Margaret Fuller Ossoli), the first woman's club in Tennessee. In that club, she worked to provide educational opportunities for women of all ages. Seventy one years old at the time of the passage of the amendment, she had already accomplished many "firsts" as a woman by the time the amendment passed.The first woman to address the Knoxville City Council appealing for the appointment of a police matron, a female police officer for women offenders, Mrs. French filled that position for several months until a permanent matron could be hired by the city. She was the first woman to address the Tennessee General Assembly speaking on behalf of efforts to establish a Reformatory for women and children in the state.

When the Knoxville Equal Suffrage Society was organized, Lizzie Crozier French became its first president, and devoted much of her energy toward voting rights for women. The vote and struggle to attain it was only one of this remarkable woman's many concerns, but she understood that the ballot was power."
She was president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association and also a member of the National Woman's Party.

Lizzie Crozier French

"The indifference today of many women of Tennessee to their right in an equal share of governmental control is due to the habit of submission. Such women seem to be able to sympathize with men in their love of freedom, but are as children when the great questions of liberty and equality are argued in connection with the female sex. This is shown to be one of the greatest injuries that disfranchisement has inflicted upon women. Lack of self-esteem, a tendency to be mean in spirit is a most detrimental influence to character building. The women of a race lay the foundations of character in the youth, and never will man be of the highest type possible to the human race until mothers learn the real meaning of freedom and enjoy it to the fullest extent in all it's phases."

Lizzie Crozier French

Catherine Talty Kenny, Nashville (1874-1950)

https://vimeo.com/476450490

Catherine Kenny moved to Nashville from Chattanooga after her marriage to John Kenny. She worked with Abby Milton of Chattanooga organizing suffrage leagues across the state. She was described as the intellectual of the suffrage movement. "She did superb work in organizing. She was just the strongest woman that I ever worked with in woman's suffrage. She had more political sense than half a dozen men," said Abby Milton.

Abby Milton also described the suffrage meeting that was held in the House Chamber on May 18, 1920, to which Mrs. Kenny had brought Frankie J. Pierce, a black woman, to speak. This was significant because white women and African-American women did not work together publicly. In describing Catherine Kenny, Abby Milton said, "Mrs. Kenny was a wonderful worker. She was a hard worker. And she did so many things for the city of Nashville. She took care of the nurses that were there and made the hospitals give them restrooms ..."

After the passage of the suffrage amendment, Mrs. Kenny was the second president of the Tennessee League of Women Voters.
Upon the death of her husband in 1926, however, Catherine Kenny moved away from Nashville.

Catherine Talty Kenny

Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, Memphis (1824-1917)

Elizabeth Avery Meriweather

Elizabeth Avery Meriwether was forced to leave her home in Memphis during the Civil War and lived as a refugee in Alabama until the end of the war. When she returned to Memphis, she advocated full equality for women and voted in the presidential election of 1872, even though women did not have the right to vote. After that vote, she began publishing The Tablet, a newspaper which supported women's rights.

Elizabeth Meriwether believed that women should have equal economic opportunities. She appeared before the Memphis School Board demanding equal pay for women teachers. At that time, male school teachers received higher pay than female teachers in the same position. Most of the female teachers were women who had not married and lived with their parents and it was generally assumed that these women did not need as much money as a male teacher with a family to support. Although she was unsuccessful in securing equal pay for the female teachers of Memphis, the seeds of equal pay for equal work had now been planted in the city.

In 1876, Elizabeth Meriwether rented The Memphis Theater to hold a meeting attended by 500 women on women's rights. At that meeting, she delivered a public speech entitled "The Spirit of English and American Law as it Relates to Woman." Later she and her husband attended a national suffragist convention as delegates from Tennessee.

When she returned to Memphis she worked for suffrage and women's equality until her family was forced to move to St. Louis because of the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. Her sister-in-law, Lide Meriwether, remained in Memphis and continued to work for suffrage. Lide Meriwether became president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and founded an equal rights association in 1889.

Elizabeth Meriwether later traveled across the United States with Susan B. Anthony, Meriwether and Anthony spoke for women's rights and women's suffrage, but both women died before the amendment was passed.

Abby Crawford Milton, Chattanooga (1881-1991)

https://vimeo.com/476479215

Abby Crawford Milton

Abby Crawford Milton became involved in the suffrage movement after marrying newspaper publisher, George Fort Milton, and moving to Chattanooga from Georgia. She had received a law degree from the Chattanooga College of Law, but never practiced law in Tennessee. "I had a natural sense for law that helped me with my thinking, although I never planned to practice as an attorney; I found the courthouse crowd didn't lie to me as much when they learned of my legal background." She was the last president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association and the first president of the League of Women Voters of Tennessee. Like many of the dedicated suffragists, she traveled across the state giving speeches and organizing suffrage leagues in small communities.

During the height of the battle for suffrage in Nashville in August, 1920, Mrs. Milton spent the entire month in Nashville lobbying members of the General Assembly to vote for suffrage, and she became friends with national president, Carrie Chapman Catt. Mrs. Milton described the events: "The battle for women's suffrage that summer, that very hot summer of 1920, that occurred in Nashville is generally conceded to be the fiercest legislative battle that ever was waged on this continent."

After the amendment was passed Mrs. Milton returned to Chattanooga where she continued to push for legislative reforms to benefit women of the state. She also worked to secure the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She attended Democratic national conventions as a delegate-at-large. In 1924, she gave the seconding nomination for William Gibbs McAdoo in his unsuccessful run for the party nomination. In the late 1930's, Mrs. Milton was an unsuccessful candidate for state senator. Her campaign included support for the then highly controversial concept of TVA.

She described the events in Nashville saying, "It seemed too dramatic to happen in real life, but this was the real thrill of history-making, not the excitement of stage or movies. Personally, I had rather have had a share in the battle for woman suffrage than any other world event. Those who stood apart from it should feel like mummies. The woman suffragists have had the thrill, the victory in the struggle for liberty, that our ancestors had at the Declaration of Independence. It is the purest American patriotism."

Frankie J. Pierce, Nashville (1862?-1954)

https://vimeo.com/476496529

Frankie J. Pierce was born during or shortly after the Civil War to Nellie Seay, the house slave of a Smith County legislator. Her mother, Nellie Seay, was taken to church services by her mistress to the First Baptist Church where she sat in the gallery with the other slaves and ultimately joined the First Baptist Church. Frankie received her education at the McKee School, a private school for Negroes, founded by the Presbyterian Church as a mission. She then married and left Nashville, but returned to the city upon the death of her husband.

When Frankie Pierce returned to Nashville, she worked to found an educational institution for delinquent African-American girls. She had observed vocational schools in other Southern states and believed that institution would benefit the African-American community of Nashville. She had also become friends with a probation officer who had the responsibility of taking delinquent girls to the county jail. Since the African-American girls were not permitted in white institutions or schools, the only place they could be taken was to the jail.

Frankie Pierce believed in justice and worked to see that all people were treated fairly. When she realized that there was no restroom facilities for African-American women in downtown Nashville, Mrs. Pierce and other members of the Women's Federated Clubs organized a march to the mayor's office. As a result of their protest, Montgomery Ward became the first store in downtown Nashville to install restroom facilities for women of color.

Frankie J. Pierce

Mrs. Pierce was the President of the Negro Women's Reconstruction League and the founder of the Nashville Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Catherine Kenny, an ardent suffragist from Nashville, invited Mrs. Pierce to speak to the state suffrage convention in May, 1920 in the house chamber of the Tennessee capitol. "What will the Negro women do with the vote? We will stand by the white women. We are optimistic because we have faith in the best white women of the country… We are interested in the same moral uplift of the opportunity in which we live as you are. We are asking only one thing - a square deal. It remained for the war to show what we Negroes could do. We bought bonds, we gave money, we made combat kits, we prayed. We want recognition in all forms of this government. We want a state vocational school and a child welfare department of the state, and more room in state schools."

The vocational schools for African-American girls became a part of the legislative agenda of the suffragists and the newly organized League of Women Voters of Tennessee. After an extensive lobbying effort by the women the following year, the General Assembly passed the bill creating the school in 1921.
The school opened its doors two years later on October 9, 1923 and Frankie Pierce became its first superintendent. She held that position until 1939.

Tennessee Vocational School, 1923

Frankie Pierce had excellent political instincts and held an annual breakfast at the school for state legislators and other community leaders so that they could observe the operation of the school. The school was located at 2700 Heiman Street, near Tennessee State University, on a 66-acre campus. It employed as many as 69 workers and received girls twelve through fifteen from across the state.

Mrs. Pierce continued to live in Nashville after she retired from the school. She died in 1954.

Lulu Colyar Reese, Memphis (1860-1926)

Lulu Colyar Reese had her first introduction into the political world at the age of seventeen, when she joined other Nashville women in an appearance before the Tennessee General Assembly to secure the property of Andrew Jackson, the Hermitage, for the state. The effort was successful and the Ladies Hermitage Association was founded.

After her marriage to Isaac B. Reese, she had regular meetings and gatherings in their home to bring together society leaders, Vanderbilt professors, and other thinkers of the city for conversation and interaction. As many as 300 persons attended these gatherings which were described as a "Parisian salon." When the Reese family moved to Paducah, Kentucky, she founded a similar group there.

In 1900, the Reese family moved to Memphis where she became active in the Federation of Women's Clubs as president of the Nineteenth Century Club. She used her experience in the women's clubs of Memphis to become active in the political problems of her day and worked for suffrage. She led the fight for women on the Memphis City Board of Education and was one of the first two women elected to the Board, running for the office on the Non-Partisan ticket. While on the school board, she fought for free textbooks and anti-child labor laws.

Lulu Reese was in Nashville at the Hermitage Hotel in August, 1920 when the 19th amendment was passed. She was active in the National American Woman Suffrage Association as well as the National Women's Party.

Lulu Colyar Reese, photo courtesy of Memphis Public Library.

Mary Church Terrell - Memphis and later Washington D. C. (1863 -1954)

Mary Church was born during the Civil War in Memphis. Her father, a slave, was the son of his master, but was not freed until Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Mary Church's parents divorced after the war and she was sent to boarding school in Ohio. After graduating from Oberlin College, an integrated college founded by abolitionists prior to the Civil War, Mary Church returned to Memphis where her father had become wealthy buying land during the yellow fever epidemic. He became an active political leader in Memphis.

Mary Church then taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio, before marrying a Harvard graduate. Like Ida B. Wells, she became appalled at the injustice toward blacks when a friend was lynched in Memphis. The Terrells moved to Washington, D. C.; her husband was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt. to the first federal judgeship held by an African-American.

Mary Church Terrell organized black women to protest against racial injustice and became the first president of the Colored Women's League of Washington. She served as the founding president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in 1896 and campaigned for woman suffrage. She advocated special assistance for share-croppers and day care centers. She was appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education in 1895 and worked throughout World War I on behalf of black soldiers in the U. S. Army. At the age of 89, the year before her death, Mary Church Terrell led a committee that won a law suit ending discrimination in Washington, D. C. hotels, restaurants, buses, and other public facilities.

Mary Church Terrell

Ida B. Wells, Memphis and later Chicago (1862 -1930)

Ida B. Wells began her struggle against injustices against African-Americans as a twenty-one year old teacher in Memphis. She had been born into slavery in 1862 and lost her parents during the 1878 yellow fever epidemic that swept through Memphis and northern Mississippi. She devoted her life to fighting discrimination. Wells had obtained a teaching position in a rural Shelby county school for African-Americans while living in Memphis with an aunt and preparing for the teacher exam required by the Memphis Negro Public Schools. After she had purchased her first-class train ticket and boarded the ladies coach of the train, the conductor told her that she would have to leave and be seated in the smoking car. Since she had purchased a first-class ticket, she believed that the conductor had no right to demand that she leave her seat. At that point, the conductor grabbed her arm and dragged her from her chair. After she had bitten the conductor, he returned with assistance to remove her to the smoking car. Ida Wells left the train rather than sit in the smoking car.

She then sued the railroad company since Tennessee law at that time required that "separate but equal" accommodations be provided to both blacks and whites. When the Circuit Court handed down its ruling in 1884, Wells was awarded $500. in damages. The Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the circuit court's ruling. She was bitterly disappointed with the Supreme Court's decision and wrote, "I had firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged."

Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells invested the money she earned as a school teacher in the Memphis Free Speech, a Memphis newspaper that criticized and challenged white discrimination against blacks. She was fired from her teaching position for writing an editorial which was critical of funding for Negro schools in Memphis. She then worked at the newspaper full-time and became a crusader for the anti-lynching movement. Three black businessmen who owned a grocery store in Memphis were falsely accused of attacking a white woman and were arrested. While in the Memphis jail, they were dragged from their cells and taken to a vacant lot where they were shot. Ida Wells' newspaper voiced the rage of the black community of Memphis and supported a boycott of the city street cars. After publishing an editorial about the lynching of these three men, her office and her presses were destroyed. At the time of this incident, Ida B. Wells was twenty-three years old. She was forced to flee from Memphis to Chicago when an angry mob threatened to lynch her.

In Chicago, Ida Wells continued to speak out against the injustices of lynching; she married Ferdinand Barnett, a man who held similar views. She remained active in the cause of civil rights and organized civic clubs for Negro women including the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first of many for black women in the country. The women of the Alpha Suffrage Club marched in Chicago alongside the white suffragists Wearing a white dress with a purple sash, Ida Well marched in the parade with her daughters, Ida and Alfreda.

Wells became friends with national suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony. They later disagreed over the involvement of African-American women in the suffrage movement. In 1913, NAWSA planned a march in Washington D. C. and Wells wanted to participate. She was told by Alice Paul, the organizer of the march, that she could not march with the white Chicago suffragists for fear of offending the South. “I was told I could bring up the rear; I would have none of it. When the march started, I appeared out of the crowd of onlookers as the Chicago delegation made its way past me. I simply joined and marched as I pleased.” Over five thousand women participated in that parade.
One of them was Ida B. Wells.

Ida B Wells in far right in suffrage parade

Sue Sheldon White, Henderson (1887-1943)

Sue Shelton White was the youngest daughter of a lawyer/minister from Jackson, Tennessee and was a member of numerous women's clubs. As a court reporter in Jackson, she joined the state suffrage association, but left Carrie Chapman Catt and the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association to join Alice Paul's more radical National Woman's Party in 1917. She served as editor of the Suffragist of the NWP.

In February, 1919, the National Woman's Party burned Woodrow Wilson in effigy outside the gates of the White House in Washington. They carried banners that read "President Wilson is Deceiving the World When He Appears as the Prophet of Democracy". These marchers gathered around an urn as Sue White set fire to Wilson's picture. The Woman's Party opposed Wilson's handling of the suffrage amendment and believed that he was not doing enough for their cause.

Sue White's activities were condemned by other Tennessee suffragists who took a more moderate approach and wanted to work within the existing political system. Anne Dallas Dudley publicly criticized their tactics saying, "It is most unjust to hold a great body of over two million patriotic women responsible for the acts of a few half-crazed fanatics....Their whole policy is un-American.... Their banners should truly be called `banners of shame'. They were not only treasonable at this time, but they carried a falsehood upon their face when they stated that President Wilson is the chief opponent of their enfranchisement. President Wilson has time and again proved the sincerity of his words...."

Sue Sheldon White

Marie Sims Jones, the daughter of Congressman Thetus W. Sims and a resident of Washington, D. C. at the time of the picketing believed that the Woman's Party sought publicity. When President Wilson tried to pardon the women, including Sue Shelton White who had been arrested and jailed after the picketing, the women would not accept his pardon. In the Washington, D. C. jail, the women "took turns throughout the day and night yowling" in order to create a disturbance. When other prisoners pleaded for sleep, the women began hunger strikes. In an effort to break the hunger strikes, Commissioner Brownlow had two gas stoves installed in the jail and hired 6 cooks to operate the stoves continuously frying ham in an effort to make the women hungry. Finally the suffragists did call the jailer at 3:00 a.m. and left the jail. Commissioner Brownlow believed that

the tactics of the militants actually delayed the vote on the suffrage amendment, but others believed that the efforts of Sue White and the National Woman's Party were a major factor in the President's support of the amendment and the passage of the amendment

In June, 1920, Sue Shelton came to Nashville as the representative of the Woman's Party, but set up her own headquarters at the Tulane Hotel rather than at the Hermitage Hotel where Mrs. Catt and other Tennessee suffragists had their headquarters. When the suffrage amendment was ratified in Nashville, Sue Shelton White did not celebrate with Carrie Chapman Catt and the other Tennessee suffragists.

After the passage of the amendment, Sue Shelton White earned her law degree and practiced law. She helped draft and pass the Tennessee Married Women's Property Act, the Mother's Pension Law and the Old Age Pension Act. She served as secretary to Senator Kenneth McKellar and was an organizer of the Tennessee Business and Professional Woman's League. She became active in the New Deal programs and served as assistant administrator for the Consumer's Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration and as the chief attorney for the Social Security Board. On the 75th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention Sue Shelton White helped draft the Lucretia Mott Equal Rights Amendment and continued working for women's rights until her death in 1943.

Young girls with National Woman's Party Banners in parade

Charl Ormand Williams, Memphis (1885-1969)

Charl Ormond Williams was a teacher from Arlington, Tennessee who became the county superintendent of schools in Shelby County, a position held earlier by her sister, Mrs. Mabel Williams Hughes. (Hughes later became state Senator-1951). As superintendent of Shelby County schools from 1914-1922, Williams orchestrated a major school building program for the county that was notable for its attention to African-American schools. Besides taking over from a women, her sister Mabel Williams Hughes, she passed on the superintendency to another woman, Sue M. Powers.

Charl Ormond Williams was described as an "aggressive and driving woman" who served as vice-chairman of the Democratic National Committee, the first woman in either party to fill so high a position. Charl Ormond Williams had become friends with Senator Cordell Hull of Tennessee and was chosen to represent the state at the national suffrage celebration in New York after the passage of the amendment.

After the passage of the amendment, Charl Ormond Williams became president of the National Education Association and joined the NEA staff after her term had been completed. She lived in Washington, D. C. where she worked for federal aid to education and to create the cabinet-level secretary of Education. Charl Williams became a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1930's and worked for civil rights. She served as the chair for two White House conferences in 1944. The conference, "How Women May Share in Postwar Policy-Making" was attended by 200 women representing women's organizations across the United States. The second conference on the subject of rural education set the direction for rural education in the U. S.

Charl Ormand Williams

These are only a few of the thousands of Tennessee women who worked for women to have the right to vote. The struggle covered more than 50 years and was a grass-roots effort. Our society has seen many changes since that hot, muggy summer of 1920. We have survived a Depression and a second world war. Women today have many choices and opportunities that those Tennessee women never achieved back in 1920. Sue Shelton White of Henderson, Tennessee said it best, “Women stand today on the ground won by women of yesterday. We must win a higher and wider field for women. It is a debt we owe.”

-essay written by Dr. Carole Bucy