

## **Document Background**

Both of the letters to Governor Townsend can be located in the Governor's Papers Collection, Record Group 1302.7, Box 087846. The Bryan letter is located in the folder titled 1920 Women's Suffrage. The Delaware Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage letter is located in the folder titled 1920 Woman's Suffrage (Against). The Governor's Papers Collection includes general administrative files created by the Office of the Governor reflecting the operations of that office. This collection dates from 1874 to 2001. John G. Townsend, Jr. served as Governor of Delaware from 1917 to 1921.

The Senate Resolution is part of the Senate Journals, 1920, Record Group 1120. It can be found on microfilm at the Delaware Public Archives.

**Background Information** Extending suffrage is ultimately a battle over power: voting restrictions maintain status quo power bases and traditions. The history of suffrage in the United States is an evolutionary movement from the politics of exclusion to a policy of inclusion, from the perception of voting as a privilege worth fighting for to the acceptance of voting as a right, often ignored or forgotten. Fights for suffrage are rich in lessons of courage and principles, in lessons of men and women struggling for future rights and political inclusion of everyone, regardless of race or gender. Understanding suffrage in the United States requires basic knowledge of 15<sup>th</sup> century England politics that was the system that came with the Puritans and Pilgrims to the colonies.

The ruling class in England ensured that the rights and privileges of the elite were protected. Through the Magna Carta, every Englishman was guaranteed certain rights as a member of English society. However, full enjoyment of all rights was guaranteed only to those men who owned land or possessed an estate worth a certain amount. While the amount of land needed or accepted value of the estate changed over time, the possession requirement did not. A 1430 law which ruled that "no Englishman could vote from that time forward in a county election unless he were the owner of land worth

at least forty shillings a year in rental value”<sup>i</sup> codified the notion that the right to vote was a privilege reserved to propertied gentlemen in England.

Colonists going to North America, citizens of England, brought with them their traditions and concerns about safety and stability. Possession of colonial land was conveyed via joint stock companies, proprietorships, or land grants from the King. As in England, most colonies tied voting rights to land ownership.

Massachusetts, under the leadership of John Winthrop, joined voting to church membership, granting Congregational Church members the right to determine suffrage eligibility. Many merchant class men were excluded from voting and decision-making. Anglicans, Presbyterians and members of other recognized sects were denied full participation in colonial life. In the 1690s, after heated debates and protests, the religious requirement was dropped. Newly issued charters from England granted suffrage to men who held land with rental value of 40 shillings **or** property worth 50 pounds. Suffrage was thus broadened to include the monied class of merchants who contributed to colonial growth and prosperity. As in England, colonial suffrage was based on principles of exclusion; no man without property was granted full membership in colonial life. Property was defined as land held as freehold or an estate’s total value<sup>ii</sup>.

18<sup>th</sup> century suffrage restrictions were directed at men. The notion of entitling women or other ethnic groups to participate in decision-making processes was not even at issue. Allowing each man a vote was sure to jeopardize the state of country or the colony; to the gentry, all men were not capable of right reasoning or of enacting legislation benefiting country, county, or township. The landed aristocracy and merchant classes believed property-less men would almost certainly vote to subvert the status quo, favoring laws assisting the landless. Thus, despite seeming liberalism, political spokesmen were most conservative on issues of maintaining status quo for self and lifestyle.

Change in suffrage was unavoidable. Leaders in the United States after the American Revolution believed extending suffrage to all men might open the country to democratizing influences, influences that could doom the new country. Except for New Hampshire, state constitutions contained provisions limiting franchise according to wealth, whether real or earned property. Restrictions produced widespread discontent.

Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts was ultimately a revolt over taxation policies levied by propertied classes of Eastern Massachusetts on the disfranchised in Western Massachusetts. Men fought against Parliamentary actions over taxation without representation and now picked up arms once again to reinforce that principle.

When it was obvious that the Articles of Confederation would not work, delegates approved the Constitution of the United States, a document of compromise. The principle of suffrage played an important role in the early Constitution. Members of the upper houses of each state selected Senators, ensuring that proper gentlemen selected the "right sort" for service in the upper chamber of the United States government. The President was elected by the Electoral College, again composed of representatives selected by the upper houses of each state. For all of the debating, and in spite of the awareness of the seriousness of the franchise issue in each state, the drafters remained conservative and sought ways to avoid awarding the vote to all male citizens. "It was to be assumed that those who lacked property would also lack intelligence and virtue, and it was clear that the only way to keep them under control was to keep them voiceless."<sup>iii</sup>

Since universal

male suffrage was problematic to leaders of the new Republic, they decided to empower states to determine the method of electing representatives to respective lower houses and to the US House of Representatives. Some states maintained property restrictions for franchise while others did not. Eventually, by the early 1800s, all states had done away with restrictive franchise for white male voters. The 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified in 1913, eliminated selection of US Senators by the upper house members from each state. With that amendment, both houses of Congress were subject to direct election by male voters.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, race, ethnicity, and gender still barred many from full participation in the electorate. Limiting the expansion of suffrage was the last bastion of control that could be imposed by the few upon the many.

Fighting the Civil War ended legislated acceptance of slavery in this country. Union victory, while manumitting slaves, did not grant citizenship or voting privileges. Passage and ratification of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted all former slaves the rights of citizenship, however, this citizenship did not ensure the right to vote. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment stated

“the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”<sup>iv</sup> Many Southern states superimposed “conditions” on top of the amendment in an effort to block African American voting. Among the strategies employed were literacy tests, poll taxes, intimidation, fraud, and, perhaps the cleverest ruse of all, the "grandfather clause" designed to bar descendants of slaves from voting by connecting voting eligibility to voting of the grandfather-- an impossibility for most people whose ancestors were slaves.<sup>v</sup> The United States Supreme Court declared such tactics unconstitutional in 1915.

Native Americans were also disfranchised and were not considered citizens of the country until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act on June 2, 1924. “Though the Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1870, granted all U.S. citizens the right to vote regardless of race, it wasn't until the Snyder Act, signed during the Coolidge Administration, that America's native people could enjoy the rights granted by this amendment.”<sup>vi</sup> Though the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Indian Citizenship Act authorized them the *right to vote*, since there was no penalty legislation, nothing mandated their implementation. Not until 1962 did the last state, New Mexico, finally extend the suffrage to Native Americans.<sup>vii</sup>

Women, however, were still barred from casting ballots. “The movement to abolish slavery paved the way for the women's rights movement in America. Concerned with the ideals of moral, social and political rights for all human beings, women began to organize for the first time and speak out against the injustices of their day.”<sup>viii</sup> Awareness of the power of the vote for women did not begin with activism in the abolition movement. In 1776 Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John and chided him to be cognizant of the importance of equal rights:

I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies [sic] we are

determined to foment a Rebellion [sic], and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.<sup>ix</sup>

In response to her request, John Adams wrote to her that the Declaration of Independence states that all *men* are created equal. Abigail Adams was right. The “Ladies” did “foment a Rebellion,” gaining suffrage after a protracted and arduous battle.

The Women's Suffrage Movement was a worldwide phenomenon. Some English women had been working for change since the 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft published her treatise *Vindication for the Rights of Women* that promoted the notion of equality of the sexes. British women had been vying for the right to vote in Parliamentary elections since the 1830s; at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British activism became a guide for American women.

While in London to attend the World Anti-Slavery Congress in 1840, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met. Both were only allowed seating in the gallery since they were women. The insult inspired them to plan their own conference to discuss issues relating to the role of women in society and in 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention became the **first** women's rights convention in the United States. The women created a document, The Declaration of Sentiments, which was a satirical parody of the Declaration of Independence and cast man as the oppressor of women.<sup>x</sup> Taking great pains to spell out the capabilities of women and stating that “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her,”<sup>xi</sup> Stanton and Mott presented the attendees with a list of grievances and twelve resolutions, all advocating equal treatment and rights for women.

Historically, a women's sphere had been limited to caring for home and family. In most states, women could not even possess property in their own names. Referred to by historians as the Cult of Domesticity, this defined woman's role as one of great responsibility: raising citizens for the democracy. Men believed that they should not be sullied with compromises and corruption of politics. Many men considered women unfit

and unable to contribute meaningfully to the body politic. The battle for suffrage was long fought and often quite brutal in the attacks made on the women who stood in the foreground of the movement. While no states extended suffrage to women during this time, inroads were made on another key issue in the women's rights arena: some states, notably Massachusetts, extended property rights to women. In the First State women were deprived of property ownership and could not even receive land through bequests under existing Delaware code up until the 1870s.<sup>xii</sup> During the Civil War the movement devoted its efforts to the Abolitionist efforts to end slavery. In 1866 the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention, the first since the beginning of the Civil War, was held in New York City. "Lucretia Mott presides over a merger between suffragists and the American Anti-Slavery Association: the new group is called the American Equal Rights Association."<sup>xiii</sup>

In 1869 the movement split into two groups because of disagreements over the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Mott, Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Women's Suffrage Association and backed change through Constitutional amendment. Their primary premise was that the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment should "be abandoned in favor of a universal suffrage amendment." Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell (her husband), and Julia Ward Howe pursued a more moderate approach, forming the American Women's Suffrage Association that challenged the system by seeking change on a state-by-state basis.<sup>xiv</sup>

Many Delaware men and women, both white and black, participated in the campaign to extend rights to women. In 1869 Mary Ann Sorden Stuart, a widow and long time activist for property rights for women, convened the first women's suffrage convention in Wilmington. Presiding over the event was abolitionist Thomas Garrett and the featured guest was Lucy Stone, proponent of the state-by-state approach to suffrage extension. At the meeting, Delaware's first official suffrage society, Delaware State Woman's Suffrage Association, was formed. Over the course of the next ten years, little happened in suffrage on the national level or in Delaware. However, with the emergence of the Temperance campaign in the 1870s, renewed interest in suffrage appeared. Both temperance supporters, many of whom were also suffragists, and suffrage leaders engaged in a symbiotic relationship to strengthen both of their movements' goals. Dr.

Carol Hoffecker, Delaware historian, stated, “Temperance leaders viewed the suffrage as a means to swell political support for their particular reformist program.”<sup>xv</sup> Conversely, suffrage leaders viewed the emergence of the temperance campaign as a vehicle to involve more conservative women in political activism.

The crusade against alcohol was a protest by women, in part, of their lack of civil rights. Women could not vote. In most states women could not have control of their property or custody of their children in case of divorce. There were no legal protections for women and children, prosecutions for rape were rare, and the state-regulated "age of consent" was as low as seven.<sup>xvi</sup>

The intersection of temperance and suffrage pulled women together from all levels of society to work for protection of home and family. Involving women in that campaign broadened the power base of suffragists. In 1888 the Delaware Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) branch openly endorsed suffrage and established the franchise department within the local organization. By the 1890s suffrage was being considered in many Western states; Wyoming and Utah had granted full suffrage to women, Michigan and Minnesota allowed voting in school board elections, and even though four more states had voted against the measure, it had gained enough support for placement on the ballot. Interestingly enough, the Supreme Court and Congress overturned or invalidated suffrage legislation in Washington and Utah. In 1898 Delaware’s General Assembly voted that every “female person above the age of twenty-one years... “having paid a school tax in the district...shall be entitled to vote at the school elections.”<sup>xvii</sup> By 1900, women could vote in Utah, now a state, and in Colorado. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony stepped aside as leaders of the movement, encouraging support be given to Carrie Chapman Catt. Assisting Catt in her leadership role was Frances Willard, head of the WCTU, and bringing the power of that organization to bear on the movement.

As agitation for the vote simmered across the country, women’s labor movements and African American women joined the crusade. However, not until Alice Paul assumed command of the movement did significant change occur. Paul, while studying in

England, met Christabel Pankhurst, who with her mother and sister founded the Women's Social and Political Union, and campaigned for women's rights in England. When Alice Paul returned to the United States, she attempted to work for change within existing women's groups but grew frustrated with their conservative ways of achieving progress. Paul broke away and with a group of women, including Mabel Vernon of Delaware, formed the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage.

Mabel Vernon's first task was to establish a branch of the Congressional Union in Delaware and bring a cohesive, more radical approach to achieving suffrage to Delaware. One of her most ardent supporters was Florence Bayard Hilles. The Delaware chapter of the CU joined the national group in advocating more radical and public displays to increase public awareness at the state and national level. The radicalized arm of the movement focused on achieving suffrage through a Constitutional amendment. Since Delaware was small, CU leaders believed that success in creating legislative support was obtainable and began focusing their efforts on the state.

Throughout the campaign's long history, men and women in Delaware were active on both sides of the issue. Suffragists, among them Pierre S., Alfred I, and T. Coleman du Pont and Governor John G. Townsend, believed that all people in the United States should be entitled to vote and participate fully in government. Women working for suffrage in the state came from all walks of life. African Americans, among them Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Emma Belle Gibson Sykes, joined white women of all social groups and religions to work for success. Sallie Topkis Ginns, active in the Jewish community, Annie Arneil, leather worker and nurse, and Naomi Barrett, widow and working woman, worked side by side with Delaware's social elite, Mabel Vernon, Florence Bayard Hilles, Emalea Pusey Warner, and Mabel Lloyd Ridgely. Even though a break later occurred within the state movement, some of the women being offended by the vocal and confrontational protest strategies being employed by members of the Congressional Union, both strategies were essential for the success of the movement.<sup>xviii</sup>

Anti-suffragists, led by Mary Wilson Thompson and Emily Bissell, believed that the role and position of women in society would be forever weakened if they received the vote. Mrs. Thompson wrote in her Memoir:



I have always opposed votes for women. It is constitutional with me. It is not that I feel women cannot vote or are not the mental equal of our men folks, but I feel that it is duplicating our work. It is putting an extra burden on the women and it has weakened materially our power with the legislatures.<sup>xix</sup>

Thompson also believed that obtaining the vote made women more independent and “overbearing” in their relationships with men. Additionally, extension of suffrage by amendment confronted the issue of states’ rights, long a concern of Delaware as a border state. The introduction of black women into the voting populace was also problematic, as the power balance between Republicans and Democrats would change, possibly altering outcomes of close elections. Anti-Prohibitionists lobbied against suffrage extension, as they believed that women voters would prevent success of the campaign to repeal the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>xx</sup> Suffrage was not a simple “Vote” or “No Vote” issue in Delaware.

The period from 1913 through 1920 in the suffrage movement was marked by unparalleled activism at the state and national level. In 1914 Delawareans joined suffragists across the country parading to convince Congress of the importance of the issue. Over 400 marched in the Delaware parade, dressed in CU colors of purple, white, and gold, and singing Onward Christian Soldiers. Delawareans joined other suffragists in Washington in enthusiastic protests, designed to confront legislators and President Wilson and increase public awareness of the movement. In 1917, Mabel Vernon became notorious as the heckler of President Wilson when he addressed the audience at the dedication of the Labor Temple in Washington D.C. When it became apparent that confrontational strategies were working against them in public opinion, the Congressional Union arranged an ongoing daily protest outside the White House. Fifteen Delaware women joined the group, taking turns standing as silent sentinels at the White House, holding banners reading “Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait For Liberty?” Refusing to end the protest when World War I began, several of the women, including Mabel Vernon and Florence Hilles, spent time in jail on more than one occasion.<sup>xxi</sup>

National success came with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1919. The battle for state ratification in 36 states now began. By March 22, 1920, thirty-five states had already approved the measure. Optimism and hopes for final ratification centered on Delaware, as it was small, was controlled by the Republican Party, and had a Governor in favor of the Amendment. The events of the next months are known as the War of the Roses in Delaware's history. Suffragists, or Suffs, and Anti-Suffragists, or Anti's, carried their campaigns to individual members of the General Assembly. President Wilson asked legislators to approve the amendment; Eamon De Valera, President of the Irish Free State, came to Dover and implored Delaware's Irish American population to contact their representatives and encourage their support of the amendment. On the first day of the special session convened by Governor Townsend, Suffs gave their supporters yellow jonquils while the Anti's supporters were handed red rose boutonnières. Each camp tried myriad tactics to entice the winning number of votes from the legislators. Among these tactics were kidnappings of legislators, victory champagne receptions, and parades with children on ponies.

Ultimately, the bill failed to pass Delaware's General Assembly on June 20, 1920, and Delaware did not become the State to put the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment over the top. It was not simply the suffragist or anti-suffragist campaigns that lost or won the day, more than likely it was the behind the scenes political lobbying. As in Ernest Thaler's poem, *Casey at the Bat*, there was no joy in Dover on that day, the mighty suffragists had struck out. Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, finally granting suffrage to women. Delaware's General Assembly did not ratify the amendment until March 16, 1923, three years after it became law.

<sup>i</sup> Marchene Chute, *The Green Tree of Democracy* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972) 531. <sup>ii</sup> Chute, 58. <sup>iii</sup> Chute, 111. <sup>iv</sup>

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<http://memory.loc.gov/const/amend.html>]. June 3, 2003. <sup>v</sup> "African Americans and the Vote."

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