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Delaware's Woman Suffrage Campaign

CAROL E. HOFFECKER*

ADDRESSING THE DELAWARE GENERAL Assembly in 1881, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of America's most famous advocates of woman suffrage, said that "fifty years from now men will wonder why they ever objected to placing the ballot in women's hands."¹ Her prophesy proved correct, for fifty years later—in 1931—women had been voting in state and national elections for eleven years and only a few still found woman suffrage repugnant or peculiar. One of that handful of die-hard anti-suffragists was an influential Delaware grande dame, Mary Wilson Thompson.² Defending her opposition to suffrage, Mrs. Thompson declared in her memoir, written in the 1930s, that the vote had been of no benefit to the country and that it had cheapened womanhood.³ This memoir reminds us of an often forgotten, yet important point about the suffrage victory of 1920: contrary to the sanguine assumption underlying Mrs. Stanton's statement and similar pro-suffrage arguments of the late nineteenth century, woman suffrage was not won simply because everybody finally became convinced that it represented the next great advance of democratic principles. To the contrary, everybody was not won over. In Delaware, a majority of the legislature never voted for suffrage in spite of the suffragists' protracted and at times intense efforts. Yet on a national level, the suffrage amendment was ultimately adopted. The recent defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment revives interest in earlier struggles for woman's rights, including the strategies employed by both suffragists and anti-suffragists in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Delaware was one of the key states in the battle for ratification.

Delaware's chapter in the history of woman suffrage is a curious one that demonstrates many reasons why state and national leaders of the

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¹ Mary R. de Vou, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Delaware," in H. Clay Reed, ed., *Delaware, A History of the First State*, 3 vols. (New York, 1947), I, 370.

² Anthony Higgins, ed., "Mary Wilson Thompson Memoir," pub. in 4 parts in *Delaware History*, 18 (1978-79): 43-62, 124-51, 194-217, and 236-66.

³ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 251.

woman's rights movement had to work so very long and hard to achieve their goal. In 1920, during the last stages of the ratification process for the Nineteenth Amendment, suffragists held such great hope for winning their final victory in Delaware that they poured enormous resources into the little state, but in the end Delaware refused to ratify. Why did the suffragists think they could win in Delaware? Why were they proved wrong? To answer these questions, we must consider several factors. Delaware's politics, which appeared so simple on the surface, turned out to be remarkably complicated. The state's ambivalence to suffrage was unusually pronounced, because as a border state Delaware reflected both the traditional social attitudes of the rural South and the more pragmatic values of the urban, industrial North. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the Diamond State produced several nationally prominent leaders on both sides of the suffrage issue or that the issue aroused one of the most spectacular and intense political battles in the state's history.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton first proposed the idea of woman suffrage to an American audience at a convention called to consider woman's rights at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. During the decade that followed, advocates of woman's rights concentrated their attention on correcting other legal disabilities, but the political events surrounding the aftermath of the Civil War finally brought the suffrage issue to the head of their list of desired reforms. At the war's conclusion, the victorious North, under Republican party leadership, used the process of amendment to the United States Constitution to eradicate slavery and to guarantee various civil rights to the freedmen, including the extension of the franchise to black males. The Republican leaders refused the appeal of woman's-rights supporters to extend the franchise to women, although they had in fact created a precedent for using the amendment process to enlarge the electorate. The Reconstruction amendments aroused such powerful sectional antagonism as to insure that the readmitted Confederate states would never support any federal amendment dealing with the franchise in defiance of the doctrine of states' rights.

Following Reconstruction the woman's-suffrage issue languished for nearly two decades before it was resurrected by the women's temperance movement in the 1880s. Temperance leaders viewed the suffrage as a means to swell political support for their particular reformist program. The moral appeal of temperance transcended sectionalism and attracted many conservative women who had previously ignored public affairs and woman's-rights issues. In Delaware, for instance, the first woman's-suffrage organization was the franchise department of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, created in 1888.⁴ Eight years later in 1896, a small group of women, mostly Wilmingtonians, formed the

⁴ Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 4, 1883-1890 (Rochester, 1902), 563.

Delaware Equal Suffrage Association (D.E.S.A.), which affiliated with the National American Women's Suffrage Association (N.A.W.S.A.).

The years following the creation of the D.E.S.A. constituted a period of disappointment for suffragists at both the national and the state levels. The N.A.W.S.A. was dedicated to the proposition that suffrage could best be won on a state-by-state basis rather than through a federal amendment. In fact, although a few Western states had granted women the right to vote, no state in the East, Midwest, or South chose to follow. Thus, the activities of the suffragists at the turn of the century suggest that they had neither the confidence in their ability to win victory nor the strategy necessary to amass widespread support. As late as 1911, the D.E.S.A. had only ninety members, whose main activity was to organize decorous annual conventions where speakers exhorted the converted. Their petitions to the state legislature on behalf of the cause of woman's political rights were ignored. In January 1900 the Supreme Court of the State of Delaware rendered a decision, which must have been particularly galling to suffragists, denying the petition of a woman to practice law on the grounds that as state officers lawyers must be voters.⁵

Historians of the suffrage movement have identified 1912 as the turning point in the United States. In that year the movement began to take on the new life and resolve that finally led to winning the vote for women in 1920. It was in 1912 that Alice Paul, one of the most determined and effective political strategists in American history, became the head of the N.A.W.S.A.'s Congressional Committee in Washington, D.C. Alice Paul, born in Moorestown, New Jersey, of a Quaker family, was a graduate of Swarthmore College and held a Ph.D. in social work from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1912 she was twenty-eight years old and had recently returned from England, where she had participated in the often violent suffrage campaign being waged by the Women's Social and Political Union (W.S.P.U.), led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. In England Miss Paul had learned the value of attention-getting tactics such as the use of mass demonstrations, hunger strikes, and protests designed to embarrass leading politicians in order to force them to support suffrage. Like other W.S.P.U. members, she went to jail and on hunger strike several times.

Alice Paul energized the American suffrage movement with new resolve, but her methods and her independent style soon caused a rift with the more accommodationist N.A.W.S.A. In 1913 Alice Paul's Congressional Committee separated from the older, more moderate suffrage organization to form the Congressional Union, later the Women's Party. Miss Paul aimed her organization's efforts at reactivating the long-dormant federal amendment for woman suffrage. She argued that to be effective the Congressional Union must hold the political party in power responsible for delays and refusals to support woman's suffrage.

⁵ Anthony and Harper, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 563.

She approached this task with a single-minded zeal and appetite for combat that the N.A.W.S.A. believed was impolitic to the point of being counterproductive. Contemporaries and historians alike are still undecided as to which suffrage group was more responsible for the final victory. Judicious study of the events of the period suggests that the roles of both groups were important and that both approaches proved necessary to bring success.

One of the first full-time employees that Alice Paul recruited for the Congressional Committee was Mabel Vernon, a native of Wilmington, Delaware. The youngest among six children born to George W. Vernon, editor-in-chief of the *Wilmington Daily Republican*, and his wife, Mary P., Mabel Vernon grew up in a spacious home on Wilmington's West Fifth Street. She attended Swarthmore College, where she developed her considerable forensic skills on the debate team, graduating in 1906, one year after Alice Paul. She was teaching German in Wayne, Pennsylvania, when the opportunity came to become a professional suffrage worker.

In 1913 Mabel Vernon opened a Congressional Union office at Seventh and Shipley streets in Wilmington, which served as headquarters for intensified efforts to win support for suffrage in Delaware. The Congressional Union's decision to concentrate on the First State at that time was based on several factors: the need to win a few more suffrage states, especially in the East, in order to create momentum for the federal amendment; the small size of Delaware; and the peculiarity of Delaware's constitution, which permitted the legislature to approve amendments to the state constitution without recourse to a referendum. Mabel Vernon's task in her native state was to create a base of support sufficient to win a majority in the Delaware legislature. To launch her campaign, she addressed church and temperance groups, labor unions, Grange meetings, women's clubs, and every other organization in the state that would agree to listen to her arguments. A fearless and effective stump speaker, she also spoke weekly to whatever crowds she could gather on Wilmington street corners and gave impromptu orations at the state fair and similar public gatherings.

Among those who heard Miss Vernon at the state fair was Florence Bayard Hilles, who had come to the fair to show her championship dogs. Many years later Mabel Vernon recalled Mrs. Hilles's reaction to her speech, which was in effect [Miss Vernon] "is saying what I believe in and I'm not doing anything about it."⁶ Mrs. Hilles was a descendant of one of Delaware's most distinguished and admired political families. Her father, Thomas F. Bayard, had been a United States Senator, Secretary of State under Grover Cleveland, and ambassador to Great Britain. Her grandfather and great-grandfather had also been United States senators,

⁶ Taped oral interview of Mabel Vernon's reminiscences conducted under the auspices of the history department of the University of Delaware in Washington, D.C., Mar. 1974. Miss Vernon was then 90 years old.



Figure 1. Mabel Vernon, an early supporter of woman suffrage, from *The Suffragist*, September 26, 1914.

as was her brother, Thomas F. Bayard, Jr. Her husband, William S. Hilles, was an equally well-connected member of the Delaware Bar. Reared in elevated circles of power and prestige, well educated in both the United States and Europe, Florence Bayard Hilles yearned for an opportunity to cultivate her own talents for leadership in the public



Figure 2. Delaware headquarters of the Congressional Union; with Florence Bayard Hilles (standing on left), Alice Steinlein (sitting), and Mary Conkle (standing on right); from *The Suffragist*, August 8, 1914.

sphere. Mrs. Hilles brought a great deal more than her will to work to the suffrage movement. Her importance to the Congressional Union and to its successor the Women's Party is suggested in a letter that Alice Paul wrote to her in 1941, which concludes, "I take you as my model and try to be as gallant and generous and courageous as you are. I could wish for nothing more."⁷

Mrs. Hilles's initial task was to prepare for Delaware's first suffrage parade, which was held in Wilmington on May 2, 1914, as part of a nationwide demonstration designed to nudge Congress into a favorable vote on the suffrage amendment. The parade ran its colorful route from the Pennsylvania Railroad Station at Front and French streets to the

⁷ Alice Paul to Florence Bayard Hilles, April 30, 1941, Callery Collection, Bayard Papers, Box 60, Folder 28, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, Delaware.



Figure 3. Florence Bayard Hilles, an influential proponent of woman suffrage, from *The Suffragist*, May 1920.

New Castle County Courthouse at Tenth and Market streets, where a rally was held. The four hundred who marched to the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" were divided into divisions, which included professional women, community organizations, and a contingent of college women who wore caps and gowns. Most of the marchers wore sashes in the Congressional Union colors of purple, white, and gold over white outfits. The *Morning News* called the parade "not large—but impressive" and "dignified," adding "it would have seemed incredible five years ago." Mrs. Hilles pronounced it "perfectly splendid."⁸

More incredible things were to follow. In 1917 the Congressional Union embarked on a campaign to embarrass President Woodrow Wilson into leading his majority Democratic party to embrace the amendment. Using a tactic that had proved effective in England, the Union sent Mabel Vernon to heckle the President when he spoke at the dedication of the Labor Temple in Washington, D.C. At a point when President Wilson was eloquently describing American democracy, Miss Vernon stood up and shouted, "Mr. President, what will you do for

⁸ *Wilmington Morning News*, May 4, 1914.

woman suffrage?"⁹ After she had interrupted the President twice in this manner, a secret-service officer tapped her on the shoulder and led her away.

Heckling, although part of the English political tradition, was obnoxious to Americans, and the Congressional Unionists soon modified their technique. Instead of interrupting the President, they began posting "silent sentinels" at the gates of the White House. Every day from morning to night a group of female pickets would stand along Pennsylvania Avenue bearing large banners and placards with messages such as "Mr. President How Long Must Women Wait For Liberty?" flanked by other women carrying the now familiar purple, white, and gold banners of the Congressional Union.

On April 2, 1917, the President, heavily burdened by what must have seemed to him to be a more pressing matter of state, drove through the pickets to the Capitol to read his war message to Congress. The speech contained a ringing statement of purpose for American entry into the European War. "We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts, for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their government."¹⁰ That memorable sentence became the new rallying cry of the Union's pickets, and Mabel Vernon had the opportunity to quote it back to the President directly during an interview in the White House a few weeks later.¹¹

Before the United States entered the war, the government had tolerated the pickets, but now criticism of the President by the "silent sentinels," as they had come to be known, was seen to be unpatriotic. The administration's embarrassment was particularly intense in June 1917, when envoys from the Alexander Kerensky government in Russia were visiting the Capital. On that occasion, the police were instructed to arrest the picketers on the charge of obstructing traffic. Among the six women apprehended was the intrepid Miss Vernon, who spent three days in the District of Columbia's jail.

On Bastille Day, July 14, 1917, the Congressional Union defied the government with yet another mass demonstration of picketers in front of the White House. A largely hostile crowd, including many servicemen, had gathered to obstruct the pickets when the police stepped in and arrested sixteen of the women. On entering the District of Columbia's grimy courtroom, Mrs. Hilles, one of those arrested, was heard to remark, "Well, girls, I've never seen but one court in my life and that was the Court of St. James. But I must say they are not very much alike."¹² The women were charged with blocking traffic and given a choice of a \$25.00 fine or sixty days in jail. Mrs. Hilles, then 51 years

⁹ Vernon interview, 1974.

¹⁰ Vernon interview, 1974.

¹¹ Vernon interview, 1974.

¹² Doris Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom* (New York, 1920), 100.

old, labeled the charge "a ridiculous frame-up" and defended herself eloquently. She told the judge, "for generations the men of my family have given their services to their country. For myself, my training from childhood has been with a father who believed in democracy and who belonged to the Democratic party. By inheritance and connection I am a Democrat, and to a Democratic President I went with my appeal. . . . What a spectacle it must be to the thinking people of this country to see us urged to go to war for democracy in a foreign land, and to see women thrown into prison who plead for that same cause at home."¹³ All sixteen women refused to pay their fines and were sent to Occoquan, a federal prison in Virginia, where they served three days under harsh and humiliating conditions before being pardoned by a higher court officer. These women were but the vanguard of numerous others who were arrested throughout the war years for their continued demonstrations on behalf of suffrage.

By 1919, as the peace treaty negotiations at Versailles were ending, the efforts of the suffragists in the N.A.W.S.A. and in the Women's Party were showing significant progress. On May 2, 1919, the United States House of Representatives passed the suffrage amendment, and on June 4 the Senate did likewise. The focus of suffrage activity turned back to the states, where the assent of thirty-six legislatures was necessary to complete the amendment process. The first state ratifications came in May and June. Pennsylvania which ratified on June 24, was the first state to do so that did not already permit women to vote through state legislation. Generally speaking, the legislatures of Western, Midwestern, and Eastern states ratified, while those of Southern states did not. The border state of Maryland proved a great disappointment to suffragists when its legislature refused to ratify during its summer session in 1919, even after suffrage workers had diligently canvassed every legislator for support. Their opposition was both racially and politically motivated. Maryland Democrats opposed the franchise for black women, who they believed would vote overwhelmingly for the Republican party. Yet, in spite of defeat in Maryland, the forward momentum for ratification continued. New Jersey ratified on February 10, 1920, after a close, hard-fought legislative battle. On March 22, Washington ratified, the thirty-fifth state to do so. The suffragists needed only one more state to win, but that state would be difficult to secure because all of the readily pro-suffrage states had already acted.

To the strategists in both the N.A.W.S.A. and the Women's Party, Delaware appeared to offer the best hope for victory. It was one of three states controlled by the Republican Party that had not as yet ratified. In the other two, Connecticut and Vermont, Republican governors personally opposed the amendment and refused to call their state legislatures into special session to consider ratification in spite of the strong endorse-

¹³ Stevens, *Jailed*, 103.

ment of the suffrage amendment by their national party. Delaware's Republican governor, John G. Townsend, by contrast, was a firm friend of the suffrage cause. Townsend had called for the Delaware legislature to meet in special session on March 22. The governor's party held large majorities in both houses of the state legislature. The suffragists reminded Republican politicians nationwide that if Delaware ratified, many of the women who would be enfranchised throughout the country might be persuaded to vote for candidates of the party that had tipped the scales to give them the long-sought franchise. On the other hand, should the Republicans fail to come through in Delaware, some other state not controlled by that party might ratify before the November elections and the women of America would owe no debt of gratitude to the G.O.P. And so it was that Delaware became the storm center for suffrage. All of the national forces of the N.A.W.S.A. and the Women's Party as well as of the anti-suffragists' National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage descended on Delaware in the spring of 1920. For several months the little state controlled the political future of millions of women.

By 1920 the arguments and tactics on both sides of the suffrage question were not only well-established but also well-worn. The supporters and opponents of enfranchisement for women had already waged battles over ratification in about forty other states. Nor was the suffrage question a novelty in Delaware, where suffrage bills had been presented and rejected by the legislators on several previous occasions. Locally, the battle lines had become clearly drawn between supporters and opponents. The one unknown element was the most crucial—the legislature.

Before describing the complex political maneuverings that were about to be played out in Dover, it is appropriate to review the nature of the debate itself, starting with the position of those who opposed votes for women. Mary Wilson Thompson's memoir offers the single best source of information from the anti-suffragist point of view. Mary Wilson, the daughter of a distinguished Union general in the Civil War, was reared at Stockford, a country estate between Wilmington and New Castle. She attended fashionable schools, including Misses Hebbs School in Wilmington, and traveled abroad before marrying Henry B. Thompson, a Princeton alumnus. Her husband served as treasurer of the Joseph Bancroft and Sons Company in Wilmington and later as president of another textile firm headquartered in New York City. The Thompsons were active in a variety of civic enterprises and were leaders of Wilmington society.¹⁴

In her memoir written in the 1930s, Mrs. Thompson explained her reasons for opposing woman's suffrage: "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

¹⁴ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 43-50.



Figure 4. Mary Wilson Thompson, leader of the anti-suffrage faction in Delaware, about 1915 (Historical Society of Delaware's collections).

has weakened materially our power with the legislatures."¹⁵ She argued that by gaining the ballot women had forfeited their independence from politics and could, therefore, no longer lobby for civic causes with the political indifference that had characterized their relationship to politicians before suffrage was enacted. She also disapprovingly linked women's suffrage to a variety of other changes in women and in their relationships to men. The vote, she said, had given women too much independence, which had led to their assuming "a sort of overbearing spirit towards the men. . . . I say to the women in this country that their first duty is to keep up their manpower. If a woman constantly jeers and openly refuses to consider her husband's opinions, what is to become of the family? With women all taking up jobs and receiving independent salaries for them, naturally they feel equal if not superior to their husbands. The young woman you see around in public is personally unattractive; she talks too loud and makes herself conspicuous; she is immodest on the beach and in the ballroom. . . . Personally, I should like to see them shut up in a harem for a while."¹⁶ As president of the Delaware branch of the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, Mrs. Thompson led speaking tours of the state, raised funds, and kept in close touch with leading politicians on behalf of her cause.

Another Wilmingtonian conspicuously allied with the anti-suffragists was Emily P. Bissell, best remembered for introducing the Christmas Seal to the United States in 1907 to raise funds for a tuberculosis sanatorium in Delaware. In addition to her social work, she was a novelist who wrote under the pen name Priscilla Leonard and a nationally known spokesperson for the anti-suffragists. In 1900 Emily P. Bissell had addressed the United States Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage, where she argued that most women did not want suffrage, a statement that Delaware anti-suffragists later supported with the results of a poll that they conducted in the state in 1917. Miss Bissell told the senators that, contrary to suffragist claims, the Western states which had embraced suffrage had not experienced any visible political purification. She also pointed out that as an unmarried, self-supporting woman, who was active in social work and an advocate of temperance (though not, she said emphatically, a prohibitionist!), she was the very sort of person that the suffragists presumed to represent. Yet she could see no advantage to be gained by extending the vote to women, because women were already fairly treated since they had gained admission to virtually every profession.¹⁷

¹⁵ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 251.

¹⁶ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 251.

¹⁷ Address by Emily P. Bissell before the United States Senate Committee On Woman Suffrage, Feb. 13, 1900, printed by the Massachusetts Association Opposed to Extension of Woman Suffrage, copy in Woman Suffrage Box, Historical Society of Delaware (hereafter Woman Suffrage Box, HSD).

In the postwar atmosphere that prevailed in 1919 and 1920, the anti-suffragists raised yet another argument—that the suffragists had behaved unpatriotically during the war. Mary Wilson Thompson, for example, dispatched a letter to all members of the General Assembly in January 1919 in which she asserted that “the Anti-Suffragists have sent more sons to the war than the suffragists” and that the suffragist argument that women should receive the ballot as a reward for war work was fallacious because no “real patriot would ask for a reward for any service she might render her country. . . .”¹⁸ Similarly, during the debate before the General Assembly in the spring of 1920, Emily P. Bissell, according to a press account, “exploded the giant verbal dynamite of the day when she charged Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, head of the suffrage party with being a pacifist during the war. She also accused Jane Addams of Hull House, Chicago, another leading suffragist, with ‘sailing on the ship of fools’” because Addams had participated in Henry Ford’s abortive peace effort before the United States entered the war.¹⁹

In 1920, in contrast to 1982, it was the feminists whose arguments and appeals to democratic principles and fairness were best known and most compellingly presented to the public. Their parades had won the public’s attention; their war work had won the nation’s gratitude; and their argument that the extension of the vote to women was the necessary next step in the evolution of democracy had won much popular support. The suffragists’ most formidable argument was summed up by a cartoon that appeared on the cover of the Congressional Union’s weekly publication *The Suffragist* in 1914. It depicts Uncle Sam pointing a revolver at a well-dressed woman above a caption that reads “It’s woman this, and woman that, and woman go away, But ‘its please deliver Madam,’ when there’s Income Tax to pay.”²⁰ This same theme of taxation without representation was echoed in Florence Bayard Hilles’s testimony before the Delaware legislature that year. She noted that although she owned a large farm south of New Castle, she had no voice in choosing its assessor, while her illiterate and penniless black servant “simply because he is a man can vote to say who shall assess my property.”²¹

Mrs. Hilles thus had cleverly managed to incorporate into her statement the concepts of both democratic justice and racism. In Delaware, as in Maryland and other former slave states, discussions of woman suffrage invariably came down to race. Many Democrats in Delaware, as in Maryland, believed that extension of the ballot to black women would result in a bigger vote for the G.O.P. and that any expansion of the

¹⁸ Mary Wilson Thompson to Hon. Harry E. Clendaniel, Jan. 17, 1919, in Woman Suffrage Box, HSD.

¹⁹ *Morning News*, Mar. 26, 1920.

²⁰ *The Suffragist*, Apr. 11, 1914. Florence Bayard Hilles’s copies are in the newspaper collection of the HSD.

²¹ *Wilmington Evening Journal*, Jan. 21, 1914.⁵



It's Woman this, and Woman that, and Woman go away,
 But "it's please deliver, Madam," when there's Income Tax to pay.

Figure 5. Cartoon linking the theme of taxation without representation to the woman suffrage issue, from *The Suffragist*, April 11, 1914.

suffrage through the process of federal amendment was an unwarranted blow to states' rights. In 1920, Mabel Ridgely of Dover, the president of the Delaware Equal Suffrage Association, tried to stifle the states' rights claim with the statement that the outcome of the Civil War had "rolled the stone on the sepulcher of such dead arguments."²² But Delaware's so-called "Southern exposure" remained one of several serious obstacles to the suffragists.

In retrospect, the reasons behind the defeat of the suffrage amendment in Delaware seem clear. The amendment had been caught in the crossfire of factional contentions that were beyond the control of the suffragists and their most powerful political supporters. Carrie Chapman Catt, president and master political strategist of the N.A.W.S.A., analyzed the situation in detail in her post-victory book entitled *Woman Suffrage and Politics, The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*.²³ In spite of Delaware's Republican majority and Governor Townsend's support, she had discovered that the party was split into warring camps that refused to cooperate, even when the good of Republicans nationally was at stake. This discordance was further exacerbated by the political and sectional controversy surrounding the state's recently enacted school code, a reform measure initiated by Pierre S. du Pont. The new school code increased taxes and imposed state-controlled public education on unwilling rural people. It was especially resented in Sussex County. Daniel Layton, the leader of the Sussex dissidents, was a political maverick whose antipathy toward outside interference into the affairs of his county was so great that when he was deputy attorney general he had condoned a riot in Georgetown in opposition to a state-mandated inoculation program during a smallpox epidemic.²⁴ Layton's faction particularly resented du Pont's involvement in public-school reforms and was determined to prevent further incursions by rich outsiders into traditional local rights and powers.²⁵

This was the turbulent political situation when Governor Townsend called the General Assembly into special session for the last, greatest, and most colorful suffrage battle in Delaware's history. It was the only session ever held in Dover that captured the attention of the entire nation. Local politicians called the spectacle the "war of the roses" because each side furnished boutonnieres in its color to supporters: yellow jonquils for the "suffs," as they were familiarly called, and red roses, the symbol of chivalry, for the "antis."

As suffrage contenders from all over the nation descended on Dover, Wilmington newspapermen were astonished at the transformation of the state capital from a sleepy small town "into a metropolis of men and

²² Mabel Ridgely to John G. Townsend, Feb. 28, 1920, Woman Suffrage Box, HSD.

²³ Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics, The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (New York, 1926).

²⁴ Wilmington *Every Evening*, Feb. 16, 1920.

²⁵ Delmarva *Star*, Feb. 8, 1920.

women seething with their respective doctrines. It burned in their eyes and filled the air with a sweet incense from their yellow and red roses."²⁶ Hotels and restaurants overflowed and the old State House on Dover Green "fairly groaned under its burden of interested humanity."²⁷ Governor Townsend's opening message to the special session contained a trenchant endorsement of the proposed Nineteenth Amendment. "Woman's suffrage," he reminded the legislators, "has been a subject of public discussion for over half a century. It is not an agitation of the moment. The right of equal franchise has been granted and exercised with success in several states for years. It is not a theory or untried experiment."²⁸ The governor, believing that those women who did not wish to vote should not stand in the way of those who did, called on the assembly to recognize its responsibility. "Your supreme duty is to think and act for the good of your state and nation—and the influence of woman is for good. The eyes of a nation rest upon you."²⁹

The suffragists had canvassed the legislature and were optimistic, although they admitted to being eight votes short. But, as a local suffrage leader later wrote, "all looked so favorable that the women were little prepared for the weeks of intrigue and double dealing into which they were thrust. . . ."³⁰ On March 25 both sides presented their arguments to a packed audience in an atmosphere of fevered excitement. Florence Bayard Hilles, Mabel Ridgely, and Carrie Chapman Catt were the main speakers for the "suffs" and Mary Wilson Thompson and Emily P. Bissell for the "antis."

With the outcome so uncertain and the debate so rancorous, tempers got short and both sides resorted to coercive tactics. One "anti" called Carrie Chapman Catt a Bolshevik.³¹ The "suffs," for their part, resorted to kidnapping the chairman of the committee charged with presenting the suffrage amendment on the floor of the House in order to prevent a vote they knew they would lose, spiriting him off in Mrs. Hilles's powerful automobile. Mrs. Thompson, livid with rage at this trick, tracked the beleaguered man down and browbeat him into signing a proxy statement empowering her to act on his behalf should he again mysteriously disappear.³² In addition to unrelenting lobbying by the representatives of the two sides, the legislators were besieged by tele-

²⁶ *Morning News*, Mar. 26, 1920.

²⁷ *Morning News*, Mar. 26, 1920.

²⁸ State of Delaware, *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 97th General Assembly, Special Session, 1920, 19.

²⁹ *House Journal*, 1920, 19.

³⁰ Mary R. de Vou, "Delaware," a typewritten, annotated copy of material sent for inclusion in chap. 7 of vol. 6 of *The History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. by Ida Husted Harper. The de Vou ms. is to be found in the Delaware Equal Suffrage Association Folder, Historical Society of Delaware (hereafter D.E.S.A. Folder, HSD).

³¹ *Morning News*, Jan. 20, 1920.

³² Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 254.

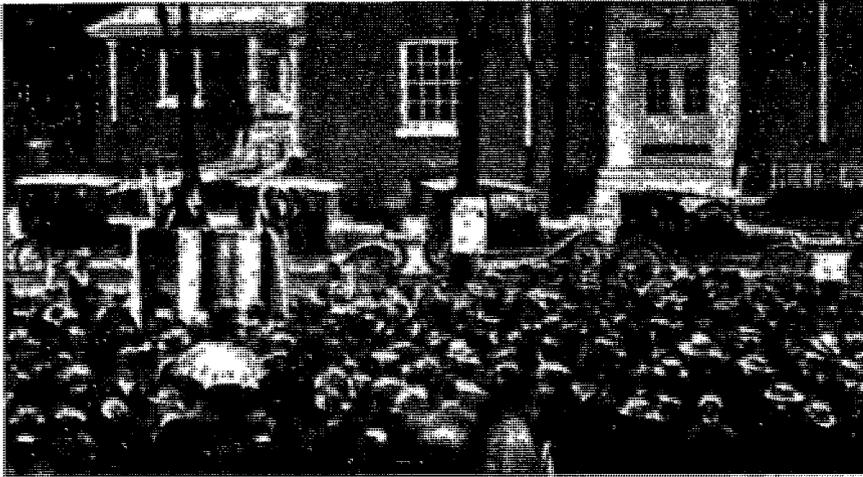


Figure 6. Suffrage rally on Dover Green, May 1920; in a final effort to win a majority of the Delaware legislature, suffragists set up a speakers' platform on the Green and decorated the trees with banners of purple, gold and white; from *The Suffragist*, May 1920.

grams from interested people all over the country, including President Wilson, who begged his fellow Democrats to support the amendment. The suffragists also brought President Eamon de Valera of the Irish Free State to Dover. De Valera pleaded in vain with the recalcitrant Irish-American delegates from Wilmington, who refused to budge from their opposition because they linked suffrage with hated Prohibition. Indeed, the suffragists believed that the bulk of their opponents were either "wets" or tools of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which strongly opposed the measure because enlarging the electorate would render it more difficult for the company to influence legislative action.³³

On April 1 the bill was finally presented to the House, which rejected it by a vote of 23 to 9. Mrs. Thompson was hoisted up on a chair amidst wild cheering from her supporters. The vote, however, proved to be but a skirmish in a larger war. That same day Alfred I. du Pont, owner of the Wilmington *Morning News* and leader of one of the principal Republican factions, endorsed suffrage.³⁴ The suffragists themselves immediately began a blitz-like educational campaign in Sussex County, where every representative had voted against them. On April 20 when the Republicans held their state convention in Dover, the suffragists were out in force. "The entire town was agog with the suffrage doctrine," the

³³ De Vou ms., D.E.S.A. Folder, HSD. The claim that liquor and business interests obstructed woman suffrage was commonly made throughout the country. See Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 307-9.

³⁴ *Morning News*, Apr. 2, 1920.

Morning News informed its readers. "Its purple, white and gold banners bedecked automobiles. . . windows, and flag staffs."³⁵ The suffragists capped the day with a parade of "suffrage children" mounted on ponies and bicycles or pulled in carts. Amid such hoopla the Republican delegates unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the legislature to ratify the amendment.

When the legislature reconvened on May 5, the Senate voted 11 to 6 in favor of ratification. The suffragists, still uncertain of overturning their earlier defeat in the House, again tried to postpone a vote. John E. "Bull" McNabb, a representative from Wilmington, assaulted the suffragists on the House floor for delaying the vote, "using freely the words 'bribery,' 'cajoling,' 'threats,' and much profanity," while, according to a pro-suffrage source, Mrs. Thompson "kept calling out encouragement to him" until ordered to stop.³⁶ Mrs. Thompson later described "Bull" McNabb as "a splendid man, honest and staunch."³⁷ McNabb's side lost on that occasion, for the Assembly did agree to adjourn until May 17.

When that day came it brought the crescendo of the ratification struggle. Both sides pulled out all the stops. "This was the most exciting day we had," Mrs. Thompson later recalled.³⁸ The three most influential du Pont cousins, Pierre S., T. Coleman, and Alfred I.—once partners in The Du Pont Company but more recently estranged—all came to Dover to urge every Republican legislator to vote for suffrage. In the center of the Dover Green the suffragists set up a speaker's platform decorated with their colors from which Mabel Vernon, Florence Bayard Hilles, and others addressed the crowds that had gathered to witness the final act of the drama. For the suffragists the end came with the proverbial whimper. They managed to postpone defeat for two weeks, but it finally came on June 2, 1920, when the House of Representatives voted 24 to 10 against bringing ratification of the amendment to a vote.³⁹ Amid jubilant cheers from the anti-suffragists, Mrs. Thompson was once again hoisted into the air in the State House and was then set down and photographed for the newspapers bearing a large bouquet of red roses. Soon after she gave a luncheon for all the members of the legislature who had voted against ratification, with Representative Walter E. Hart of Townsend, the kidnap victim, as guest of honor. Since he had voted in favor of ratification both times the question had come up, the occasion must have been discomfiting for him.

The suffragists were disappointed but not discouraged. Mrs. Ridgely told the press that "of course the failure to ratify is a fearful disappointment. But it really is only a brief delay."⁴⁰ *The Suffragist* apologetically

³⁵ *Morning News*, Apr. 21, 1920.

³⁶ De Vou ms., D.E.S.A. Folder, HSD.

³⁷ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 255.

³⁸ Higgins, ed., "Thompson Memoir," 255.

³⁹ *House Journal*, 260.

⁴⁰ *Morning News*, Jun. 3, 1920.

described Delaware as a quaint backwater, with its colonial Green and ancient State House, too old fashioned to accept such a progressive reform.⁴¹ A Women's Party supporter wrote that "this accumulation of historic atmosphere added its subtle weight to the regret of the suffragists when Delaware failed them."⁴² The first state to ratify the constitution was not to be the state to put the Nineteenth Amendment over the top. As soon as the cause was lost in Delaware, the suffragists shifted their focus to another border state, Tennessee, where after a similarly exhausting campaign they were finally rewarded with victory on August 18, 1920.

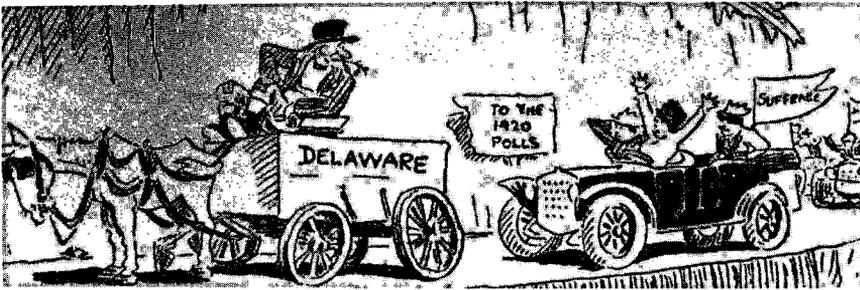


Figure 7. Cartoon depicting Delaware as a country bumpkin blocking the suffrage coalition, from *The Suffragist*, May 1920.

⁴¹ *The Suffragist*, Jun. 1920.

⁴² Inez Haynes Irwin, *The Story of the Women's Party* (New York, 1921), 443.