



Library of Congress

Suffragists Picketing the White House, 1917.

# Virginia Women and the Vote

BY NANCY TATE

## The Big Picture

August 26, 1920. Early that morning, and without fanfare, United States Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby signed a proclamation stating that the required 36 states had ratified the so-called Susan B. Anthony Amendment. That new 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution stated simply that *“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.”* That proclamation culminated 72 years of organized struggle to win the vote for women and finally succeeded only when one young legislator in the last state—Tennessee—switched his vote after receiving a letter from his mother.

The struggle to win the vote was long and hard. It was more than a political struggle; it was deeply social and cultural as well. It took three generations of dedicated activists who withstood continual verbal abuse and ridicule. The messaging and the tactics took many forms, played out in every state, and involved women of all races and many men. “It took more than 900 local, state, and national campaigns, involving tens of thousands of grassroots volunteers, financed by millions of dollars of mostly small (and a few large) donations by women across the country.”<sup>1</sup> The final act was purposely done with little fanfare, but this movement produced the largest expansion of the franchise in our country’s history.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment guarantees a constitutional right to vote for American women. In actuality, even before the final passage, women in thirty states (mostly in the West and Midwest) had already obtained that right from state legislatures or referendum. As a result of the federal amendment, women in Virginia were now legally entitled to vote.

But that was not what the political leaders of the Commonwealth wanted. This was not part of the culture of “southern womanhood” that was valued. Previously, Virginia had been the only colony to explicitly state that women could not vote. The state legislature soundly defeated the Anthony amendment on February 12, 1920. In addition, even after defeating the amendment in the Old Dominion, the Virginia General Assembly joined several other southern states in sending a joint rejection resolution to Congress, hoping to head off adoption by other states.

Despite this historically discouraging political culture, a number of Virginia women had become increasingly irritated by the lack of government efforts to handle growing social and humanitarian problems. They wanted to

have a voice. Beginning in 1909, they began organized efforts to gain the vote. Although most of the leaders, such as Lila Meade Valentine and Mary Johnston, were based in Richmond, women in what was then Alexandria County, (which included what is now Arlington County) were also involved. Seeking to draw attention to their cause, they placed many articles in the *Washington Post* announcing their meetings and advocacy activities.

## The National Women's Suffrage Story

From the earliest days, the American political system essentially excluded women. In a heavily gendered view of the world, men occupied the public sphere and women the domestic and private one. There had been some limited voting rights for women in the colonial era. But such possibilities were effectively erased by the new constitution, despite letters from Abigail Adams to her husband John "to remember the Ladies."

Women had virtually no legal or political rights. They had no independent rights after marriage, no custody of children in the case of divorce, no right to a college education, no opportunity to enter most professions, no right to vote, and no voice in the laws. Despite occasional reform efforts in some states, the issue of women's rights was not raised in a serious way until 1848, when ardent abolitionists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott became enraged when the all-male membership of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention refused to seat them as delegates. They returned to Seneca Falls, New York and called for a "woman's rights convention." Stanton drafted a document, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, which summarized women's overall condition of servitude and protested against a range of unjust laws and practices. Nearly 300 women and men attended and debated the various grievances and proposals contained in this Declaration of Sentiments. The issue of the vote, in particular, was considered an especially radical and controversial step. It took the vocal support of abolitionist Frederick Douglas to help ensure its narrow approval.

Most of the early suffragists were abolitionists. As a result, the drive for women's voting rights, called woman suffrage, was interrupted by the Civil War. After the war ended and slavery was abolished, a major rupture occurred in the movement. Congress proposed the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, which southern states were required to ratify as a condition of reentry to the Union. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment defined national citizenship and declared that states could not deny voting rights to any male citizen. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment stated that voting

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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term "woman's suffrage" was used to refer to efforts to gain women the vote. In more recent times, that term has been replaced by "woman suffrage," which is the term used more often here.

rights could not be denied on the basis of race. The wording of both explicitly excluded women.

“Suffragists tried to have the wording (of the 14th Amendment) changed to include women as well. But among those who blocked their efforts were former allies in the abolition movement who claimed that it was the “Negro’s hour” and that demanding woman suffrage could jeopardize Black freedom.”<sup>2</sup> A major rift occurred, with different suffrage organizations following different strategies. These included numerous federal legislative proposals, court challenges, and state initiatives. Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt and many others traveled the country repeatedly, often to disdain and derision, explaining the necessity of women having the vote.

Efforts for suffrage at the state level showed promise. The Wyoming legislature voted to grant women the vote while it was still a territory (1869) and was the first state to adopt it in 1890. Eleven states, mostly in the West, followed, but with some granting only limited suffrage rights. However, efforts faltered in other states and by the early 1900s, the momentum had stalled. By that point, the earlier factions had joined together to create the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). They had members in nearly every state, but the original leadership was dying off.

New leaders began to emerge, and another organizational split occurred. The two suffragist organizations that played the key roles in the final stages of the movement were NAWSA, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, and the newer, smaller and more radical National Woman’s Party (NWP) led by Alice Paul. “These organizations had set their sights on the same ratification goal, but they insisted on pursuing it in their own way: each conducted its own polling, lobbying, organizing and publicity campaigns in every state.”<sup>3</sup>

Utilizing Catt’s “Winning Plan,” NAWSA sharpened its organizing strategies to fight for both a federal amendment and for state referenda in the most propitious states. Momentum increased significantly after New York’s male voters supported a woman suffrage referendum in 1917. NAWSA’s membership continued to grow, reaching nearly two million members of both women and men. Once the United States entered World War I, Catt pledged the organization’s support to the war effort, while also encouraging members to continue their suffrage work in the states.

Influenced by the more militant suffragettes\* in Britain, Alice Paul and the NWP took a different and more controversial approach. “Silent Sentinels” began picketing the White House every day. Volunteers came from nearly every state to take turns standing peacefully, through every kind of weather, with banners demanding the vote. Those messages ranged from “Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?” to denunciations of “Kaiser” Wilson.

President Woodrow Wilson and the broader public were generally tolerant of these protesters at first, but as United States involvement in World War I deepened, the women were condemned as traitors and Bolsheviks. They were insulted and assaulted. Over ninety suffragists were imprisoned, most at the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia and some in the District of Columbia Jail, on charges of “obstructing the sidewalk.” The jail conditions were terrible, and many women went on hunger strikes in protest. Several were then force fed with tubes crammed down their throats and up their noses. But once word started to get out about this excessive treatment, public sympathy increased.

President Wilson had vacillated in his support for woman suffrage, ultimately taking the position that it was an issue to be left to the states. Finally, however, on January 9, 1918, he urged Congress to pass the Anthony amendment as the first step in the process of amending the Constitution. His motives were unclear, but he was probably influenced by the political realities of growing public support for woman suffrage and the importance of women’s contributions to the war effort.

The United States House of Representatives passed the amendment on May 21, 1919, and the Senate did the same on June 4. It had taken innumerable congressional votes, spread over forty years, to reach this point. Now the amendment had to be ratified by three-fourths of the then 48 states.

The ratification process moved quickly at first, with 35 states having ratified by June 1920. But eight states had defeated the amendment, and the number of remaining states with encouraging political environments was small. The final showdown came in Tennessee. An enormously intense effort was waged in that state in the summer of 1920, as is well documented in Elaine Weiss’s book *The Woman’s Hour*. In the end, the amendment only passed when young legislator Harry Burn followed his mother’s advice to “do the right thing” and switched his vote to “yes.” The amendment passed in the last state by one vote.

## The Virginia Story

In the South, the issue of women’s voting rights was deeply entwined with issues of race. White southerners supporting “Jim Crow” laws and other ways to marginalize black men were not interested in expanding the vote to black women, to say the least. Some women in every southern state created visible suffrage efforts. “Many of the aristocratic southern women leaders had become frustrated by their political impotence in trying to wrest humanitarian

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\*In the United States, women (and men) advocating for women’s voting rights have always been called “suffragists.” This distinguishes them from the radical arm of the suffrage movement in Great Britain, who were referred to as “suffragettes.”

reforms from the politicians...But none dared challenge the move to restore white political supremacy that occurred simultaneously with the southern woman suffrage movement.”<sup>4</sup>

In Virginia, there had been limited efforts in the 1870s and 1890s to work publicly for women’s suffrage. Suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony had visited the Commonwealth in the 1880s to recruit suffrage leaders. But these efforts were short-lived. However, in November 1909, a small committed group of women met in Richmond and formed the Equal Suffrage League (ESL). Participants included reformer Lila Meade Valentine and author Mary Johnston. In one year alone, Valentine gave over one hundred speeches across the state. Later, in an effort to influence the governor, she led a march of over 200 suffragists to his office. Joining her were female descendants of Thomas Jefferson and George Mason.<sup>5</sup>



Virginia Museum of History  
**Lila Meade Valentine**

Other suffrage leaders included Adele Clark and Dr. Kate Waller Barrett. Clark later became the first president of the Virginia League of Women Voters. Dr. Barrett, best known for involvement in the Florence Crittenton Homes for Unwed Mothers, is the woman for whom Arlington’s Barrett Elementary School is named.

Other Virginia activists included Maggie Walker, a black businesswoman in Richmond, and Gertrude Crocker. Crocker was among those suffragists jailed at Occoquan and later ran the well-known Little Tea House on Arlington Ridge Road.

The ESL joined NAWSA, which sent trained organizers into the state, and became one of the strongest suffrage organizations in the South. “They began drawing up petitions urging both federal and state government action and began a campaign to educate Virginia citizens on the issue. Opponents quickly charged that female suffrage would reopen the entire matter of Negro voting, which had been effectively controlled by the 1902 revised Virginia Constitution...The ESL, however, persevered; during its first year of existence membership grew to nearly 120. By the time the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed in Congress in 1919, the ESL boasted 32,000 members across the state.”<sup>6</sup>

As for the ESL’s Alexandria chapter, an article in the *Washington Post* described the following:

The next delegation of suffragists to make a formal call on a member of Congress (Congressman Carlin) has been organized

by Mrs. Henry Lockman, who lives at Clarendon, VA., and is also chairman of the Alexandria and Fairfax Equal Suffrage League...The call on the Virginia congressman ...will be followed by the organization of deputations who will call on every representative and senator before the two bodies convene in December, with a demand for a statement of their position on the constitutional amendment proposed for universal suffrage.<sup>7</sup>

## Opposition to the Vote

Fear of expanding voting and other rights for blacks was a major source of opposition to women's suffrage, especially in the South. Elsewhere in the country there were fears about enfranchising immigrants. Other sources of opposition to the vote were powerful business interests that worried about the types of policies that women might enact. This was particularly true of the railroads, the liquor industry, and various manufacturers. Many political bosses were worried too. "They feared that enfranchised women would clean up politics, support prohibition, and force reduced exploitation of women and child laborers."<sup>8</sup> And there were women—primarily white, upper class women—who felt that political acts like voting were not only degrading, but diminished their special feminine role in society and undermined home and family.



Virginia Historical Society  
Portrait of Adele Clark

But the pressure from the suffragists continued. And the social culture was changing. World War I had demonstrated the valuable roles that women played in public and economic, as well as domestic, life. In the growing number of suffrage states, the dreadful prophecies about women and the vote had not come true. And men elected to Congress from those states needed to keep faith with their constituents.

## After Winning the Vote

Change did not come easily in the Commonwealth. Even after the federal amendment was ratified, Virginia, like several other southern states, was sluggish in implementing it. It procrastinated in passing "enabling acts" to set up mechanisms to handle female suffrage. As a result, women in Virginia were actually not able to vote until 1922. It took until 1952 for the Commonwealth to officially ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Despite the legal right to vote, voting in Virginia has not been easy. Repressive voting laws and other forms of segregation and discrimination

against people of color were state law and rigidly enforced. Property and residency requirements, poll taxes, and literacy stipulations essentially limited the voting public to middle and upper-class white men. This situation did not begin to change significantly until passage of the federal Voting Rights Act in 1965. In recent years, laws regarding voter identification requirements, purging of voter lists, restrictions on absentee ballots and other regulations have had disproportionately negative impacts on both younger and non-white populations.

However, in more positive developments, women's rates of electoral turnout and participation have grown dramatically over the decades, and now eclipse those of men. And in recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of women running for office in Virginia—and winning. In addition, “the organizing strategies, lobbying techniques, and nonviolent protest actions (of the suffragists) became the model for the civil rights campaigns to follow in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”<sup>9</sup>

These outcomes were not foreseen in 1920. Before the amendment had finally passed, but anticipating that the legal right to vote would not be sufficient in and of itself, Carrie Chapman Catt called upon NAWSA to create a League of Women Voters to mobilize and educate new women voters. Its mission was to instruct and engage women in the world of political participation, utilizing both nonpartisan voter education and issue advocacy. As Catt had said upon the amendment's passing,



Virginia Commonwealth  
University Library

Portrait of Kate Waller Barrett

The vote is the emblem of your equality, women of America, the guaranty of your liberty...The vote is a power, a weapon of offense and defense, a prayer. Use it intelligently, conscientiously, prayerfully. Progress is calling to you to make no pause. Act!<sup>10</sup>

Almost immediately, suffragists began to create state and local Leagues. This was the case in Arlington County (which had formally adopted this name change in 1920). A local League organization formed in 1923, and then operated as three separate subgroups. The Clarendon members later decided to focus only on local issues and became the Organized Women Voters. The Cherrydale branch continued as the League of Women Voters. Among their early accomplishments was the creation and operation of the Cherrydale library.<sup>11</sup>

However, the Depression years and World War II were hard on state and local Leagues. By 1936, the Virginia League office had closed and operations had ceased. The only local League was in Richmond. But in 1944, seventeen

women came together to form the Arlington-Alexandria League. As stated in its official letter of recognition from the national League, its mission was to “develop a more effective citizenry.” In 1946, the joint League split so that each could concentrate on its own jurisdiction. That year Arlington League members were also instrumental in helping the state League regain its standing with the national organization. From its founding, the Arlington League has provided voting information, voter registration, and get out the vote services, in addition to being engaged in a wide range of local, regional, state and national issues.

Many prominent Arlington leaders have also been active League members. Among those was Kathryn Stone, who not only served as Arlington League president, but also became a member of the national League board and later represented Arlington in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1954 to 1966. Ellen Bozman was the Arlington League president from 1963 to 1965, and was active for many more years. Among the initial men members was Joe Fischer, who was commended publicly by the national League president for being the first male member to be elected to Congress.



Wikipedia Article

**Portrait of Ellen M. Bozman**

In 2019, the Arlington League is celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It has recently produced an anniversary booklet that lays out the many ways in which it has contributed to a better county, better schools, a better region, and better state and national policies. It is a proud history. Today the Arlington League boasts nearly 200 members, both male and female. It is actively engaged in providing a broad range of educational services to voters, and in advocating for election integrity, restoration of voting rights, redistricting reform, the Equal Rights Amendment, affordable housing, an effective regional transportation system, and other issues.

## Conclusion

On August 26, 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment became the law of the land. On that day, 26 million women—roughly half the adult population—were enfranchised, producing the largest expansion of democracy in our country’s history. Women were not “given” this fundamental right. Three generations of women won it through their courage, commitment, and political savvy. Yet few Americans know this story and how difficult it was to achieve success.

The 2020 centennial of this accomplishment offers many opportunities to commemorate this milestone of democracy. Many programs and exhibits

are being planned and some exhibits, such as those at the National Archives, National Portrait Gallery, and the Library of Congress, are already on display. Yet no national memorial has ever been created to recognize the suffragists' hard-fought struggle. That is the goal of the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, which is being built in Occoquan, Virginia. It will tell the story of women's struggle for the vote, from early beginnings in colonial times to the present, at the location where so many suffragists were incarcerated. Renderings of the memorial can be found at [www.suffragistmemorial.org](http://www.suffragistmemorial.org).

The year 2020 is also the one hundredth anniversary of the national League of Women Voters, now called the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS). There will be celebrations. But most of all, LWVUS and its nearly 800 state and local Leagues will redouble their commitment to "Empowering Voters and Defending Democracy."

One of the best ways to commemorate the centennial of women winning the vote is to examine its relevance to issues of today. This was a movement that involved many social, cultural and political tensions that still exist. There are lessons to be learned about the strengths and weaknesses of various political strategies, alliances, messaging, and compromises. There are insights about the inevitable struggles over whose voices should be heard in our democracy, and what it feels like to be excluded from the body politic. And there are lessons about the roles that individuals can play, as leaders, as supporters, and activists, in making our representative democracy the best it can be.

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### **About the Author**

Nancy Tate is the Co-chair of the 2020 Women's Vote Centennial Initiative and is a board member of the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, which is scheduled for unveiling in August 2020. She is a board member and Centennial Committee chair for the League of Women Voters of Arlington. She previously served for fifteen years as the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of the United States. A native Californian, she has lived in Arlington since 1980.

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### ***Endnotes/Sources***

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. J. Cooney, Jr., in collaboration with The National Woman's History Project, *Winning the Vote: The Triumph of the American Woman Suffrage Movement* (Santa Cruz, California: American Graphic Press, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Bernice Colvard, *Virginia Women and the Vote: 1909 – 2009, The Equal Suffrage League and the League of Women Voters in Virginia* (Fairfax, Virginia: The League of Women Voters of Virginia Education Fund, 2009), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, p.228.

<sup>6</sup> Colvard, *Virginia Women and the Vote*, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> “Suffragists to See Carlin. Delegation Headed by Mrs. Lockman Will Present Plea for Votes,” *Washington Post*, fall 1914.

<sup>8</sup> Colvard, *Virginia Women and the Vote*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, p. 324.

<sup>11</sup> Arlington Library's Center for Local History, <https://arlingtonwomenshistory.org/2018/12/organized-women-voters-league-of-women-voters/> and <https://arlingtonwomenshistory.org/2018/02/cherrydalebranchlibrary>  
Bendactum hus, caperit, C. Satio, ompro es culla nonsidem iam spio, diem tanum det omniquod cluserum senihilium husqua nimus factus, scere cribus locum nondi ips, fachuisa dem, novidem denihiliuro nost vente publicu legerem P. M. Si sint.

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