

Women's Rights and Loudoun County

By Priscilla B. Godfrey

Note: This article introduces the evolution of women's rights and suffrage in Loudoun. The Editors also wish to encourage prospective authors to continue the conversation by writing about women in various walks of life, politics, medicine, science religion, art, law, etc.

It was not until 1720 that women joined the men in the first British colonies on our shores. The British common law was the "law of the land." This law subsumed married women's ability to own property, earn wages, enter contracts, inherit the financial holdings of the spouse and act autonomously to their husband's authority. All rights were vested to the husband. Women's responsibilities were to raise the children, prepare meals for the family and feed and care for livestock. This English common law concept of coverture, the legal subordination of a married woman to her husband prevailed in the United States until the middle of the 19th century when economic realities of life in the New World demanded greater flexibility for women.

The suffragette movement started in England. In 1897, several regional suffrage groups decided to join forces and founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847 – 1929). She published widely on women's issues and was a frequent public speaker on women's rights. In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst founded The British Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Both groups continued to campaign for the right to vote. They pushed for passage of The United Kingdom Representation of the People Act which gave the vote to all men over age 21 and all women over age 30; it tripled the electorate. This bill passed 385

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to 55 on June 19, 1917. In 1928 the law was amended to include women ages 21-30.

Here in the United States in the 1840's state legislatures started to enact legislation overriding the disabilities associated with coverture. A series of statutes gradually expanded the rights of married women to act as independent agents in legal contexts. (Britannica.com 2020). In 1848, New York State passed the Married Women's Property Act, the same year as the Seneca Falls Convention started the suffrage movement in the United States.

In 1910 the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was founded and by 1913 six states had granted women the right to vote. In 1910, Alice Paul returned from England where she had been active in the suffragette movement. She and Lucy Burns founded the Congressional Union for Women which then became the National Women's Party in 1916. After many protests and many incarcerations, she lived to see the 19th Constitutional Amendment ratified on August 20, 1920.

The League of Women Voters was created by Carrie Chapman Catt on February 14, 1920 to become the successor to the National American Woman Suffrage Association. In Richmond, Virginia in 1909 the Equal Suffrage League was formed as a state organization. Loudoun County joined the Equal Suffrage League August 10, 1915 with 15 members. The chairman was Miss Charlotte Boland of Middleburg (head of Foxcroft private girls' school). Members at large were Mrs. D.E. Sands and Mrs. E.L. Brown. Members from Lovettsville were Miss Freda Johnson; from Bluemont Miss Eliza Lunsford, Mrs. Henry Page and Mrs. Harry Dulin and from Hillsboro teachers Mrs. W.S. Hammerly and Mr. C.C. Gaver. In 1920 the Equal Suffrage League dissolved and became the Virginia League of Women Voters. The League of Women Voters in Loudoun County was formed in 1920 but

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went dormant due to the depression. In 1946 the Loudoun group was reborn as the Loudoun Provisional League of Women Voters. The LWV Loudoun County is still in operation today with over 60 members.

Loudoun County was known in the 1800's for its agriculture. Many farms were known for growing corn, grains, tobacco, and dairy and beef cattle. It had several large plantations (Oatlands, Selma, Morven Park). Plantation owners feared that granting women the right to vote would lead to women of color voting, but the County was staunchly pro-Union. They elected two anti-secessionists to the Virginia State Convention of 1861. Loudoun County and its farms took a severe hit from the fighting on both sides of the issue. ¹

October 4, 1920 there were 3,400 women eligible to register to vote but only 200 women completed registration and voted. The Loudoun Mirror notes that 18 were "colored women."

From property rights to voting rights to where we are today with a woman running for President in 2016 and a Presidential candidate with a female vice president, we have advanced equality in one hundred years but there is still much work to be done.

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A poem by the League of Women Voters².

Keep us, Oh God, from pettiness.
Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed,
Let us be done with fault-finding,
And leave off self-seeking.
May we put away all pretense
And meet each other face to face,
Without self-pity and without prejudice.
May we never be hasty in judgement
And always generous.
Let us take time for all things,
Make us to grow calm, serene, gentle.
Teach us to put into action our better impulses,
Straightforward and unafraid.
Grant that we may realize it is
The little things that create differences,
That in the big things of life we are at one.
And may we strive to touch and to know
The great common human heart of us all.
And Oh Lord God, let us forget not
To be kind!

Endnotes:

¹ James William Head, "History and Comprehensive Description of Loudoun County, Virginia," 1909, pp. 145-148; Chares Preston Poland, Jr. "From Frontier to Suburbia," Marceline, Wallsworth, pp. 167-181.

² Poem by Mary Stewart, flyer for League of Women Voters of Loudoun County Women's History Month Tea, March 14, 2010.