



Cartoon in the Boston Post July 9, 1920, dramatized the competition between Vermont and Tennessee for the final state to approve the 19th Amendment. University of Vermont Digital Archives

The Evolution of Woman Suffrage in Vermont: Bennington and Beyond

Dawn and Raymond Rodrigues

On November 2, 1920, the lines of voters in Bennington were long at the library—the polling site, with two lines inside and a line outside.¹ Usually the results were known quickly, but not that night. The *Banner*

reported that “owing to the women voting in all states a tremendous vote is being cast and the returns will be slow and authentic news is likely to be late.”² To give people across the town access to the “big board”—the election results board of the time—extra magic lantern projectors and screens were set up at the bank, the *Banner*, and the local theaters. **Women in town had voted for president for the first time!**

Dampening the excitement on election day 1920 would have been the memory of the valiant effort made by both male and female Vermont suffragists to make Vermont the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment. In spite of high expectations and an energetic campaign to call the legislature into a special session, it was Tennessee, not Vermont, that won the race, thereby ratifying the amendment.

The path toward suffrage in Vermont was a bumpy one. Isolated from one another by the Green Mountains, women in small communities like Bennington had few opportunities (without significant travel time and expense) to take part in statewide conventions, which were held in different towns each year, most of them far beyond Bennington County.³ Instead of monumental gains at any given point, suffrage for women evolved gradually. From 1847-1919, legislation yielded partial voting rights at some points, only to have other attempts fail repeatedly. It took seventy years for universal suffrage to gain widespread acceptance in Vermont.

From Abolition to Women’s Rights

Nationally, the women’s movement had its roots in the anti-slavery movement.⁴ *The Vermont Telegraph*, published in Brandon from 1828 to 1843, included columns on women’s rights, temperance, and anti-slavery,⁵ but women’s actual participation in the anti-slavery movement in Vermont was limited to attending meetings with their husbands, making contributions through benevolent work, or distributing anti-slavery literature and circulating petitions.⁶ For example, one column in the *Telegraph* noted that “Mr. Prentiss presented the petition of a number of women of Townshend, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and the slave trade in the United States.”⁷ Unlike in states such as New York, Massachusetts, and Ohio, where women in the abolition movement formed their own auxiliary organizations, giving them a chance to develop leadership skills and a progressive agenda, in Vermont women would have to wait until the temperance and suffrage movements to have the benefit of meeting by themselves.

In 1840, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, two abolitionists, were transformed into women’s rights advocates when—at the World Anti-slavery Convention in London—they were banned from the convention

Vermont Suffrage Timeline

- 1848--Seneca Falls Convention
- 1847--Bill passes Vermont Legislature allowing women to inherit property, write their own wills, and be free from their husband's debts (inspired by Clarina Howard Nichols).
- 1869--Suffrage organizations split into two factions: American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA). AWSA supported the Fifteenth Amendment. NWSA opposed it because it did not include suffrage for women.
- 1870--Men form Vermont Woman Suffrage Association and invite the American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA) to organize conventions across the state.
- 1875--Vermont Woman's Christian Temperance Union organized.
- 1880--Bill passed to allow tax paying women to vote in school elections (supported by WCTU).
- 1883--Vermont Woman Suffrage Association reorganized.
- 1886--Vermont WCTU endorses suffrage. Municipal suffrage bill defeated.
- 1889--Schism in Vermont WCTU. Anna Park from Bennington forms a separate temperance association.
- 1890--Vermont Legislature again defeats municipal suffrage.
- 1890--Rival national organizations (AWSA and NWSA) reorganize and form National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).
- 1900--Carrie Chapman Catt becomes president of NAWSA after Susan B. Anthony retires.
- 1907--Vermont Woman Suffrage Association is renamed Vermont Equal Suffrage Association (VESA).
- 1914--Vermont Federation of Women's Clubs endorses suffrage.
- 1917--Municipal Suffrage passes Vermont legislature.
- 1919--Vermont legislature passes Presidential suffrage bill, but Governor Clement's veto is not overturned.
- April, 1920--400 women meet with Governor Clement to request a special session, which Clement denies.
- 1920--Tennessee ratifies 19th Amendment (making it possible for all women to vote).
- 1921--Vermont ratifies 19th Amendment.

floor and forced to sit in the gallery (where they were joined by prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison). Their indignation over this treatment prompted them to form their own organization. In 1848, they organized the Women's Rights Convention, otherwise known as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, widely viewed as the start of the suffrage movement.⁸ The purpose of this convention was "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and *rights of women*." Interestingly, the inclusion of suffrage in their Declaration of Sentiments was a point of contention with the group, some of whom felt that including it would "make the whole movement ridiculous."⁹

The Role of Clarina Howard Nichols

Several years before the Seneca Falls Convention, Clarina Howard Nichols (1810-1885), from Townshend, Vermont, became editor of the *Windham County Democrat* in Brattleboro, where she wrote a series of editorials on topics such as temperance, abolition, and the property rights of married women. She focused on the unfairness of inheritance rules (coverture) which made not only a married woman's real estate, but also her personal property, subject to the management and control of her husband. Inspired by Nichols's writing, Larkin Mead of Brattleboro introduced legislation (Act 26 of 1847) to protect married women's property rights: An Act Relating to the Rights of Married Women. The act became law, thus

allowing a woman to own, inherit, or will property.¹⁰ In a chapter of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, Nichols writes that “this was the first breath of a legal civil existence for Vermont wives.”¹¹

In 1852, Nichols organized a series of petitions submitted to the Vermont Legislature arguing that women deserve the right to vote in school elections. She was granted permission to speak before the legislature, thus earning the honor of being the first woman to address it. This report of her speech was printed in the *Vermont Christian Messenger*:



Clarina Howard Nichols

Vermont Historical Society

*A petition has been presented to the Legislature from various persons in Brattleboro, asking for women the right to vote in school meetings. Mrs. Nichols, the talented editress [sic] of the Windham County Democrat, was allowed to present the claims of the petitioners in the Representatives' Hall. . . She claimed for a woman the right to represent her property and natural interests in her child, in overseeing its educational interests.*¹²

Even though it would be years before women were granted the right to vote in school elections, Nichols's sentiments were prescient. Her speaking skills led to many invitations to address groups across New England. In 1851, she was invited to speak at the Second National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts; in 1852, she was invited to the Third Woman's Rights Convention in Syracuse, New York. It was there she met Susan B. Anthony, who became a life-long friend. Disappointed with the slow speed of women's reform efforts in Vermont, Nichols and her family moved to Kansas in 1855, where she hoped more could be accomplished than “in conservative old Vermont, whose prejudices are so much stronger than its convictions.”¹³

First Attempt at Suffrage Legislation

The Fourteenth Amendment, passed in 1866, granted citizenship to former slaves. In 1870, The Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the right to vote. Deeply disappointed that the amendment did not include women, the more radical wing of the National Woman's Suffrage

Association (NWSA), led by Susan B. Anthony, was determined to achieve the vote by way of a federal amendment. The conservative side of the party—led by Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, Julia Ward Howe, and others, including William Lloyd Garrison—believed in incremental change and chose a different strategy. In November 1869 they formed an organization called the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), with the goal of achieving suffrage state-by-state.

Gradually, suffrage was entering the national conversation. The western territories had begun to consider enfranchising women. Although Kansas voted against it, the territory of Wyoming included full suffrage for women in its 1868 constitution.

Vermont suffrage supporters were paying attention. During the Constitutional Convention of 1869, the Vermont Council of Censors recommended an amendment to the state constitution granting women the right to vote in state elections. The amendment was initially introduced as a joke, but the legislators took it seriously, noting that they realized that the purpose was to try “the effect of ridicule upon the claim of woman to suffrage,” and adding that “as the Council has entertained the resolution, and referred its consideration to this committee, we have given it that attention that the dignity of the Council and the subject seem to require.”¹⁴ Although this amendment failed, the mere fact that it was brought up by the legislators indicated that the time might be ripe for the suffrage movement to gain momentum.

Seeing an opportunity to move the Vermont cause forward, the men who supported suffrage formed a male-only suffrage organization, known as

Leading Vermont Men Want a Special Session

Of the Vermont Legislature to Ratify the Federal Suffrage Amendment

RICHARD BILLINGS, Woodstock.—National woman suffrage is bound to come. Our legislature should have the distinction of putting it over the top.
JAMES HARTNESS, Springfield.—The coming of equal suffrage is inevitable. We have the choice of expediting or retarding its coming. As a Vermonter, I hope history will record that His Excellency, Governor Clement called an extra session of the Legislature in the spring of 1920 to satisfy the demand for a square deal to women.

H. C. COMINGS, Richford.—Personally I have always been in favor of woman suffrage, but I think the time has come when it is not a question of whether or not Vermont is in favor of woman suffrage, but a question of whether the women of Vermont are to be given an equal privilege with those of other states. I sincerely hope that Governor Clement's decision will be in favor of an extra session.

Senator CARROLL S. PAGE, Hyde Park.—I favor calling special session of legislature as suggested and hope Governor Clement will conclude to act promptly in the matter.

HARRY A. BLAKE, Secretary of State, Montpelier.—Equal suffrage for women is a matter of simple justice. There ought to be no delay in administering justice.

Ex-Governor CHARLES W. GATES, Franklin.—I favor a special session of the legislature and if called, I sincerely hope it will ratify the suffrage amendment.

(Capt.) E. W. GIBSON, Brattleboro.—In my opinion the Governor is warranted in calling a special session for the ratification of the Suffrage Amendment. Vermont cannot well afford to stand in a position of looking Suffrage for the other states of the Union.

FRANK METZGER, Randolph.—I am firmly of the opinion that the Vermont Legislature ought to meet in special session at the earliest possible moment in order to take action on the suffrage amendment.

JOHN SPARGO, Bennington.—Governor Clement owes it to the people of Vermont to convene a special session of the legislature to vote on ratification of the Equal Suffrage Amendment. Ver-choice to pass upon this constitutional amendment.

COLLINS M. GRAVES, Bennington.—Am in favor of the calling of a special session of the legislature by the Governor to ratify the suffrage amendment, as it is in my judgment unfair that one woman throughout the United States. The failure to call a special session results in the rule of the minority, which is un-American.

FRANK E. LANGLEY, BARRE.—I believe the women of Vermont are entitled to a special session of the legislature to consider ratification of the suffrage amendment.

Congressman PORTER H. DALL, Island Pond.—Vermont should, and I believe desires to, go into history as the essential state to permit, rather than prevent, to a large number of the nation's citizens, the ballot, and save itself from the just charge of delaying the benefits of a victory already fairly won.

Put Vermont in the Ratification Column
Root for the Special Session

Authorized by the

**VERMONT
EQUAL SUFFRAGE
ASSOCIATION**

DR. MARION R. HORTON, President

*This ad was published in the
Brattleboro Reformer on April 16,
1920.*


the Vermont Woman Suffrage Association (VWSA) in January, 1870. In an attempt to convince citizens across the state that women should be granted suffrage, the VWSA decided to hold a series of conventions before the next session of the legislature. But they needed help from experienced suffrage leaders.

Annette W. Parmelee's extensive letters and speeches reflected her comprehensive knowledge of laws and legislative matters.

Vermont Historical Society

HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM
RANDOLPH, VERMONT
Friday Evening, Feb. 2nd, 1917

Mrs. Annette W.
PARMELEE



Vermont's Most Eloquent Suffrage Advocate

SUBJECT: WOMAN'S PLACE

Auspices of Randolph Suffrage Study Club

EVERYBODY WELCOME

With their new mission to work state-by-state, the AWSA members were happy to come to Vermont and help push for a statewide suffrage amendment. In February 1870 a group of AWSA reformers (both women and men) arrived in Montpelier.¹⁵ Lucy Stone, one of the women, was quite familiar with Vermont, having campaigned in Vermont in the 1850s, shortly after Clarina Nichols moved to Kansas. Henry Blackwell, her husband, was especially optimistic, noting that Vermont appeared to be “an especially promising ground for a suffrage campaign.”¹⁶

After a successful convention in Montpelier, the group worked with the VWSA to hold a series of events across the state: In February they went to Rutland (where William Lloyd Garrison spoke); in March, there was a convention in Brattleboro. Then smaller conventions were held in St. Johnsbury, St. Albans, and Burlington. Initially, newspaper articles across the state were positive. As the months went by, however, the press began to publish mostly negative reports, maintaining that women were simply not interested in the suffrage cause.

By the time the speakers got to Burlington it was clear that the sentiment in Vermont was not favorable to suffrage. One person wrote: “One could scarcely resist the conviction that the speakers themselves were hired advocates having but little heart or faith in their work.”¹⁷ A newspaper story in the *Woodstock Standard* expressed a similar notion,

indicating that the “eloquent periods of the most impassioned orators failed utterly to awake a response in the hearts of the audiences.”¹⁸

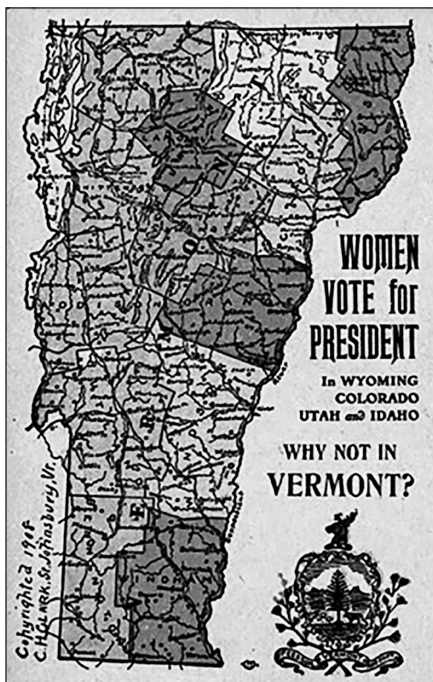
The Constitutional Convention convened in June. When the amendment was placed on the floor, the legislators did not even discuss the issue; rather, they immediately cast their ballots. Only one delegate, Harvey Howes from West Haven, voted for the amendment. Clearly, the Vermonters were not comfortable with the idea of full suffrage for women. At least the year of publicity for the suffrage movement got people talking and thinking. *The Woman's Journal*, the AWSA publication, reported that in Vermont, “two persons cannot meet in the street without discussing woman suffrage.”¹⁹

The Push for School Suffrage:

The Temperance-Suffrage Connection (1880)

When the Civil War broke out, the suffrage movement ground to a halt as women helped with the war effort. After the war, the temperance movement had replaced abolition as the focal point for reformers. The Women's Christian Temperance Union provided an opportunity for women to support a cause that they believed in, while at the same time having an opportunity—possibly the first in their lives—to be involved in a woman-only organization, one that was socially sanctioned. Though a small step, the WCTU's involvement moved suffrage from the background onto center stage. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union was established in Cleveland in 1874. The Bennington WCTU was organized in March of 1875, four years before the Vermont WCTU, which, in 1879, immediately advocated for the right for women to vote in school committees: “The Christian women of Vermont ought to have more influence and power in suppressing intemperance; and as an indirect means to that end, we will petition the next Vermont Legislature to allow us to vote for school committees, hoping thereby that we may be able to place temperance textbooks in our public schools.”²⁰

In 1880, the measure was sent to the legislature and passed. But only tax-paying women, that is, women who owned property, could vote. Nationally, a WCTU organizer named Mary Hunt was paying close attention. She asked individual chapters to petition their school districts to demand that temperance instruction be added to the curriculum. She traveled around Vermont with Mrs. Perkins, the Vermont WCTU president, as they “bombed legislators with petitions, and attended open hearings on a proposed bill.”²¹ The bill was signed into law by the governor in 1882. So Vermont had the dubious honor of being the first state in the nation to add alcohol education to the curriculum. Twenty-two other states



Postcards were a popular tool in the campaign for suffrage.

Vermont Historical Society

prohibition and suffrage—a still controversial cause—to the platform was not a good idea: "Our state is in the hands of the minority as is the national WCTU. But we do not intend to continue to aid the partisanship of the leaders. We claim a right to our religious and political beliefs outside of the WCTU and will work against the saloon (and Democrats!)." ²²

In spite of the lack of support from temperance members in Bennington, the temperance movement at the state level played a major part in moving suffrage into the spotlight. In 1903 the Baptists held a convention in Bennington during which women were granted "an equal voice with the men" on the question of the license or prohibition. ²³ By 1905 the WCTU had begun to openly support suffrage. The Vermont Equal Suffrage Association Convention minutes include a letter from the WCTU president who had to be in Bennington at a WCTU meeting on the same date. In her letter she pointed out that both organizations were working on common goals, including "trying to create public sentiment in favor of woman's suffrage. . . . Not many years ago we had to avoid this question as much as possible lest someone might be offended. A minister's wife in conversation with me a few years ago, said in a whisper—'Yes down deep in

followed.

In 1881 Frances Willard, president of the national WCTU, formally endorsed suffrage. In 1889 she encouraged the WCTU to endorse the Prohibition Party, a decision that caused a split in the Vermont WCTU. Anna Park of Bennington, the Vermont WCTU president, withdrew from the organization and formed a splinter organization in Bennington County. Park's decision was based on her notion that the WCTU should be a single-issue organization. Even though the national organization indicated that state chapters did not have to follow in lock-step with the platform, Park was appalled at the notion of politicizing the movement.

In a pamphlet distributed across the state and republished in the *Banner*, she argued that adding support for

my heart I believe in woman's suffrage, but I dare not mention it." –Mrs. A.F. Smith, State Supt. Franchise, W.C.T.U.²⁴

Moving Toward Municipal Suffrage

Undaunted by the failed attempt toward full suffrage, the VWSA re-organized in 1883. At a state meeting in St. Johnsbury, the group decided to focus on women's suffrage in municipal elections, arguing that women who owned property had to pay taxes but were deprived of the right to vote. They recognized that municipal suffrage might provide an inroad to full suffrage, for reforms "are in a measure experimental and must from their nature be brought about gradually and by the strengthening and education of public sentiment."²⁵

Again they collaborated with the AWSA and held meetings across the state during the next year. They proposed "giving taxable female citizens a right to vote in town, village and fire district meetings." They were encouraged by the response to the bill when it was introduced on November 22, 1886. Of five speeches made on the floor, only one was opposed to the bill. Yet when the bill came up for a third reading, it failed. The *Daily Journal* reported, "the woman suffragists were highly elated by the vote ordering the municipal suffrage bill to a third reading, but a saneness came over them when the representatives, subsequently recovering from a quixotic freak, incontinently dismissed the bill."²⁶

In 1887 the VWSA proposed the bill yet another time. In a letter to the editor, Joseph B. Holton wrote: "Should this bill pass, Vermont which never had a slave . . . will have the added honor of being the first New England state to grant municipal suffrage to women."²⁷ Again the bill failed. It passed in the House but lost in the Senate by eight votes. The anti-suffragist organization from Boston had intervened and managed to change the minds of many legislators. The group introduced the bill a third time in 1888, with the usual high hopes of passage, this time because the WCTU and the Prohibition party had both endorsed the bill. But the sentiment against the bill across the state was growing; newspapers reported that women simply did not want the bill. This time the bill failed 192 to 37.

Every two years until 1917 the VWSA introduced the bill, only to see it fail in one branch of the legislature or the other. Why didn't the organization give up? Laura Moore of Barnet, its secretary for twenty-two years, explained that it was important to keep the suffrage cause in the minds of legislators and citizens.²⁸ By 1912, women had gained various forms of suffrage in Washington, Wyoming, California, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho, but not in Vermont. Finally, in February 1917 the legislation passed. Vermont was the first state in New England to grant women the



Members of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Weston before the 1910 convention. Vermont Historical Society

right to vote in municipal elections. The WWSA was well organized by then and continued to push for full voting rights, with enthusiasm growing across the state.

The Final Push

With municipal suffrage a huge success, suffragists planned the next phase of the movement, this time focusing on presidential suffrage. In 1907, the WWSA re-organized and renamed itself the Vermont Equal Suffrage Association (VESA), a name that strengthened the emphasis on equal rights. The push for suffrage slowed down somewhat after April 6, 1917, when the United States entered World War I. Women's work for the war effort, however, caused many Americans—including President Woodrow Wilson—to finally recognize that women deserved the vote.

In 1919, both houses of the Vermont legislature voted to give women the right to vote in presidential elections, but Governor Clement vetoed the legislation. Already across the country, thirty-five states had voted in favor of full suffrage for women. Only one more state was needed to ratify the U.S. Constitution granting women full suffrage. Tennessee and Vermont seemed to be the two states most likely to vote in favor of the amendment to the constitution, so national suffrage leaders focused their effort on those two states.

Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, helped Vermont leaders design a campaign to convince Clement to call a special session of the legislature. Of the many active women during this initiative were these three: Annette Parmelee, from Enosburgh Falls, Anna Hawks Putnam, from Bennington, and Mary Bennetts Spargo, also from Bennington. Each was also active in other reform movements that supported suffrage. And all three were part of the attempt to change Governor Clement's mind and enable Vermont to cross the finish line.

Annette Parmelee

Annette Parmelee was well known to legislators, who dubbed her the "Suffragette Hornet." Beginning in 1908, Parmelee gave regular addresses to the Vermont Legislature, attempting to persuade the legislators to grant women the right to vote in municipal elections. In November 1910 she spoke for almost an hour before arguing that if women had to pay taxes, they ought to be able to vote on matters for which their taxes were used, just like men. A native of Enosburgh Falls, Parmelee first began her public efforts in her support of temperance, becoming vice president of the Enosburgh Falls Women's Christian Temperance Union. She became the press secretary one year later. Parmelee gave speeches at VESA annual conventions, routinely offering strategies for members to gather support in their local communities. It may have been her work on temperance that taught her how necessary it would be for women to have voting rights the same as those of men.

Parmelee was invited by towns across the state to give lectures, which were always reported in key newspapers. In a talk titled "Woman's Place Defined," she posed a poignant question: "Some have placed us as fit to occupy a pedestal in some man's parlor, while others say our place is rocking the cradle in some man's kitchen. If every woman's place is 'in the home' why have not all women been given decent homes and decent husbands?" Referring to that talk, the *Herald and News* of Randolph reported that "Randolph has survived the shock occasioned by holding its first public meeting for disseminating equal suffrage wisdom."²⁹

Newspaper editors thoroughly enjoyed her and appreciated her spunk. They also took every opportunity to poke fun at her. For example, a correspondent for the *Bennington Banner* wrote: "I shouldn't wonder if some of the 'boys' were influenced by Annette's words."³⁰ Her continual advocacy for suffrage led the *Rutland News* to poke fun at her, writing, "In Iceland the women are allowed to vote. Why not locate in Iceland, Mrs. Annette W. Parmelee?" To which the *Brattleboro Reformer* responded, "But would Iceland be Iceland with Mrs. Parmelee there?"³¹ She thanked them

for not asking her to go to a “hotter place than Iceland.”³² In yet another attack in a *Rutland Herald* article entitled “He Has Heard from Annette,” the writer said that if Parmelee were living during the time of the Puritans, she would have been put on a board and dunked in a pond.³³ Depending upon whose side you were on, you either thought of her as “Annette the Suffragette” or “The Suffragette Hornet.”

Anna Hawks Putnam

Anna Hawks Putnam moved to Bennington in 1893 with her husband, Warren, a doctor (unrelated to hospital founder Henry W. Putnam). She was named secretary of the Vermont Branch of the National Child Labor Committee during its inaugural meeting in 1910 in Burlington.³⁴ In addition to working on child labor issues, Putnam was actively involved in both the statewide committee of the Vermont Federation of Women’s Club (VFWC) and the Fortnightly Club, a local affiliate of the national organization. She chaired the Industrial and Consumer’s League at the 1908 VRWC convention in St. Johnsbury, a position that she held for many years. Also, during World War I, she served as the state chair of the Vermont Division Woman’s Committee, Council of National Defense.

An accomplished speaker, Putnam gave talks across the state on both child labor and women in industry, reporting on working conditions. In a 1909 talk on “Women in Industry,” she disclosed that Vermont is the only New England state without laws to protect working women and proposed areas that club women might work on. She recommended a state department of factory and labor inspection.³⁵ In “Vermont and Child Labor,” published in the 1910 *Vermontier*, Putnam wrote of deplorable labor conditions children face. She asked, “Is it necessary that they should toil day after day ten and eleven hours? Does it tend toward their physical well-being to breathe marble dust, woolen dyes and cotton lint? But beyond this, will it improve their moral well-being?” No children should be allowed to work more than eight hours a day and those under fourteen should not work in these jobs at any time of the year, she demanded.³⁶

Although more widely known for her work on child labor reform, Anna Hawks Putnam was a strong advocate for equal suffrage. The “Woman’s Page” editor for *The Advance*, a Burlington weekly published in 1915 and 1916, Putnam explained that “all of the big questions of social import are included in the feminist agenda: temperance, peace, child labor . . . and so ad infinitum.” She added, “To some extent through its efforts the hours of labor for working women have been shortened.”³⁷

In a letter to the *Banner*, Putnam posed this question: “Vermont was the first state in the union to adopt universal manhood suffrage. Why not the first New England state to bestow presidential suffrage upon its women?”

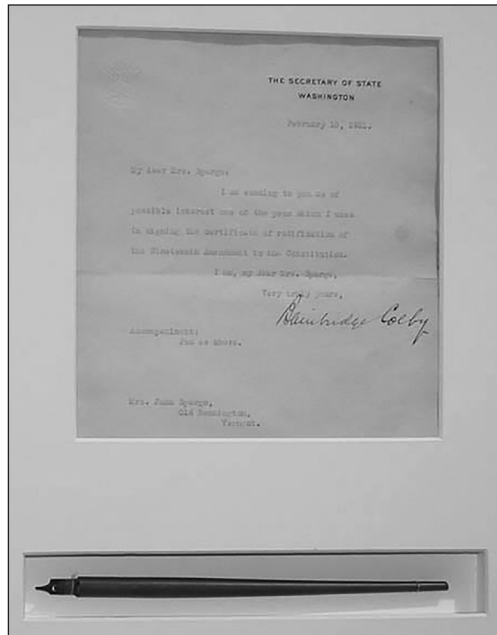
Is there a specific reason for Vermont's granting this privilege to her women during this coming legislature?" Her answer: "Yes, enthusiastically."³⁸

Mary Bennetts Spargo (1880-1953)

Though John Spargo is best known in Bennington as founder and first curator-director of the Bennington Museum and nationally as a prominent socialist and writer, his second wife, Mary Bennetts Spargo, was prominent in Vermont's state suffrage movement. Born in London to Frederick M. Bennetts and Anna Smith, she came to New York in 1882 and worked in a carpet mill. It was there, in 1904, that she met John Spargo, a recent widower. After they married, they lived

in Yonkers and managed Prospect House, one of many settlement houses in New York.³⁹ In 1909, the Spargos were invited by friends to live in a house in Old Bennington so that he could recover from poor health.⁴⁰ They later purchased the 34 Monument Avenue home and lived there the rest of their lives. John lectured locally, nationally, and internationally about topics ranging from Marxism to child labor to woman suffrage. Mary took part in Bennington women's groups, including the Bennington Woman Voter's Association, serving as its vice president. She sang in the Community Choral Club and was active in the Fortnightly Club, an affiliate of the General Federated Women's Clubs, which promoted volunteer service and in 1914 supported suffrage for women.

Mary's local involvement set the stage for her statewide effort for equal suffrage. She attended every Vermont Equal Suffrage Association (VESA) conference from 1916 to 1920 and was its auditor from 1917 to 1920. John lent his support to the suffrage cause by writing letters to the editor of newspapers across the state, pointing out the importance of granting women



Letter from Bainbridge Colby, secretary of state, to Mary Bennetts Spargo with the pen he used to sign the constitutional amendment that gave women the right to vote in national elections.

Bennington Museum collection

full voting rights. He also organized a group of male suffrage supporters to meet with the governor and attempt to convince him to call a special session.

As one of VESA's executive board members, Mary collected thousands of signatures from men and women supporting equal suffrage. The signed petitions were delivered to Governor Percival Clement in 1920, as part of the effort to convince him to call a special session of the legislature. When Mary died in 1953, her obituary, published in the *New York Times*, portrayed her as "a pioneer worker in the national women's suffrage movement" and said that, "as one of the first women in the successful drive for women's suffrage, she canvassed the entire state of Vermont for signatures . . . and was one of the three recipients of pens used to sign the suffrage legislation."⁴¹

Conclusion

The high point in the campaign for a special session occurred in April 1920. Almost 400 women from across the state marched in a pouring rain to the Statehouse for two meetings at 5 and 8 o'clock. They packed into the meeting room wearing yellow badges and jonquils and made their arguments. Governor Clement's response was a model of political obfuscation:

I do not know that there is anything I would care to say at the present time, only that I am pleased to see you here, as I said this afternoon. I think all of these meetings do go and create interest in the thing that you are asking—that you are in favor of. I have not been at any time opposed to suffrage and have taken no position on that question. Whenever the State of Vermont shall pass upon that question, in whatever the state decides to do we shall all acquiesce.

I think it very desirable that the state—and when I say the state, I do not mean part of the state; I mean the people who hold the right of suffrage, should control this question. I think those people who have the right to express their wish in regard to this important matter, are the ones to whom we should leave the decision. I think that you agree with me in this that that is what we should do in the matter.

In other words, let the men of Vermont vote on whether the women of Vermont should have the right to vote in national elections.

Clement's official reason for not calling a special session was that the amendment "invades the Constitution of Vermont," since the legislators had

been elected before the amendment was considered. More likely, Clement had an underlying reason for opposing woman suffrage. He realized that many of the women who were working for suffrage had also been active in the temperance effort and were members of the WCTU. Further, in January 1919, Prohibition had been approved as the 18th Amendment to the U.S Constitution. Hopeful that it might someday be overturned, Clement may have feared that giving women the vote in national elections might lead to their supporting the continuation of Prohibition should it come up for a national vote.

Some supporters of equal suffrage in Vermont even hoped for a bit of skullduggery to enable the legislation to pass and be signed into law. Warren G. Harding was the Republican candidate for President at that time, and he asked Governor Clement to meet with him. That gave a number of Vermonters the idea that, if Clement were to leave the state to meet with Harding, Lieutenant Governor Mason Stone, as acting governor, could convene a special session of the legislature. They would pass legislation giving women the right to vote in national elections, and Stone would sign it into law before Clement returned. As it turned out, that never happened.

On August 18, 1920, Tennessee crossed the finish line, becoming the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment, ensuring that voting rights could not be denied based on sex. Women across the nation would be able to vote in the next presidential election, even women in states that had not yet ratified the amendment.

And so, on November 2, 1920, the lines at the polls in Bennington and across Vermont were long – women had the right to vote, and vote they did. The *Brattleboro Reformer* noted that those who thought that “the American woman, especially the New England woman, as a rule didn't want to vote and wouldn't vote if she could, met enlightenment yesterday – enough to persuade even the most stubborn of them of their error.”⁴² The victory for equal suffrage in Vermont came as a result of the efforts of women – and many men – working for over 70 years to establish the right to vote in school district, municipal, and national elections, overcoming competing priorities, such as prohibition vs. suffrage, and committing themselves to keep up the effort, despite the political losses over time.

On Feb. 8, 1921, the Vermont legislature finally ratified the 19th Amendment—three months after Vermont women had voted in the first presidential election. □

Notes:

1. *Bennington Banner*, Nov. 3, 1920.
2. *Bennington Banner*, Nov. 2, 1920.
3. For example, early meetings of the Vermont Equal Suffrage Association were held in the following towns: Barton Landing, 1885; Danby, 1886; Barton Landing, 1887; Bellows Falls, 1888; Barre, 1889; Bradford, 1890; Lyndonville, 1891; Sutton, 1892; Hardwick, 1893; Barton, 1894; Peacham, 1895; Montpelier, 1896; Burlington, 1897; South Royalton, 1898; Bellows Falls, 1899; Waterbury Center, 1900; Rochester, 1901; Concord, 1902; Barton, 1903; Woodstock, 1904; Springfield, 1905; Brattleboro, 1906; Burlington, 1907; Rochester, 1913.
4. Bennington's anti-slavery society was founded in 1837. The group combined with Shaftsbury in 1839 to form the "Shaftsbury and Bennington Union Anti-slavery Society (*Vermont Telegraph*, Feb. 10, 1887). See also *Vermont Gazette*, November 5, 1833.
5. *The Vermont Gazette*, Dec. 14, 1819, includes the constitution of the American Colonization Society. This group believed in moving slaves back to Africa (colonizing them) rather than freeing them in the states.
6. Marilyn S. Blackwell, "Women Were Among Our Primeval Abolitionists: Women and Organized Antislavery in Vermont, 1834-1848," *Vermont History* 82:1 (Winter/Spring 2014), pp.14-34.
7. *Vermont Telegraph*, July 14, 1841, p. 172
8. Women had been introduced into some leadership roles within the wing of the abolitionist movement that William Lloyd Garrison led.
9. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper (eds.) *History of Woman Suffrage*, New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881-1922.
10. Vermont, Acts and Resolves Passed By the Legislature of the State of Vermont at their October Session 1847, Burlington, 1847.
11. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper (eds.) *History of Woman Suffrage*, New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881-1922.
12. *Vermont Christian Messenger*, Montpelier, November 3, 1852.
13. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper (eds.) *History of Woman Suffrage*, New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881-1922.
14. Paul S. Gillies and D. Gregory Sanford, eds. *Records of the Council of Censors of the State of Vermont*. Montpelier, 1991, p. 680. The Council of Censors, established in the Vermont Constitution, had the power to review the actions of the legislature to determine whether it had functioned within the intent of the Constitution, whether taxes were appropriately established, collected, and used, and whether the laws of the State were appropriate. It could censure an action, but could not change or repeal it. Also, it could convene a constitutional convention to review and possibly amend the Constitution.
15. Deborah S. Clifford. "An Invasion Of Strong-Minded Women: The Newspapers and the Suffrage Campaign In Vermont in 1870. *Vermont History*. Winter 1975, Vol. 43, No. 1. pp. 1-19
16. Cliffords, *Invasion*, p. 6
17. Cliffords, *Invasion*, p. 6
18. Cliffords, *Invasion*, p. 6
19. *Women's Journal*, April 2, 1870.
20. Tyler, Helen E. *Where Prayer And Purpose Meet: the WCTU Story, 1874-1949*, Evanston, Ill.: Signal Press, 1949.
21. Mezvinsky, Norton. "Scientific Temperance Instruction in the Schools." *History of Education Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1961): pp. 48-56.
22. *Banner*, September 1889.
23. *Annual Report of the Vermont Woman's Suffrage Association and Minutes of the 19th Convention*,

- Barton, Vermont, June 9 and 10, 1903.
24. *Twenty-first annual report of Vermont Woman's Suffrage Association and Minutes of the Annual Convention at Springfield, Vermont, 1905*. Retrieved from University of Vermont Libraries Digital Collections.
 25. *Minutes of the Suffrage Convention of St. Johnsbury*, Nov. 8 and 9, 1883. Retrieved from University of Vermont Libraries Digital Collections.
 26. *Daily Journal* (Montpelier) Nov. 25, 1884.
 27. *Daily Journal* (Montpelier), Nov. 9, 1896.
 28. *Woman's Journal*, 1903, p. 240.
 29. *Herald and News*, Jan. 8, 1917.
 30. "Women and the Ballot," Letter to the Editor, *Banner*, May 25, 1914, p. 2.
 31. Quoted in the *Rutland Daily Herald*, July 13, 1915, p. 4.
 32. Quoted by Marilyn Blackwell, *Enosburgh Historical Society Newsletter*, July, 2020.
 33. *Rutland Herald*, Nov. 29, 1909, p. 4.
 34. Tony Marro, "Biographical Sketch of Anna Hawks Putnam." Included in *Biographical Database of NAWSA Suffragists, 1890-1920*.
 35. *The Vermonter*: Volume 15, January 1910, and *Rutland Daily Herald*, Nov.16, 1909
 36. *The Vermonter*: Volume 15, January 1910.
 37. *The Advance*, April 29, 1916.
 38. *Banner*, Jan. 17, 1917.
 39. A Settlement House was a home for poor immigrants who lived together and took part in cultural and social activities together.
 39. Tony Marro, "John Spargo: The Socialist Founder of the Bennington Museum," *Walloomsack Review*, Volume 15, *Spring 2015*.
 40. *Banner*, March 13, 1920.
 41. Obituary, *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1953.
 42. *Brattleboro Reformer*, Nov. 5, 1920.