

The fight for women's suffrage in Lycoming County

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

Historians consider the Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 to be the beginning of the fight for women's right to vote in the United States.

The convention, attended by several hundred women and men, was organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, two abolitionists who had met at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London.

The women delegates issued their own declaration of independence, beginning "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all

men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." Their "Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances" detailed the injustices inflicted upon women in the United States and called on U.S. women to organize and petition for their rights.

In Pennsylvania, the new reform movement took root in Quaker Philadelphia as an anti-slavery adjunct, the same people being interested in both movements.

The first convention of suffragists took place in 1869. After that,

leading suffragists began making speaking tours, and Williamsport, by then a center of the lumber industry with many influential citizens, was an important stop.

Visits of early

suffragists to Williamsport

Elizabeth Cady Stanton lectured in Williamsport in November 1869.

On her way here from New York, she took the wrong train from Harrisburg and was obliged to spend the night traveling.

"However," she wrote in her diary, "I lived through the trial and arrived at Williamsport as the day dawned. I had a good audience at the opera house that evening and was introduced to many agreeable people who declared themselves converted to woman suffrage by my ministrations."

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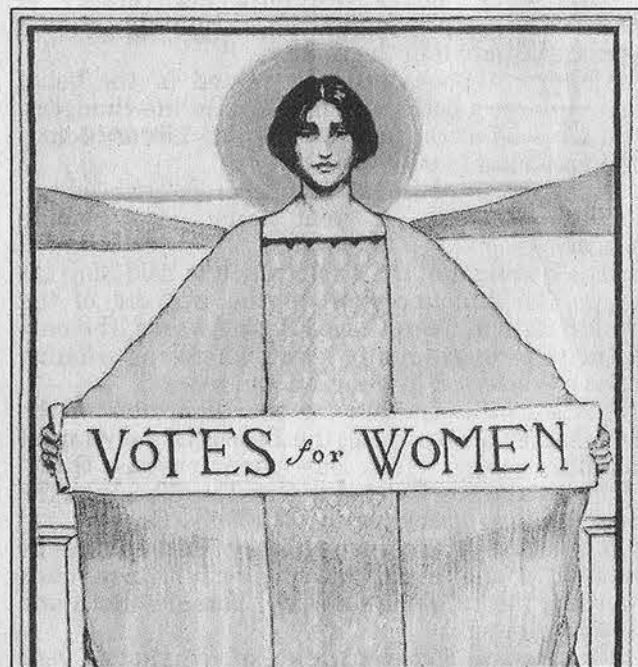


PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is a "Votes for Women" poster, which was widely circulated in 1911.

Lifestyle

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Susan B. Anthony, another pioneer of the women's suffrage movement, visited Williamsport in November 1870. Like Stanton, Anthony spoke at the Ulman Opera House. Her lecture was entitled "False Theories," and the Gazette and Bulletin reported that it was met with applause.

Anthony's "false theory" was "the delusive idea entertained by such large number of women that they are simply born to be supported."

She urged the women in the audience to prepare to work in the trades and the professions and stated that fathers should encourage their daughters to do the same.

Another leader of the suffrage movement, Lucretia Coffin Mott, a Philadelphia Quaker, had spoken in Williamsport decades earlier, in 1842, when she was on tour advocating for the abolitionist cause.

Despite their best efforts, the founding mothers saw little progress during the latter part of the nineteenth century in getting the vote for women on either the state or the national level.

Progressive era

According to the National Women's History Museum, a coincidence of events at the turn of the century helped to revitalize the suffrage movement. The Progressive Era, spanning from about 1890 to 1925, "gave new life to all reform efforts. Millions of women from all ethnic, class and racial backgrounds entered public life to address severe social problems through inno-

vative reforms. As women's roles in society expanded so did the activism that politicized women and brought them into mainstream politics."

The Progressive movement took hold in Williamsport, where women founded many organizations, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Home for the Friendless, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Home for Aged Colored Women. The mode of action in Pennsylvania was educational and generally peaceful, with women organizing in clubs, leagues, or branches of the Woman Suffrage Party. The Civic Club, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the College Club, the Home and School League, the Business and Professional Women's Club and the Clio Club Civic Department were all very active in the suffrage movement.

They held open meetings; spoke at schools, churches, the courthouse, and the county fair; distributed literature throughout the city; and sponsored and attended state conventions.

Groups elsewhere were much more radical. Alice Paul, influenced by British suffragists, founded the National Woman's Party. She organized a large demonstration in Washington, D.C., at the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson in 1913.

According to the Alice Paul Institute, the suffragists arrested at that demonstration were sent to Occoquan Workhouse, a prison in Virginia, where they staged hunger strikes.

By all accounts, Paul and her compatriots were treated brutally. She and several other suffragists were force-fed, and

prison officials removed Paul to a sanitarium in hopes having her declared insane.

In 1917, in response to public outcry about the prison abuse of suffragists, President Wilson reversed his position and announced his support for a suffrage amendment. In 1919, Congress passed the 19th amendment, first drafted 41 years earlier by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A year later, it was ratified by the requisite number of states and became law.

Local activists

Among the many Lycoming County women whose names were frequently associated with the suffrage movement (in addition to Henrietta Baldy Lyon, profiled in the Williamsport Women series in March) were Mrs. Robert Fleming Allen, Mrs. Newton C. Chatham and Mary Elizabeth Crocker.

Mrs. Robert Fleming Allen, of South Williamsport, born Edith Bennington, chaired the local suffrage movement while she still had young children at home. After the death of Robert Allen, she married Renshaw C. DeWitt. Later, as Mrs. Edith DeWitt, she played an exceptionally active role in local and state politics and in the Democratic Party. She was elected a delegate to the national presidential nominating conventions in 1924 and 1943, and she served as Pennsylvania's Deputy Secretary for Welfare and Deputy State Treasurer.

In 1930, she ran for the office of Secretary for Internal Affairs, but was defeated.

Mrs. Newton C. Chatham, born Louise Lazelere, was very active in local civic groups, as



PHOTO PROVIDED

This photo from the May 9, 1915, edition of the Grit shows the City Suffrage Committee. None of the women in the photograph are named. If any readers are able to identify any of the committee members, contact Sieminski.

well as chairing the local suffrage group. In 1911, she was the first female candidate for Williamsport School Committee, a post she did not win. At 48, she began to pursue her life-long dream of studying law, entering Boston University Law School (while her son was a student at M.I.T.). After graduating magna cum laude, she was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1923. She was the first woman ever admitted to the bar in Lycoming County.

Mary Elizabeth Crocker, a librarian who graduated from Drexel University in 1905, was another chair of the local suffrage movement. After working in the New York Public Library, she returned to her hometown of Williamsport and in 1906 was appointed first assistant to O. R. Howard Thompson, the first director of

the brand new James V. Brown Library.

The first presidential election in which women could vote was the 1920 contest in which Warren G. Harding, Republican, defeated the Democratic contender, James M. Cox. On election night, the Williamsport YWCA hosted an open house for the women of Lycoming County, giving them an opportunity to attend a general rally and to listen to the election returns. Local activists celebrated the dream that had come true because of their hard work and steadfastness.

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