



“A Vast Host of Consecrated Women”

New Scholarship on Minnesota’s Woman Suffrage and Women’s Rights Movement

Kristin Mapel Bloomberg, guest editor

IN THE FALL OF 2017, I pitched the idea of a special issue focused on woman suffrage to *Minnesota History* editor Laura Weber. As the centenary of the Nineteenth Amendment approached, the history of woman suffrage and women’s rights was attracting renewed interest, and I wanted to ensure Minnesota’s history would attract equal interest. The end result is this double issue, which presents new scholarship from researchers whose topics I introduce in this essay. Collectively, their articles highlight the reform efforts of a variety of activists and organizations, revealing that the state’s progressive effort was sustained for decades. This is necessary scholarship. As contributor Elizabeth Dillenburg notes in “Looking Back and Looking Forward,” (p. 94) a paucity of women’s history topics, including woman suffrage, characterizes the volumes of *Minnesota History*. And, despite some notable exceptions, scholarship beyond the journal is too

often influenced by an inherited history centered on, and purposefully shaped by, the victorious officeholders of woman suffrage organizations who stood in the winner’s circle when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. This has concealed the decades of difficult work mobilizing for woman suffrage and women’s rights, resulting in a triumphalist history focused on the achievement of the Nineteenth Amendment.

The essays presented in this issue reflect the history field’s new approach to woman suffrage and women’s rights, and offer a broader view that goes beyond the narrow, highly crafted story promoted by the leaders of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) following ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Instead, our authors highlight subjects that amplify the traditional woman suffrage narrative to explore how ethnicity, race, class, gender, and rural location influenced Minnesota’s movement. They reveal the variety of women who contributed to the effort that culminated in Minnesota’s ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on September 8, 1919—of that event, Minnesota suffragist Maud Stockwell explained, “On that memorable day the curtain was rung down on the last act of the drama of seventy-two years, in which a vast host of consecrated

National American Woman Suffrage Association gathering, 1910.
(MNHS COLLECTIONS)



women had parts, inspired by a faith in the ultimate attainment of justice.”¹

MINNESOTA’S WOMAN SUFFRAGE story reflects, but also diverges from, the national story. Like suffragists elsewhere, Minnesota women established associations and used petitions, lobbying, and lectures to promote their cause; however, Minnesota was not always dominated by just one organization affiliated with NAWSA. At times, independent suffrage associations flourished and eclipsed MWSA membership. What is more, Minnesota women of nondominant race or ethnicity established influential suffrage associations that worked with, or parallel to, the state’s dominant-culture suffrage associations.

Minnesota’s woman suffrage story reflects, but also diverges from, the national story.

Tracing the chronology of Minnesota’s movement that begins to emerge in the pages of this issue reveals the threads connecting the state’s story to regional, national, and international ones, prompting new ways of thinking about Minnesota’s movement. The early decades of statehood showed that Minnesota held progressive promise. For example, the state’s earliest and longest-lived woman suffrage association, the Political Equality Club of Minneapolis (originally the Woman Suffrage Club of Minneapolis), was established in 1868, the same year

that Black men were included as Minnesota voters—and two years before the Fifteenth Amendment. Minnesota’s early woman suffrage efforts focused on legislative action, which contributor Linda Cameron documents via petitions in favor of woman suffrage submitted to the Minnesota Legislature throughout the 1860s (p. 98). The first woman suffrage bill was introduced in 1869, followed in 1870 by an ill-fated state constitutional amendment for woman suffrage that was never presented to voters. Had it been approved, Minnesota would have been the first state to grant suffrage to women through a popular vote.²

Despite this failure, there were achievements. In 1875, Minnesota was likely the first to pass a state or territorial constitutional amendment explicitly granting women the right to vote on local school matters and to be elected to school boards. The decade of the 1870s also saw the beginning of organized reform activity that brought together like-minded people, notably in the 1877 founding of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) of Minnesota, which became an avenue for cultivating women’s political leadership. Contributor Frederick L. Johnson examines this development in a new history of Julia B. Nelson—a prominent WCTU speaker and founding member of MWSA—that exposes the links between WCTU activism, the expansion of progressive networks that favored woman suffrage, and the skills built by speakers and organizers like Nelson who used them for decades of woman suffrage activism (p. 104).³

In the 1880s, Minnesota women entered more public municipal, political, and social roles, and the woman suffrage and women’s rights movement strengthened and diversified. From the WCTU emerged the leaders who

assisted in the formation of the MWSA in 1881, uniting local suffrage clubs. Many Minnesota women saw the vote as a means to larger social reforms that would improve both home and public life. Women not only occupied the domestic realm but also filled roles in factories and as teachers, business owners, and farmers—while simultaneously serving as social leaders in clubs and religious organizations. In 1885, Minnesota women gained the ability to vote for county school superintendents—but they had to submit their votes to a separate ballot box for women.⁴

The 1890s were a pivotal decade, with developments both promising and discouraging. Through one constitutional amendment in 1898, Minnesota women gained the ability to vote for and serve on municipal library boards. Women's social and political culture matured as they activated their power through the growth of what historians call “organized womanhood.” Beyond the WCTU, other groups engaged different populations of women. In 1893, the St. Paul and Minneapolis sections of the Council of Jewish Women were established as charter members of the National Council of Jewish Women. Two years later, in 1895, the Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs united a variety of associations under the banner of the General Federation of Women's Clubs—but the federation excluded the state's Black women's associations, which would unite in 1905 through the Minnesota Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. All these clubs were important responses to the social upheavals of the late nineteenth century, when emigration and immigration fractured old ways of social organizing and created a new social sorting process as the middle class developed itself in racial, ethnic, and white communities.⁵

Women's clubwork refined their public leadership skills and further expanded their social and political networks. The end of the decade, however, generated a significant barrier to woman suffrage. In 1898, the same year Minnesota women gained the right to vote in library elections, voters also approved a constitutional amendment that made passing future amendments to the state constitution extremely difficult. Now, a majority of all voters in an election were required to vote “yes” on an amendment; abstaining on a question was effectively a “no” vote. The favored approach to achieving woman suffrage—amending the state's constitution—was no longer a practical option in Minnesota. Early twentieth-century suffragists needed to regroup.⁶

And regroup they did. Minnesota's woman suffrage movement now engaged additional communities and established new, non-legislative strategies designed to draw attention to the cause and unite supporters. Suffrage

associations beyond MWSA flourished, representing diverse memberships of race, class, ethnicity, and age. For example, the Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association was formed in 1907; the Minnesota Equal Franchise League and the Women's Welfare League in 1912; the Everywoman Suffrage Club (later, the Everywoman Progressive Council) in 1914; and the Minnesota branch of the Congressional Union (later, the National Woman's Party) in 1915.

A FOCUS ON INCLUSION ushered in new suffrage strategies embraced by a younger and more varied population interested in the cause, and the years around World War I emerged as a turning point. Black women worked for suffrage through the Everywoman Suffrage Club, led by Nellie Griswold Francis, and contributor William D. Green's analysis of her efforts demonstrates how Francis combined her suffrage work with activism on behalf of Minnesota's Black community (p. 128). Also during this period, suffragists expanded their reach beyond urban areas to rural ethnic Minnesotans. Men immigrants to Minnesota could vote upon declaring their intention to become citizens; however, organizing for woman suffrage among rural populations with strong cultural identities posed unique difficulties. Contributor Sara Egge confirms it was especially difficult to organize German immigrants, who experienced discrimination during World War I (p. 116). However, suffragists successfully infused their woman suffrage appeal with aspects of the emerging patriotism movement that celebrated immigrant loyalty to America.

In both urban and rural areas, suffragists occupied Minnesota's streets—previously men's territory—popularizing the cause through open-air meetings, parades and rallies, and automobile caravans. They knew performance activism could strengthen solidarity and shift public opinion, as it did during Minnesota's grand suffrage parade in 1914. Yet suffragists needed to carefully balance political activism with restrictive gender performance codes; as a result, they chose means that would not undermine their messaging. Contributor Annette Atkins thus explores how suffragists used clothing and costume to convey gender-appropriate political messages and shows that clothing was—and remains—a powerful symbolic form of feminist activism (p. 140).

Dissatisfied with the slow-moving strategies advocated by MWSA and NAWSA, new organizations proliferated in the 1910s, most notably the Congressional Union, which in 1916 became the National Woman's Party. Inspired by the American suffragist Alice Paul and British suffragettes Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst, for a few years, Minnesota's National Woman's Party might have been the largest suffrage organization in the state. Contributor Jacqueline R.

deVries traces the Pankhursts' influence as popular speakers who drew record crowds of Minnesotans, galvanized supporters throughout the state, and were reported on and discussed in Minnesota's non-English-language press (p. 146). Like their national colleagues, Minnesota's National Woman's Party members were willing to engage in radical strategies beyond the sedate halls of the state legislature. Contributor J. D. Zahniser demonstrates how some Minnesota women took up more militant efforts, if not in their home state, then in Washington, DC, where they picketed the White House under the banners of the Minnesota branch of the National Woman's Party and the Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association (p. 154). As a result of their civil disobedience in the nation's capital, Minnesota women were harassed, arrested, and imprisoned. But despite their robust contributions to both the state and national woman suffrage movement, the efforts of the National Woman's Party in Minnesota have remained largely hidden under the shadow of the MWSA.

The increased suffrage activism of the 1910s spurred opposition from Minnesota women such as Lavinia Gilfillan, who was a typical anti-suffragist: an elite white woman who occupied the same social circles as many MWSA members. Contributor Hannah Dyson reveals how Minnesota's anti-suffrage efforts reflected national anti-suffrage activities, which promoted preservation of the gendered, racialized, and classed status quo (p. 163). Minnesota's anti-suffragists also used tactics similar to those used by the state's suffragists, including the distribution of material translated into German and Scandinavian languages.

THE CLOSE OF THE 1910S saw a new objective: presidential suffrage for women. This form of women's limited suffrage bypassed the state's difficult constitutional amendment requirements by requiring only legislative approval. Suffragists achieved their goal on March 24, 1919, when the Minnesota Legislature established women's right to vote in presidential elections if they met the same requirements as male voters. Ultimately, suffragists completed their task when a little more than five months later, the Minnesota Legislature met in special session on September 8, 1919, to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which in the following year would lift the prohibition on women voting for all elected offices.⁷

As is apparent from this overview, generations of Minnesota's woman suffrage and women's rights activists worked in political climates from the Civil War to the Progressive Era and through World War I. Increasingly through time, these activists came from diverse backgrounds to campaign for women's votes either separately or alongside suffragists of the dominant culture. Yet,

Minnesota's suffragists were multifaceted human actors who held conflicting points of view even as they worked for a radically progressive cause. As a result, other themes emerge from the scholarship presented in this issue of *Minnesota History* that both confirm and complicate traditional woman suffrage histories. Minnesota's woman suffrage movement reflected the complexities and contradictions found nationally, especially those relating to race, ethnicity, and class. Racist, ethnocentric, and anti-immigrant arguments were made by some of Minnesota's suffrage and anti-suffrage leaders, who occasionally structured their rhetoric to appease moderate white or Yankee voters who might support their cause. However, Minnesota suffragists also advocated for Black civil rights and ethnic inclusion, forged coalitions, and established integrated associations across the lines of class, ethnicity, and race to work together for woman suffrage. These positive points of collaboration among Minnesota's activist groups perhaps reveal a different approach to woman suffrage and women's rights than what was seen regionally or nationally.

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This issue's scholarship moves Minnesota's historical narrative forward and offers pathways to future research on the state's involvement in one of the largest and longest reform movements in American history. What's collected here is not comprehensive, and this issue is notably missing an assessment of American Indian women's roles in Minnesota's woman suffrage and women's rights movement. American Indian citizenship—and therefore suffrage for both Indigenous women and men—was restricted in Minnesota until 1960. Future scholarship would benefit, for example, from Minnesota-focused histories of women like Elizabeth Bender Cloud, an Ojibwe woman raised on the White Earth reservation and the first American Indian to lead the Indian Affairs Division of the General Federation of Women's Clubs; or Marie Bottineau Baldwin, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, and a suffragist who marched with other women lawyers in the 1913 Washington, DC, suffrage parade.⁸

Scholarship on Minnesota's woman suffrage and women's rights movement has been hindered by limited

archival preservation influenced by decades of gender, race, and class prejudices. Researchers were further disadvantaged when the 2020 coronavirus pandemic closed libraries and archives, forcing scholars who were also teachers to shift their attention to online education. Yet, new avenues have allowed researchers access to digital repositories such as the Minnesota Digital Newspaper Hub and Chronicling America to locate their subjects, providing the authors featured in this issue of *Minnesota History* with primary sources that expose a broader woman suffrage story. To highlight this approach, we offer snapshots of the discussions about woman suffrage and women's rights found on those pages, including Minnesota's non-English-language and immigrant communities, indigenous communities, and the African American community. It is our hope that after learning more about these rich historical repositories, researchers will be inspired to delve further into these archives.

The centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment has provided our authors with the opportunity to write new histories about woman suffrage and women's rights in Minnesota, to extend the scholarship listed in the bibliography on the next page. Our authors' contributions help us further decenter the usual historical narrative and contemplate how Minnesota's woman suffrage and women's rights movement paralleled or diverged from national or regional expressions of the cause. As a result, this issue of *Minnesota History* invites its readers to consider some of the "vast host of consecrated women" who worked for decades,

and provides a foundation for future exploration. With this in mind, continued research could perhaps be guided by questions such as, how did Minnesota activists support, and also oppose, the prejudices held by many Americans at various points in time? Or, what were the greater effects of the National Woman's Party on Minnesota's movement? And, what is the history of Minnesota's limited presidential suffrage for women, passed months before the state ratified the Nineteenth Amendment? Addressing these questions can cast a new light that will better illuminate the national story of woman suffrage.

Above all, this issue of *Minnesota History* is an invitation to join the discussion and discover more about how Minnesota's woman suffrage and women's rights activists furthered their goals. Happy reading, and I look forward to the conversations. ▣

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Notes

1. Maud C. Stockwell, "Suffrage in Minnesota," *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women*, ed. Mary Dillon Foster (St. Paul: The editor, 1924), 317.

2. General Laws of Minnesota for 1868, Chapter 106, 149–51, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1868/0/General+Laws/Chapter/106/pdf/>. On Black male suffrage in Minnesota, see Wayne Gannaway, "The Perils of Peace: Frederick Douglass, Winona, and Civil Rights in Minnesota after the Civil War," *Minnesota History* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 74–84. Until their disfranchisement in 1807, single, property-owning women voted in New Jersey, a right initially granted to them by the state constitution. Wyoming (1869) and Utah (1870) established woman suffrage in their territorial constitutions. Wyoming was the first state to grant women full suffrage, in 1890. Colorado was the first state to grant women suffrage through a popular vote, in 1893.

3. Laws of Minnesota for 1875, Chapter 2, 18–19, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1875/0/General+Laws/Chapter/2/pdf/>; Kathryn A.

Nicholas, "Reexamining Women's Nineteenth-Century Political Agency: School Suffrage and Office-Holding," *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 3 (2018): 468. Nicholas's research indicates the following states or territories extended some other form of school suffrage to women prior to Minnesota: Colorado, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Indiana, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Minnesota (1875), Colorado (1876), Wisconsin (1885), and North Dakota (1889) established it a constitutional right.

4. General Laws of Minnesota for 1885, Chapter 204, 275, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1885/0/General+Laws/Chapter/204/pdf/>.

5. General Laws of Minnesota for 1897, Chapter 175, 331–32, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1897/0/General+Laws/Chapter/175/pdf/>.

6. General Laws of Minnesota for 1897, Chapter 185, 345–46, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1897/0/General+Laws/Chapter/185/pdf/>.

7. Session Laws of Minnesota for 1919, Chapter 80, HF no. 222, 89, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1919/0/Session+Law/Chapter/80/pdf/>; Special Session Laws of Minnesota for 1919, Joint Resolution Ratifying a Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, 105–6, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/data/revisor/law/1919/1/1919-SP-R01.pdf>. Minnesota was the fifteenth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.

8. For these voting rights in Minnesota, see 1857 Constitution of Minnesota, Article 7, Section 1: Elective Franchise, and General Laws of Minnesota for 1950, Chapter 696, 1359–60, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1950/0/Session+Law/Chapter/696/pdf/>. For Elizabeth Bender Cloud, see Lisa Tetzloff, "Elizabeth Bender Cloud: 'Working for and with Our Indian People,'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, no. 3 (2009): 77–115. For Marie Bottineau Baldwin, see Cathleen D. Cahill, "Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin: Indigenizing the Federal Indian Service," *American Indian Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2013): 65–86.

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