

## A Brief History of Women's Suffrage in South Carolina



Voting is the most basic way that citizens participate in our political system, the foundation for the concept of representation, and a central tenet in the make-up of America's government. For the first part of America's history, however, this right was reserved exclusively for white males. Even before groups began organizing for women's suffrage, American women had already been making themselves heard as activists for change, particularly in the movement to abolish slavery. Two such women, the courageous Grimké sisters from Charleston, SC, were significant champions of women's rights and participants in the antislavery movement beginning in the 1830's and continuing through the Civil War years. Banished from South Carolina, they traveled throughout the Northern states, using writing and public speech to spread the movement for abolition and women's rights. When Angelina Grimké went before the Massachusetts legislature to speak against slavery in 1838 she became the first woman to speak before a U.S. legislative body. After a two-century struggle for freedom, slavery was abolished, and African Americans were finally granted the right to vote in 1869 with the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Yet after some debate, the word "male" was placed into the language of the amendment, excluding both black and white women from the right to vote.

The first cries for women's suffrage came in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY. Two prominent early suffragists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, led the first convention on women's rights: the beginning of a long and challenging road to the ballot box. In South Carolina, the movement began to gain momentum in the 1880's. Yet in a state that held old traditions dear, suffragists were faced with great resistance to their efforts. South Carolina was still recovering from the Civil War, and the historic association of women's suffrage advocates with abolition made many people in this former Confederate state wary. Virginia Durant Young of Fairfax, an early suffragist, sponsored an 1890 women's rights conference in Greenville with Adelaide Neblett, and organized the first South Carolina Equal Rights Association. Mrs. Young traveled the state, gaining support for the movement, usually from members of women's church organizations, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). These organizations were important precursors to the suffrage movement because they gave individuals an opportunity to organize with other women, outside of the home, for social change. One such woman, Abbie Christensen, of Beaufort and Boston, joined the S.C. Equal Rights Association in 1891. Christensen had ties to suffrage groups in the North and the South, and became an important player in the movement in this state. Her son, Neils Christensen, would later become a S.C. senator. He was a voice for the women's suffrage movement in the Senate, sponsoring ratification each of the 40 years he served, at Mrs. Salley's behest.

In 1895, the movement experienced a great flurry of activity when the government of South Carolina held a constitutional convention. The suffrage activists seized this opportunity to be heard and presented their case to S.C. legislators. Over the course of the convention, many women activists and supportive male legislators argued for an amendment to the constitution. To the great disappointment of the suffragists, in October of 1895 the proposed amendment was soundly defeated by 121 to 26 votes. Disheartened, but refusing to give up, the small but active suffrage movement in South Carolina continued to strive for justice through the turn of the century.

Following the death of Virginia Durant Young in 1906, the movement subsided for several years. Yet the 1910's saw significant growth in the movement across the U.S., as well as in S.C. In a 1915 meeting in Spartanburg, leagues from all over the state gathered and initiated the S.C. Equal Suffrage League. M.T. Coleman, Harriet P. Lynch, and Eulalie Salley were the early presidents of this body, and influential figures in the movement. Another inspiring participant was Emily Anderson Dunovant, who used her skills in writing and persuasion to argue for woman's suffrage, and whose columns were published in numerous S.C. newspapers. Suffrage groups sprang up all over the state, with ties to the National American Woman Suffrage Organization, and these activists never stopped pushing for legislative reform in Congress.

From 1917 to 1918, the US became involved in WWI, and suffrage activity was interrupted once more when women gave their energies instead to the war effort. When WWI ended, the women regrouped, stronger than ever, to demand recognition and the right to vote. Bolstered by their increasing momentum, endorsement from President Wilson, and turning tides of public opinion, proponents of women's suffrage brought their amendment proposal to the U.S. Congress. On June 4, 1919, the amendment passed, and was presented to the states for ratification. Suffragists in South Carolina immediately began working for ratification by the S.C. Legislature. Senator Neils Christensen of Beaufort introduced the proposed ratification to the Senate, but it lacked enough votes to pass. The amendment needed ratification from 36 states in order to be incorporated into

the US Constitution, which they reached when Tennessee signed it. Finally, on August 26, 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment became law, granting all American women the right to vote in federal elections. In 1921, South Carolina passed an act allowing women to vote in state elections, but continued to prohibit them from jury duty.

Following the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which had been so critical to the suffrage movement, immediately began looking to the future and planning a way forward for women's rights in America. The NAWSA was transformed into the National League of Women Voters at a February 1920 convention in Chicago. A few months later the South Carolina Equal Suffrage League became the South Carolina League of Women Voters. Early leaders were prominent suffragists, including Mrs. Dunovant of Edgefield, Eulalie Salley of Aiken, and Bertha Munsell of Columbia. Although women could vote, there was still so much work to be done. In these early years, the League facilitated women's incorporation into the political system by encouraging women to register to vote, holding citizenship classes, and educating these voters so they could best use their new access to this right.

In the early 1930's, circumstances such as the national depression, lack of funds for the state League of Women Voters, and lack of sustained leadership resulted in the League's de facto dissolution. There was no activity for over a decade, until 1947-48, when the first three local Leagues were established in Columbia, Charleston and Spartanburg. By 1950, these thriving new leagues came together to restore the state League, voting Harriet P. Simons of Charleston their president. The LWVSC was officially recognized by LWVUS in 1951. It continued to grow and enjoyed a symbolic milestone in 1969 when Governor Robert McNair signed the 19th Amendment into law in S.C., in preparation for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the League of Women Voters of the United States in 1970. Eulalie Salley came from Aiken for the signing and told the General Assembly: "Well, boys, I've waited 50 years to tell you what I think about you for taking so long to pass this." S.C. women finally gained the right to serve on juries in state courts by legislation passed in 1969.

Women's Equality Day, August 26, 2011, marks the 91<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, giving all American women the right to vote. South Carolina has always been, and continues to be, home to truly great women. In light of the historic significance of this observance, let us not forget the inspiring legacy of the South Carolinian suffragists, who fought against great odds for justice and equality.

### **South Carolina Women in Federal & State Elective Office**

#### **U.S. Congress**

Elizabeth Patterson (D)	U.S. Rep.	1987-1993
Corinne Boyd Riley (D) <sup>1</sup>	U.S. Rep.	1962-1963
Willa Lybrand Fulmer (D) <sup>2</sup>	U.S. Rep.	1944-1945
Clara Gooding McMillan (D) <sup>3</sup>	U.S. Rep.	1939-1941
Elizabeth H. Gasque (D) <sup>4</sup>	U.S. Rep.	1938-1939

1. Riley won a special election to fill a vacancy caused by the death of her husband.
2. Fulmer won a special election to fill a vacancy caused by the death of her husband.
3. McMillan won a special election to fill a vacancy caused by the death of her husband.
4. Gasque won a special election to fill a vacancy caused by the death of her husband.

#### **Statewide Elective Executives**

Nikki Haley (R)	Governor	2011-present
Inez Tenenbaum (D)	Superintendent of Education	1999-2007
Barbara Nielsen (R)	Superintendent of Education	1991-1999
Nancy Stevenson (D)	Lieutenant Governor	1979-1982

**State General Assembly**--In 2011, South Carolina ranked 50<sup>th</sup> among state legislatures for the proportion of women (9.4%).

Senate: 0 out of 46 members are women    House: 16 out of 124 members are women

*Provided as a public service by a coalition of non-partisan organizations committed to accelerating women's progress in South Carolina: League of Women Voters of South Carolina, Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics, The Alliance for Women, South Carolina Women Lawyers Assoc., Center for Women, and Coalition of South Carolina Healthy Families.*



[www.lwvsc.org](http://www.lwvsc.org)

*The League of Women Voters of South Carolina is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.*