

The empowering story of how Dayton was at forefront of women's suffrage movement

100 years ago today, women granted the right to vote.



Dayton suffragists prepared for a suffrage parade in Columbus.
CONTRIBUTED

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HISTORY

An iconic photo from local history shows suffragists decked out in matching white dresses and straw hats and waving Dayton pennants.

The Columbus Dispatch singled out the Dayton contingent for their smart attire and wellorganized activism at the 1912 suffrage parade in Columbus.

“They were at the forefront of a major movement,” said Nancy Horlacher, local history librarian for Dayton Metro Library.

Dayton activists played an outsized role in the 72-year battle for women’s suffrage that began with the American Woman’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1848 and ended 100 years ago today when Tennessee became the last of the necessary 36 ratifying states.

Early efforts

The Dayton Woman’s Suffrage Association was first formed as early as 1869, but disbanded in 1871. It wasn’t until 1912 that the Dayton movement began in earnest with the formation of the Woman’s Suffrage Party of Montgomery County, which later morphed into the Woman’s Suffrage Association of Dayton and Montgomery County.

In 1912 the Dayton contingent worked tirelessly for an amendment to the state constitution, sponsoring open-air meetings and inviting national speakers to town. They distributed 20,000 leaflets and countless letters to clergymen.

“They put it all on the line,” said Susan Hesselgesser, executive director of the League of Women Voters (LWV) of the Greater Dayton Area. “People thought they were crazy. People kept pelting them with vegetables. But they kept going because they knew it was important.”

The measure failed by 88 counties to 24, Horlacher said, “but they just reorganized and started over. They did not give up.”

They persevered even after the devastation of Dayton’s 1913 flood. Library director Electra Doren redoubled her suffrage efforts even as she shepherded the library system’s recovery efforts. It is because of the librarian’s meticulous record-keeping that so much of the history of Dayton’s suffrage movement has been preserved. “She made sure the materials were not destroyed or stashed in a basement like so many other things,” Horlacher said. “They are a wonderful record of the women’s suffrage movement not only in Ohio, but also the United States.”

Ardent suffragist Katharine Wright was one of the key organizers of the suffrage parade in Dayton on October 24, 1914, in support of the amendment

on the Nov.

3 ballot. Her father, Bishop Milton Wright, and brother, Orville, proudly marched beside her.

But the measure failed once again. It would be nearly five more years – June 16, 1919 – before Ohio became the sixth state to ratify the 19th amendment by a General Assembly vote of 74 to 5.

Inclusive movement

The national suffrage movement has been criticized for not granting full participation – or credit – to Black suffragists. The Dayton movement was far more inclusive, according to local historians.

Educator Hallie Q. Brown gained international renown for her pro-suffrage speeches, as did Jewelia Higgins, the nation's first Black Red Cross nurse and one of the founders of Dayton's first YWCA for Black women.

Dayton also was unique in that many of its most prominent male citizens supported suffrage, including the Wright family; National Cash Register founder John H. Patterson; inventor and Delco Electronics founder Edward A. Deeds; and Dayton Daily News founder James M. Cox.

“The real movers and shakers in town were big pro-suffragists,” noted Dianne Herman, coordinator for the LWV's speakers bureau.

“There was a political climate of reform and innovation. So there was a very strong, progressive, enlightened value system promoted by our civic leaders.”

More typically, Herman said, “Powerful interests at the national level were opposed to suffrage.

They thought it would upend the whole society.”

The Dayton Daily News covered the suffrage movement extensively and devoted full pages to the arguments pro and con in the weeks leading up to the 1912 vote.

“The New York Times, in contrast, was vehemently opposed to suffrage, and they made no bones about it,” Herman said.

The resistance Dayton women encountered the greatest resistance from the powerful liquor lobby, Herman said: "Dayton was a town of Eastern European and German immigrants, with a strong brewing industry. They were afraid women would vote for Prohibition."

Some prominent

Daytonians opposed suffrage, notably philanthropist Katherine Talbott. "We think the women have enough to do to attend to their household duties properly without mingling in outside affairs," she once said.

Leading suffragist Jesse Davisson retorted, "Isn't it about time to admit that most of the dirty work in the world is done by women? Are the washing of foul linen, the scrubbing of floors, the cleansing of dirty dishes, tasks which befit a creature too fine or too frail to go to the voting booth?"

Ironically, Dayton's LWV offices are today located in Talbott Tower, named for her famous family.

There have been reported sightings of a woman in 1900s-style garb haunting the building. "I wonder if it is Mrs. Talbott, upset because the League of Women Voters is in the building,"

Hesselgesser mused.

Or perhaps she is offering her benediction after witnessing the aftermath of the passage of the 19th amendment.

Their legacy

In Dayton, 900 suffragists immediately teamed up to form one of the first LWV chapters in the country in 1921. "Our strength is built upon the strength of the women who founded us," Hesselgesser said.

Added Herman, "The suffragists have not gone away.

We have one of the most active, largest and oldest Leagues in the country."

The spirit of the suffragists lives on, Herman said, in the battles against

racism and sexism, in the Me Too Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the diversity of women today seeking and winning office.

Concurred Hesselgesser, “Since women vote in larger numbers than men, we are the deciding votes on candidates and issues. As the women’s marches proclaim, ‘Voting is our superpower.’ I work among some of the strongest, smartest women in Dayton, and I know, firsthand, that women are multi-taskers and problem solvers. They run for office with that in mind and also choose candidates who will make a difference in the issues that matter to women, their families and their communities; education, health care, the environment, equal pay, child care and social justice.”

The story of the suffragists is so empowering, yet it is relegated to a paragraph or two in the history books, Hesselgesser said: “I have three daughters and four granddaughters, and I want them to know that we continued to work hard and to fight to tell their stories.”

WATCH: ‘Let Women Vote’

To learn more about the suffrage movement, watch “Let Women Vote: The History of the 19th Amendment” – produced by the League of Women Voters of the Greater Dayton Area and the Miami Valley Communications Council – at <https://youtu.be/Hck91vNkymY>.