

Votes for Women, The Suffrage Movement in Western Maryland, 1910 – 1920

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THE TERM, WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SUFFERING BUT INSTEAD DERIVES FROM THE LATIN WORD "SUFFRAGIUM," MEANING THE RIGHT OR PRIVILEGE TO VOTE.

Achieving the right to vote was not an easy process for American women. Reformers fought a century long struggle against prejudices and legal obstacles that excluded half the United States adult population from participation in the democratic process.

When thinking of suffrage campaigns from the past, flickering newsreel images of elaborately dressed demonstrators usually comes to mind—public demonstrations, letter writing, and discussions with elected leaders became the trademarks of the movement. While the newsreels captured nationally known figures and events, they did not record the activities of western Maryland residents, and local history books remain mostly silent on the suffrage movement. It is now known that Allegany County suffragists demonstrated surprising strength and determination in the face of opposition from elected officials and an apathetic citizenry.

Maryland's twentieth century suffrage movement organized under the direction of several leaders including Edith Houghton Hooker, a Baltimore resident who formally created the Just Government League in 1909. The league became a leading force for women's suffrage in the state. Hooker's organization also affiliated with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), one of the leading voting rights groups in the country.

Cumberland's Civic Club organized the first Allegany County suffrage event when it welcomed M.I. Manning, secretary of the Just Government League, on August 25, 1910. Manning's remarks to the group received coverage in *The Evening Times* and revealed a broad social and economic agenda. According to Manning, the rise of industry "left women practically without intelligent occupations." To remedy the ills, Manning highlighted the need for "education, pure food, pure water," and safe neighborhoods. The secretary returned on August 30, 1910, to address a "fair size audience at...the Emmanuel Church Parish House."



Women's Suffrage
postcard dated February 27, 1915.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF ANGELA AND ALBERT FELDSTEIN

Manning's introductory visits were followed by a well received appearance of nationally known Edith Houghton Hooker who also spoke at Cumberland's Emmanuel Episcopal Parish House on February 18, 1911. An editorializing reporter concluded the church group was "highly sophisticated," a statement that reinforced the class and racial distinctions of the time period and within the group itself.

Speaking extemporaneously, Hooker's comments were more focused on voting rights than Manning's Cumberland Civic Club address the previous year. According to a local newspaper article, Hooker believed that "women were the equal of men mentally," and even superior in some regards. "Taxation without representation is tyranny," recited Hooker, and voting rights for women followed as a necessity. Hooker concluded, "It is not right for a people living in a free country to keep half in slavery."

The state league's outreach efforts culminated on March 10, 1911, when it was announced that an Allegany County Just Government League would be organized. Officers introduced at the Parish House meeting were: Florence McKaig, Louisa Henderson, Marguerite Sloan, Kate Ernst, Isabelle Wheeler, Mrs. Anna Stubblefield, and Annabelle Troxell. Also attending the meeting was Merwin McKaig, husband of Florence McKaig.

Like suffragist organizations throughout the country, the Allegany County Just Government League was composed of wealthy and upper middle class white women, and several male supporters. A prime example of the groups' affluence was Merwin McKaig whose credits included industrialist, banker, and civic leader—one of the wealthiest men in the county. Women members of the league were regularly cited in newspaper articles as participants in social gatherings, extended vacations, and civic endeavors only available to wealthy individuals. It should be noted, however, that local leaders made attempts to recruit and inform working class women, particularly those at Footer Dye Works in Cumberland.

In February, 1914, the local league set course by planning a complete canvas of election districts in Allegany County under the direction of chair persons. The stated purpose involved the distribution of literature and the establishment of personal contacts to “arouse sentiment for franchise for the women of this state and county.” Increasing league membership would have also been a benefit of the canvas. One account from the time placed the membership enrollment at 100. Lonaconing and Frostburg also organized meetings and events, but it is unknown if those groups were counted in the county league.

On March 31, 1914, the local league announced “Suffrage Day” celebrations to be held in conjunction with National Suffrage Day on May 2, 1914. Announced plans included meetings in Cumberland’s public buildings where featured speakers were to address supporters and curious onlookers. The extent of preparedness was evidenced at the league’s Bedford Street headquarters where decorated rooms complemented the meals served daily during the noon and evening hours. An *Evening Times* reporter captured the enthusiasm for Suffrage Day activities when he wrote, “Whether a visitor favored suffrage or not, one noticed a most earnest and enthusiastic effort being put forth by the women of the Just Government League.”

An even larger multi-day event, held June 16-27, 1914, influenced both Allegany and Garrett counties when Edna Latimer of the state Just Government League led a “pilgrimage” to western Maryland. Organizer of a similar hike around Annapolis, Latimer organized an impressive summer campaign for the purpose of educating residents “along suffrage lines.”



Suffragists in Cumberland, Maryland, circa July 1912.

PHOTO COURTESY
ANGELA AND ALBERT FELDSTEIN

Women’s Suffrage buttons from the time period.



Robin McKenzie, Allegany College of Maryland library staff, created a unique display as part of the “Finish Her Story” Maryland Humanities Grant presented in March 2021. The display was also the centerpiece of the grant funded Community Artifact Day which invited the community to see the display and also to share artifacts, letters, photos, and diaries. The mannequin and suffrage clothing (left) were purchased as part of the grant. Project Coordinator for the grant was Cherie Snyder. Barbara Browning, ACM Librarian, served as a member of the “Finish Her Story” committee.

PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN



Arriving on Train #5 at Cumberland’s Queen City Station, local leaders escorted the participants to City Hall where public remarks were well received by the crowd. Moving from Frostburg into Garrett County the following day, the pilgrimage gathered momentum. Although the exact route is unknown, communities visited by the suffragists were Bittinger, Accident, Friendsville, Granstville, Sang Run, Mountain Lake Park, Oakland, Hutton, Crellin, Swanton, Kitzmiller, and Bloomington, all in eleven days. One can imagine the excitement created

by what must have appeared to be a colorful entourage hiking its way through the county.

According to the *Oakland Republican*, 820 “new soldiers” were recruited to the “army” of suffragists during their eleven day pilgrimage. In addition to recruits, 6,600 pieces of literature were distributed to the more than 6,000 attendees at 20 mass meetings. The local league reportedly planned a similar extended hike through Allegany County starting August 1, 1914.

The Allegany County Just Government League continued to campaign through 1919 by meeting elected officials and publicly demonstrating, including an event in South Cumberland that was sufficient to be reported by a local newspaper.

It was an uphill struggle, however, as key local officials opposed the measure.

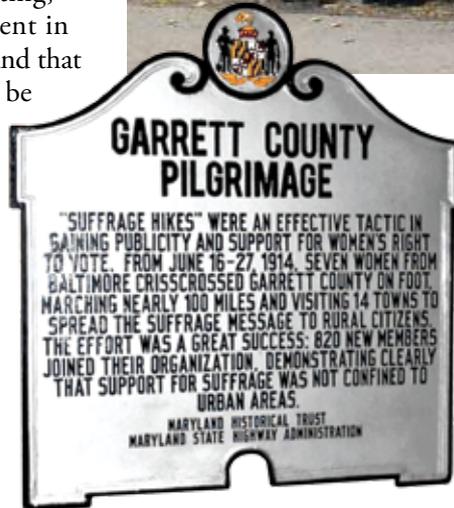
Local officials were not alone and Maryland ultimately failed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. While Maryland legislators hesitated, the required number of states voted in the affirmative by 1920, thereby enfranchising women in the United States. Maryland’s symbolic affirmative vote did not occur until 1941.

The local suffrage movement caught the attention of Cherie Snyder of Allegany College of Maryland who recently facilitated a program to investigate its leaders and activities. The pioneering work involved students who sought to research and document key leaders and events. Interest in the subject has not diminished and Cherie plans to continue the quest.

“We are looking forward to building on the foundation provided by the 2021 Allegany College of Maryland (ACM) project, “Finish Her Story” which was funded by the Maryland Humanities Council and focused on the lives and contributions of Allegany County suffragists. Four women emerged from this initial project and are currently the focus of deeper research: Louisa Patterson Henderson (Mrs. Robert), Florence McKaig (Mrs. Merwin), Allen Harris (Mrs. Edward), and Annabelle Troxell (Mrs. William).



PHOTO BY DAN WHEITZEL



The Garrett Branch of the American Association of University Women celebrated the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment by sponsoring “Women’s Equality Day” on August 28, 2021, at Sang Run State Park near McHenry, MD. Participants marched in suffragist’s attire to the recently restored Election House and presented monologues at the nearby park. The group’s trek also celebrated the Just Government League’s march through the county in June 1914. The AAUW – Garrett Branch continues to organize events, including the most recent “Women’s Equality Day” program held in Oakland, MD, on August 26, 2022.

The Sang Run Election House was built around 1872 and served the local community until 1972.

It is the oldest election house still standing in Maryland. Restoration work began on the building in 2019 and was completed in time for the 2021 Women’s Equality Day event. Participants of the August 2021 program dressed as key personalities of the suffrage movement and celebrated the restored building’s reopening during festivities.

However, the names of over ten other women have emerged whose lives over time will also be researched.

The plan is to publish the results of our research in a booklet highlighting the Allegany County suffrage movement and the contributions of these women. Eventually, we would like to develop a self guided tour of the places that illustrate their lives, legacy and history of the suffrage movement in our community.”

For more information on the “Finish Her Story” project or to provide us with diaries, letters, pictures or other artifacts, call Cherie Snyder at 240-264-7426.

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