Women’s Suffrage in Iowa

A Sneak Peek of a new Digital Collection

Created by Christine Mastalio for the Iowa Women’s Archives
University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa
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The Iowa Women’s Archives (IWA) has received a grant from the State Historical Society Inc. to digitize important documents pertaining to the women’s suffrage movement in Iowa.

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified on August 26, 1920, giving women the right to vote. But the struggle started long before that and the story of Iowa women reflects the stories of women across the country.

As we celebrate 90 years of equal suffrage, the IWA is undertaking a project to make these valuable and unique items of local and state history available online. In addition to the digital collection, we will create a permanent online exhibit and a resource page linking Iowa suffrage materials across the state.

This presentation kicks off our work on Women’s Suffrage in Iowa: A Digital Collection, and offers a sneak peek of the types of resources that will be available through the University of Iowa’s Iowa Digital Library by summer 2011.

Thank you for visiting. Please direct questions about the Women’s Suffrage Digitization Project to karen-mason@uiowa.edu or call the Iowa Women’s Archives at 319-335-5068.
The Fight for the Vote in the Hawkeye State:
1850s-1919 and beyond

“This is jubilee day. This is glory day. I am so happy to be here tonight to tell you about the long trail, - the Suffrage trail, the wonderful trail that has led us up and up, - until today women are free.”

Alice Longley,
Des Moines Political Equality Club speech,
Polk County, Iowa 1920

Iowa Suffrage Memorial Commission Records, Box 1, Folder 16
Iowa Women’s Archives (IWA), University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa
The first women's rights convention in the U.S. was held in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. But the women of Iowa and the nation faced a "long trail" before they would have full enfranchisement.

Progressive social movements including child welfare, abolition, black suffrage, and temperance were sweeping the nation in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century—and Iowa women were becoming actively involved. Many built on earlier activism during the suffrage campaign.

The women of the Hawkeye State spent seven decades fighting for the vote--from the early 1850s, when "reform dress" (bloomers) swept through Iowa towns such as Dubuque and Farmington, to 1919, when the woman-suffrage amendment finally passed in the U.S. Congress.

In the late 1860s, Annie Savery (Des Moines), Mary Darwin (Burlington), Mattie Griffith (Mount Pleasant) and a host of other women were publicly speaking for woman's rights.

Amelia Jenks Bloomer was the only women residing in Iowa to publicly speak for women's rights before the Civil War. She and her husband moved to Council Bluffs in 1855. Bloomer is perhaps the best-known early Iowa suffragist.

In 1870, the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association was organized in Mount Pleasant after the Iowa General Assembly passed a woman suffrage amendment.

Iowa law, however, required that two consecutive assemblies approve a measure before it was sent to voters. Almost every Iowa legislature would consider the proposal for the next 49 years, until the federal amendment passed.

*The Iowa Signal*, vol. 1, no. 6, July 1891. Woman's Christian Temperance Union papers, Box 35, Folder 2, IWA.
Suffrage = Temperance?

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Iowa was supportive of the suffrage movement from its fourth annual convention in Ottumwa in 1877. Publications of the WCTU, such as The Iowa Signal, often referred to a woman's duty to clean up her town and protect it from the evils of intemperance.

Temperance activists believed if women got the vote, alcohol would soon be banned, thereby improving the quality of life for women and children.

According to the WCTU, some of the fiercest opposition to equal suffrage came from the liquor industry, which feared women voters would support prohibition.

The first president of the National WCTU was Annie Wittenmyer of Keokuk, Iowa, who served as a state sanitary agent starting in 1862.

Wittenmyer was against women's suffrage, but her successor, Frances Willard (Evanston, IL), was extremely active in the suffrage movement.

L.A. Burkhalter of Cedar Rapids wrote in the July 1891 issue of The Iowa Signal, "In granting this [equal suffrage], we believe all the rest would follow in due course of time."

This department has been actively at work. Petitions have been sent to the legislature for the Sunday closing of the exposition, for the much-needed reformatory, for equal suffrage and for continuance of the prohibitory law. This last, circulated by our sisters in the work, who still bear the distinction without a difference—non-partisan. We have all worked together, hand in hand, and our hearts and purposes are the same.

The following letter was sent by our superintendent to each of the one hundred and fifty members of the Iowa legislature.

*The Iowa Signal*, vol. 1, no. 6, July 1891. Woman’s Christian Temperance Union papers, Box 35, Folder 2, IWA.
By 1870, the *Iowa State Register* was reporting heavily on women’s rights. But a controversy was about to divide the suffragists of Iowa . . .

In the spring and summer of 1871, free-love advocate and suffragist Victoria Woodhull of New York was raked over by the national press in an effort to derail the suffrage movement.

At the Iowa State Suffrage Society convention in Des Moines, Nettie Sanford of Marshalltown introduced a resolution that marriage was sacred and binding—trying to distance the association from allegations that all suffragists would vote to destroy traditional marriage.

Women like Annie Savery of Des Moines disagreed with such resolutions and thought opinions of free-love or any other issue should be considered secondary to the cause of suffrage and protected as the private thoughts of men were.

While Savery defended Iowa suffragists against free-love allegations at this conference, she also said women should be allowed to hold private opinions that differed from the majority.

Sanford’s resolution was defeated after a contentious debate, and a more moderate one was adopted, which separated the Society from members’ opinions on anything but the suffrage question.

Sanford submitted another, more strongly worded resolution that was tabled.

The Polk County Suffrage Society, influenced greatly by Martha Callanan (also a WCTU leader), was one of several that issued a statement of moral purity—distrancing local societies from the state association.

“*The Woman Suffrage party of Iowa is not, nor cannot be made responsible for the individual opinions of those who, in the states, are exciting the public mind upon the so-called doctrine of ‘free-love,’ …*”

Carrie Chapman Catt described Mary Jane Coggeshall as “The Mother of Woman Suffrage in Iowa.”

Coggeshall died in 1911, nine years before equal suffrage became a reality.

“...We who took our baby boys with us to those early meetings, now find these boys are voters, while their mothers are still asking for freedom.”

Coggeshall speech, 1895, 25th Anniversary of Polk Co. Women’s Suffrage Society.

MARY JANE WHITELY COGGSHEALL 1836-1911
FIRST EDITOR, THE WOMAN’S STANDARD, 1886-1888
IOWA WOMEN’S HALL OF FAME AWARD, 1990

1890-1891: Coggeshall elected president of the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association (IESA).


1903-1905: Coggeshall serves second term as president of the IESA.

1908: Des Moines women denied ballots in bond election. Coggeshall files suit; election is voided.

1911: Coggeshall dies at age 75. Leaves $15,000 to suffrage associations.
By 1874, the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association had become the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association—the main suffrage body in the state.

In the early 1900s, many organizations such as the Iowa Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Cary Club of Marion, Iowa, and the Professional Women’s League of Des Moines were debating and advocating for equal suffrage.

Iowa-raised Carrie Chapman Catt served as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association from 1900-1904 and again from 1915-1920.
Fighting for enfranchisement had its lighter moments. This is a scrapbook of a play put on by the Proteus Club of Des Moines in 1913.

The Proteus Club was founded in 1896 as a study club for women. This play parodies suffragettes (more militant advocates of women’s suffrage) in a spoof of a Moliere work they entitled, “The Militant Husbandette.” The main character, Sylvia Spankhurt, pokes fun at British activist Sylvia Pankhurst.
The Proteus Club’s scrapbook provides insight into sentiments anti-suffragists had at the turn of the century.

The Proteus Club planned to use the proceeds from the performances to purchase a photo by Charles A. Cumming for their art collection.
The plot of “The Militant Husbandette” follows the Spankhurt daughters—Sylvia, an ardent suffragette, and Flora, who only thinks of marriage. Sylvia and Mrs. Spankhurt are portrayed as harsh and uncompromising. Flora is considered the favorite daughter by Mr. Spankhurt, who is portrayed as a weak-willed man who has lost control of his household. The crazy aunt, Bella Abnormalia, is said to suffer from “chronic suffragitis.”
Miss Helen Witmer and Miss Hannah Nollen of Des Moines are credited with parodying Molière’s work, “Les Femmes Avantes.”

**Woman Conqueror**

by Mrs. Spankhurt after dreaming of Paradise (Act III)

Let the vault of heaven echo with the battle-cry of “Votes”,
And no longer let strong womanhood be bound to patching coats,
Let the yellow flag of suffrage fling its challenge to the gale,
For the female of the species is more lively than the male.

Let woman break the bondage of the deadly tasks she hates,
Let the infant cry in anguish while his father washes plates,
Oh, from the man-bound ballot-box forever tear the veil,
For the female of the species is more lively than the male.
From 1896 to 1910, no state had a successful suffrage referendum.

The movement, however, gained new momentum starting in 1904, due to a rise in Progressivism, new leaders in state organizations and an increased militarism in segments of the suffrage movement.

Boone, Iowa hosted one of the first suffrage parades in the nation in October of 1908.

By 1915, fifteen states or territories had at least partial suffrage. Iowa’s neighbor, Illinois, granted presidential suffrage in 1913.

In 1914, the national suffrage amendment was considered after laying dormant for 27 years.

In 1915, Iowa became a “campaign” state. Suffrage supporters began a flurry of activity to get ready for a June 5, 1916 referendum, which would allow men to vote to strike the word “male” from Article II, Section 1 of Iowa’s constitution. (The word “male” was not removed until 1970).

Flora Dunlap (Des Moines) led the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association through this campaign.
Just months before the polls opened for the 1916 referendum, student Dorothy Mills summarized reasons to support equal suffrage for her English class. Mills later earned a one-year diploma from the Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls, married Joseph Buess, and settled in Coggan, Iowa.
The first three pages of this undated brochure (ca. 1916) refute common arguments against equal suffrage, including that women getting the vote would result in raised taxes and destroyed families. By this time, many Western states had granted full or partial suffrage to women and the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association wanted their state to be on that list.
Finally, the day Iowa suffragists had worked so hard for was here.

The June 5, 1916 referendum, however, was defeated by 10,341 votes, mainly in the “wet” counties on the eastern edge.

An investigation by the WCTU found thousands of unregistered votes were cast. Fraud was strongly suspected.
Despite the failed referendum, Iowa women kept fighting for even partial suffrage in the state. They also started petitioning the national legislature. The advent of World War I drew attention away from the suffrage cause. However, war work by suffragists "melted many hearts formerly cold to suffrage" (p. 11). This 23-page document contains reports and reactions to the failed 1916 referendum and a plan for 1917.

From fair booths and floats to plays and petitions, Iowa women kept up the campaign in 1917 (p. 16).
On July 2, 1919 the Iowa General Assembly ratified the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. By August 26, 1920, 36 states had ratified—making it a federal guarantee. But the suffrage supporters of Iowa still had more work to do....

In 1915, Iowa-raised Carrie Chapman Catt served a second term as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association.

The failed referendum generated a new strategy, known as “the winning plan” in September of 1916. State organizations were divided into groups—each with a particular task.

Tasks ranged from lobbying Congress to working for presidential suffrage in their home states.

Carrie Chapman Catt between 1909 and 1932. (Library of Congress image archives.) Born in Wisconsin in 1859, Chapman Catt lived in Iowa from 1866 to 1891 and continued to campaign for suffrage in the state after she moved to the East Coast.
In 1920, the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association reorganized as the League of Women Voters of Iowa. The League’s purpose was to educate women on how to use their newfound political responsibility. It soon became a non-partisan political education body that still exists today.

Letter from Julia B. Mayer to Mrs. Walter, reporting on schools of citizenship established in Muscatine, March, 1921, League of Women Voters of Iowa records, Box 42, Folder 9, IWA.

Report of State Organizer, Trip to Osage, 1924, League of Women Voters of Iowa records, Box 42, Folder 9, IWA.
“Perhaps voting became easy for me because the seed to do so was planted early when still a child of seven or eight...when my mother explained to me some of the trials and anguish of women’s suffrage and Susan B. Anthony’s fight for the vote in 1920,”


Lucille Ketchum was seven when her mother, Matilda Jane Ketchum, voted for the first time in a one-room school house in Missouri. Later, Lucille would actively campaign for her husband, Iowa Congressman Steven V. Carter. These writings describe her election experiences—starting with her mother’s first vote in 1920.
The following resources were used to write the captions in this presentation:


Records and papers in the Iowa Women’s Archives used in the creation of this presentation.
When citing materials from the Iowa Women’s Archives, please use this citation:

Collection name, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

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Mission
Inspired by the vision of its founders, the Louise Noun - Mary Louise Smith Iowa Women’s Archives nourishes creative research, learning, and teaching by providing collections and a separate space dedicated to the women of Iowa and their history. The Archives fulfills its mission by collecting and making available primary sources about the women of Iowa and their history. It undertakes a robust outreach program to gather and preserve the history of groups underrepresented in archives. Through its programs and online resources, the Iowa Women’s Archives serves a broad audience ranging from students and scholars to the general public.

History
Established in 1992, the archives is named for its founders, two prominent Des Moines women who conceived the idea of a repository that would collect solely on Iowa women and who worked to bring it to fruition. Louise Noun was an art collector, historian, social activist, and philanthropist. Mary Louise Smith was a Republican Party activist and the first woman to chair the Republican National Committee, serving from 1974 to 1977. Louise Noun first recognized the need for a women’s repository as she researched her 1969 book on the history of women’s suffrage in Iowa, *Strong-Minded Women*. She later shared with Mary Louise Smith her frustration about the scarcity of primary sources by and about women, and the two decided to establish a repository to document the experiences and achievements of the women of Iowa. In 1991 Louise Noun auctioned the Frida Kahlo painting “Self-Portrait with Loose Hair” to permanently endow the archives. The Iowa Women’s Archives is supported by that initial gift and by the generosity of donors who continue to contribute to the archives fund.

About IWA

Mary Louise Smith, Louise Noun. Photo by Jon Van Allen
The Iowa Women’s Archives plans to digitize a variety of documents relating to the suffrage movement in Iowa. Here’s a look at what will eventually be online:

• 1919 League of Women Voters of Iowa history scrapbook.
• 1913-1915 minutes of the Cary Club of Marion, Iowa (includes plans for a county suffrage league).
• 1918-1919 articles by Dorothy Ashby Pownall, Iowa journalist.
• 1868 diary of Ellen Mowrer Miller (includes entry about a townsman opposed to equal suffrage).
• Undated speeches by Jennifer Riggs Cosson, suffragist in the late nineteenth century.
• Woman’s Christian Temperance Union materials relating to suffrage from the 1870s to 1920.

Thanks for journeying the long trail with the Iowa suffragists!

Check back for more progress on the project or visit the Iowa Women’s Archives on the 3rd floor of the Main Library at The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242. Phone: 319-335-5068. lib-women@uiowa.edu