

Harry T. Burn



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Although he served in the Tennessee General Assembly for only a short period—two terms in the House of Representatives—Republican Harry T. Burn's vote for women's suffrage brought nationwide attention to the legislatures' youngest member at the age of 24. Tennessee stood poised to become the 36th and last state required to ratify the 19th Amendment, otherwise known as the Anthony Amendment, named in honor of Susan B. Anthony. But when the General Assembly reached an impasse, a 48 to 48 tie, Burn's vote in favor of women's suffrage broke the deadlock on the issue, delivering Tennessee as the "Perfect 36" to ratify the amendment.

Burn, the son of James LaFayette and Febb King Ensminger Burn, was raised in Niota in the lower East Tennessee Valley. Although Burn would later reside for some time in Rockwood in Roane County, McMinn County was always his home. Raised on his family's farm, Hathburn, the Burn's lived in a brick mansion (originally built in 1849) purchased by his father in 1914. Today, the home is on the list of McMinn County's historical landmarks. At the age of 81, Burn would succumb to a heart attack on February 19, 1977 while at Hathburn.

Burn's banking, law, and part-time political career began when he graduated from the Harvard Banking Seminar. He first served in the state House from 1919 to 1921, and managed, in spite of the uproar caused by his vote for women's suffrage, to be reelected for a second term from 1921 to 1923. Several of his colleagues who had supported women's suffrage, including Democratic Tennessee Governor Albert H. Roberts, suffered defeat in the 1920 elections. When Burn's second term came to an end, he was admitted to the state bar. As was often the case prior to the twentieth century, young prospective lawyers learned the law (often referred to as "read law") from a private tutor. In 1930, Burn failed in his effort to unseat incumbent Democratic Governor Henry Hollis Horton, who had assumed the role as the state executive in his position as Senate Speaker (according to the terms of the Tennessee State Constitution) following the untimely death of Governor Austin Peay. Burn later served as a state Senator from 1949 to

1953. Burn's other acts of public service included serving on the Tennessee Planning Commission for 15 years and three consecutive terms as delegate from Roane County to the Tennessee Constitutional Convention (1953, 1959, 1965). In addition, Burn was a well-known banker, serving as president and chairman of the board of the First National Bank and Trust Company of Rockwood before his retirement from public life. He was married to Ellen Cottrell Burn and had one son, Harry T. Burn, Jr.

It is Burn's single vote in favor of women's suffrage that he is known nationally as having delivered Tennessee as the required 36th and last state to ratify the 19th Amendment. Having deadlocked 48 to 48, Burn, who wore a red rose (the symbol of anti-suffragists) in his jacket, switched his vote in favor of women's suffrage when the time came to either pass or kill the proposed amendment in the General Assembly. Unbeknownst to his fellow colleagues and those in the House galleries, Burn carried a letter from his mother in his jacket pocket admonishing him to "vote for Suffrage."* Yet Burn's knew his constituents back home in McMinn County were equally split on the issue. He had been receiving telegrams to vote both in favor and against women's suffrage from not only McMinn residents but also from interested parties throughout the nation (see 2 telegrams below). In the end, Burn chose to follow his mother's advice and voted for the Anthony Amendment thereby securing a woman's right to vote as the law of the land.

When asked to explain his defection to the suffragists' cause, Burn inserted a statement in the House Journal defending his action as based on morality, justice, his mother's advice, and the rich legacy of the Republican party:

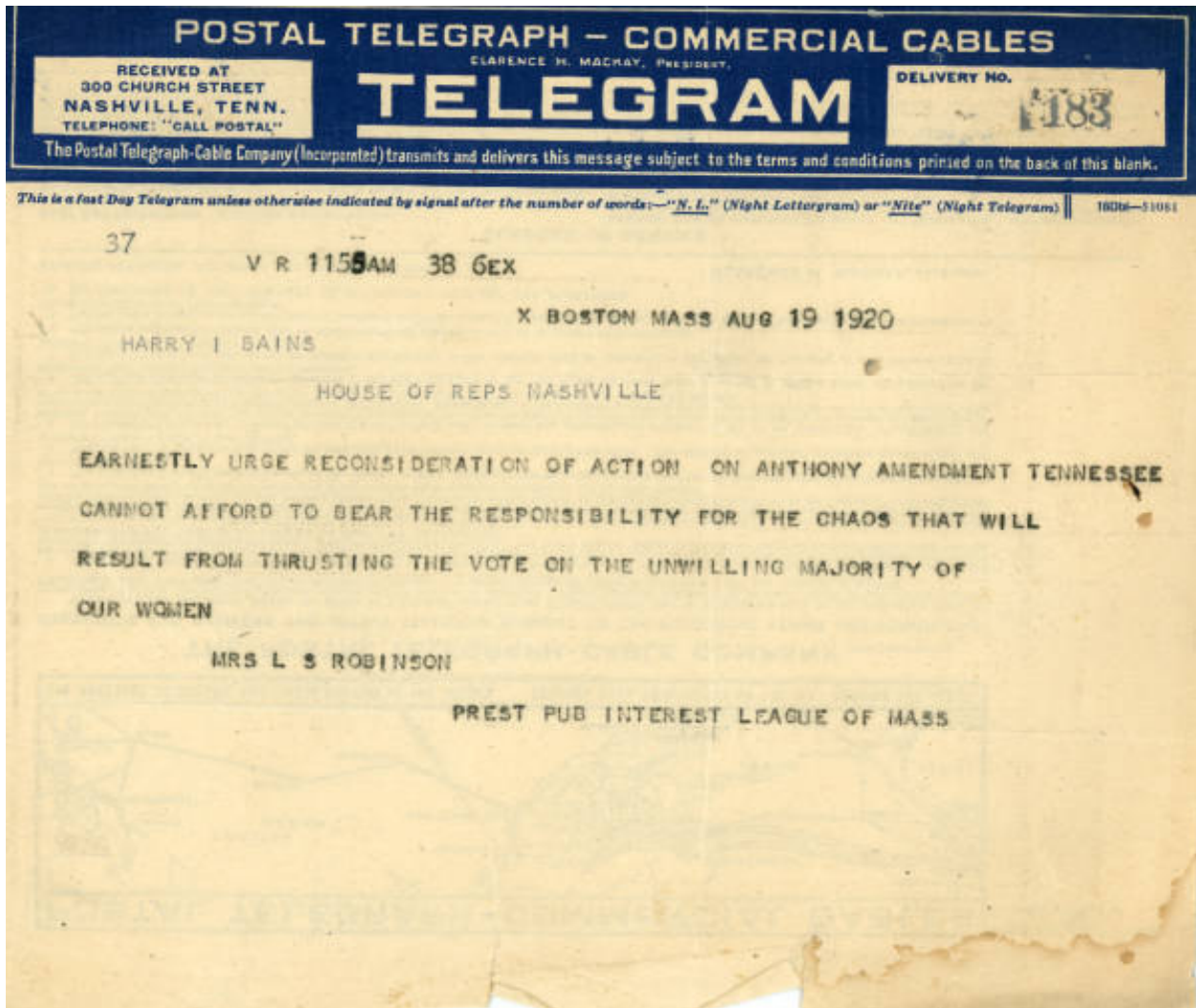
I desire to resent in the name of honesty and justice the veiled intimidation and accusation regarding my vote on the Suffrage Amendment as indicated in certain statements, and it is my sincere belief that those responsible for their existence know that there is not a scintilla of truth in them. I want to state that I changed my vote in favor of ratification first because I believe in full suffrage as a right; second, I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify; third, I knew that a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification; fourth, I appreciated the fact that an opportunity such as seldom comes to a mortal man to free seventeen million women from political slavery was mine; fifth, I desired that my party in both State and nation might say that it was a republican from the East mountains of Tennessee, the purest Anglo-Saxon section in the world, who made national woman suffrage possible at this date, not for personal glory but for the glory of his party.

Years later, Burn proudly reflected on his deciding vote: "I had always believed that women had an inherent right to vote. It was a logical attitude from my standpoint. My mother was a college woman, a student of national and international affairs who took an interest in all public issues. She could not vote. Yet the tenant farmers on our farm, some of whom were illiterate, could vote. On that roll call, confronted with the fact that I was going to go on record for time and eternity on the merits of the question, I had to vote for ratification."

** See the letter from his mother by selecting "History Kit" on the main page. Then select "Era 7 (1890-1930) and click on "Don't forget to be a Good Boy: Harry T. Burn's letter from Mom and the Ratification of the 19th Amendment in Tennessee"*

The following documents are two of several telegrams that Harry T. Burn received prior to the vote on ratification in the General Assembly urging him to vote for or against the 19th Amendment, otherwise known as the Anthony Amendment.

The following document is a telegram misaddressed to Harry Bains [Burn] from Mrs. L. S. Robinson of Boston, Massachusetts. Robinson served as President of the Public Interest League and urged Burn to vote against ratification of the 19th Amendment.




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The following document is a telegram from John W. Bayless of Athens, TN to Harry T. Burn urging that Burn remain firm and vote for ratification of the 19th Amendment, which would place his name among the immortal in American history.

Form 1201

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Telegram	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nite
Night Letter	N L



WESTERN UNION

TELEGRAM

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Telegram	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nite
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a telegram. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT GEORGE W. E. ATKINS, FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT

RECEIVED AT

9AGU 11

ATHENS TENN 1055A AUG 19 20

HON HARRY BURN **172**

HOUSE REPRESENTATIVES NASHVILLE TENN

VOTING FOR SUFFRAGE ENROLLED YOUR NAME AMONG THE IMMORTALS

STAND FIRM

JOHN W BAYLESS

1107A

1920 AUG 19 AM 11 09

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