The Suffragists Come to Town:
Elizabeth Upham Yates and the 1914 National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention in Nashville

By Shannon M. Risk

In August 1920, the proposed Nineteenth Amendment focused the nation's attention on the final battle to guarantee women the right to vote in all levels of elections. After over seventy years of efforts to give women the right to the franchise, Congress approved the amendment and sent it to state legislatures for final ratification. Members of state legislatures wore roses pinned to their lapels—yellow for suffrage, and red against suffrage. After a flurry of state approvals, the state of Tennessee found itself at the center of the storm as the possible 36th and final state needed to ratify the amendment. Ratification ultimately depended on the vote of Tennessee legislator Harry T. Burn, a young man from McMinn County who had previously gone on record against women’s suffrage. As the final vote was taken, Burn took out a note from his mother, urging him to approve of women’s right to vote. Her note read: “Dear Son: Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don’t keep them in doubt. I noticed some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet. Don’t forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the ‘rat’ in ratification. Your Mother.” He took his mother’s advice, and Tennessee ratified the amendment. On August 26, 1920, women received voting rights in the U.S. Constitution.

An East Tennessee woman’s group advocated for women's suffrage, but it was the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association that led the charge. Six years earlier, in 1894, this group was formed by women in Tennessee to support the movement for women's rights and the group held several conventions to promote its agenda. Several suffragists from the state traveled to Washington, D.C., to put pressure on the president, but they targeted southern states to attract southern women's votes. It was the success of the Alabama delegation that they held meetings in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1911.

The year 1915 was a banner year for women's rights activists. The year, Congress debated the proposed Nineteenth Amendment. This year, the women’s movement held several conventions and ratification referendums. A vote in Tennessee would have been a significant victory for the movement. In 1915, the president issued a call for women to sign a petition to the Constitution. The proposed amendment was created by Democratic congressmen to gain support for it. The amendment gained support in the South, with nations in the Southern states, such as Tennessee, from Pennsylvania, and other states. The amendment, ratified in 1920 (which became the Nineteenth Amendment), was a significant victory for women's rights activists.

1 For a contextual history of women in the United States, see New Women of the United States (New York, 1924), pp. 147-150.
2 For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the American Memory Project, www.americanmemory.gov. For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the American Memory Project, www.americanmemory.gov.
3 For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, www.nwsa.org. For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, www.nwsa.org.
4 For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, www.nwsa.org. For more information on the conference in the Turnip Green, see the website of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, www.nwsa.org.
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amendment. On August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution.2

An East Tennessean played a decisive role in the struggle for women's suffrage, but it was in Nashville where many of the battles were fought.

Six years earlier, Nashville hosted a major women's suffrage convention. Founded in 1890, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was the leading suffrage organization in the country, and the group held a convention each year to promote its agenda and bring together suffragists from around the country. NAWSA leaders had held their conventions in Washington, D.C. every other year to put pressure on their congressmen and the president, but beginning in 1895 they targeted southern cities. Their goal was to attract southern women to the cause. After the success of the Atlanta convention in 1895, they held meetings in New Orleans in 1903, Louisville in 1911, and Nashville in 1914.3

The year 1914 represented a pivotal year for women's suffrage efforts. That year, Congress debated the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment. This legislation stipulated state referendums on women's suffrage if a small percentage of the male population was willing to sign a petition in support.4 The bill was created by Democratic Representative John F. Shafroth of Colorado (a state where women gained suffrage in 1896), and Mitchell Palmer, a Democratic Representative from Pennsylvania. This bill and the Susan B. Anthony Amendment (which became the Nineteenth Amendment) both sought to change the Fifteenth Amendment to include disfranchisement of women. Some suffrage...
leaders worried this back-door method to suffrage would embitter the male population towards further political participation by women.

In 1914, suffragists at the state level experienced joy and frustration. Some state campaigns in Montana and Nevada bore fruit and women were granted the right to vote either by referendum or by state legislature. But in many other states, like Nebraska, North Dakota, Missouri and Ohio, male voters and legislators simply refused to budge. States in the West and Midwest saw the closest contests, and those states adopted women's suffrage earlier than those in the East. Historians have described a number of reasons for this, but many suffragists believed that the pioneer conditions of the West brought deeper respect for women's contributions. Southern leaders were reluctant to involve women in politics at all, and it was here that the suffragists encountered the greatest challenge. Suffragists tried to gain different types of suffrage as well: school, municipal, state, and federal voting rights. Some argued women should have political equality with men because they believed that women were more moral than men and could clean up politics if given the vote.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, national suffrage leaders were overwhelmingly from the northern states, but by the 1890s, southern women took a strong role in state suffrage campaigns. NAWSA was the national conglomeration of many different kinds of suffrage groups. It relied on important grassroots efforts that ultimately determined whether suffrage initiatives failed or succeeded in each state. By the 1910s, suffrage leaders initiated efforts to secure southern support for a national women's suffrage amendment.

A crucial factor in winning southern states to the cause of suffrage was overcoming a strong culture of states' rights. Many southern leaders distrusted national mandates, seeing them as a federal invasion all over again, like during Reconstruction when the North militarily and politically occupied the South. Suffrage leaders won southern women to the cause of suffrage by connecting voting rights to the "New South"—a culture that encouraged industrialism and a new era of prosperity. The culture also included a social structure based on Jim Crow segregation laws. While arguing for their voting rights, white suffragists in both North and South upheld racial segregation, disfranchisement of African American men at the polls, and a limited role for African Americans in a new and prosperous South. Overall, suffrage leaders agreed that a group of white female suffragists would be important that would help push "Jim Crow segregation" out of the voting right for white American men.

In 1914, socialists and Progressive Americans viewed the First World War with anxiety. The war reassured them that the United States could win overseas conflicts so that if women had the vote, they would not have to leave the country. At the same time, the socialists feared a debate over women's suffrage would have the same result in the United States. They did not put the amendment on the front line through national politics.

It was in early 1915 that a group of northern and southern socialist leaders met at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville for the first annual NAWSA convention. The 1914 convention was held in Nashville featuring the leadership of both northern and southern women and was notable for the female ballots cast in the crossroads of the South in Nashville. Women from all over the South attended the convention at the Ryman Auditorium and at the state capitol.
leaders agreed that gaining white female suffrage was more important than ending Jim Crow segregation or protecting the voting rights of African American men.¹⁰

In 1914, suffragists faced the issue of global war. Most Americans viewed the Great War with anxiety, but many reassured themselves that the United States could stay out of overseas conflicts, and, indeed, if women had the vote, wars would not happen. At the same time, the war reopened debate over whether women should have the ballot if they did not put their lives on the line through military service.

It was in this context that a group of suffragists from around the country met at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville for the forty-sixth annual NAWSA convention. The 1914 convention held in Nashville featured a crowd of both northern and southern men and women seeking the female ballot for various reasons. Nashville was a strategic city in the crossroads of the suffrage battle. The NAWSA held their annual conference in Nashville from November 12-17, 1914.¹¹ Hundreds of suffrage delegates from all over the United States traveled to Nashville, with the organization’s leadership staying at the Hermitage Hotel. They held their larger meetings at the Ryman Auditorium and had a special meeting at Representatives Hall at the state capital. According to the Woman’s Journal, “They found Nashville

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¹⁰ African American women organized their own suffrage movements, drawing from their networks of mutual aid in a society increasingly hostile to any gains for African Americans. See, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920 (Bloomington, 1998); Wheeler, Votes for Women, 71-104.

women increased their voting power in national elections. Yates' presentation on October 14, 1914, is recounted by her son, Euphemia Yates Beaumont:  

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The logic of events, as well as the value of presidential suffrage, and the far-reaching consequences of the situation, is best explained by the late President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton was a leader in the fight for women's rights throughout her lifetime. Her advocacy for women's suffrage was influential in the passage of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920. Stanton believed that women were equal to men and that they should have the right to vote.

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Yates was born in Bristol, Maine, in 1857, and educated at local schools and in Boston. In 1880, she shipped off as a missionary to China for the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, and stayed for six years. Upon her return, she published a memoir on her experiences, and then turned her attention to lecturing on behalf of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and NAWSA. She started as a lecturer for NAWSA in 1890 and became one of the organization's elders. She was also active in the Maine Woman Suffrage Association and the Maine WCTU. After her father's death in 1901, Yates moved to Rhode Island, a state on the forefront of the suffrage battle. In 1909, she became president of Rhode Island's NAWSA chapter.  

In Yates' presentation at the Nashville Convention, she encouraged the federal and state governments to pass "presidential suffrage." This measure, through national or state amendment or law, would guarantee women the right to vote for president, or rather, the right to vote for the electors who selected the president. In this way, she believed, women would demonstrate their voting abilities to sluggish male legislators and voting populations. Once they showed their political intelligence, Yates and others hoped other kinds of voting rights would follow. With voting sway in the Electoral College,

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12 Women's Journal 45 (November 21, 1914): 305.
14 Ibid., 17-22.
16 See, Elizabeth Upham Yates, Olimpiae into Chinese Homes (Boston, 1887); Anthony and Huston, History of Woman Suffrage, 4:689-969, 907-921.
women increased their political influence over the outcome of national elections. Yates' presentation to the convention at Nashville on November 14, 1914, is recounted below:

REPORT OF PRESIDENTIAL SUFFRAGE COMMITTEE

The logic of events during the past year gives emphatic emphasis to the value of presidential suffrage. It is of itself the most significant and far-reaching of any act of voting because of its political potentiality in bringing the voice of womanhood into the Electoral College, and into the arena of Federal legislation. Moreover the consideration that it calls forth from politicians on account of the fact that over three hundred thousand offices of emolument and honor are filled by the presidential administration renders it the most direct means towards the great end of full enfranchisement; for in any state the party most advantaged by its exercise by the women will support their efforts for the full rights of citizenship. The favorable decision the past year by the Supreme Court of Illinois leaves no room for any further contention regarding its constitutionality. It can be granted by any state legislature by a bare majority vote, and this can be obtained by many states that could not secure the large vote necessary to submit a constitutional amendment for full suffrage. Even where that can be obtained, the experiences of suffrage campaigns have proved too often that they were premature, and the great outlay of time and strength that they have involved have resulted in defeats whereby further progress of the cause has been impeded;

In view of the comparative ease by which it may be secured and the significance of its possession as a political factor in obtaining full suffrage, the following recommendations are submitted;

That any state contemplating a campaign for full suffrage shall first secure presidential suffrage. That those states that have secured favorable action for a constitutional amendment for full suffrage by one legislature, shall seek to obtain presidential suffrage before attempting further action for full suffrage;

By such a program it is quite probable we might double the vote of women in the presidential election of 1916.

—Elizabeth Upham Yates, Chairman.

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Note:


2. NAWSA, Handbook, 1914, 125.
In her address, Yates referred to the recent events in Illinois, where suffragists had actively campaigned for decades. The state governor would only issue a referendum to the male voters to decide their fate, but the suffragists did have powerful allies in the Illinois legislature. The general assembly approved of presidential suffrage to women in that state by a narrow margin of six votes. Opponents of the bill challenged it at the Illinois Supreme Court. The Court ruled to uphold the new law and as a result, women could vote for president, but they could not vote for members of their state assembly or for representatives to the U.S. Congress. For many suffrage leaders this victory had the potential to demonstrate that women deserved full voting rights.¹⁹

The so-called “premature” suffrage campaigns Yates referred to had happened in a number of places. Suffragists who had successfully lobbied state politicians might not have spent enough time actually convincing the public to favor women’s right to vote. If state legislatures approved the franchise for women, they then conducted a referendum to the male voters, who often defeated the measure. But, if women could vote for president, this action could further the ultimate goal of political equality with men.

Yates’ address was part of a larger contention from the convention attendees that they should strengthen their Congressional Committee and apply more pressure to Congress and the president. There had also been a brewing schism not acknowledged by the NAWSA convention leaders about the growing radicalism of Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and other suffragists. Paul wanted to employ pressure tactics, which the American press labeled “militant.” Paul and her allies dominated the Washington, D.C. branch of NAWSA and its Congressional Committee, and in 1914 left the NAWSA to form their own group, the Congressional Union. Three of the younger suffragists from Illinois replaced Paul and her associates in NAWSA’s Congressional Committee. Though the convention leadership of November 1914 never mentioned this controversy, they empowered the Congressional Committee to work closer with civil rights leaders.

Yates grew more sympathetic to the Congressional Union in 1914, and the Susan B. Anthony Chapman Union took over.
to work closer with congressmen and the president. Elizabeth Upham Yates grew more sympathetic to the NAWSA and refused to work with the Congressional Union in Rhode Island. Shaw resigned in 1915 and Carrie Chapman Catt took over as leader of the NAWSA. Catt created a “winning plan” to apply more pressure—albeit, polite—on both state and national legislators and leaning on President Woodrow Wilson. Despite their disagreements with Paul’s tactics, NAWSA tightened and unified their policy towards the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, and deemphasized the gradual approach of the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment. 30

The Nashville convention closed out in typical fashion, with a renewal of hope and spirit as suffragists launched new efforts at state levels. The Nashville convention laid important groundwork for the rapid advancement of the female suffrage movement. Within the next six years, the suffrage movement unified and leaders brought the issue to Congress and state legislatures. The final ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920, with the help from a young East Tennessee politician, served as a landmark moment in the long struggle for suffrage. The 1914 Nashville Convention and Yates’ address highlighted the intricate network that women wove in their own communities, statewide, and nationally to achieve their political goals, and were important contributions to the larger effort that resulted in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.
