

Celebrating 100 years of suffrage

How Florida women helped win the right to vote (but not without a fight)

By Peggy Macdonald

Florida women's fight for the vote began with the same concept that fueled the American Revolution: no taxation without representation.

In 1892, after returning from a women's suffrage conference in Des Moines, Iowa, Ella Chamberlain pitched an idea for a new column to the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. Although her editor wanted her to write on topics that would be of interest to women and children,

Chamberlain focused on a timelier topic: women's rights. "The world was not suffering for another cake recipe," she said, "and the children seemed to be getting along better than the women."

In 1893, Chamberlain established the Florida Woman Suffrage Association, which was affiliated with the National American Woman Suffrage Association, whose early presidents included Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

Although the campaign for women's right to vote was a progressive cause, not all suffragists were enlightened when it came to race. While the national suffrage group welcomed black women as members, state and local organizations discriminated against African Americans. State women's suffrage conventions were segregated, and even the National American Woman Suffrage Association prevented black women from marching together with whites during the March 3, 1913 suffrage parade in Washington,



Orlando equal suffrage float photo c. 1913

COURTESY OF ORANGE COUNTY REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER



Fay Gibson Moulton Bridges

Fay Gibson Moulton Bridges became the first woman to vote in Florida after the 19th Amendment went into effect. When Bridges reported to work at the Liddon General Dry Goods Store, her boss advised her that it was going to be a busy day and if she wanted to vote in the election for town mayor and constable she should do so right away. Bridges voted on the porch of the dry goods store.

D.C., according to the National Women's History Museum website.

Florida was no different. Chamberlain's vision for equal suffrage was laced with xenophobia and racism. While making a case for (white) women's suffrage, she asked why a "free-born American woman" should be represented by "the alien and the Negro." In reality, a combination of poll taxes, literacy tests and lynching prevented most African Americans from voting in the Jim Crow era. Chamberlain's anti-alien argument gained little traction in the Tampa area, where immigrant labor contributed to the booming cigar industry. She left the state in 1897, and the Florida women's suffrage movement stalled.

Things began to change in 1912, when the Orlando mayor announced that "all freeholders" should register for an upcoming local election, according to Elizabeth Taylor's history of the suffrage movement in Florida. When a small group of Orlando women attempted to

register to vote, they were referred to several confused city officials. Eventually, the city attorney informed them that Florida law did not grant women the right to vote.

The incident provided the Orlando women with a concrete example of taxation without representation, and the equal suffrage movement started to flourish in the city. Mary Safford, an experienced suffragist, was elected president of the Orlando Equal Suffrage League. A state convention was held in Orlando in November 1913, and the Florida Equal Suffrage Association was established. Safford was elected the first president of the new organization. Regular state conventions were held, continuing even when World War I altered the political landscape.

While the Florida Woman Suffrage Association was still in existence, most suffrage groups eventually merged with the Florida Equal Suffrage Association, which was aligned with the National



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA

May Mann Jennings, former First Lady of Florida, who championed suffrage, was a president of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs and cofounder of the state's chapter of the League of Women Voters.

American Woman Suffrage Association. Through its state and local affiliates, the National American Woman Suffrage Association worked for passage of equal suffrage amendments to the U.S. Constitution and state constitutions. Many officers and members of the Florida Equal Suffrage Association came from the ranks of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs, whose president was May Mann Jennings, a cofounder of the Florida chapter of the League of Women Voters and First Lady of Florida from 1901-1905, during the governorship of her husband, William Sherman Jennings. The members of the Federation and local suffrage leagues were so entwined that they were practically one and the same, observed Jennings' biographer, Linda D. Vance.



Suffrage parade

continued on page 54

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CENTENNIAL continued from page 39

In 1915, the Federation passed a motion at its state convention supporting the right to vote for women. And the Federation voted into membership the Orlando Equal Suffrage League, Florida's most active suffrage organization. The Federation soon became the largest organization in Florida to support equal suffrage. In 1917, the Florida Legislature considered a proposed amendment to the state constitution to enfranchise women, according to Elizabeth Taylor.

But there was strong resistance to the movement among the state's political establishment. Alachua County representative Frank Clark Jr. maintained that voting is not a natural right. C. A. Stephens of Hamilton argued against women's suffrage on the grounds that "divine law placed man at the head of the family and made him the ruler and governing power of nations."

As early as 1915, some municipalities permitted women to vote in local elections. Fellsmere lays claim to being the birthplace of women's suffrage in the Sunshine State because it was the site where Zena Dreier became the first woman to vote in a local election in Florida, and possibly the entire South.

Although several local suffrage bills were passed, the Florida Legislature failed to pass a state suffrage amendment, and when the U.S. Congress passed the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919, formally granting all women in the U.S. the right to vote, Florida did not ratify the amendment



Mary McLeod Bethune

Nonetheless, on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified and eight days later women's suffrage went into effect across the nation. The following day, on August 27, Fay Gibson Moulton Bridges became the first woman to vote in Florida after the 19th Amendment went into effect. When Bridges reported to work at the Liddon General Dry Goods Store in downtown Sneads in Jackson County, her boss advised her that it was going to be a busy day and if she wanted to vote in the election for town mayor and constable she should do so right away, according to the *Jackson County Times*. The act of voting was quite informal. Bridges voted on the porch of the dry goods store.

"We didn't have voting booths in those days," she explained to the *Miami Herald* before her death in 1974. After casting her ballot, Bridges was invited to attend special ceremonies at the Governor's Mansion and the White House to recognize her as the first woman to vote in Florida. A widow with seven children, Bridges was unable to attend the ceremonies.

She later remarried and moved to Miami, where she and her husband opened a coffee shop and general store. Until well into her eighties, Bridges would start working at 4:30 a.m. each day, making key lime pie, homemade chicken and dumplings, biscuits and other Southern staples at the coffee shop. A lifelong Democrat, Bridges said

she never missed an election. GFWC Florida Federation of Women's Clubs president Sharon Oliphant reported that a historical marker will be dedicated in Bridges' honor in 2020.

Another woman who voted in that first post-ratification election was Mary McLeod Bethune. Working to overcome both sexism and racism, Bethune offered night classes in reading at what is now Bethune-Cookman University to help members of the black community pass the literacy test. Bethune also campaigned door-to-door to raise money for a poll tax fund for black voters. In retaliation, the Ku Klux Klan threatened to burn Bethune's school. When KKK members marched toward the school, Bethune led a group of students in song. According to former Bethune-Cookman history professor Leonard R. Lempel, the singing drove the KKK away and the next day Bethune and the students marched together to cast their first ballots.

Although the 15th Amendment extended suffrage to black men in 1870 and the 19th Amendment granted voting rights to women in 1920, Bethune and other civil rights activists continued to work for decades to help black men and women gain access to the polls. Their goal was finally accomplished when Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prevented states from using measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests to prevent African Americans from voting.

Peggy Macdonald is an adjunct professor of history at Stetson University and Indian River State College. She is the former director of the Matheson History Museum. A Gainesville native, Macdonald earned a doctorate in history at the University of Florida. She



writes for Gainesville Magazine, Our Town Magazine and Senior Times and serves on the Alachua County Historical Commission. She is the author of *Marjorie Harris Carr: Defender of Florida's Environment*.

COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVE CENTER, INDIAN RIVER COUNTY MAIN LIBRARY



Zena Dreier in 1963.