

Woman's Suffrage and Its Impact on Government

by RoAnn Bishop

Since winning suffrage (the right to vote) in 1920, women in North Carolina have used their votes to elect candidates and enact legislation that they believed would improve government and make positive changes in the lives of the state's people. However, until the early 1900s, Tar Heel women, like women in the rest of the nation, had little control over their own lives. The law did not allow women to vote or seek office, and married women could not own property in their own names. Even their children and personal possessions did not legally belong to them, but to their husbands. Because they were expected to stay at home and care for their families, women had little opportunity to earn money or get an education.

In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first American women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. There, Stanton called for giving women the vote, providing equal opportunities in jobs and education, and ending gender-based discrimination. These goals became the basis of the nationwide women's rights movement.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

The woman's suffrage banner above is in the museum's collection. The banner belonged to suffragist Gertrude Weil, of Goldsboro. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*



WOMEN
bring all
VOTERS
into the world
~
Let Women Vote

The poster above is an artifact from the museum's collection. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

After the Civil War, North Carolina women began working outside the home in offices and factories to help support themselves and their families. When public higher education became available to females after Reconstruction, some women went to college. During the 1880s and 1890s, a few women entered the male-dominated professions of law, medicine, and dentistry. Others worked as teachers and nurses. As



Gertrude Weil (left) was a leader of the woman's suffrage movement in North Carolina.

their skills and self-confidence grew, so did their desire for political involvement.

In 1894 Helen Morris Lewis of Buncombe County helped organize the Equal Suffrage Association to begin advocating that women be allowed to vote in North Carolina. Three years later, the first woman's suffrage bill was introduced in the state's General Assembly,



President Woodrow Wilson is featured in a political cartoon dealing with woman's suffrage in June 1918.

only to be referred by the senate to the Committee on Insane Asylums. Although Tar Heel lawmakers seemed to find the idea of women

voting "insane," four western states already had granted women this right. In Congress, three woman's suffrage bills had been introduced, and defeated, by 1897.

In 1914, after more than a decade of inactivity, North Carolina's Equal Suffrage Association (which later became the League of Women Voters) was rejuvenated under the leadership of Gertrude Weil. By that time,

many prominent men and newspapers in the state also supported the suffrage movement. In 1915, bills to allow women to vote were introduced—and promptly tabled—in both houses of the North Carolina General Assembly. Supporters next tried to win the right for women to vote specifically in presidential and in municipal elections. But the all-male legislature defeated both of these



The first female state representative, Lillian Exum Clement (third row, fifth from left), as a member of the house in 1921.

bills in 1917. Many of the lawmakers were conservative and feared that giving women the vote would disrupt family life, expose the "fairer sex" to corruption, and allow females to influence issues that they did not fully understand.

In the spring of 1917, the United States entered World War I, and women took over many jobs vacated by men who left to serve in

the military. Partly because of women's contributions to the war effort, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to approve the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote. Congress overwhelmingly passed the amendment, but thirty-six states still had to ratify it for it to become law.

By the summer of 1920, thirty-five states had ratified the amendment, but time was running out. North Carolina's vote was crucial. Mary Hilliard Hinton and the Southern League for the Rejection of the Susan B. Anthony

Amendment led a strong last-minute opposition to the amendment. The strongest leadership came from textile mill owners, liquor interests, and political machines, which opposed child labor laws and other social and political reforms and feared that women voters would support these measures. However, many Tar Heels, including women, opposed woman's suffrage because they saw politics as a moral threat to women and to domestic stability.

In a special session, the General Assembly not only refused to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment but also sent a telegram urging Tennessee legislators to reject it, too. The Tennessee legislature was meeting at the same time, and only one other state's approval was needed to make woman's suffrage the law of the land. Tennessee ratified the amendment anyway, and it became part of the United States Constitution on August 26, 1920. All

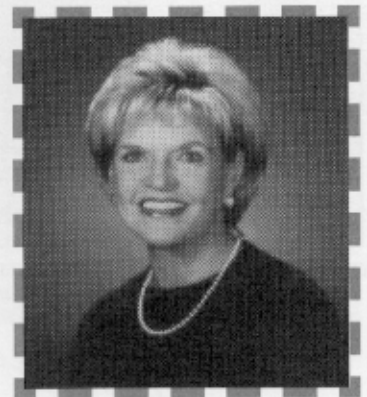
states were then required to abide by the new law. Remarkably, not until 1971 did the North Carolina General Assembly finally ratify the amendment.

Since gaining the right to vote, Tar Heel women have participated actively in the political process. Just months after national ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, Lillian Exum Clement of Buncombe County was elected as the first female state representative. In 1974 Susie Sharp became both the state's and the nation's first popularly elected female chief justice. In 1996 Secretary of State Elaine Marshall became the first woman elected to statewide office in North Carolina. And in 2000, Beverly Perdue became the state's first female lieutenant governor.



Susie Sharp (second from right) being sworn in as a justice of the superior court in 1949. In 1974 she became North Carolina's and the nation's first popularly elected female chief justice of a supreme court.

But more than being a mere presence in government, women have worked to make a difference, not only through legislation but also by helping to educate the public about issues, monitoring the election process, registering citizens to vote, and getting voters to the polls. As lobbyists, campaign workers, convention delegates, county election officials, political party members, and voters, women have helped—and continue to help—improve the quality of North Carolina's government and the lives of its people. ❀



Lieutenant Governor Beverly Perdue, the state's first female to occupy that position. Image courtesy of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.