

LWVCC November 2018 *Concord Journal* Column: Our Pride and Prejudices

The evening before the November 6th election—in which 74% of Concordian registrants voted—Barbara Berenson spoke at the Concord Museum. Her topic was: “The Woman’s Suffrage Movement,” and her focus was on the Massachusetts women who organized and led the national movement.

While the Seneca gathering, in July of 1848, often registers as the more important moment in the movement, Berenson argues that it was Lucy Stone and participants like Sojourner Truth—who organized the First National Woman’s Rights Convention, held in Worcester, Massachusetts, on October 23, 1850—where a clear resolution emerged and a national effort began. Over 3,000 participants—men and women—gathered and passed a resolution that stated, “every human being ‘who is required to obey the laws, is entitled to a voice in its enactment.’ ” William Lloyd Garrison spoke at this convention, as did Massachusetts women who would eventually lead the cause for universal suffrage.

Many opposed this movement. Scores of New Englanders feared the expansion of the franchise to women. Francis C. Lowell, a Boston Brahmin and Harvard Trustee, chaired the Man Suffrage Association, an organization that was determined to stop women from voting. There was little interest in disturbing the balance of power or in encouraging women to engage in political discourse.

A clear pride in the judgment and intelligence of the male social elite cemented a reluctance to change. Buttressed by Social Darwinism and reinforced by the emerging magnates of Mark Twain’s Gilded Age, a focus on a government unfettered by regulation or labor unions and toward a world of enormous fortunes, meant few eastern states were interested in expanding the franchise to women.

Fearful of the influence the uneducated woman would have on our elections, Henry Cabot Lodge (a Massachusetts Congressman), Charles Eliot (President of Harvard University), and Agnes Irwin (Dean of Radcliffe College), were among the strongest anti-suffragists. Berenson notes in her book *Massachusetts in the Woman Suffrage Movement* that a Harvard Medical School Professor, Edward Clarke, “claimed that women’s ovaries shriveled in response to intellectual exertion.” Justice Joseph Bradley, in an 1872 U.S. Supreme Court decision, wrote:

The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which
belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for
many of the occupations of civil life...This is the
law of the Creator.”

And while many agreed, the Massachusetts legislature passed, in 1879, a law permitting women to vote in school committee elections, and Louis May Alcott was one of the first to cast her ballot. Eventually, on August 26th, 1920, the Fourteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote, was finally proclaimed.

What prejudice governed and still influences our reluctance to allow every citizen the opportunity—since each citizen now clearly has the right—to vote? Clearly, it is the fear that the votes of some citizens will mean a change in the existing power structure. From gerrymandering to identification cards, from limited poll hours to poll site closings, many states erect frustrating barriers and disincentives to voting. The Governor and Senator's races in Florida have once again inspired accusations of voter fraud and voter manipulation. It is important to recall that only 537 Floridian votes (or hanging chads), in the 2000 election, secured the Presidency for George W. Bush. The importance of taking our time to count every vote remains critical.

The right to vote was hard won, and the League of Women Voters believes that every citizen should be allowed and encouraged to exercise that right. We are grateful to our Town Clerk and the many citizens of Concord who oversee our polls and warmly welcome voters.

Democracy is not a spectator sport.

Diane Proctor

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