

90 years ago women gained the right to vote

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The balloons Carol Kane will tie to a Framingham Centre signpost Thursday pay tribute to her great-aunt Josephine Collins.

The colors pay tribute to Lydia Taft of Uxbridge, Augusta Cheney of Natick, Louisa May Alcott of Concord, the "Women Taxpayers" of Milford, fellow Framingham resident Louise Parker Mayo, and the thousands of other local women who shared in Collins' goal.

White, gold and purple symbolize the suffragette movement that brought voting rights to all American women 90 years ago, when Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment on Aug. 18, 1920, and it became the law of the land on Aug. 26.

The 90th anniversary "serves as a reminder of both the lengthy struggle that preceded it, and the relatively short period of time that women in the United States have been fully enfranchised," said Anita Danker, a Framingham resident and retired Assumption College associate professor of education.

"I think that Massachusetts women had a more visible presence during the first wave - Lucy Stone, Lydia Maria Child, Abby Kelley Foster and Lucretia Mott were among the most prominent," said Danker. "In 1850, the National Woman's Rights Convention was held in Worcester, and Susan B. Anthony herself was born in Adams."

And a century before the mid-1800s "first wave," Lydia Taft of Uxbridge became the first woman to cast a vote.

Her husband, Josiah, a military officer and Uxbridge's largest taxpayer, died in 1756, "immediately prior to an important vote on the town's support for the war effort in the French and Indian Wars. Josiah's untimely death opened the door for Lydia's step into America's history of women's suffrage," Taft's Wikipedia entry notes. The men of Uxbridge voted to give her Josiah's proxy, and she voted to increase the town's contribution to the war effort.

"Over half a century later, another Blackstone Valley woman, Abby Kelley Foster, who belonged to the Quaker Meeting at Uxbridge, would lead two later famous suffragists," Anthony and Stone, "into the anti-slavery movement," according to Wikipedia. Foster was also noted for refusing to pay property taxes before her death in 1887 because she didn't have the right to vote.

Eyes on the prize

Augusta Cheney, daughter of the Rev. Horatio Alger Sr., founded the Women's Suffrage Club of Natick in 1877.

"In 1881, the club succeeded in putting an article on the warrant for Town Meeting proposing that women be given the right to vote in local elections and hold town offices," Natick resident James Morley writes in his history of the Eliot Church, "From Many Backgrounds."

"The Town Meeting members were all men, of course. The motion was rejected. In 1882 it was put again. Again it was rejected." Even after it failed in 1883, "the women were not daunted." They fought, and won, a measure of equality as full members of the Unitarian Parish that year.

"Augusta kept hammering away at the men for the rest of her life," Morley writes. In an 1896 column Cheney wrote for The Natick Bulletin, "she took no prisoners."

"Home is not the place for every woman," Cheney wrote. "If a woman can do more for her fellows by a public life (and many can), then it is her duty to live her life for the public; if she can do more at home, then her duty is there, and the same will apply to men. There are many men today who would do the country immeasurable good if they would sink into oblivion."

Concord's Abigail May Alcott authored a petition to change the state constitution and grant equal political rights to women in 1853, and in 1880, her daughter, "Louisa May Alcott and 19 other women attended the Concord Town Meeting," massmoments.org reports.

"The year before, the Massachusetts Legislature had made it legal for women to vote in school committee elections. ... The author of 'Little Women' was the first woman in Concord to register to vote.

"She rallied the other women to exercise the limited franchise they had been given," and when their votes had been cast, "she later reported, 'No bolt fell on our audacious heads, no earthquake shook the town.'"

But three years after Alcott's triumphant Town Meeting vote, only seven women cast votes for school board candidates in Concord.

In Wayland, "women served on the school committee before the turn of the 20th century," said Jane Sciacca, president of the Wayland Historical Society, and the town had its share of suffrage sympathizers, "in particular, a Mrs. (Walter) Henderson."

The Wayland Woman's Club records from a March 1915 meeting at Henderson's home, held eight months before the state legislature was to vote on the issue, "the afternoon was devoted to consideration of the equal suffrage question from the point of view of an Anti."

"In spite of its leading role in the 19th-century women's rights movement, Massachusetts was the first state to organize an association of women opposed to suffrage," a Mass Moments article states. "Known as the 'Antis,' these women believed that they could be better, more effective citizens without the ballot. Many of the Antis were active in Progressive era causes; they feared that involvement in electoral politics would erode their influence."

Massachusetts was also home to many Catholics, "and while the Church took no official position, strongly worded statements by leading clerics were issued in opposition to the proposed bill," author Eleanor Flexner writes in her book, "Century of Struggle."

Dorchester native Margaret Foley, a working-class Irish Catholic, was not among those swayed by anti-suffrage sentiment.

Foley's "in-your-face tactics" didn't always sit well with the "largely middle-class leadership of Boston's suffragist movement," a Dorchester history website notes, but she did help Nevada women win the vote a year she addressed a large rally in Milford's Draper Park in July 1915.

Western states and territories were more open to female voters. In 1890, Wyoming was admitted to the Union as the first state to allow women full suffrage. Colorado women were enfranchised in 1893. Utah followed in 1895.

"The suffrage issue was due to come before the Massachusetts Legislature in November 1915," said Framingham resident Libby Franck, who is researching the era for her upcoming performance of Collins' "journey in the fight for a woman's right to vote."

"The Suffrage Parade in Boston on Oct. 16 was magnificent; 9,000 women marched; the spectators were well behaved. Yet despite this beautiful spectacle orchestrated by Alice Paul, the measure failed to pass."

Jailed for the cause

Framingham's Collins and Mayo "represented countless women throughout the country who interrupted their everyday lives to be a part of history," said Danker.

"Thousands of American women fought the battle for the vote. Hundreds of them were jailed and 168 received the suffrage pins. Framingham is honored to have been home to two of them," said Franck, whose Framingham History Center performance is planned Sunday, Sept. 26.

Mayo, the mother of five boys and two girls, left the family's Nixon Road farmhouse in July 1917 to picket at the White House.

"My grandfather, a tall Abraham Lincoln type, said 'Go ahead,' " said Jean Trifero, a Nantucket resident who spent much of her childhood with her grandparents, Louise and William. "He knew if that's what she was going to do, she would do it."

Mayo was among 17 women protesters arrested and sentenced to 60 days in jail. She was pardoned and released after serving two days, but her actions earned her a silver jail-door pin from the National Woman's Party.

"I always have an awful lot of pride in what she accomplished," Trifero said of the woman known to solve math problems for fun and drive "the school barge," a horse-drawn conveyance that ferried students in the days before buses.

Her grandmother's passion for equality included her belief that "college was the goal for everyone. I think only one son didn't go. My mother and my aunt did," said Trifero.

Collins, who was single, owned a teahouse in Framingham Centre and managed the family business, Collins Market, while her brother served in World War I.

Teahouses, such as the one Collins ran, "were all the rage in that era and were frequently patronized by suffragists," said Franck. "I also discovered the Nobscot Mountain Farm Tea House near the Wayside Inn in South Sudbury. Now a private home for sale, I visited it and envisioned suffragists from Framingham sipping tea and muffins there when it was in operation in 1917."

Collins "also had a dry goods shop, after the teahouse," said Kane. "It was that business that was impacted by her 'militant' activities. Husbands would not let their wives shop there" because she had spent eight days in the Charles Street jail after joining a suffrage demonstration during President Woodrow Wilson's visit to Boston in 1919.

"Aunt Jo was the backbone of her family," said Kane. "She was generous and cared for all. She made sure my mother had an education and financed her schooling," as well as paying for her niece to attend summer camp. "She also got my mother her first pair of long pants," the Framingham native said.

"The fact that I know these things, the fact that my mother shared all those memories with me so long after Aunt Jo was gone, just demonstrates the impact this one woman had.

"Of course, I knew from a young age the impact Josephine Collins had on women's rights. She made extreme sacrifices to improve the lives of women going forward," Kane said.

"Our town has much to be proud of," said Franck.

Framingham was also the site of a 1909 suffrage rally in Irving Square, and noted sculptor and local resident Meta Warrick Fuller was a member of the Equal Suffrage League.

The first voters

Milford's first woman to cast a ballot in a presidential election was Grace Nugent, wife of Selectman T.J. Nugent, the Milford Daily News reported on Nov. 2, 1920, and "not a single (woman) found any difficulty in voting" when 1,500 of the 3,800 town voters were female, and Warren Harding defeated James Cox.

In a letter to the editor published Feb. 17, 1921, a group identified as "Women Taxpayers" laid out their vision for their first town election in the spring:

"All we ask are clean upright men to conduct our affairs; our taxes levied equitably and justly; our schools and library maintained at a high standard; our beautiful parks kept clean and orderly; our streets kept clean and in good repair; our youth protected from pernicious influences such as gambling or the semblance of a saloon; our police department an efficient body of men; and each town official carry on his work all the more efficiently."

Wayland's Sophia Sears wasn't quite as starry-eyed about her first encounter with democracy at Town Meeting in 1921.

"I was embarrassed to tears," Sears told the Wayland Town Crier in 1971.

"She merely went along with her husband ... because he assured her all the other women in town would be there," the Crier reported. "They weren't and she was the only woman in the hall."

"The moderator introduced me, said he was honored to have me there and everyone clapped," said Sears. "All the other women in town were home washing dishes and doing their duty, I guess."

Hear us roar?

"For six decades after women obtained the right to vote in 1920, they voted at lower rates than men," Rutgers professor Susan Carroll said in a report posted on the university's Center for American Women and Politics site.

In 1980, both 59 percent of American men and 59 percent of American women reported taking part in elections, according to U.S. Census data that represents "voting and registration estimates alongside various demographic characteristics."

While the percentage of women has been slightly higher than men in each post-1980 Census survey, both sexes are less likely to vote than in 1964, when 71 percent of male and 67 percent of female voters said they cast a ballot. In 2008, the figures were 56 percent for men and 60 percent for women.

The Massachusetts Secretary of State's office doesn't have a breakdown of voters by gender, a spokesman said, nor do local town clerks surveyed.

"We don't pay attention to who votes" in regard to gender, said Hopkinton Town Clerk Ann Click.

Those who followed in the pioneering footsteps of state Reps. Susan Fitzgerald, D-Jamaica Plain, and Sylvia Donaldson, R-Brockton, who went to Beacon Hill in 1923, also said they aren't aware of differences in the number of men and women who cast ballots these days.

"It seems to be 50-50 when I'm standing outside" a polling place, said state Sen. Karen Spilka, D-Ashland.

State Rep. Pam Richardson, D-Framingham, said that's been her experience as well, and "of the volunteers that are helping me, I think it's 50-50."

But, said Richardson, "we still have a long way to go as far as equal representation. More men than women run for public office. More men than women hold public office."

That might change in coming years.

"I've been impressed by the number of women applying for internships" at the State House, said state Rep. Carolyn Dykema, D-Holliston.

"We've come a long way, but we're not there yet," said Spilka.

"I think it's something we take for granted," she said of the right to vote, "but that was an amazing thing that the women of that generation did."

"I go up to the Mayo-Collins Square every Aug. 26 and put white, gold and purple, the suffrage colors, balloons on the sign that bears (Collins') name," said Kane.

"And I write 'Votes for Women' on the balloons."

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