

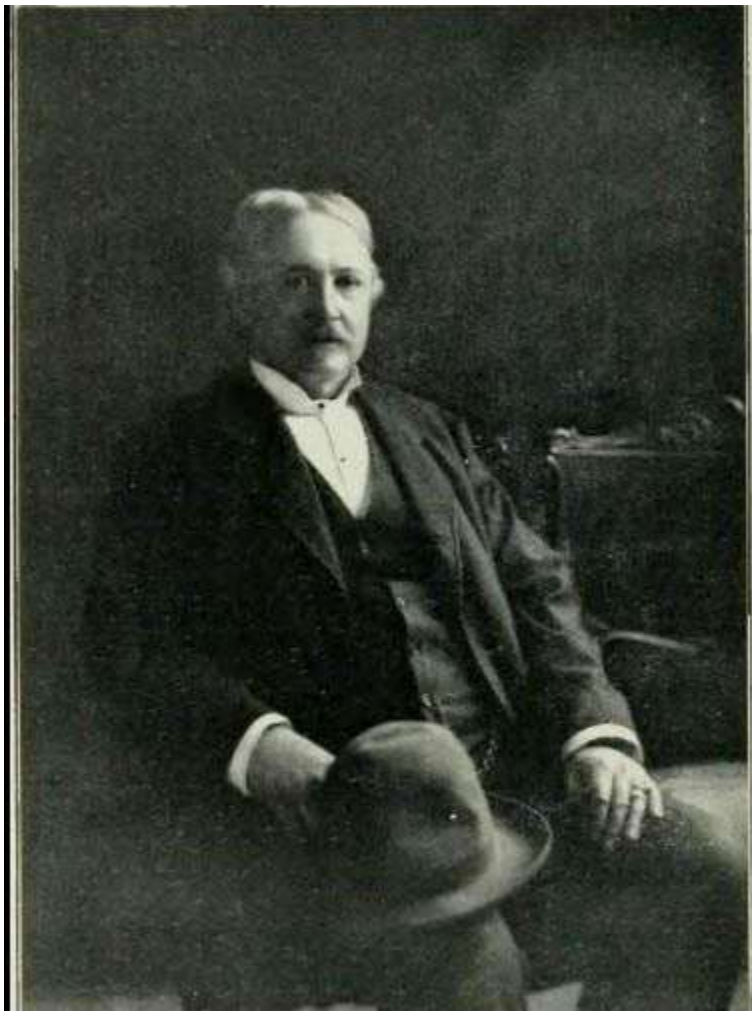
MANSFIELD MEMORIES: 683 Mansfield women voted in the first presidential election after the 19th amendment passed

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This is the final of a three-part series on the women's suffrage movement in Mansfield.

Local observers witnessed an unusual spectacle in October 1915. It was one month before a referendum to allow the women of Massachusetts to vote in statewide elections. An anti-suffrage rally was held in front of the Wheeler Building at 129 North Main Street. It was part of a roving anti-suffrage tour making its way through the area.



In 1915 John P. Irish of California brought his anti-suffrage message to Mansfield saying women can't be allowed to vote for laws that they cannot physically defend.

The featured speaker was John P. Irish of California. He said that force is the foundation of government and that women can't be allowed to vote for laws that they cannot physically defend.

“Women are not morally or intellectually degraded by not having the ballot,” Irish said. “Morality and learning are not qualifications for the [vote], which rest upon a physical superiority only.”

He further argued against female politicians, claiming that they would bring women down onto a lower plane with men. Young men would not show the “gentler sex” the deference that they should.

Irish also decried the increasing number of women in the workforce. “We have more cigarette smoking mashers hanging around cigar stores and pool rooms than before women's suffrage,” Irish claimed. “Many of these boys might be employed if the new women did not force themselves into the fields that are proper for men.”

The anti-suffrage speech was followed by a pro-suffrage rally. Miss Edith Spencer of Boston immediately rose to refute Irish in a “short but spirited address.” She said the suffrage movement couldn’t be blamed for conditions in the American workplace, especially since they were worse in states where women weren’t allowed to vote. She urged laws that would give women “equal wage for equal work.”

The suffrage movement was dealt a blow when the voters of Massachusetts rejected the 1915 referendum. Despite the setback full suffrage would soon come with the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920.

In the summer of 1920, women in Mansfield registered to vote in numbers larger than ever before. A rumor surfaced claiming that women would be subject to a five dollar poll tax, but that was quickly dispelled.

The Mansfield News worked with local registrars to ensure women understood their rights and were properly registered. “The opportunity to participate through the ballot, in shaping the policies of the state and the nation is the greatest that has ever come to women,” the paper stated on August 27, 1920. “Let every woman therefore; make the right use of it that they may aid in helping to solve the many problems that menace the ideals and institutions which have made our nation a leader among the nations of the world.”

The moment of truth came on Tuesday, September 7, 1920, the first statewide election in which women could vote. Some wondered if there might be mass confusion at the polls as female voters would not know how to properly read and mark their ballots. This proved not to be the case. In Mansfield 126 women came out for the state’s primary election. The first to cast a ballot was Ethel Bessom, a 35 year old housewife from Church Street.

Two months later, on Tuesday, November 2, 1920, 683 women were among the 1,801 voters to cast a ballot in the presidential election in Mansfield. Warren Harding carried Mansfield by a margin of 5 to 1 and won the election nationwide. With that election the question of women’s suffrage was finally settled.



Ethel Bessom was first female voter in a state primary in Mansfield after the passage of the 19th amendment.