

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: ‘A question of right’ - the suffrage movement

By Andy Todesco and Kevin McNatt | mansfield@wickedlocal.com

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This is the first of three parts on the women’s suffrage movement in Mansfield.

MANSFIELD - The women’s suffrage movement in America began at the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls, New York. There is no way to know how the women (or men) of Mansfield were thinking at that time. But if subsequent history is any indication, there were likely some who would have been in agreement.

By the 1870s Massachusetts was considering the right of women to vote for school committee.

“It should not be a question of policy — it is a question of right,” wrote the Mansfield News in 1876.

The following named ladies voted, of whom Mrs. Makepeace had the honor of depositing the first ballot. Harriet A. Bordon, Betsey Cobb, Elizabeth P. Dunham, Ellen H Draper, Lutheria E Hodges, Lydia A Hodges, Mary E. Leonard, Mary L Leonard, Emelie A Lucas, Carrie J. Makepeace, Adeline M Pratt, Sylvia A. Phillips, Peddie S. Reed, Martha J. Rogers, Martha Richardson, Martha M. Shepard, Ruth A. Shepard.

This article in the Mansfield News in March 1880 chronicled the first time women were able to vote though it was only for local school committee elections. Eighteen Mansfield women voted for school committee with Carrie Makepeace having the honor of casting first ballot.

This early endorsement shouldn’t be mistaken for widespread support of suffrage. But it does indicate that there were some who favored the cause.

By 1879 suffrage for school committee elections was granted to women in the Bay State. Women registered for the next election in March 1880. As they began to assert their new (if limited) political power the newspaper offered a sense of how the men of Mansfield were dealing with this new reality.

“Mansfield husbands don’t object much unless they come short on meals, or the baby claims too much of their attention, while the mother is out on political matters.”

The big moment came in early March 1880, the first time women voted in a local election. Eighteen Mansfield women voted for school committee with Carrie Makepeace having the honor of casting the first ballot. Samuel Brown was elected. Observers credited his victory to the women’s bloc.

As the women cast their votes, “all shades of expression were visible” on their male counterparts. They ranged from “those glad that even a partial right of suffrage had been granted, those who were of the barely willing class, those who believe in degrading rather than elevating women, and those who were supremely disgusted at the whole thing.”

One discouraged gentleman was heard to say, “Well, they’ve let down the bars — no knowing what length they’ll go now.”

As the years passed women continued to press for universal suffrage. In 1882 a letter was published locally by three suffragists from Boston decrying the fact some candidates for statewide office wished to continue to hold women “where the law now holds them, as the political equals of idiots, lunatics and felons.”



In May 1914, Rabbi Charles Fleischer of Boston spoke at the town hall in favor of women's suffrage.

Two years later “A Suffragist” wrote to the Mansfield News to complain of a frequent argument against women’s suffrage.

“It has been said that the delicate and cultured women would shrink away,” she wrote, “and the bold and indelicate come to the front, in public affairs.”

She assured her male brethren that this would not be the case.

Local groups continued to push for full suffrage for women. By 1910 there were 686 registered voters in Mansfield, 110 of whom were women. By that point some states had granted full suffrage to women in all elections save federal, which would require a constitutional amendment. There was a push for Massachusetts to follow suit.

At this point a series of dignified speakers came to Mansfield to address local suffragists and their like-minded male counterparts. One was Rabbi Charles Fleischer of Boston who spoke at the town hall in May 1914. He “clearly and eloquently set forth the argument in favor of women’s suffrage.”

The meeting later voted in favor of adopting the resolution of the National American Woman Suffrage Association which called for universal suffrage. Rabbi Fleischer’s appearance in Mansfield set the stage for two prominent suffragists to visit Mansfield soon thereafter.

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