

Scrapbooks trace women's suffrage in Tompkins

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In 1917, women earned the right to vote in New York state. That triumph was the result of many decades of struggle on the part of women all over the state, dating back to at least the 1840s and the Woman's Rights Convention, which had been held in Seneca Falls.

In Tompkins County, the cause of suffrage was not adopted until the 1890s and, at first, only reluctantly.

This early history of the suffrage movement in Tompkins County is detailed in three scrapbooks in the archives of the History Center, and the quotes below are from the first of these.

In the fall of 1894, the New York Women's Suffrage Association held its annual convention in Ithaca despite the fact that, at the time, there was no women's suffrage organization in Ithaca, nor was there much public support for the issue here. But the impact that a university community could have on this crucial issue was a strong draw for the state organization, and they wisely sent an emissary to generate support in the women's community.

Harriet May Mills, of Syracuse, then the Suffrage Association state organizer, met with Kate Lewis, Marie Lewis, Flora Gillette and Ithaca newcomer Louisa Riley. The upshot of that meeting was an agreement to host the convention in Ithaca.

“Miss Susan B. Anthony was in attendance at this Convention and gave an evening address, and the Lyceum was packed to hear her, some no doubt out of curiosity while others, with more open minds, wanted to hear the woman who had gained such National reputation.”

The representatives of the state suffrage association were eager to establish a suffrage organization in Ithaca, but local opinion was against it because “it was such an unpopular movement.”

A compromise of sorts was offered by Riley. A Philadelphia native, Riley had moved to Ithaca to enable her son to attend Cornell. Her proposal was that a general Women's Club be formed and that it have a women's suffrage section.

The Women's Club's first meetings were held in the homes of members, and discussion topics included civic affairs and women's suffrage. Over time, about half of the members of the Women's Club belonged to the suffrage section.

“In March 1899, the suffrage section decided that they could do more active work if they had a separate Club and with kind feelings 'tord (sic) the Women's Club who had mothered them while they were getting rooted, as it were — they decided to withdraw the suffrage section but as individuals they all retained their membership in the Woman's Club as well.”

“Mrs. Lucy H. Calkins called a meeting of this Section at her home and the Political Study Club was formed, March 14, 1899” The new club's constitution stated that “... the object of this Club is to secure to women the unrestricted exercise of all the rights of citizenship, and equal constitutional rights with men, and equal protection of the law.” Membership was restricted to “persons in favor of extending the ballot to women,” and a membership fee of “not less than fifty cents” was imposed.

Once begun, the suffrage movement in Tompkins County picked up speed: “In October 1899 a meeting was called by Lucy H. Calkins at her home for the purpose of forming a County organization. Representatives from the Groton Suffrage Club, the Newfield Suffrage Club and the Ithaca Political Study Club were present. Also representatives from other towns that had no Clubs.”

The scrapbooks date to the 1890s and are fragile and difficult to use. The History Center is very grateful for support from the South Central Regional Library Council for funding to digitize them and make them available on their New York Heritage website. This broad access is critical for users who can't come here to view the scrapbooks themselves, and for us here at The History Center in our efforts to preserve them for the future.

This digitization project is one of the ways in which The History Center is honoring the anniversary of suffrage in New York state. Another is a small photograph exhibit highlighting

the history of the League of Women Voters. Watch this space for more information about other initiatives later this year.

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