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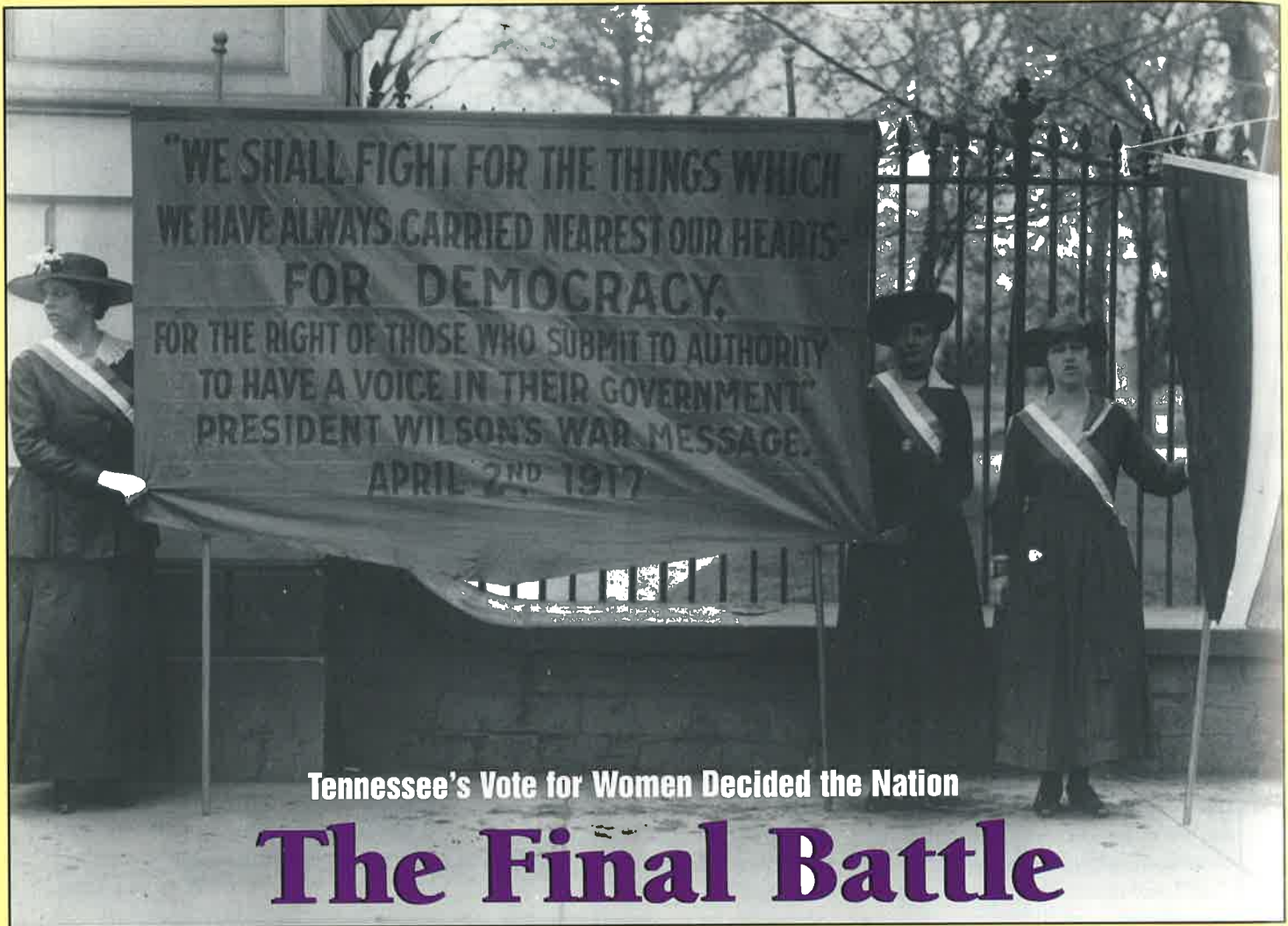


## The Final Battle

Tennessee's Vote for Women Decided the Nation

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Tennessee's Vote for Women Decided the Nation

## The Final Battle

BY PAULA F. CASEY

*"All honor to women, the first disenfranchised class in history who, unaided by any political party, won enfranchisement by its own effort alone, and achieved the victory without the shedding of a drop of human blood."*

— Harriot Stanton Blatch  
(Daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton)

**D**uring this 75th anniversary year commemorating the passage of the 19th Amendment granting all American women the right to vote, Tennessee is receiving greater recognition for its pivotal role.

Books and essays are being printed and re-issued that reflect upon the 72-year-long struggle for votes for women and highlight the significance of the suffragists' achievements. This peaceful revolution achieved legal empowerment for women for the first time in the U.S. Constitution.

But, it was obtained only after hundreds of ratification campaigns in state after state as the

suffragists met with defeat. Yet, they persevered until victory was achieved in Nashville on Aug. 18, 1920.

The story of the suffrage struggle has largely been relegated to "footnote" status in history textbooks. Edith P. Mayo, curator of political history at the Smithsonian Institution, has written in an introduction to the newly reissued book, *Jailed For Freedom*, that "until the early 1970s, when women's history became a legitimate academic pursuit and women began writing their own history, suffrage was barely mentioned in textbooks, let alone militant activism by suffragists. ... Few know that it was women seeking the vote who first picketed the White House for a political cause, or faced jail, hunger strikes, and forced feedings. ... Few have knowledge of Carrie Chapman Catt and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and the years of strategizing and education in their fight for the vote."

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the suffrage struggle was the creation of a new political culture. Elizabeth Cady Stanton first introduced the "radical" concept of votes for women as part of the Declaration of Sentiments at the first women's rights



Elizabeth Cady Stanton, left, and Susan B. Anthony, were two great icons of the woman's suffrage movement. Reproduced from the collections of the LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.

"It is the sacred duty of the women of this country," Stanton said, "to secure themselves our sacred right to the elective franchise."

Stanton and her friend, Quaker activist Lucretia Mott, began their activism as abolitionists. They deeply resented the male abolitionists who would not allow them to speak at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. They saw parallels between their lives as women and those of the slaves.

The Seneca Falls gathering gave activist women in this country the focus they needed to change their legal and political status.

Susan B. Anthony met Stanton in 1850 through Amelia Bloomer, who edited a temperance newspaper. Stanton persuaded the young Anthony that no reform movement would be successful as long as women were denied the ballot. Anthony's conviction was strengthened in 1852 when she was denied the right to speak at a temperance rally because of her sex. Under the tutelage of Stanton, whose exceptional writing and speaking abilities complemented her own organizational and political skills, Anthony began her lifelong devotion to woman suffrage and securing legal equality for women.

Efforts to organize suffragists were halted during the Civil War. After the war, suffragists were bitterly disappointed with the passage of the 14th and 15th amendments that extended voting rights to black men, but not to any women. This was also the first time the word "male" was mentioned in the U.S. Constitu-

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The U.S. Postal Service has issued two commemorative stamps in honor of the 75th anniversary and to honor Alice Paul.



**“During a steamy southern summer, Nashville, the ‘Athens of the South,’ became the site of one of the most fiercely fought contests in American political history.”**

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tion. While Victoria Woodhall, Anthony and Stanton believed women were included in these amendments, that was never construed to be the case. The idea of including woman suffrage was considered too outrageous.

In 1869, the Equal Rights Association that had been formed after the Civil War split into two warring factions after deep philosophical differences surfaced on the best strategy to achieve woman suffrage.

Stanton and Anthony represented the "radical" approach advocating a constitutional amendment to guarantee votes for women and sweeping social change in their National Woman Suffrage Association. Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe founded the "more moderate" American Woman Suffrage Association, which supported suffrage laws at the state level. They all organized, spoke, and educated the public, particularly through women's clubs and temperance groups. Anthony also lobbied Congress diligently, but only one vote was held before 1890 and it failed.

The two groups agreed to merge in 1890 and become NAWSA. Stanton and Anthony remained as leaders. According to Mayo: "The pioneering work of Lucy Stone, combined with the intellectual and organizational partnership of Stanton and Anthony, dominated the drive for woman suffrage from the mid-19th century until their deaths in 1893, 1902, and 1906, respectively. Despite their unflagging efforts and Anthony's rally cry, 'Failure is impossible!' uttered at her last public appearance shortly before her death, success did not come in their lifetimes."

But, their legacies inspired others to keep fighting.

During the Progressive Era (1890-1925),



Casey

**Paula F. Casey is a writer and speaker on the college lecture circuit about woman suffrage and Tennessee's pivotal role. She produced a 12-minute video, "Generations," about the suffrage movement, which is in all 50 states and the Smithsonian's political reference files.**

## Attention Solo and Small Firm Practitioners

The Solo & Small Firm Practitioner's Committee plans to petition the Tennessee Bar Association Board of Governors to create a formal section on solo and small firms. To accomplish this, your help is needed. The committee must present names and addresses of TBA members who would be willing to join such a section.

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the quest for woman suffrage started to become more of a mainstream issue. More activists joined the movement as women's roles in society expanded and they saw the need for reforms strengthened by legislation.

New leadership emerged and energized the movement. Harriot Stanton Blatch (Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter) returned to New York in 1902 after many years of living in England where she observed the British tactics. She was determined to bring working-class women into the suffrage movement. Carrie Chapman Catt assumed the leadership of NAWSA after Anthony's retirement in 1900. When she stepped aside after four years to care for her dying husband, Dr. Anna Howard

Shaw took over. After Catt's husband died, she returned to her suffrage work. She was a brilliant and effective organizer, speaker, and fund-raiser for the cause. She returned to lead NAWSA in 1915 and, in that capacity, to spearhead the final ratification effort in Tennessee in 1920.

Then, there was Alice Paul who had also studied and been active in the British suffrage movement, which stressed holding "the party in power responsible" for the amendment's fate. She infused a new element of political imagery and street theater into the suffrage debate. She led a parade of 8,000 through the streets of Washington to draw attention to the cause. She and her followers chained themselves to the White

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House gates where they were spat on and ridiculed. More than 200 of her followers were arrested for "obstruction of sidewalk traffic" and put in Occoquan prison in Virginia and the Washington, D.C. jail. But for every protester arrested, there was another to take her place. They endured hunger strikes and forced feedings to draw attention to their belief that they were political prisoners and, also, to embarrass the Wilson administration into supporting the 19th Amendment. Alice Paul's Congressional Union became the National Woman's Party.

Even though Catt and Paul didn't care much for each other and their strategies differed on achieving the ultimate goal of a federal amendment, the movement needed them both to succeed.

Catt's "Winning Plan" bolstered grassroots democracy as she urged NAWSA leaders in the states to support state referenda. She believed that once a state passed some form of woman suffrage (as Tennessee did in 1919 allowing presidential and municipal suffrage), its Congressmen and Senators would become de facto supporters of a federal amendment. As more states passed woman suffrage, support in Congress increased, making passage of a constitutional amendment more likely.

NAWSA's lobbyists were collectively known as "The Front Door Lobby" because they were up-front and above-board in their tactics. In January 1917, Alice Paul and her National Woman's Party began "Silent Sentinels" in front of the White House hurling Woodrow Wilson's words in support of democracy back in his face on their banners and placards.

President Wilson finally endorsed the 19th Amendment and it passed Congress on June 4, 1919. The battleground shifted to the states where 36 of the 48 states were needed for ratification. Wisconsin became the first state to ratify on June 10, 1919.

A string of victories followed. By the summer of 1920, 35 states had ratified, eight had rejected it and, with no other state even close to ratifying, suffragists looked toward Tennessee to be "The Perfect 36."

In an article by Anastatia Sims titled

## Where to find out more about it

**THE MOST COMPLETE COLLECTION OF SUFFRAGE ARTIFACTS, EDITORIAL CARTOONS, PHOTOGRAPHS, NEWSPAPERS AND BUTTONS** opened July 6 and ran through Aug. 20 at the University of Memphis Art Gallery under the direction of Dr. Janann Sherman, who is on the school's history faculty. The exhibit, titled "The Perfect 36," is traveling across the state. It was at East Tennessee State University in September and then is traveling to Fisk University the latter part of October. Knoxville will feature it sometime during the Bicentennial celebration in 1996. Two Memphis lawyers, Patricia Horton and Gail O. Mathes, provided financial support for the grand opening. An exhibition catalogue is planned.

**A LASTING MEMORIAL TO THE SUFFRAGISTS** representing the three grand divisions of Tennessee is being coordinated by Knoxville lawyer Wanda G. Sobieski. The 75th Suffrage Anniversary Coalition, based in Knoxville, has designed and launched a project to erect a life-size, bronze statue featuring three of Tennessee's most important suffragists: Lizzie Crozier French of Knoxville; Anne Dallas Dudley of Nashville; and Elizabeth Avery Meriwether of Memphis. A three-panel suffrage banner will honor 12 additional suffragists from each Grand Division. So far, the statue is planned for Knoxville and Memphis, but the mold will be available for any future use once the money is raised. For a donation of \$1,000, your name will be engraved in granite on the base of the statue. A donation of \$50 puts your name on a brick. Bronze miniatures of the statue will be available soon for \$500. Proceeds go to the construction of the statue. For more information, contact Ms. Sobieski at 423/546-7770. Contributions may be sent to and are payable to: ETF 75th Suffrage Anniversary Coalition, 550 NationsBank Center, 550 West Main St., Knoxville, TN 37902.

**MORE BOOKS ARE NOW AVAILABLE TELLING THE SUFFRAGE STORY**, but Tennesseans will forever be indebted to the late Dr. A. Elizabeth Taylor who wrote her 1943 doctoral dissertation on Tennessee suffragists while studying at Vanderbilt University. Her dissertation was one of the first doctoral-level studies relating to women's rights and became the book, *The Woman's Suffrage Movement in Tennessee*. She did the first primary research on those involved in the suffrage struggle in Tennessee.

**"THE PERFECT 36" IS A PLAY WRITTEN BY** Laura Harrington and Mel Marvin that will be performed by the Tennessee Repertory Theatre at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center in Nashville May 1-5, 1996. Group rates are available for 15 or more and can be arranged by calling (615) 244-4878. Or call Ticketmaster at (615) 741-7777.

"Armageddon in Tennessee," she writes: "If the suffragists could win the approval of just one more state, they would, at long last, achieve their goal. When the Delaware legislature unexpectedly defeated the amendment in early June, women pinned their hopes on Tennessee. During a steamy southern summer, Nashville, the 'Athens of the South,' became the site of one of the most fiercely fought contests in American political history. For the amendment's friends and foes alike, it was Armageddon — the final battle in the long, bitter struggle that had, in the words of one observer pitted 'powers that pray' against 'powers that prey.'

"Suffragists were by no means certain of victory. Tennessee, like the rest of the South, had a history of hostility toward women's rights. In 1908, for example, Gov. Malcolm R. Patterson offered this comment on woman suffrage: 'Let the women pray and the men vote.' Twelve years later many Tennesseans — male and female alike still agreed with the governor. Woman's place was at home, in church, in the schoolroom or even in the factory — but not at the polls."

The pressure began for Gov. A.H. Roberts, a Democrat, to call a special session. On June 19, Sue Shelton White, who chaired the NWP in Tennessee, sent Gov. Roberts a letter requesting a special session. Two days later, Nashvillians Catherine T. Kenny and Kate Burch Warner of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association led a delegation of women who requested the governor to call a special session so women could vote in the Aug. 5 state primary.

President Wilson even weighed in with a telegram stating: "It would be a real service to the party and to the nation ... to call a special session of the Tennessee legislature to consider the suffrage amendment. Allow me to urge this very earnestly." He wasn't entirely altruistic since he hoped women voters would support his League of Nations.

The opposition was fierce once Gov. Roberts called the special session for Aug. 9 (conveniently after his party primary). Leaflets and pamphlets were distributed that fed fears of family breakdowns, "she-males" terrorizing males, racism and communism, to name a few.

Carrie Chapman Catt knew this final battle was going to be tougher than any. She came in July expecting to stay a few days, but was in Nashville for nearly six weeks. She wrote on Aug. 15: "I've been here a month. It is hot, muggy, nasty, and this last battle is desperate. Even if we win, we who have been here will never remember it with anything but a shudder."

"The War of the Roses" began as the anti-suffrage forces proudly displayed their American Beauty red roses depicting their femininity and efforts "to save Southern womanhood." The pro-suffrage forces countered with the yellow rose. As legislators arrived at Union Station in Nashville, the rose reflecting their position on suffrage was pinned to their lapels. One noncommittal legislator sported a talisman rose (yellow with red stripes).

The state Senate passed the amendment 25-4 on Aug. 13, 1920. Present-day Sen. Steve Cohen (D-Memphis), who is also a lawyer, put it in perspective: "They were the

heroes. They got it. Too bad the House wasn't as progressive."

But, Cohen adds, "It was also the General Assembly's finest hour."

An article in the December 1978 issue of *American Heritage* by Carol Lynn Yellin of Memphis titled "Countdown in Tennessee" is considered by many to be the definitive account of what happened. She recounts the daily activities leading up to the climactic House vote in meticulous detail.

The story is that, after the Senate's overwhelming vote in favor of the amendment, Carrie Chapman Catt wrote: "We are one-half of one state away from victory."

The 72-year struggle had come down to one last vote in the Tennessee House of Representatives. A young lawyer, Rep. Joe Hanover of Memphis, became the floor leader and astutely held the pro-suffrage forces together, including a united Shelby County delegation. Rep. T.K. Riddick of Memphis introduced the amendment and

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said on the floor that refusal to enfranchise women was "a relic of barbarism."

After all the parliamentary maneuvering, vote trading, and the devastating defection of Speaker Seth Walker to the anti-suffrage side, debate began on Wednesday, Aug. 18, 1920. Yellin writes:

Oration after oration reviewed 72 years of familiar arguments until, abruptly, a self-assured Speaker Walker turned over his gavel to Rep. William Overton, another staunch Anti, then made his way down to the House floor and asked to be recognized. With melodramatic flourish, Seth Walker was making it known that the Antis, just as suffragists had calculated, had at least 45 sure votes, a majority of those present and voting.

"The hour has come," Walker announced. "The battle has been fought and won, and I move you, Mr. Speaker, that the motion to concur in the Senate action go where it belongs — to the

table." And now his strategy was clear.

As double insurance, Walker was moving to kill the amendment by tabling it. Any still uneasy fence-sitters could more easily justify a temporizing vote to table than an outright vote against.

Antis chorused "Second the motion." Suffragists clamored for recognition. Mr. Overton ordered the roll call to begin. There were no surprises. Republican Harry Burn's name came early in the roll; he voted in favor of tabling. Other members answered according to expectations until the name Banks Turner was called ... The roll call went on, but before the final vote could be announced — most had already added up their own totals at 48 to 47 in favor of tabling — Turner rose. "I wish to be recorded as against the motion to table." Suffragists gasped in joy. On a tie vote, 48-48, the motion was defeated. The 19th Amendment was still alive in Tennessee.

But not for long. The motion to table had failed on a tie vote. It seemed certain that the original motion to concur in the Senate's ratification would do likewise. Realizing this, Seth Walker immediately called for a vote on the original motion. Once more the agony of the roll call began. And this was the vote that counted.

The first two recorded votes were "aye" followed by four "nays." Harry Burn, the youngest member of the General Assembly who had been counted as a sure Anti since he wore the red rose, had not told anyone of a letter he had received that morning from his mother, Febb Ensminger Burn, of Niota. She had written him since she knew the sentiment against ratification had become fierce in McMinn County.

She wrote: "Dear Son: Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt. I noticed some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification. Your Mother."

When his name was called, Burn said "aye" so quickly that many did not realize what had happened. Banks Turner decisively

shouted his "aye" and the resolution was carried 49-47. But Seth Walker was determined to regain control of the measure. In an oft-used parliamentary maneuver, he immediately jumped to his feet and cried out, "I change my vote from 'nay' to 'aye' and move to reconsider."


Yellin writes: "It was not until later that the irony emerged: This change of vote by Seth Walker, made for parliamentary expediency, had given the ratification resolution an unchallengeable constitutional majority 50 of the total House membership of 99. Walker unwittingly had cut off one line of legal attack upon the validity of Tennessee's ratification already being prepared by Anti lawyers. At that moment, however, the uproar in the House chamber had become so great that the clerk's announcement that the resolution to ratify had carried — by a vote of 50-46 — was never heard.

"Pandemonium prevailed. Women were screaming, weeping, singing. They threw their arms about each other and danced, so far as it was possible, in the jam-packed aisles. Suffragist legislators tore off their yellow boutonnieres and threw them into the air to meet the gentle rain of yellow rose petals floating down from the galleries above. ... The time had come to celebrate!"

The next day Harry Burn rose on the House floor to explain his vote: "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."

Attempts to reconsider failed and on Tuesday, Aug. 24, Gov. Roberts signed, sealed, and sent the ratification papers to Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby in Washington, D.C. Early on the morning of Aug. 26, he signed the amendment into law. That's why Aug. 26 is known as "Women's Equality Day."

Today, our right to vote is secure. But, anniversary celebrations remind us of those who came before us and made democracy work. With voter turnout declining, we would do well to heed the words of Carrie Chapman Catt:

Women have suffered an agony of soul that you can never comprehend that you and your daughters might inherit political freedom. That vote has been costly. Prize it! 

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