GEORGIA FEMINISTS BEFORE AND AFTER THE FRANCHISE

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The early woman's suffrage movement has been of great interest to historians, but little attention has been given to the political activities of the women after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.[1] Some authors write of a decline in feminism after 1920,[2] and others see little political change after the franchise.[3] The activities of the Atlanta League of Women Voters from 1920 to 1930 indicate, however, that their members were more politicized and more active than historians have previously recognized. The organizational abilities and experiences gleaned from the early Georgia suffrage associations were transferred to the newly formed League, and the women were able to launch successful registration and "Get Out The Vote" campaigns with the financial backing of local civic organizations and business corporations. The League also provided citizenship training classes to educate the women in their new political duties. As a result of these activities, League women became more aware of their role in society and actively participated in government. By 1928, both the membership and the finances of the League had doubled. The existence of such political activity on the local level and, of all places, in the heart of the deep south, raises questions about the interpretations now generally accepted about the decline of the women's movement after 1920.

Information about the League and the activities of women in Georgia from 1890 through 1930 can be obtained from the manuscript collections of the Atlanta League of Women Voters and the Georgia Woman Suffrage League, which are available at the State Archives in Atlanta. The inventories for both collections are complete and provide the researcher with specific descriptions of the materials. The collection includes holograph and typed letters, photos, newspaper clippings, political handbills, and some scrapbooks. Private family papers, such as the Raoul Papers housed at Emory University, can also be very useful. In the 1940s and 1950s historian A. Elizabeth Taylor examined some of the materials at the State Archives, but she focused only on the early suffrage years. Although valuable, her work does not address all the issues raised by the new scholarship on women, nor does it include information on the years after 1920.[5]

The suffrage movement started late in Georgia as in the rest of the south. In the north, women had included the right to vote in their list of demands at Seneca Falls as early as 1848, but, because the issues of woman suffrage and abolition were linked together, the idea of enfranchised females was viewed with horror and trepidation by southerners after the Civil War. Many of the large textile mill owners also opposed woman suffrage because they feared subsequent passage of child labor laws.[4] Not until nearly three decades after the Civil War did suffrage demands emerge in Georgia.

The Georgia Woman Suffrage Association was founded by H. Augusta Howard of Columbus in 1890. The organization at first consisted of Miss Howard, her mother and four sisters; later Mrs. Kate Mallette Harwick and Mrs. Mary Latimer McLendon of Atlanta joined the group. Their association was affiliated with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and by 1893 had members in five counties.[5] In 1895 the NAWSA met in Atlanta, which was quite a coup since the Georgia organization was a

new affiliate. Howard, one of the Georgia delegates to the national convention at Washington, D.C., persuaded the delegates from other states to choose Atlanta. The Georgia women knew that unless a national convention took place south of the Mason-Dixon line, their opponents in their home state would not take the womens' cause seriously.[6]

In 1899 the Georgia Woman Suffrage Association (GWSA) held its first state convention in Atlanta. At this two-day meeting, the delegates planned future activities, elected officers, and adopted resolutions, including one insisting that the women of Georgia be exempt from property taxation until they received the franchise. They also supported a federal amendment for woman suffrage.[7] Two years later, in 1901, another state convention was held with the NAWSA president, Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, as the featured speaker.[8] Her presence helped to strengthen the ties between north and south.

During the next few years, Georgia suffragists sponsored a series of literary teas to arouse interest in their organization. They also devoted much time to educational work and put great effort into obtaining more publicity in the newspapers. Mrs. Mary McLendon, president of GWSA, wrote in 1911:

> The press of Georgia [is] no longer filled with contemplations and sarcastic allusions to Woman Suffrage, and we take that to mean that we are to succeed in our endeavors. . . .The Atlanta papers are good to us and publish our meeting announcements, reports, and articles in favor of woman suffrage without charging us anything.[9]

Nonetheless, although they made slight gains with the press, the women were blocked by the state legislature, which prevented them from using the hall of the House of Representatives for the evening session of their 1911 convention. Instead, the women held their convention in a hall donated by the Federation of Trades, where they celebrated their twenty-first birthday, elected officers, and passed "red hot resolutions" aimed at intimidating the legislature. The women decided "that 'Big Brother' was very much in evidence in the legislature of 1911 and 12."[10]

Though geographically separated, the southern women maintained active communication with the National Association, which was headquartered in the north. Many equal-suffrage speakers were sent to Atlanta to rally the Georgia women. Jane Addams of Chicago and Caroline Ruutz-Rees of Connecticut spoke at a meeting in 1914, and in 1915 Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, past president of the NAWSA, was a guest speaker.[11] The Georgia women needed help in establishing a newspaper; accordingly, Madeline Wyly, vice president of the Georgia Suffrage Association in Rome, wrote to Antionette Funk in Washington, D.C. Wyly asked for advice: "help us about our paper" and "tell us something not to do as well as things to do." She also described the dilemma of working for the cause in the south:

> We have to 'go slow' in the South . . .Conservatism orginated and first sprouted in Dixie; it has always been our chief export, import, report and support . . .We may not at first do very big things and we are perfectly certain not to do spectacular things, but believe me . . .

we are not dead.[12]

By 1915, women had the ballot in twelve states, one territory, and seven foreign countries. At the National Convention held in Washington that year the primary concern was the federal suffrage amendment which had been introduced and re-introduced into Congress by pro-suffrage members for the preceding thirty-seven years. Mrs. Pattie Ruffner Jacobs of Alabama addressed the first meeting of the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage and described the situation in the South: "The pedestal platitude appeals less and less to the intelligence of southern women, who are learning in increasing numbers that the assertion that they are too good, too noble, too pure to vote in reality brands them as incompetent."[13]

Many victories occurred during the next year (1916); during which the National Association received the endorsement of large organizations such as the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Anti-Saloon League, as well as the sanction of President Wilson.[14] The southern movement was also gaining strength as influential ministers spoke favorably from the pulpit, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Daughters of the American Revolution worked for suffrage in Mississippi.[15]

In Georgia the collective strength of the women's organization stood against the marshalled forces of the state legislature and city governments. The state legislature proved immovable and defeated the state suffrage measure in 1917; in the same year, however, the women at Waycross won the fight for the municipal vote. Two years later, in 1919, the Atlanta women were granted local primary suffrage after a four year fight. One member of the city committee polled his ward and was surprised to find that three out of five voters supported women suffrage.[16] Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the NAWSA, issued a press release on May 22, 1919, congratulating the women of Atlanta:

> The municipal primary vote just granted [them] is indicative of the ingenuity with which women have gained their ballot rights. This is the second city of Georgia, a state supposed to be locked and barred against equal suffrage, to grant city primary suffrage to women.[17]

Having acquired the municipal vote, the Atlanta women now concentrated all their efforts on registration. Large handbills were printed which proclaimed "ministers of men and other professions as urging women to register."[18] Letters were sent urging women to convince others to register. For example, Eleonore Raoul, chairman for the Central Committee of Women Citizens, wrote to those women already registered:

> You have registered and so have about 2,000 other women, but we want at least 5,000 registered by next Tuesday which is the last day . . . get three other women to go immediately and register. This is our last hope to put Atlanta abreast with other cities which have suffrage.[19]

The municipal votes in Atlanta and Waycross were, however, the only victories the Georgia suffragists won. The Georgia legislature was

hostile, to be sure, to the ratification of the federal suffrage amendment, and Georgia was the first state to reject the Nineteenth Amendment. Nonetheless, a year later on August 26, 1920, President Wilson's Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, proclaimed the Susan B. Anthony amendment part of the federal constitution.[20]

When women were finally granted the right to vote in Georgia, the Georgia suffragists were ready. The National League of Women Voters, first mentioned by Catt at the 1917 NAWSA convention, was organized in 1919 and proclaimed a new and independent society at the NAWSA Victory Convention in 1920.[21] The Atlanta League of Women Voters was established the same year with the following goal: "The object shall be to foster education in citizenship and to work for an enlightened electorate and improved legislation."[22] While realizing that the political situation in Atlanta could not be affected overnight, League members hoped to secure two things: first, a change of attitude on the part of citizens toward government and, second, an understanding of fundamental principals underlying good government.[23]

Suffrage brought the inexperienced and untrained women new responsibilities. To assist these voters in their new role, the Atlanta League established citizen-training classes. They consisted of ten sessions; upon completion, the students were awarded a certificate. The women were required to bring newspaper clippings on local politics to class for discussion. Other sessions included a tour of City Hall and required field work such as attendance at a council meeting. Four exams were held during the sessions which included questions on Atlanta City Government, the Democratic Executive Committee, and registration information.[24] From 1924 to 1930 and beyond, the Atlanta League marshalled massive registration and "Get Out The Vote" campaigns.[25] League members could borrow from their past experiences, for these women had become knowledgeable in the techniques of organizing during the last twenty years.[26] Added to their own experience and know-how was the cooperation and support the League now received from civic organizations and business firms.

In 1924, a presidential election year, the League emphasized the importance of registering the newly enfranchised women.[27] Mrs. Florence Neal, executive secretary, took the idea of a movable registration booth (a truck) from an article in the Woman Citizen, which described the activities of the Minneapolis League. Neal borrowed a truck from "the New Grape folks" (NuGrape, a soft drink manufacturer) and decorated it in "purple, the New Grape color, yellow and black, the League colors." The sign on the truck read, "We don't care who you vote for but register and vote . . ."[28] The Saturday before registration week, the members boarded the truck which Mrs. Neal drove. They disbursed literature up and down Peachtree and Whitehall Streets while a young Boy Scout played the bugle to attract attention. The campaign ended with a "series of lectures or really five minute talks over radio." As a result of the campaign, 1,500 men and women were registered in one week.[29]

In 1926 the League launched another registration campaign. The White Truck Company donated one of its large trucks to the League for a movable registration booth. The decorated truck, filled with League members and ten Boy Scouts, toured the wards the Saturday prior to registration week. Major dry goods (department) stores enclosed flyers advertising voting in their packages for this week, and Foote and Davies printed and donated 3,000 tags which asked, "I've registered, Have you?" Movie houses showed a newsreel of prominent citizens voting; the Georgia

Railroad and Power Company donated advertising space on fifty of their cars for one week; and the Atlanta Journal sponsored a League speaker on the radio every night for five minutes.[30] The League women even had an airplane scatter flyers over the city on election day. Despite all this effort, however, the total number of people registered was 1,500, the same as in 1924. At first this result seemed a failure, but the League women soon realized that the city had been throughly canvassed just two months before for a bond election and, under the circumstances, their results were understandable.[31]

In addition to their registration drives, the League also conducted "Get Out The Vote" campaigns.[32] In 1925 they offered an incentive of a Voters' Prize to stimulate these campaigns. A silver trophy cup and $200 were awarded annually to the town or county which reported the highest percentage increase in voters over the preceding year. It was stipulated that the $200 would be spent for some civic purpose.

Each year Georgia women gained more expertise in their campaigns. In 1928 when Herbert Hoover and Alfred E. Smith were the presidential candidates, the Atlanta League embarked on yet another registration drive. Blandy's and Rich's department stores donated trucks for the week, and voting posters were displayed on the outside of these buildings. In addition, Rich's Davison's, Paxon-Stokes, and Cole Book Company enclosed slips containing registration and voting information with their monthly bills. Three newspapers had printed this information on their front page, and the Voters Prize was again offered. Posters appeared in store windows all over the city and on the sides of the street cars for one week. The Georgia Railroad and Power Company donated space on their cars for 100 posters.[33] By 1930 the League women had secured sign space on the tower at Five Points during registration week. They could proudly look at their progress during the decade, which began with a campaign in one small truck and expanded into a full fledged movement supported by business and civic organizations.

Thus in Atlanta after 1920 the women's movement did not decline; on the contrary, it accelerated. Moreover, League efforts went beyond registration drives. Candidate meetings were held, and candidates investigated. Educational material published by the League included leaflets on government, registration, a chart on voting and a book entitled Lessons in Citizenship. In 1928, a monthly bulletin Facts provided information on elections, primaries, candidates, issues, registration and city government.[34] League members were interested in the structure of government and wanted to make it more democratic. The League sponsored a number of changes in the City Democratic Executive Committee which were subsequently adopted: public sessions of the Committee, a reduction in membership from 72 to 52, and late primaries. In 1922 and 1927 the League secured, by petitions, city charter elections to be decided by a referendum.[35]

The degree of political activity generated by the Atlanta League of Women Voters stands in stark contrast to the failure, conservatism, and lack of continuity which many historians see as characteristic of the women's movement after 1920. Richard Evans, for example, calls the League of Women Voters "very conservative by the mid-1920's." By the end of that decade, he argues, "the American feminist movement was characterized by falling membership, political failure, financial decline and increasing conservatism." After the franchise was won, "many feminists felt there was little more to do."[36] Carl Degler adds "nothing much changed socially or politically as a result of the women's winning the franchise."[37]

William O'Neill argues "they [the women] had not come up with any useful ideas"[38] and sees the feminist movement at an end in 1930. Only Anne Firor Scott recognizes an outburst of post-suffrage activities in the south during the 1920s.

The records of the Atlanta League support Scott's claim rather than the standard interpretation. The Atlanta organization remained active and highly politicized throughout the 1920s, doubled its membership and resources, and even won acceptance from civic and business organizations. One might even go so far as to argue that in Atlanta, at least, the women's movement did not decline but, on the contrary, accelerated in new directions after 1920. Local records thus suggest the need to re-evaluate established generalizations.

NOTES

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[1]The term feminism has been much debated but in this paper it will simply mean the movement to secure equal rights for women.

[2]Richard J. Evans, The Feminists (London: Croom Held Ltd., 1977) pp. 208, 209; Carl Degler, At Odds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p.341; William L. O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969) pp. 263-271.

[3]A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Origin of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 28 (June, 1944): 64-79; "Revival and Development of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 42 (1958): 339-354; "The Last Phase of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 43 (1959): 11-28.

[4]Degler, At Odds, p. 341.

[5]Taylor, "The Origin of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," pp. 64,65,66.

[6]Ibid., p. 69.

[7]Taylor, "Revival and Development of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia" pp. 338, 340, 341.

[8]Ibid., p. 343.

[9]"Report of the President," GWSA, Fall 1911, Georgia Woman Suffrage League Records (hereafter GWSL Records), Georgia Department of Archives and History (hereafter GDAH) Atlanta, GA. Cf. Taylor, "Origin of the Woman

Suffrage Movement in Georgia," p.71. Taylor writes that earlier "editors published anti-suffrage literature gladly but rejected articles advocating votes for women."

[10]Ibid.

[11]Taylor, "Revival and Development of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," pp. 350,351. See also Aileen S. Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) p. 186. "South was the key to nationwide suffrage."

[12]Madeline Wyly to Antionette Funk, 8 Jan. 1915, GWSL Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[13]Ida H. Harper, History of Woman Suffrage, 6 vols. (New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1969 orig. pub. 1881-1922), 5: 460-63.

[14]Ibid., pp. 502, 503.

[15]Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady - From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) p. 180. Scott also writes "the southern suffrage movement became a full-scale political campaign with an array of gifted orators, petitions, hearings, national meetings and propaganda agencies."

[16]Atlanta Journal, 22 May 1917, clipping GWSL Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[17]NAWSA press release, 22 May 1917, GWSL Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[18]Leaflet, GWSL Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[19]Eleonore Raoul to a citizen, 28 July 1919, GWSL Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[20]Harper, History of Woman Suffrage, p. 653.

[21]Ibid., p. 683.

[22]Report on the Atlanta League of Women Voters 1920-1929, undated, Atlanta League of Women Voters Records (hereafter ALWV) GDAH, Atlanta.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Citizen Training Classes 1927, ALWV Records, GDAH, Atlanta. See also Harper, pp. 698, 699. Mrs. Catt conducted a school of political education to train women and urged each state to hold a similar school.

[25]My research covers only the years 1924 to 1930, but the League continued these practices after 1930. The following table shows the numbers voting in various elections during the 1920's:

Years	Votes	Issues
1922	13,826	Charter election
1923	6,778	Park bonds
1924	14,533	Mayoralty contest
1925	7,549	City Hall bonds
1926	12,182	Mayoralty contest
1927	12,531	City charter
1928	15,123	Primary city-wide

[26]Eleonore Raoul, for example, led the first suffrage parade in Atlanta in 1915, founded the Central Committee of Women Citizens (1920), which became the Atlanta League of Women Voters, and served as President and chairman of the ALWV.

[27]Taylor, "The Last Phase of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia." p. 28. The women of Georgia could not vote in the general election of 1920. In 1921, the state legislature passed an act enabling the women to vote and hold office.

[28]Report on Registration Week 1924, ALWV Records, GDAH, Atlanta. Mrs. Neal made arrangements for the truck, a sign painter, and a newspaper man for publicity photos.

[29]Ibid. There is no breakdown in League Records on the percentage of women voters.

[30]Ibid. Fifty-two stores and business firms participated in the registration drive.

[31]Report on Registration Week 1926, prepared by Mrs. G. Sink, ALWV Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[32]Scott, The Southern Lady, p. 200: "It was the newly enfranchised women who invented the now commonplace idea of getting out the vote."

[33]Report on Registration Week 1928, ALWV Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[34]Report on ALWV 1920-1929, ALWV Records, GDAH, Atlanta.

[35]Ibid. The Committee was important because it had absolute control over the city primaries. Late primaries were held for a few years but then reverted.

[36]Evans, The Feminists, pp. 209, 212.

[37]Degler, At Odds, p. 341.

[38]O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, p. 271.