

Montclair Equal Suffrage League: Grassroots Suffragists

PART 1

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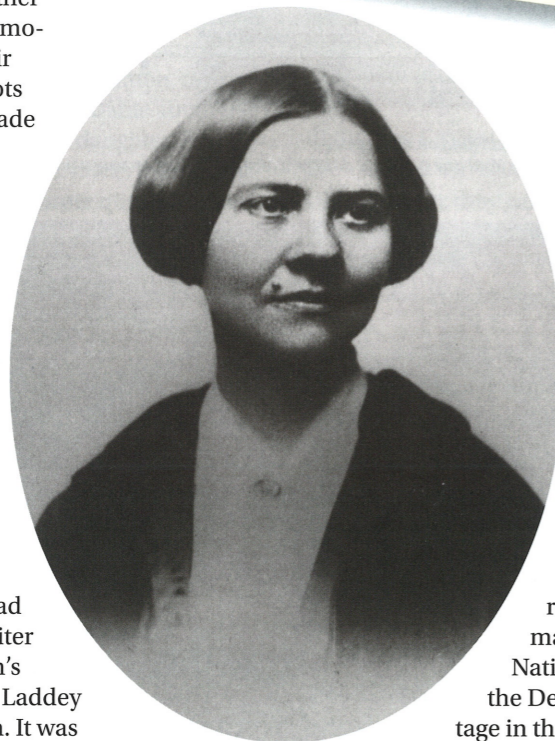
WHEN PEOPLE THINK of Montclair and women's suffrage, they often think of Lucy Stone, who moved to 119 North Mountain Avenue in 1858 and founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. But, like so many other people whose names you won't find memorialized in history books, other Montclair women fought for suffrage on a grassroots level, often going door-to-door to persuade others.

We are lucky to have a first-person narrative about the Montclair Equal Suffrage League in the Montclair History Center's archives. In honor of the upcoming 100th anniversary of the women's suffrage, we'd like to share that narrative with you. This article is the first of a two based on the "Recollections of the Montclair Equal Suffrage League by an Old Timer." The woman who wrote it in 1950 preferred not to be named.

"It was at a meeting of Unity Alliance in Unity Church in the spring of 1910 that Woman Suffrage raised its timid head in Montclair," recalls the anonymous writer who was involved in the fight for women's right to vote. She continues, "Mrs. Clara Laddey of Newark spoke on the status of women. It was an emotional speech and given with a slight German accent, which in those days sounded particularly warm and inviting."

"To my amazement, at the end of her speech I stood up, my umbrella clattering to the floor. It was the first time I had ever raised my voice in public, and a quavering voice it was indeed. 'Is there anything we can do to help?' Mrs. Laddey pointed her finger at me and cried, 'Form a suffrage league in Montclair and you be president.' I sat down in consternation and recovered my umbrella."

Women in New Jersey had not always been denied the right to vote. New Jersey's first constitution in 1776 allowed "all inhabitants of this colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds... and who have resided in the county for twelve months" to vote.



Montclair's own suffragette, Lucy Stone (left) lived at 119 North Mountain Ave (above)

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Wealth and the length of time lived in the state mattered more than gender. In fact, in 1790, the New Jersey constitution was even amended to read "he or she," further ensuring women could vote. Because a woman gave her property over to her husband upon marrying, only single women could be "worth fifty pounds" and therefore eligible to vote.

Women - single that is - continued to vote until 1807 when New Jersey restricted voting rights to tax-paying, white male citizens. According to an article by the National Park Service, "this was done to give the Democratic-Republican Party an advantage in the 1808 presidential election. Women often voted for the opposing Federalist Party, so taking away women's voting rights helped the Democratic-Republicans. This law also took voting rights away from African Americans." Early voter suppression.

One hundred and twelve years later, a small group of Montclair women went to Newark to hear Mrs. Laddey's talk on women's suffrage. "Old Timer" continues her story, "Those who were interested were asked to gather round the piano at the end of a meeting. There were not more than eight or ten of us. I declined with alacrity to be president, but arranged for a meeting at my house, and there after much discussion, we chose a name, the Montclair Equal Suffrage League. We thought it had a dignified sound. The first officers were: President, Jannetta Studdiford;

Vice President, Alice Parsons; Treasurer, Caroline Francke; Recording Secretary, Margaret Reed; Corresponding Secretary Mary Clark; Auditor, Florence Foster. We had plenty of officers, so now we set about getting members."

"Montclair in 1910 had a population of 21,500," she explains. "It was a pleasant town with many open fields. The women were interested in their homes, their children, their church work. The Upper Montclair Women's Club probably had a committee on civic affairs, but Woman Suffrage was often spoken of as Women's Rights, and to many, that suggested a strident type of women with an aggressive voice, mannish clothes and short hair - no windblown bob, just short. Some regarded her as the enemy of man. At all events, she was no lady. We determined to be ladies, and yet get the vote."

The women set dues at fifty cents a year, "in order that there should be no financial stumbling block to membership," and began talking to friends and influential people in town. The women organized a meeting and reached out to a well-known English actress, lecturer, writer, and suffragist to be a guest speaker. "We knew that the success of this meeting was vital, and we must have an outstanding figure. Whom to get? We wanted a woman and there was one with the glamour of the stage, the glamour of a great name, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson. Our dauntless president wrote to Miss Robertson explaining that we were an infant league without a penny, with a great need of a boost. Would she come to us? She would."

"When the great night arrived, the weather was propitious, and as we watched the crowd stream into the church we knew that Montclair was interested in Beatrice Forbes Robertson if not in

us. And why not? She captivated her audience with her dramatic appearance, her lovely voice, her wit, but above all with the subtle flattery whereby she almost convinced us that we were as logical, as clever and as witty as she. We took up a silver collection [coins] at the end of her speech, and there was flurry of excitement when it was whispered that a gentleman in the balcony, an anti-suffragist at that, had put a dollar bill in the plate. Folding money! Our first!"

After their opening hit, the Montclair Equal Suffrage League began to attract new members, including Miss Mary Waring at the Kimberly School who "gently chided those mothers who objected to any of her teachers working for the suffrage cause. She allowed us to use the auditorium of Kimberly School for our little dramas, 'How the Vote was Won,' and others, heavily weighted with propaganda, but thrilling to the actors if not the audience." The women also won over some clergy in town, often to the dismay of their congregations.

While it's hard to understand now, not everyone in 1910 believed women should vote and soon an anti-suffrage league was formed to oppose the Montclair Equal Suffrage League. "These ladies were ladies indeed, and ardent in their wish to save us from ourselves. One of our highlights was a debate with the anti-suffrage league given in the old Montclair Club House, which stood near the corner of Church Street and South Fullerton Avenue. There was a rousing audience. ... Each side applauded its own violently, and each side was sure it had won." ■

In the next issue, we'll discover how, through "Old Timer's" recollections, Montclair suffragists took to the streets canvassing and marching, as their quest for the right to vote continued.



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