

WINNING THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND SERVE



*Suffragists Marching in a May 1919 Parade in Nashville down West End Avenue to Centennial Park
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

Tennessee is known as the “Perfect 36” because the General Assembly voted in favor of ratification of the 19th amendment to the United States Constitution on August 18, 1920. The legendary cliffhanger vote by Representative Harry T. Burn in the State Capitol at Nashville created the three-fourths majority of states needed for passage of the constitutional amendment. What is not so well known is that numerous influential Tennessee women, many of whom were lawyers, worked extremely hard for years to produce that decisive moment in U.S. History.

Sue Shelton White of Henderson, Tennessee, while not earning a law degree until 1923, was an early suffrage activist. She entered the legal arena in Jackson, Tennessee, in 1907 as one of Tennessee’s first female court reporters, and furthered her interest in the law working as a private secretary to several Justices of the Tennessee Supreme Court. White was active in the Jackson league of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association (TESA), an affiliate of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), from its founding in 1912. She joined TESA President Anne Dallas Dudley in Nashville to organize the state headquarters for a month in 1915 and was elected to chair the regional chapter in 1916. As momentum for women’s voting rights grew, White went on speaking tours across the state and worked in Washington with the leaders of the rival National Woman’s Party (NWP), editing their national newspaper, the *Suffragist*. She and other NWP members picketed the White House on February 9, 1919, burned a cartoon of President Wilson, and spent five days in jail. She returned to Nashville to provide national coordination for the Tennessee campaign in 1920. White is thought to have helped persuade Governor Albert H. Roberts to call a special session of the legislature to consider the issue and, later, to have assisted Anna Lee Keys Worley, the first woman to serve in the Tennessee Senate, in drafting legislation granting additional rights to women. Sue Shelton White saw woman’s suffrage not as an end, but as a step toward equal rights for women in all areas of life.



Sue Shelton White, 1920, photograph by Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division



*Abby Crawford Milton
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

Most of Tennessee’s major newspapers supported the cause, including the Nashville *Tennessean*, edited by former U.S. Senator Luke Lea, who had been one of only three southern senators to vote in favor of the federal amendment; the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*; the Knoxville *Sentinel*; and the Chattanooga *News*. The editor of the *News*, George Fort Milton, was married to one of the state’s leading suffragists, Abby Crawford Milton. Having earned a law degree from Chattanooga College of Law, she never practiced law. She believed that her legal training improved her mind and gave her more credibility. Milton served as the last president of TESA and as the first president of the League of Women Voters in Tennessee.

Eleanor Coonrod, the first woman admitted to the Tennessee Bar Association, served as secretary of the Chattanooga Equal Suffrage League. Elizabeth Lea Miller, an attorney from Bolivar, and Margaret

Ervin Ford, a graduate of Chattanooga College of Law, both of whom had been admitted to the Tennessee Bar Association in 1918, worked to promote the Bar Association’s 1918 resolution endorsing woman suffrage by federal amendment. Margaret Ervin Ford, TESA president in 1917, also testified before the Tennessee General Assembly in support of a bill granting women the vote in municipal and presidential elections.

Women in the Tennessee General Assembly



*Anna Lee Keys Worley served in the 62nd Tennessee General Assembly (detail from composite photograph)
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

After the 19th amendment was ratified, Tennessee women began occupying seats in the Tennessee General Assembly. The first woman to be elected to the Tennessee legislature was Anna Lee Keys Worley. In a special election in 1921, she was elected to the Tennessee Senate to fill the remainder of the term of her late husband, an antisuffragist. She represented Sullivan and Hawkins counties. Due to filing deadlines, she could not seek reelection to a full term. In her brief tenure, she sponsored several bills that became law, including an act to make women eligible to hold any public office in Tennessee.

In 1922, Marion Scudder Griffin was the first woman elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives. She represented Shelby County. In 1907, Griffin had become the first woman to practice law in the state. She headed the House Social Welfare Committee and promoted legislation affecting women and children. Bolivar attorney Elizabeth Lea Miller was the second woman to serve in the Tennessee House of Representatives. She represented Chester, Hardeman, and Haywood counties in the 64th General Assembly (1925-1927).



*Lizzie (Elizabeth) Lea Miller, 64th Tennessee General Assembly, House of Representatives, 1925-1927 (detail from composite photograph)
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

In 1966, Dr. Dorothy Lavinia Brown was the first African American woman elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives. She represented Nashville. Dr. Brown was also the first female African American surgeon in the Southeast and, in 1956, the first single woman to adopt a child in Tennessee. During her one term in the House, she was particularly concerned with issues of health, education, and welfare reform. In 1968, Dr. Brown ran for a seat in the Tennessee Senate, but lost.



*Dorothy Lavinia Brown (extract from group photograph)
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*



*Thelma Harper
(image provided by Robert Green)
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

In 1990, Thelma Harper was the first African American woman elected to the Tennessee Senate. Previously, she had been a leading member of the Metropolitan Nashville/Davidson County Council for eight years. Some of her interests include education, economic opportunity, and public safety.