Winning the Right to Vote and Serve

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 chifffhanger 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.

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.

In 1966, Dr. Dorothy Lavinia Brown was the first African American 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).

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.