Niota is home to Tennessee’s oldest historic train depot, built in 1854 when the town was known as Mouse Creek. This National Register landmark became the heart of the modern town, a place that gained national recognition in 1920 when state representative Harry T. Burn of Niota took his mother’s advice and cast the deciding vote for woman suffrage.

White and enslaved laborers built the Mouse Creek Depot in 1854 as part of the East Tennessee & Georgia Railroad’s 98-mile line from Dalton to Knoxville. The brick depot housed a post office and became a commercial hub, which, unfortunately, included the sale of enslaved people. During the Civil War, Confederate troops first occupied the depot. In 1863, to defend the railroad, Union troops turned the depot into a military outpost, installing gun ports in the depot’s walls. The Federals held off Confederate raids in 1864 and occupied the depot until July 1865.

After the war, the railroad became the East Tennessee, Virginia, & Georgia, which in 1894 was merged into the Southern Railway Co. In 1897, local officials renamed the town Niota. During the Jim Crow era, the Southern operated racially segregated stations and passenger trains.

In 1972, the Southern deeded the station to the city, which soon placed the depot on the National Register of Historic Places. Graffiti on the baggage doors remind visitors of the station’s bustling past. In 2019, a major restoration reinvigorated this invaluable transportation landmark.
Married in 1894, James Lafayette Burn and Febb Ensminger Burn raised two sons and two daughters, one of whom died as a child. James farmed and worked for many years as the Southern Railway agent at the Niota Depot. A graduate of U.S. Grant Memorial University (now Tennessee Wesleyan) and a former teacher, Febb kept up with national and world news.

Oldest son Harry T. Burn followed in his father's footsteps and worked for the Southern Railway, fulfilling various jobs, including telegrapher. On his World War I selective draft questionnaire, a railroad official wrote about him: “He is the only man on the road that can fill one and all jobs.” At age 22, Burn was elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives. In less than two years, he would face the most important question of his young political career: should women have the right to vote?

"I hope you see enough of Politicians to know it is not one of the greatest things to be one. What say ye??"
—Febb Burn to Harry T. Burn, Aug. 17, 1920

Niota residents sent Harry T. Burn telegrams to try to influence his vote on suffrage. Courtesy of the Harry T. Burn Papers, McClung Historical Collection
A NATIONAL SUFFRAGE VICTORY SEALED IN TENNESSEE

Fresh from their patriotic support for World War I, suffragists campaigned vigorously for the vote. By the summer of 1920, they needed just one more state to ratify the 19th Amendment. After intense lobbying, they convinced Tennessee’s governor, A.H. Roberts, to call a special session of the 61st General Assembly. Suffrage supporters and opponents converged on steamy downtown Nashville in August.

On Aug. 13, the Tennessee Senate overwhelmingly voted for the amendment. Votes in the House were much more divided. Conflicted between his personal support for woman suffrage and his uncertainty over his constituents’ views, on Aug. 18 Harry Burn joined the anti-suffragists in voting to table the issue until the next year. In the subsequent vote on the amendment itself, however, he famously voted “Aye”—ensuring that Tennessee would forever be “the Perfect 36!”

“After we reached Nashville, we learned that what we thought was practically a state issue was a national issue because as went Tennessee, so went the nation.”
—Harry T. Burn, interviewed in 1962

Harry T. Burn’s five reasons for voting “Aye”:
• I believe full suffrage is a right.
• We have a moral and legal obligation to ratify.
• My mother wanted me to vote for ratification.
• I want to free American women from political slavery.
• I hope to bring glory to my political party.

"Hurrah and vote for Suffrage and don’t keep them in doubt.”
—Febb Burn to Harry T. Burn, Aug. 17, 1920

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”
—19th Amendment, U.S. Constitution

MTSU’s Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area developed this exhibit as a public service to the City of Niota. Text by Antoinette G. van Zelm, CHP assistant director. Special thanks to biographer Tyler Boyd for images of the Burn family.