

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Suffragist speakers bring cause of women's rights to town

By Andy Todesco and Kevin McNatt

Mar 16, 2020

This is the second in three parts on the women's suffrage movement in Mansfield.

MANSFIELD - The year 1915 would prove dramatic for the cause of women's suffrage. Massachusetts was considering a referendum to allow women to vote in all elections except federal, which would require an amendment to the US Constitution.



Anna Howard Shaw, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, spoke in Mansfield in September 1915, just over a month before Massachusetts would vote on the suffrage issue.

More than a year before the referendum Mansfield was visited by a dedicated young suffragist. Mrs. Clairborne Catlin was just beginning a horseback tour of Massachusetts. On her tour she would visit 37 cities and towns and cover 530 miles. Her first stop was Mansfield.

Just prior to her tour Mrs. Catlin was visiting Florence Harding of Mansfield, a fellow suffragist. It was at Mrs. Harding's farm where she met a young jockey from the South. The jockey agreed to offer his mare Trixie for Mrs. Catlin's journey. Trixie was said to "do wonderful tricks and has a record for winning races." She also "is capable of protecting her young rider and equal to any emergency."

On July 1, 1914, Mrs. Catlin set out from the headquarters of the Massachusetts Political Equity Union in Boston. She made her way to Mansfield and met Trixie. While in Mansfield she spoke at a reception held at the home of Mrs. Charles McKenna of South Main Street. It was reported that she “spoke freely of her work in trying to interest the voters and women of Massachusetts in the equal suffrage movement so that all may intelligently decide the question of women suffrage.”

A little more than a year later Mansfield would be visited by a most distinguished suffragist. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw was an ordained minister and a physician. She served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association for 11 years. In September 1915, just over a month before Massachusetts would vote on the suffrage issue, Shaw spoke in Mansfield.

A welcoming dinner was held in Shaw’s honor at The Tavern on North Main Street. From there a lengthy procession of more than 30 automobiles proceeded to the Town Hall on West Street. Local and area suffragists rode in the procession.

Town Hall was not nearly big enough for the standing room crowd, which was “eagerly listening and frequently applauding.” Young ladies “decked in the colors of the suffragists” (presumably purple, white and gold) served as ushers.

Shaw was introduced by John B. Willis of Mansfield, who declared “the right to vote is conceded by practically every fair-minded man.”



MRS CLAIRBORN CATLIN.

In 1914, suffragist Mrs. Clairborne Catlin did a horseback tour of Massachusetts visiting 37 cities and towns. Her first stop was Mansfield.

Dr. Shaw was handed a bouquet of flowers before her address. She drew a laugh by stating that “it was splendid to receive a bouquet before speaking as after listening the donor might not be so favorably inclined.”

Dr. Shaw then struck a more serious note, asking if America has been true to its founding as a republic.

“We have been content with great ideals that we have never lived up to,” she said. “The people have never elected representatives. Only half of them (men) elect and make the laws to govern the whole.”

She compared that system to an aristocracy rather than a democracy. Shaw’s speech was hailed locally as a great success for the cause.

Despite the best efforts of Clairborne Catlin, Anna Howard Shaw and many local suffragists, the male voters of Massachusetts rejected the women’s suffrage referendum with a resounding 65 percent against the measure. Every city and town in Massachusetts voted against it except Tewksbury, where it passed by one vote.

Similar measures were rejected in New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. But the women’s suffrage movement would not have to wait much longer. Equal suffrage was on the doorstep in the form of an amendment to the United States Constitution.