



Tennessee tips the scale

The Volunteer State's ratification gave women the right to vote

As students once learned in American civics classes, three-fourths of the states must ratify a proposed amendment for it to be added to the U.S. Constitution. In 1920 (when there were 48 states), Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify one of the most important additions ever to the Constitution — the one extending the right to vote (or “suffrage”) to women. And there was plenty of drama when the Tennessee General Assembly met in August 1920 to consider the 19th Amendment.

In March 1920, Washington became the 35th state to ratify the amendment. Four months later, on July 25, Gov. Albert Roberts called a special session of the Tennessee legislature to consider it. National attention focused on the Volunteer State when the session began. Suffragist activists from across the country, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, descended on Nashville's Hermitage Hotel. Several of those activists were from Tennessee, among them Anne Dallas Dudley and Sue Shelton White.

Among the key officials in Tennessee in favor of the passage of the amendment were Gov. Roberts and U.S. Sen. Kenneth McKellar (who, by the way, represented Tennessee in the U.S. Senate from 1917 to 1953). The most important government official opposed to the measure was State House Speaker Seth Walker of Lebanon.

Looking back, it is easy to make the assumption that all women were in favor of the 19th Amendment. But that was not the case. Lobbying against the so-called “Susan B. Anthony Amendment” in Nashville were a coalition of anti-prohibitionists, manufacturers, religious elements and white supremacists. Some Tennessee women loaned their names to newspaper advertisements opposing suffrage. Some argued that if women were given the vote, a series of laws “bad for



The Tennessee Woman Suffrage Memorial stands in Market Square in Knoxville.

business” would be enacted (child labor laws, for instance). Some said, and wrote, that the passage of the amendment was contrary to biblical principles and that the breakdown of families would result from it. And some even argued that the suffragist movement would result in the empowerment of African-Americans (which most whites were against at that time).

That month, roses were in high demand in downtown Nashville. People opposed to the passage of the 19th Amendment wore red roses (or ribbons). Those in favor of its passage wore yellow roses (or ribbons).

As the special session began, supporters and opponents of the measure set up their bases in the Hermitage Hotel. For the next several days they met with legislators in an attempt to get support for their causes. And during the next few weeks both sides would accuse each other of foul play. According to one historic essay, Catt later claimed that anti-suffrage lobbyists “used liquor, loans, bribes, promises of high office” and other means to get people to vote against the measure.

Pro-suffrage advocates, meanwhile, were being pushy as well. One reporter saw a suffragist grab a legislator by the tie, refusing to let it go while she vigorously stated her case to him. Finally the legislator pulled a knife from his pocket, cut himself loose and walked away.

The state Senate approved the measure first, passing it by a vote of 25-4. This sent the measure to the 99-member state House.

People on both sides knew it would be close. In advance of that roll-call vote on Aug. 18, 1920, both sides appeared to be deadlocked. But when the name of “Representative Burn” was called, suffragist forces were thrilled to hear him respond with “aye” instead of “nay.” Burn, a little-known state representative from McMinn County, had previously been in the anti-suffrage camp. But he changed his mind and decided to vote in favor of the amendment because, as he later told a reporter, he held in his pocket a letter from his mother urging him to vote for suffrage. “Vote for ratification and don't keep them waiting,” his mother wrote. Burn's vote put the measure over the top, in spite of intense opposition (and parliamentary maneuvering) by House Speaker Walker.

A few days later Gov. Roberts signed the certificate of ratification and sent it to Washington. And on Aug. 26, U.S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby issued a proclamation declaring the 19th Amendment ratified.

Tennessee History for Kids



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