

FIGHTING FOR WOMEN'S VOTING RIGHTS



Fighting for Women's Voting Rights

Introduction

The first serious attempt to grant women in Arkansas the right to vote emerged shortly after the Civil War when Miles Ledford Langley of Arkadelphia proposed at the 1868 Arkansas Constitutional Convention that “all citizens 21 years of age, who can read and write the English language” should be eligible to vote. While this proposal was rejected, the fight for women’s voting rights did not cease. Women advocating the idea of equal political participation of men and women, known at the time as suffragists, engaged in a variety of tactics and strategies that pushed their agenda. They created suffrage clubs, published and distributed suffrage newspapers and pamphlets, organized marches, parades, and rallies, and sent petitions to state and national legislatures that demanded voting rights for women. In 1917, all these efforts resulted in Arkansas women gaining the right to vote in primary elections.

One of the key activists fighting for women’s voting rights in Arkansas was Florence Brown Cotnam. Cotnam was a member of multiple suffrage organizations and served as president of the Little Rock Political Equality League. In 1914, several suffrage organizations joined with the Little Rock Political Equality League to create the Arkansas Woman Suffrage Association, and Cotnam was elected the new organization’s treasurer. She was an inspiring public speaker and used her talents to convince others that women should have the right to equal political participation. Between 1915 and 1920, Cotnam traveled across twenty states to advocate women’s suffrage. In 1915, she was also the first woman to address the Arkansas General Assembly.

In 1917, Cotnam once again helped to unite Arkansas suffrage organizations, this time to campaign for the federal amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In 1919, Congress passed the federal women’s suffrage amendment, which now had to be submitted to the states for ratification. The Arkansas General Assembly was required to meet for a special session to ratify the amendment. Cotnam was among Arkansas suffragists who wrote letters to legislators urging them to attend the special session and support the amendment. In this activity, you will examine a response that Cotnam received to one of her letters from a member of the Arkansas General Assembly.

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HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

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INSURANCE

EMMET VAUGHAN
ATTORNEY-AT-LAW
DES ARC. ARKANSAS
June 16th, 1919.

Your File

In re

Arkansas Equal Suffrage Central Committee,
Little Rock, Arkansas,

Dear Mrs Cotnam:-

In the event the Arkansas legislature is called in extra session for the consideration of any matter, I will be glad to attend, but I shall oppose the ratification of the Equal Suffrage Amendment. I am unwilling to lend my support to any movement that will disturb the proverbial modesty and refinement of American womanhood and motherhood. I consider it little short of a crime to tempt the good women of this country to surrender the dignity of their high position in the home and to mingle with the mottley crowds of impure women, ~~and~~ ~~xxx~~ political hangers on who ~~xxx~~ become a fixture in the manipulation of our election machinery.

I believe that your movement has the best of intention, but like many other reforms, well intended as they have been, they are working today in direct opposition to the good intended.

Yours very Respectfully,

Emmet Vaughan

Letter from Emmet Vaughn, attorney at law and member of the 42nd General Assembly, to Florence Cotnam, June 16, 1919 (Florence Brown Cotnam Collection, 1916-1932)

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Questions:

1. Who wrote this letter, when, and to whom is it addressed?
2. Research the exact date when Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment. How long did Cotnam and other activists wait to start writing letters to Arkansas legislature members to push for a special session and ratification? Note that this letter is a response to a letter that Cotnam must have sent to Vaughan sometime before June 16.
3. Does Vaughan intend to attend a special session if it is called?
4. Does Vaughan intend to support the Equal Suffrage Amendment? How does he justify his decision?
5. How does Vaughan understand politics and voting? Do you agree with his position? Note that he himself was a politician.
6. This letter documents key steps of the process of how a constitutional amendment is ratified. Research and explain what needs to happen for an amendment to the Constitution to be ratified.
7. Were Cotnam and her political allies successful in their letter-writing campaign? Read the resources listed in "Introduction" for more information.