



Educated Citizenship

Introduction

The first serious attempt to grant Arkansas women 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 1919, Congress passed the federal women’s suffrage amendment, which was ratified and certified in August 1920. Following this momentous achievement, Cotnam and her fellow suffragists focused on citizenship education. Cotnam led the League of Women Voters of Little Rock, an organization that worked to educate women about their new rights and responsibilities as voters. The idea of educated citizenship was central to those efforts. In this activity, you will examine a letter that Cotnam wrote to Louis Wynn of Judsonia, Arkansas. In it, she discusses women’s contributions to social changes and civic responsibilities.

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November 11, 1920.

Miss Louis Wynn,
Judsonia, Arkansas.

Dear Miss Wynn:

As the women of the United States have so recently become enfranchised, it is impossible to judge what the ultimate value of the vote will be. They have voted, however, in a number of western states for many years, and the testimony from all of these is that the votes of women have always been cast for clean candidates and for moral advancement. I believe women will bring the same view point into the electorate that she has in the home, looking upon the State and Nation as enlarged homes she will wish to bring to them economy, comfort and happiness.

The League of Women Voters has been organized for the purpose of the education of women for citizenship, and we are holding citizenship schools wherever there is a demand for them. The ignorant voter is a menace to any government, and the women of America are uniting to bring intelligence into the electorate.

I am sending under separate cover some literature which may be of assistance to you. I have a larger History of Suffrage which gives a more detailed account of what has been done by the women's vote, but it does not seem practical to mail you that volume. It seems to me that you will be expected to speculate on the value of the women's vote, and certainly knowing and believing in women you can judge of what the effect of their interest will be upon the government. Let us take the churches for instance: Where do you suppose they would be to day if the women had not upheld them. Look over any congregation you may go into and observe the preponderance of women. Consider the cause of temperance in America, and I am sure you will agree that the W. C. T. U. and Frances Williard and her followers are responsible for our having prohibition. Nearly every measure for social reform which has been effected in the United States was started by some group of women. People express their ideas at the polls, and these are the ideas that women will surely have - better conditions for working women, shorter hours, better pay; better pay for school teachers, longer terms for schools; the elimination of child labor; the elimination of red light districts, a single standard of morals for men and women - the standard that women are now judged by; the eradication of venereal diseases;

Letter from the Chairman of the League of Women Voters (Florence Brown Cotnam) to Louis Wynn, November 11, 1920, p. 1 (Florence Brown Cotnam Collection, 1916-1932)

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· parks and play grounds in large cities, wholesome amusement everywhere, in both country and city; good roads to bring the farmer in close touch with the town; better marketing conditions to lower the cost of living. In short, all of these things that make for a clean, wholesome, progressive State and country in which to live.

Cordially,

Chairman.

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Letter from the Chairman of the League of Women Voters (Florence Brown Cotnam) to Louis Wynn, November 11, 1920, p. 2 (Florence Brown Cotnam Collection, 1916-1932)

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Questions:

1. This letter was written by the “Chairman” of the League of Women Voters Florence Brown Cotnam to a person named Louis Wynn (we do not know anything about Wynn). How long after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment did Cotnam write this letter?
2. Why does Cotnam refer to “western states” in the opening paragraph? If you are not sure, research the first five US territories and/or states that granted women suffrage. Note that some states gave women limited voting rights in some elections (e.g., school boards) before they granted them full voting rights. Research first five territories/states that granted women *unrestricted* (full) voting rights.
3. What is the purpose of the League of Women Voters? Explain in your own words.
4. What examples does Cotnam use to argue that women have already had a positive impact on their communities and on government? What causes have women led according to Cotnam?
5. In her letter, Cotnam suggests that women are more moral and honest because they elect “clean candidates” and support “moral advancement.” Do you agree with her? Do women vote differently than men? Research demographic data from any recent election to support your argument.
6. Cotnam and her collaborators worked to educate women about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. In what ways can we be more educated citizens today? List three strategies that can help us be more educated about our rights and responsibilities as citizens.