The Stuff of Suffrage

Selected Ephemera from the Woman Suffrage Movement

Cody Dodge Ewert

The woman suffrage movement in the United States did not begin with one inciting incident. Rather, the notion that gender should determine access to political rights had been challenged, if not widely debated, since the nation's founding. Abigail Adams famously implored her husband John to "remember the ladies" in a 1776 letter, warning the nation's eventual second president that women "will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."[1] After the American Revolution, a select group of women exercised the right to vote, as a loophole allowed all property owners in New Jersey to cast ballots until the state legislature restricted suffrage to white men in 1807.[2] Three decades later, the "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" drafted at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 famously included a resolution that implored women to seize their "sacred right to the elective franchise."[3]

The most dynamic and well-documented period of suffrage activism, however, began after the end of the Civil War in 1865. In 1869, after a nearly successful attempt in Dakota Territory, Wyoming Territory became the first state or territory to explicitly grant women the right to vote. Utah followed suit within months. The adoption of woman suffrage in these remote western territories sparked a wave of similar campaigns. A half century later, such efforts culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The intervening decades saw both landmark changes in the realm of politics and society and decisive advances in technology that helped spread ideas, information, and entertainment across an increasingly connected nation. Not coincidentally, suffragists after the turn of the

1. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 Mar.–5 Apr. 1776, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/.

2. Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 24–25.

3. Ibid., p. 93.

twentieth century used the developing mass culture to disseminate an array of striking images and items—not to mention songs, slogans, and even styles of dress—to promote their cause.[4]

What follows is a glimpse into how participants, observers, and opponents experienced this particularly spirited and consequential period in the long fight for woman suffrage. While idealized depictions of suffragists as young, attractive, well-dressed, and almost always white proliferated during these years, so too did stereotypes that cast them as embittered, unattractive, and hostile toward men. Some of these images are iconic; others are simply curious. Readers will also notice that the suffrage movement produced a wide variety of objects: magazine covers, postcards, banners, hand fans, stamps, and at least one pillowcase. Rather than being meant to stand the test of time, this ephemera served the immediate purpose of swaying public opinion on the suffrage cause. Often amusing and always eye-catching, these images offer a sense of the movement's cultural context.

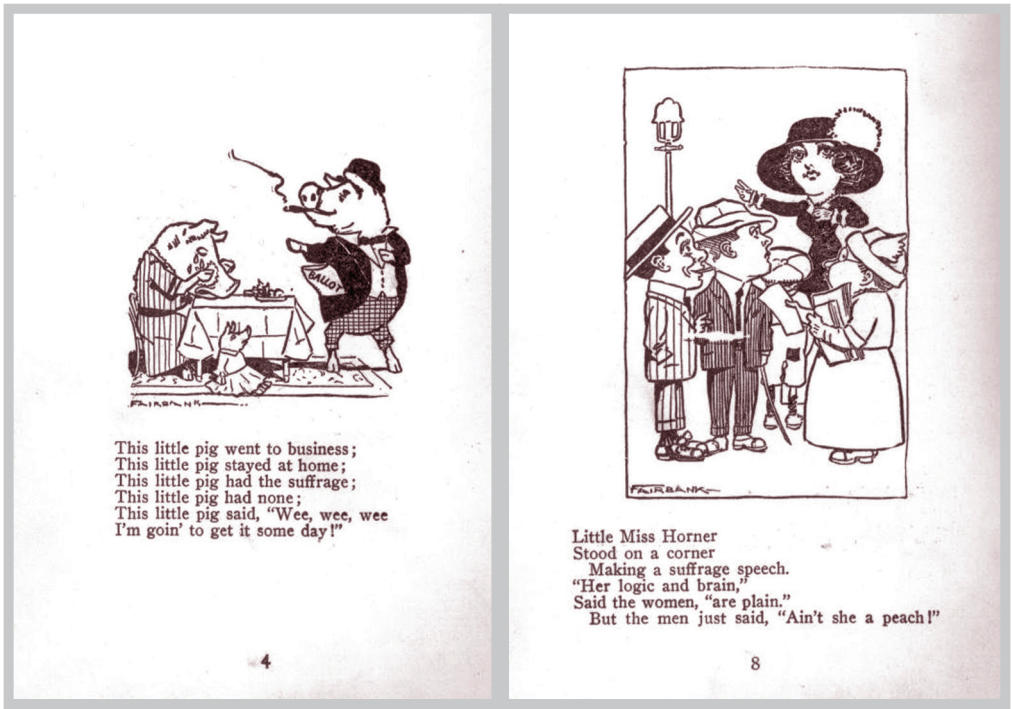
4. On how Reconstruction-era politics advanced suffrage in Wyoming, *see* Jennifer Helton, "'So Great an Innovation': Woman Suffrage in Wyoming," in *Equality at the Ballot Box: Votes for Women on the Northern Great Plains*, ed. Lori Ann Lahlum and Molly P. Rozum (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2019), pp. 33–71. On how cultural and technological change influenced suffrage politics, *see* Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 131–33.

The cover of the 7 November 1912 issue of *Leslie's The People's Weekly* depicts a suffragist waving a "Votes for Women" banner from a coach. It evokes the massive suffrage parade held in New York City that May. The iconic archway in Washington Square, the parade's starting point, can be seen in the background.

Puck, the nation's leading satirical magazine at the time, dedicated this 1915 issue to suffrage. The cover shows a woman wearing a "Votes for Women" sash next to the magazine's titular mascot, a partially clothed toddler named after the mischievous character from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

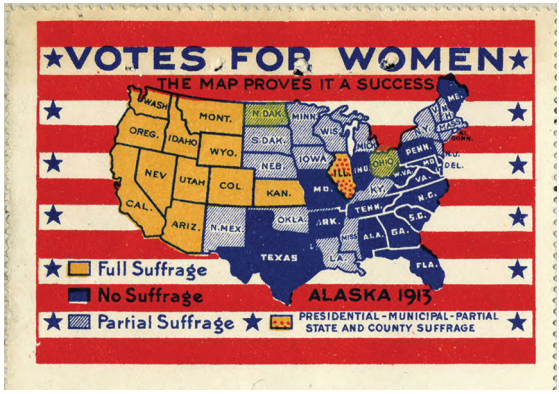
The peak years of the suffrage movement coincided with a postcard craze that began during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and waned following the outbreak of World War I. Naturally, suffrage postcards became popular. A card from roughly 1913 promotes the cause with images of children and a simple rhyme, a prevailing trend at the time.

Both pro- and anti-suffrage themes became standard in early twentieth-century Valentine's Day cards. The politics of this card are less clear, though it suggests that granting Cupid the right to vote would interfere with his matchmaking work.



In 1912, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published *Mother Goose as a Suffragette*. The short, illustrated booklet recast various nursery rhymes to reflect the votes for women crusade. These selections play on "This Little Pig" and "Little Jack Horner."

This poster stamp—a popular collectible item during the era that had no value as postage—shows the status of woman suffrage in every state and Alaska Territory as of 1913.



This postcard with its sulking man washing clothes depicts a common trope in materials mocking the suffrage movement. A sign reading "EVERYBODY WORKS BUT MOTHER: SHE'S A SUFFRAGETTE" hangs on the wall. Such images suggested that granting women the vote would emasculate men and remove women from what many deemed their rightful place: the home.

In another anti-suffrage postcard, an impractically dressed employee of the "U.S. feMAIL" snoops through the letters she has been tasked to deliver. The suggestion here is that women, due to their perceived penchant for gossip, could not be trusted to carry the mail, let alone vote.

In this *Puck* cartoon from 1915, a "political boss" conducts an anti-suffragist soprano backed by an array of the era's standard villains, including a "sweatshop owner" and a "dive keeper." The title, "I Did Not Raise My Girl to be a Voter," references "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier," a popular song that reflected pacifist sentiment in the United States following the outbreak of war in Europe.

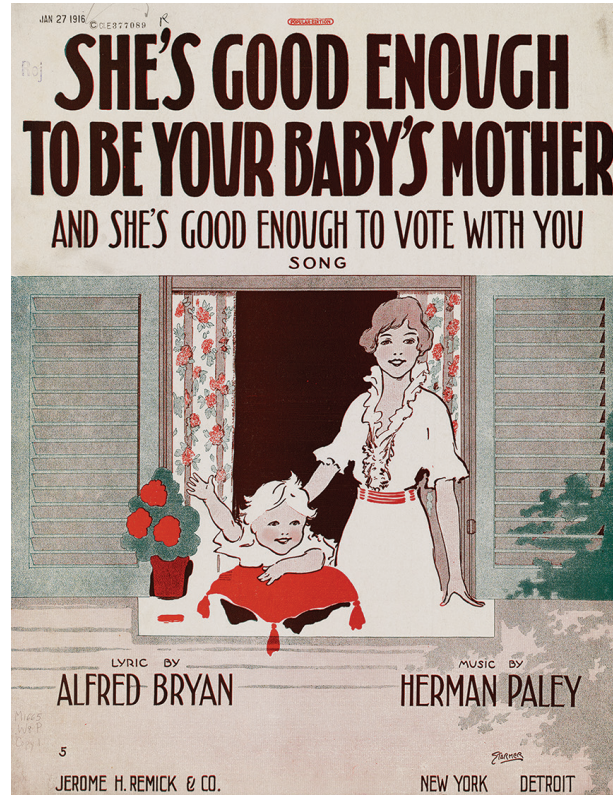
"I DID NOT RAISE MY GIRL TO BE A VOTER"
Soprano Solo With Vociferous Supporting Chorus of Male Voices

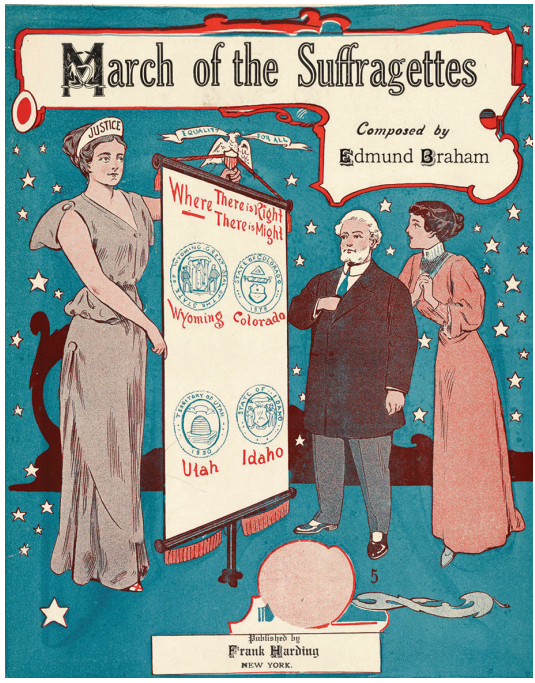
Illustrator Rea Irvin's image evoking ancient Greece appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1913. It depicts women's rights advocates, led by a figure who resembles Susan B. Anthony brandishing the sharp end of an umbrella, rushing a frightened contingent of toga-wearing men.

This hand fan, distributed by the publishing affiliate of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, features a precious rendering of Uncle Sam with an aspiring voter on one side and a punning pro-suffrage message on the other.

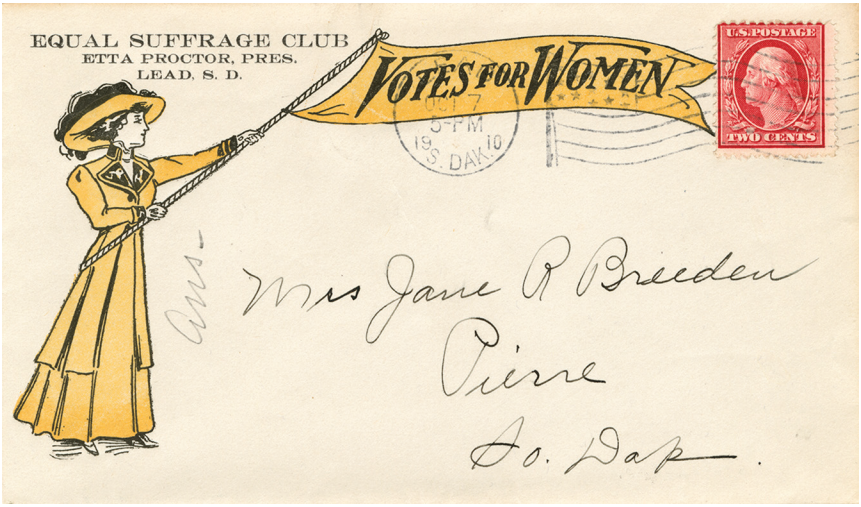
Doubling as a pillowcase, this hand-made flag from around the turn of the twentieth century honors the first and, to that point, only states to grant women the vote: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho.

In the 1910s, publishers flooded the market with suffrage songs that reflected the diverse array of arguments for and against the cause. This pro-suffrage song, for instance, celebrates women's roles as nurturers who "warm your heart with kisses when you are lonesome and blue," a quality rendering them "good enough" to vote.





On the cover for a piano piece by Edmund Braham, a stoic Lady Justice highlights the first four states to grant women the vote. By 1912, when the music was published, Washington (1910) and California (1911) had joined them. Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon would do the same later that year.



Jane Rooker Smith Breeden became an influential suffrage and temperance activist in central South Dakota beginning in the 1890s. She received a note in this suffrage-themed envelope—a popular design from the time—in 1910.

This poster urged South Dakota voters to approve Amendment E to the state constitution. Its adoption in November 1918 would finally grant most women the right to vote but would also disenfranchise many recent immigrants.