

The Spirit of

BY MARGUERITE KEARNS

In 1913, New York suffragists took as their inspiration and symbol an old wagon that hearkened back to the “unfinished” American Revolution—one in which men were created equal, but women were absent.



Riding in the “Spirit of 1776” across Manhattan was the last thing suffrage activist Edna Kearns wanted to do on July 1, 1913—what would have been a hot summer day in Manhattan. It meant holding tight to the side of the horse-drawn wagon all the way from Madison Avenue to Fifth Avenue and 59th Street. As the horse trotted across the Queensboro Bridge toward Richmond Hills, Kearns likely struggled to keep from fainting in the heat. She and Irene Davison, both suffrage activists, were dressed in heavy costumes of the

American Revolution: blue coats with yellow facings and three-cornered hats. Edna’s daughter, eight-year-old Serena Kearns, sported a red, white, and blue outfit.

The bold printed slogans attached to the vehicle gave the reason they were there: “If taxation without representation was tyranny in 1776, why not in 1913?” Pedestrians stared at the wagon as it passed, which was followed by a caravan of brightly decorated automobiles emblazoned with “Votes for Women” banners and slogans. Some passersby on the street waved and cheered. Others shook

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1776

their fists. Women's suffrage was a volatile issue: it was opposed by the liquor industry, many men, and even some women who believed that men and women had separate responsibilities, that politics was a dirty business, and that women should stay in their own "sphere."

The wagon and costumes of the 1913 journey were symbolic of what suffragists considered to be the unfinished American Revolution. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 stated that "all men are created equal," but by July of 1848, the female organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention in upstate New York demanded the inclusion of women in the clause. Though the suffrage movement had made significant gains since then, the essential fact remained that in 1913 most American women were still barred from participating in the democratic process. Suffrage leaders from the Seneca Falls days—including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott—had passed the torch to a

new generation of activists. But because not enough progress had been made state by state, movement tactics became more aggressive and visible as the twentieth century progressed. Yet even with parades and intensified lobbying, the resistance persisted.

New York Efforts

As Edna Kearns, Irene Davison, and little Serena Kearns set out in July 1913 for a month-long grassroots organizing campaign for the New York State Woman Suffrage Association that targeted Long Island towns and villages, they and their support network of committed activists dug in for a protracted struggle. Energetic, mild-mannered, and passionately committed to the cause of women voting, they wrote and published articles supporting women's suffrage, served as officers of Long Island suffrage clubs, attended state and national Votes for Women conferences as delegates, and understood that changing a social system required a dawn-to-dusk

commitment. They were willing to commit to the likelihood that votes for women would require an amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In order to provide the local support desperately needed by the state and national suffrage movements, activists like Kearns and Davison set aside the traditional woman's role of "shrinking violet" and placed themselves in the forefront of the action. This meant engaging in activities such as the theatrical parade, speaking publicly at every available forum, no matter how large or small the audience, writing letters to elected officials, standing on soapboxes to speak on street corners, circulating petitions, and dialing phones. They spread their message through the printed word, art, poetry, pageants, and theater, on subways and in crowded streets, in conversations at dinner tables and tea receptions, and at public events. Even little Serena was involved. She traveled with her mother in the "Spirit of 1776," participated in a suffrage



NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

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Opposite: The "Spirit of 1776" wagon in 1913. Left to right: Irene Davison, Serena Kearns, and Edna Kearns.

Above: The wagon is now in the collections of the New York State Museum and is considered a prime artifact of the women's suffrage movement.



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Above: Serena Kearns with her mother, Edna, at their home in Rockville Centre, ca. 1915.

Middle: Suffragettes at Long Beach, New York, 1912.

Opposite: Rosalie Jones (left) leads a suffrage hike from New York to Washington, March 1913.

pageant and fundraiser at the Metropolitan Opera, and became a poster child for the Long Island movement.

Thus Kearns and Davison found themselves still riding in the “Spirit of 1776” on a Saturday afternoon in mid-July, entering the heartland of Long Island. But the old wagon’s journey developed a serious wrinkle as the caravan paraded through Huntington. The suffragists weren’t prepared for Mrs. Oliver Livingston Jones, a vehement “anti,” who placed herself in the middle of the street and refused to move.

Showdown in Huntington

After Mrs. Jones raised her hand high to halt the parade, drivers of suffrage-decorated automobiles slammed on their brakes. Musicians in the fife and drum band from the local fire department stopped in the middle of a song. A strange silence overcame the hundreds of people lining Huntington’s main street as they witnessed the confrontation.

“No longer will this old wagon be put to such a base use!” Mrs. Jones bellowed. She claimed the “Spirit of 1776” had been improperly taken from her relatives and sold to I.S. Remson, the Brooklyn wagon and carriage company whose officials had donated the wagon to the state suffrage movement, and she announced plans to pursue a lawsuit. It was no idle threat: she was a member of one of the wealthiest aristocratic families on Long Island. Exacerbating the tension of



Suffragettes at Long Beach, N.Y. 1912.

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the showdown was the fact that Jones’s own daughter, Rosalie, was a high-profile suffrage activist, and many parade participants were Rosalie’s friends.

Mary Jones went on to attack the wagon’s name and its alleged link to American revolutionaries. The suffragists had claimed publicly that the wagon was built by a Long Island patriot, Ebenezer Conklin, in Huntington in 1776—but “Not true!” Mrs. Jones argued, in a tone of voice that a *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reporter described as “belligerent.” In fact, she claimed the wagon had been in the hands of the Hewlett family (her relatives) as far back as anyone could remember. And the extended Jones and Hewlett families on Long Island couldn’t be traced to revolutionaries: quite the contrary. Family members had been loyal to King George III, Mrs. Jones maintained, and their descendants continued to be proud of it. In her estimation, “Patriots” had been traitors to the English crown—unsavory individuals who threw temper tantrums over a little bit of tea and tax.

Mrs. Jones’s disdain for the Patriot cause reflected tensions that had existed

between Loyalists and Patriots on Long Island since the time of the Revolution. But it wasn’t only the Revolution that upset her: she and another daughter, Louise, were outspoken members of the New York State Anti-Suffrage Association, and the Huntington incident wasn’t the only time she had spoken her mind on the suffrage issue. When daughter Rosalie had “hiked” to Albany to meet with the governor to discuss votes for women in 1912, Mary had driven north by motor car to demand that Rosalie return home immediately (she didn’t). And at the March 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, Mary greeted Rosalie and the other marchers as they reached the city by commenting to the press that their suffrage support and activist tactics were “ridiculous” and “foolish.” Then she issued “anti” statements and headed off to attend an “anti” convention.

The Huntington standoff ended a few weeks later when, in early August, Mary’s husband, Dr. Oliver Livingston Jones, committed suicide at the family’s residence in New York City. The tragedy set aside any plans Mary might have had to drag the New

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The New York State Museum, which owns the “Spirit of 1776,” also holds photographs, memorabilia, newspaper articles, and correspondence associated with the 1913 acquisition of the wagon by the New York State Woman Suffrage Association, as well as the research of former museum transportation curator Geoffrey Stein concerning the wagon’s design and history.

The wagon’s presentation ceremony to the state suffrage association was covered by New York City newspapers, including the *New York Times*; the confrontation in Huntington in mid-July 1913 was highlighted in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Long Island papers also gave considerable coverage to the month-long grassroots organizing campaign. Because Edna Kearns wrote and edited suffrage news for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, as well as other New York City metropolitan and Long Island papers, she left a newspaper trail. These and other documents from our personal family archive (photos, writings, scrapbooks, memorabilia, and letters) paint a unique picture of her grassroots suffrage activities from 1911 to 1920.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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York State Woman Suffrage Association through court over ownership and use of the “Spirit of 1776” wagon. The *New York Times*’s obituary for Dr. Oliver Livingston Jones characterized him as a “wealthy retired physician and real estate owner,” but it featured daughter Rosalie in the headline. Indeed, the first paragraph described Dr. Jones as the father of “...the suffrage ‘hiker’ who led the march of the suffragists into Washington at the time of President Wilson’s inauguration.” Thus, likely to Mary Jones’s displeasure, her husband was defined by his relationship to his more famous suffragist daughter—who continued her high-profile suffrage work after her father’s death and then dropped out of the movement after 1915 to earn a law degree.

Continuing the Struggle

Meanwhile, Edna Kearns and other New Yorkers went on to picket the White House in 1917 and to participate, with the National Woman’s Party under the leadership of Alice Paul, in the uphill struggle to

win a federal amendment. Kearns served as a congressional representative for the National Woman’s Party and could always be counted on to track down another Long Island resident, Theodore Roosevelt, and rally his support for the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment” whenever it was needed. The New York victory for suffrage in 1917 represented a turning point in the national movement by dramatically increasing the number of women voters nationwide, and New York earned the distinction of being recognized as the cradle of the U.S. women’s rights movement because of the Seneca Falls convention and the committed leadership and grassroots activism of New York suffragists.

Edna Kearns was my grandmother. Her second child, Wilma, my mother, was born on November 12, 1920, ten days after American women voted for the first time in the United States. The “Spirit of 1776” wagon was preserved by Edna’s extended family; today it is in the collection of

the New York State Museum. It’s considered a vibrant symbol of what it took to win the vote and a prime artifact of not only the New York suffrage movement but also the national struggle. To highlight the wagon’s centennial journey, both houses of the New York State legislature passed a resolution designating July 1, 2013 as the “Spirit of 1776” Wagon Day.

Though the true age of the wagon was never scrutinized in 1913, scholars have since concluded that the “Spirit of 1776” was built in 1820. The association with 1776, however, fit the national movement’s theme of the unfinished American Revolution, which had been memorialized in 1848 at Seneca Falls. In 2020, the “Spirit of 1776” will be 200 years old. As the centennial celebration of women’s suffrage in New York approaches in 2017, it’s likely that national suffrage centennial celebrants in 2020 will also find inspiration in the story of an old wagon and the women it carried. ■