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How LI women helped win women the vote

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By BY BILL BLEYER bill.bleyer@newsday.com



Antonia Petrash of Glen Cove, author of "Long Island and the Woman Suffrage Movement," with a sculpture her husband, Jack, made of suffragist Harriet Stanton Blatch of Shoreham. Petrash will be discussing the book on Wednesday, March 26, at 1 p.m. at Bryant Library, 2 Paper Mill Rd., Roslyn. (Credit: Newsday / Audrey C. Tiernan)

Videos

Long Island may have been something of a backwater in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but it played a disproportionate role in the woman's suffrage movement in the state in which it was born.

"The island is small in area, about 1,700 square miles, with a population that represented only about 4 percent of the state total,"

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Spotlighting women in Long Island's past

Antonia Petrash writes in "Long Island and the Woman Suffrage Movement." "It was then mostly agricultural in nature, far from the capital of Albany and even farther from the middle of the state, where much of the suffrage action was centered."

But its proximity to New York City and its small cadre of intelligent, determined and often wealthy women more than made up for those deficits, Petrash, a Glen Cove resident, says in the 158-page paperback published last year by The History Press.

"Most people don't realize it's one of the first civil rights movements in the United States, and they don't realize how many years it took and how much effort and how much it cost them to leave their comfort zones of their homes and families, even with something as simple as a parade," she said of the suffragists.

"So it's important to remember that during March -- Women's History Month -- and throughout the year," Petrash said.

LI women joined the movement

The suffrage movement, especially on Long Island, is little-known, according to Petrash, the former director of the Glen Cove Public Library and the author of two other books on prominent women in the

region. The national movement started with a small meeting and then a convention in upstate Seneca Falls in 1848. It was not until 1917 that the state granted women the right to vote. Three years later, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution extended it to the entire country.

Long Island women were late in becoming prominent in the movement, said Natalie Naylor, a retired Hofstra University history professor and author of "Women in Long Island's Past: A History of Eminent Ladies and Everyday Lives" (The History Press). She noted that most of the action for suffrage took place upstate in the 19th century, although Susan B. Anthony did come to Riverhead and Jamaica in her campaign in the 1890s. But it was only in the early 1900s that Long Island women began to stand out.

The most well-known local suffragist was Rosalie Gardiner Jones of Cold Spring Harbor. Petrash, who said she was always interested in women's history and wrote a paper about the suffrage movement as a high school student in Plainview, describes Jones as "a real Long Island heroine" as well as "very eccentric and colorful." A descendant of one of the first white families on the Island, "she had the benefit of being wealthy, but she was also so straightforward and dedicated. She decided what the movement needed was more organization, and it should be organized in a military fashion. They ended up calling her 'The General.'"

Jones (1883-1978), a descendant of Lion Gardiner, for whom Gardiners Island between the North and South Forks is named, is best known for organizing marches. The first began Dec. 16, 1912, in the Bronx with close to 200 marchers. Jones and four others walked the entire 170 miles to Albany in 13 days. The Washington March began the following February from Newark -- 245 miles covered in 14 days.

"Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, Harriot Stanton Blatch, lived in Shoreham and she was very active in the radical wing of the movement, as were Alva Belmont and Rosalie Jones," Naylor said. "That radical wing is responsible for pushing the mainstream organization into doing more and getting the authorities to view the mainstream as more acceptable, leading toward the 19th Amendment."

Even though she was the daughter of a founder of the movement, Blatch (1856-1940) disagreed with her mother, who favored only including women from higher social and economic strata, Petrash said. Blatch argued that the movement needed to be more inclusive because the vote was even more important for poorer women with less opportunity.

Many of the key Long Island players, such as Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, were wives or widows of Gold

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Coast magnates who were able to pour some of their enormous wealth into the campaign. Petrash said "Alva started involving the wealthy women. She gave perhaps more than anyone, in terms of dollars and personal commitment."

Some of the chief activists lived in Manhattan and had summer homes on Long Island. Edna Buckman Kearns lived in Rockville Centre and was an editor on the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. "It was very unusual for a woman to have an editorial position on a newspaper at that time," Petrash said. "She used that as a bully pulpit to push for suffrage."

Parades, tea and suffrage

The movement did not have wide support here. But "if you look in the newspapers, you can see that every community had a little suffrage group," Petrash said. In Glen Cove, the group met monthly in a tea room. There were two conventions in Long Beach and parades in Hempstead.

"The East End had some wonderful suffragists, but the East End also had a very strong anti-suffrage movement," Petrash noted. "That was fueled by the liquor industry because they were afraid that if women got the vote, they would vote for Prohibition."

Petrash said many suffragists had to deal with opposition within their own families, "but on the other side, there were many men active in the movement as well."

Petrash devotes a chapter to President Theodore Roosevelt, "who may have come a bit late to the dance" she writes, but "once converted, he proved to be a strong and unwavering ally"

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