
Standing up for woman's historic role

By Jaclyn Reiss

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Framingham storyteller Libby Franck stood rigid and defiant, wearing a gold sash proclaiming "Votes for Women" around her navy blue tunic, as she slipped into the character of Josephine Collins, a Framingham suffragette who fought almost a century ago for women's right to vote.

"I got involved in 1909, when I went to an open air meeting for women's suffrage at Irving Square in South Framingham," Franck said, portraying Collins. "The square was packed with women, wearing sashes like mine, singing, 'Oh dear, what can the matter be? Women are wanting to vote.'"

Franck's performance on Aug. 26 celebrated the 92d anniversary of the enactment of the 19th Amendment, which gives women the vote.

Framingham played a significant role in the fight for women's rights, as two local women in the 1910s were thrown in jail while fighting for the vote: Collins, a single woman who ran a dry goods store in town, and Louise Mayo, a mother of seven who drove a horse-drawn wagon carrying students to and from school.

"Framingham was a small town, so to have two such enterprising women is pretty remarkable," said Annie Murphy, executive director of the Framingham History Center. "I think it's pretty amazing that we had two women who were jailed for their fight to get women to vote."

The town has recently recognized the women's endeavors, dedicating a small square across from Edgell Memorial Library as Mayo-Collins Square in 2005, Murphy said.

Local descendants of the suffragettes have traveled to the square every year on Aug. 26 to tie purple, gold, and white balloons — the colors of the movement — to the marker on the square, commemorating their ancestors.

"It's the only square in Framingham dedicated to women," Murphy said. "It's a little Post-it stamp of a square, but there's a sign, and it's there."

The Framingham History Center also displays Mayo's jailbird suffragette pin. Both women received such pins from the movement's leaders after being released from custody. The pins were distributed to women nationwide who were jailed while picketing for the right to vote.

The history center also sells replicas of the pin at its store and online for \$35.

"The pin is a powerful reminder of women's history in breaking out of conventional roles," Murphy said, adding that Mayo's family donated her pin to the history center.

Collins's current descendants could not be reached for comment, but Franck said they were not available this year to travel to Framingham on the 19th Amendment's anniversary, so Franck tied up balloons in Mayo-Collins Square that Sunday herself.

"I'm keeping up the tradition," she said, adding that talking to the suffragettes' descendants proved key in her research for her characterization of Collins.

Franck said she started portraying Collins because she felt as though the town's residents did not know as much about her as about Mayo, who was the focus of more articles in the local newspaper. Franck spent time at the Framingham and Natick libraries, poring over microfilms of old newspapers to research the role, as well as town records, census data, and a general history of the suffrage movement.

"It's unusual for a town like Framingham to have two women be jailed for this on separate occasions," she said. "Also, these were just middle-class women, not wealthy women who could take time off. That's pretty extraordinary."

However, Franck's research was not without obstacles. She said that from 1916 through 1920 — key years in the fight for women's voting — clippings from the local paper were missing on microfilm, causing her to use her imagination for some of her presentation.

"It's one of the most frustrating things," Franck said, noting that she found out about the Irving Square meeting from an article in a Natick newspaper. "Thankfully, I knew her great-niece, who promised her mother before she died to be sure that Framingham never forgot 'Auntie Jo.'"

When asked whether the two Framingham women knew each other or worked together in the movement, Franck laughed.

"They must have known each other, but I'm not certain," she said. "I keep thinking there would be something in those missing papers."

Franck said Mayo was the first woman from Framingham to be thrown in jail for her efforts after she picketed the White House in 1917.

"They sang, 'We'll not get out on bail, go to jail, go to jail,'" Franck said, noting that Mayo was sentenced to a 60-day term. "Louise Mayo gladly dedicated her body and mind to suffrage."

Collins was sentenced to jail after she rallied in Boston in February 1919 as then-President Woodrow Wilson returned by sea from a trip to Europe.

"I stood on the Boston Common, with my back to the State House, holding a sign that read, 'Mr. President, how long must we women wait for liberty?'" said Franck, putting on her Collins character at the Democratic Coordinated Campaign office in Framingham.

Following their prison sentences, both women were ostracized as jailbirds — some female patrons even told Collins that their husbands forbade them to shop at her store, Franck said.

But eventually, the women's efforts prevailed. The 19th Amendment became law on Aug. 26, 1920.

The ratification by the states came down to a tie-breaking vote in Tennessee, with the youngest man in the state's Legislature putting it over the top.

The clincher for him?

"His mother was a suffragist," said Franck, "and she wrote him a note telling him to be a good boy."

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