

# The Women's Suffrage Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador



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## Introduction

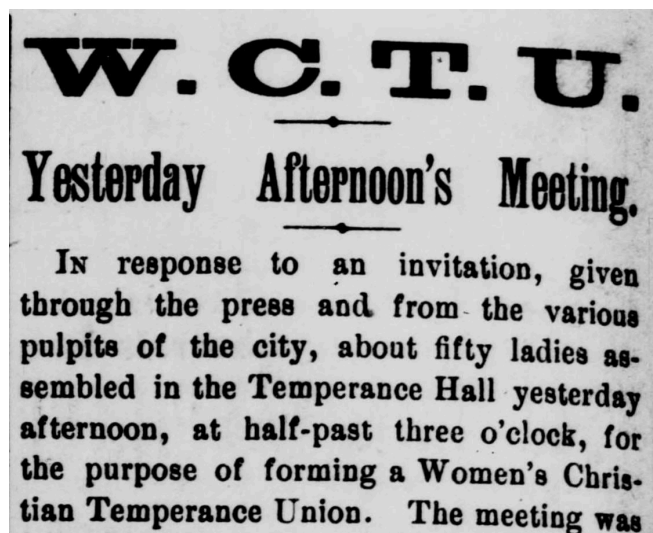


*Fig 1. Newfoundland Suffragists, ca. 1920s. (Gertrude Crosbie, Memorial University Archives and Special Collections)*

2025 marks the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in the Dominion of Newfoundland, an historic moment when women 25 years of age and older and living in electoral districts represented in the House of Assembly could cast their votes for the first time. Labrador was not yet represented in the House of Assembly so women there would vote for the first time in 1946, when they cast their votes for a representative to the National Convention. Since 1925, great strides

have been made towards increasing the political presence and participation of women in Newfoundland and Labrador. The road to "the vote" was marked by resilience, collaboration, and the fierce advocacy of countless women. This article captures a component of this broader push forward for women's political and legal rights from the late 1800s to the 1920s, which fits within the broader socio-cultural context of the social reform movement of the time.

## The White Ribbon Army



*Fig 2. Report on the first WCTU meeting held in St. John's. (The Evening Telegram, 1890-09-11)*

The suffrage movement has deep connections to women's participation in temperance organizations. One key component was the Newfoundland branch of the international Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), led locally by president Rose Emma Cole Peters who, apart from a short period in 1894, served as

president of the Newfoundland WCTU from 1890 until her death in 1913 (Duley, 2025). Importantly, the Newfoundland chapter of the WCTU was not just a St. John's based organization but had branches in many outports as well.

The WCTU's broader mandate focused on temperance issues but also included poverty reduction initiatives and improving conditions in prisons. Members saw all these issues as being affected by alcohol abuse. They believed that one way to curb the abuse of alcohol was through outright prohibition or restrictions on its use. In 1891, the Newfoundland chapter organized petitions demanding that proposed changes to The Temperance Act would include giving women the right to vote on plebiscites related to the control of alcohol (Duley, 2025). While not a call for universal women's suffrage, this petition drive was the first time that the issue of women being allowed to vote in some capacity was brought to the Newfoundland government.

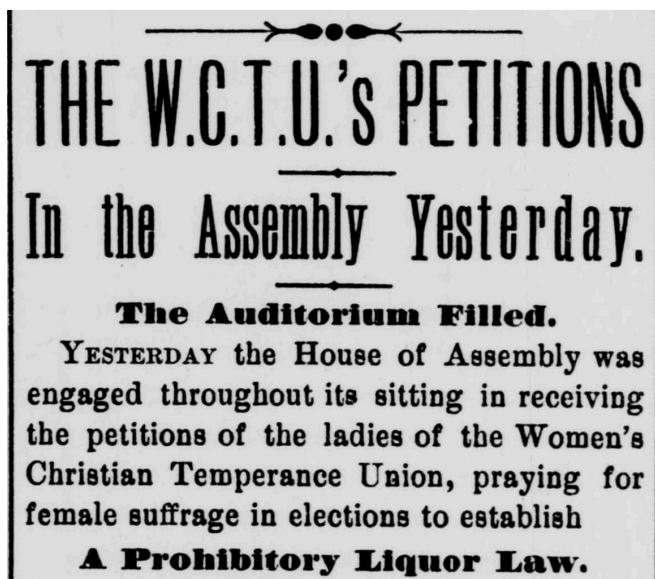


Fig 3. Report on the WCTU's petition to allow women to vote on temperance issues. (*The Evening Telegram*, 1891-03-19)

On March 18, 1891 members of the WCTU, wearing white ribbons over their winter clothes, marched in parade to the Colonial Building to present their

petitions asking that women be allowed to vote on temperance matters. 27 petitions had been collected, six from St. John's and the remainder from outports. The petitions carried the signatures of thousands of women. MHA Donald Morison would introduce a Private Member's bill on behalf of the petitioners. On March 15, 1892 the first debate on the bill to allow women over the age of 21 to vote in local plebiscites commenced. It was defeated 12 to 10 with one abstainer. The issue was debated again on May 4, 1893, when it was defeated by a vote of 17 to 14 (Duley, 2025). Although the WCTU was unsuccessful in their campaign, they did set the groundwork for women's suffrage efforts to come.

## The Water Lily



Fig 4. The masthead of the first edition of *The Water Lily*. (*The Water Lily*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1892)

Working in step with the WCTU for women's suffrage on temperance matters was Jessie Murray Ohman. In January of 1892, a few months before the first debate in the House of Assembly, Murray Ohman, a WCTU member and staunch prohibitionist, edited and published the first edition of *The Water Lily*, a monthly journal that remained in circulation until November of 1893. It was the first such publication to be owned and operated by a woman in Newfoundland. It had subscribers across Newfoundland and was distributed to outport communities through the Royal Stores (Duley, 2025).

The first edition clearly stated the ethos of the publication, noting that "The Water Lily comes to you unconnected with any society, and unsupplemented by any funds...We desire, through the columns of the Water Lily, to furnish

items of interest to every earnest worker who reads it[s] pages, and to supply intelligence suitable to the needs of those interested in the temperance cause" (Murray Ohman, 1892). The contents included many articles and opinion pieces relating to temperance, but also featured puzzles, household tips, poems, and serial fiction.



*Beggar.*—Would you please give me a few cents, sir?

*Sir W. Whiteway.*—Where is your husband, can't he support you and your children?

*Beggar.*—He has been drinking those six months and earned nothing.

*Sir W.*—Why don't you keep him at home?

*Beggar.*—I can't sir. The only way I can stop him drinking is to try and close up the liquor stores. While they're open he'll drink.

*Sir W.*—Ah! You are one of those for whom the ladies ask a vote?

*Beggar.*—Yes, sir, bless them.

*Sir W.*—(Turning abruptly away). Then I shall give you neither vote nor money.

**Fig 5. Editorial cartoon featuring Prime Minister Sir William V. Whiteway (*The Water Lily*, vol. 2, no. 5, May 1893)**

By its third issue, *The Water Lily* directly called for women to be able to vote in plebiscites dealing with the control of liquor (McDonald, 2023). *The*

*Water Lily* was often attacked by politicians, those not in favour of prohibition, and anti-suffragists. But its editor never backed down, replying instead with often scathing rebukes (Duley, 2025).

## The Ladies Reading Room

### Ladies Reading Room.

The Ladies' Reading Room, at 158 Water Street, in the Lyon Building, will be opened to-morrow morning informally. This association has been formed by a number of ladies for the purpose of conducting a reading room, where all the latest magazines and periodicals may be seen. It is not a club and any lady is eligible for membership, the subscription being \$3 a year. Lady Horwood is President, Mrs. J. A. Clift Vice President, and Mrs. W. G. Gosling, Secretary Treasurer, and there are now one hundred and twenty-five members

**Fig 6. Early notice announcing the establishment of The Ladies Reading room. (*The Evening Chronicle*, 1910-01-31)**

One of the critical points in the timeline of the women's suffrage movement in Newfoundland and Labrador is the establishment of the Ladies Reading Room in St. John's in 1909. The catalyst for the formation of the Ladies Reading Room was a local men's club's decision to ban women from attending lectures and debates. In December of 1909, Harriette Armine Nutting Gosling, who went by Armine, hosted a gathering of women at her home. What resulted was the formation of the Ladies Reading Room (Duley, 2025).

The Reading Room became popular quickly, with the membership increasing to 125 members

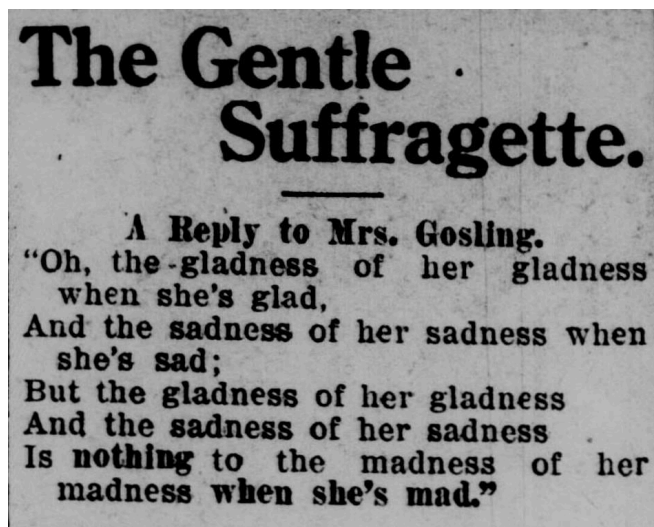
within weeks of forming (Duley, 2014). The Reading Room “had social, educational, but also political objectives. It provided a place where women could meet for conversation or to read some current British and American literature (Warren, 1998). It was a space where women educated each other and discussed issues that were politically and socially important to them. Women’s suffrage was one of those issues. While not formed as a suffrage organization, the Ladies Reading Room, and some of the women who met there, shone a new light on the suffrage cause.



**Fig 7. Armine Nutting Gosling, ca. 1885. (Memorial University Archives and Special Collections)**

Armine Nutting Gosling in particular was a fierce proponent of women’s suffrage. As early as 1908 she had made her views public. On January 15, 1912, she gave a speech at the Ladies Reading Room that would rekindle the sparks of the women’s suffrage movement in Newfoundland

and Labrador. The speech was so popular that she was asked to give it a second time and copies were printed for sale. Armine was regularly the target of ridicule in local newspapers, but she was undeterred in her views (Duley, 2025).



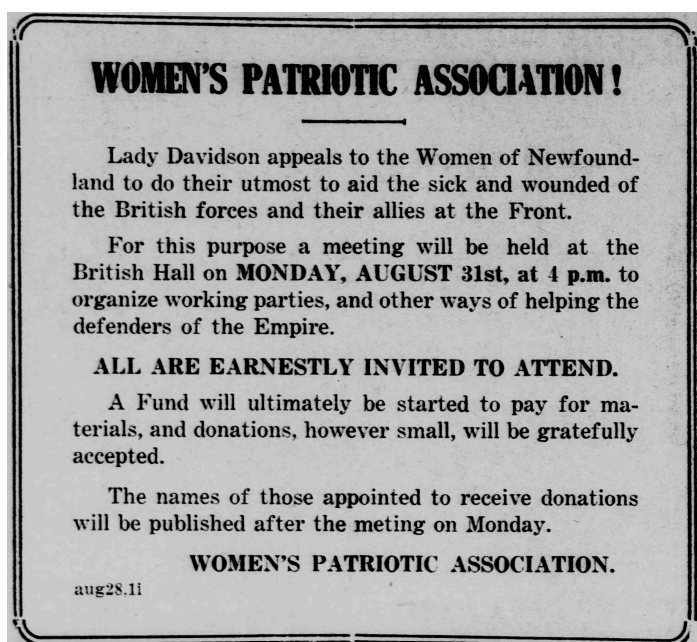
**Fig 8. One example of the vitriol directed at Armine Nutting Gosling in local papers. (The Evening Telegram, 1913-04-17)**

In December of 1913, Reading Room member Myra Jane Fisher Campbell added fuel to the fire with a lecture entitled “Woman’s Wrongs.” It highlighted the inequalities between husbands and wives, the reality of husbands abusing wives in affluent households, infidelity within marriage, and the false notion that marriage was an aspiration for all women, among other typically unspoken topics. The lecture was classed as so radical, even by the Reading Room membership, that unlike other lectures given by Gosling and other contemporaries, Myra’s speech went unpublished for seven years (Duley, 2025).

While the Ladies Reading Room never became a full-fledged, strictly pro-suffrage organization, its openness to discussing the issue in a safe space allowed some members to hone their public speaking skills and confidently express their support for suffrage. Flames had been fanned and they would not easily be smothered.

## The Women's Patriotic Association

Women's participation in World War I, both at home and abroad, showed the strength of women's movements in mobilizing around a cause. It also highlighted the value of their contributions. Newfoundland and Labrador women had long been the organizers of community projects and the driving force behind many fundraising efforts, but did not always receive fair acknowledgement. They also contributed immensely to household production and income, but again received little to no recognition of their role as material providers.



*Fig 9. Early Women's Patriotic Association appeal. (The Evening Telegram, 1914-08-28)*

On the homefront, many women in Newfoundland and Labrador became involved in the island-wide Patriotic Association of the Women of Newfoundland, later referred to as the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA). Members went on to fundraise, offer support to the families of men fighting in the war, manufacture medical supplies, and provide care packages to soldiers - including much sought after handknit socks. 700 women attended the WPA's first meeting in St. John's. Organized by upper class women, most often the

wives of men in positions of power, the organization's reach was expansive. Within a few months 168 branches comprising 15,000 members had been established. Outside of St. John's, many of the organizers were women from fishing families and single working women. By the end of the war, 250 WPA branches had been established and many communities without formal branches also contributed to the cause. Armine Nutting Gosling acted as the WPA's secretary from 1916 onward (Duley, 2025).

Through its Vigornia Red Cross wing, the WPA also actively recruited local nurses to serve overseas. Records gathered by historian Margot I. Duley provide a total of 115 nursing graduates and Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurses from Newfoundland and Labrador who served during World War I, including 34 nursing graduates who went overseas. The WPA was also the driving force behind the establishment of the Waterford Convalescent Hospital for returning injured soldiers. They also aided in the establishment and operation of recreational facilities for returning soldiers. They raised money for special causes, such as ambulances for the frontlines.



*Fig 10. Women's Patriotic Association members at work in the Ball Room of Government House, 1915. (The Rooms Archives Great War photograph collection)*

Nurse Mary Southcott, a veteran of the Boer War, supervised the WPA's overseas medical

assistance efforts. Many members contributed to fundraising efforts, realizing a total of \$282,988 dollars raised over the course of the war - around six million present-day Canadian dollars. While the WPA was at times the target of criticism from the same male-centric sources that had criticized earlier women's efforts, on the whole the WPA was well-respected and highly praised for its contributions to the war effort (Duley, 2025).

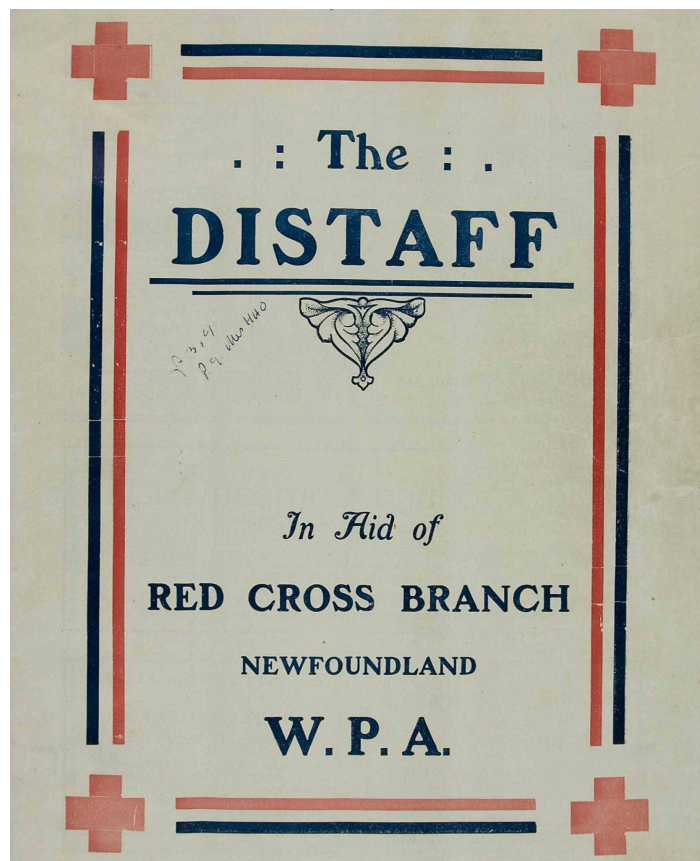


Fig 11. Cover of the 1916 edition of *The Distaff*.

Newfoundland and Labrador women had shown what they were capable of. They fulfilled critical economic, social, and cultural roles throughout the war. And within the pages of the WPA sponsored journal *The Distaff*, published during the war by *The Royal Gazette* in St. John's, their capabilities were spelled out for all to see. Armine Nutting Gosling's contribution to the 1916 edition clearly showed her unrelenting passion for women's suffrage.

"From all quarters we hear expressions of enthusiastic appreciation for the devoted women whose endurance and steadfast courage are helping England through this crisis as surely as are the men in the trenches. And the question naturally presents itself, "What has the future to offer these women? What will be the attitude of men after the war towards the women who have tried to do their work during their absence?" Women have been appealed to in a time of great stress to help the industries of the country to keep going, and they have responded with a whole-hearted energy which has evoked the warmest admiration from all quarters. They have helped to win the war, and may justly demand more than the minor joy and satisfaction which comes from a hard task honestly performed."

(Gosling, 1916)

During the war years, women in Newfoundland and Labrador established robust and interconnected networks, both across the Dominion of Newfoundland and around the world. After the war, they were able to leverage these connections to continue their advocacy and community development work for the betterment of women. In the aftermath of World War I, Newfoundland suffragists would make a link between the critical economic, social, and cultural roles of women during the war effort to the appropriateness of extending voting rights to women.

### Newfoundland Women's Franchise League

In 1920, WCTU member Anna Barnes Mitchell hosted a meeting at her home, the express purpose of which was to reinvigorate the suffrage movement. What resulted was the formation of

the Newfoundland Women's Franchise League. Executive members included president Armine Nutting Gosling, treasurer May Kennedy Goodridge, and secretary Fannie Knowling McNeil. Many of the core organizers were older, married women who had long histories of advocating for women. Many could also be considered members of the St. John's elite or at least more well off than many of the women who they hoped to gain the support of. One positive group dynamic was that all major religions were represented among the membership, unlike some earlier movements advocating for women's enfranchisement (Duley, 2025).



Fig 12. A group of young women suffragists in St. John's. (Holloway Studios)



Fig 13. Update on suffrage petition. (The Evening Telegram, 1920-05-19)

The Women's Franchise League began their public lobbying in May of 1920, which included article and letter submissions to newspapers, knocking on doors, petition drives, establishing contacts in outports, and buying advertising space. While support for women's suffrage seemed to be more accepted, as with the WCTU and WPA previously the Franchise League was still subjected to misogynistic tropes in print media. They also had to contend with the political maneuverings of Prime Minister Richard Squires.

The first petition campaign in 1920 received 1,700 signatures. Two war veteran MHAs, Fredrick P. LeGrow representing Bay de Verde district and Harry Small representing Burgeo and LaPoile district, brought a suffrage bill forward in May of 1920. It was defeated 13 to 9. A year later, the petition had grown to 7,485 names. By the fall of 1921, 11,000 signatures had been collected. When the 1922 session of the House of Assembly concluded, the suffrage bill was left in limbo. Meanwhile, local members of the Franchise League started to attend international suffrage meetings.

In May of 1923 the petition had swelled to 18,000 names. Squires resigned from the House of Assembly in June of 1923 and an election was called for June of 1924. Walter S. Monroe was elected Prime Minister of Newfoundland on June 9, 1924. Meanwhile, the Franchise League continued to build support, gathering 20,000 signatures by 1925 (Duley, 2025).

### Women's Suffrage Bill

Amid all the political turmoil of the time, the Franchise League kept campaigning, lobbying, and gathering supporters - including the Great War Veterans Association. On March 9, 1925, the Women's Suffrage Bill, introduced by Prime Minister Monroe, passed unanimously. The bill became law on April 3, 1925. The Franchise

League held a victory ball on April 21, 1925 and took a new name - the League of Women Voters, "a non-partisan organization that promoted compulsory education, child welfare, maternal health care, and other social issues" (Higgins). 52,343 women on the island of Newfoundland cast ballots in a general election for the first time on October 29, 1928 (Higgins).

for women's political and voting rights. During the 100th anniversary year of women's suffrage in Newfoundland and Labrador, new generations of women voted and ran in municipal, provincial, and federal elections, continuing a strong legacy of female leadership and agency in this province. The 100 years between have been marked by significant social, political, and technological change, but the strategies and community building that the women of the suffrage movement engaged in remain relevant today. Through its commitment to imagining a better future for all, the women's suffrage movement brought about remarkable change and left a profound legacy.

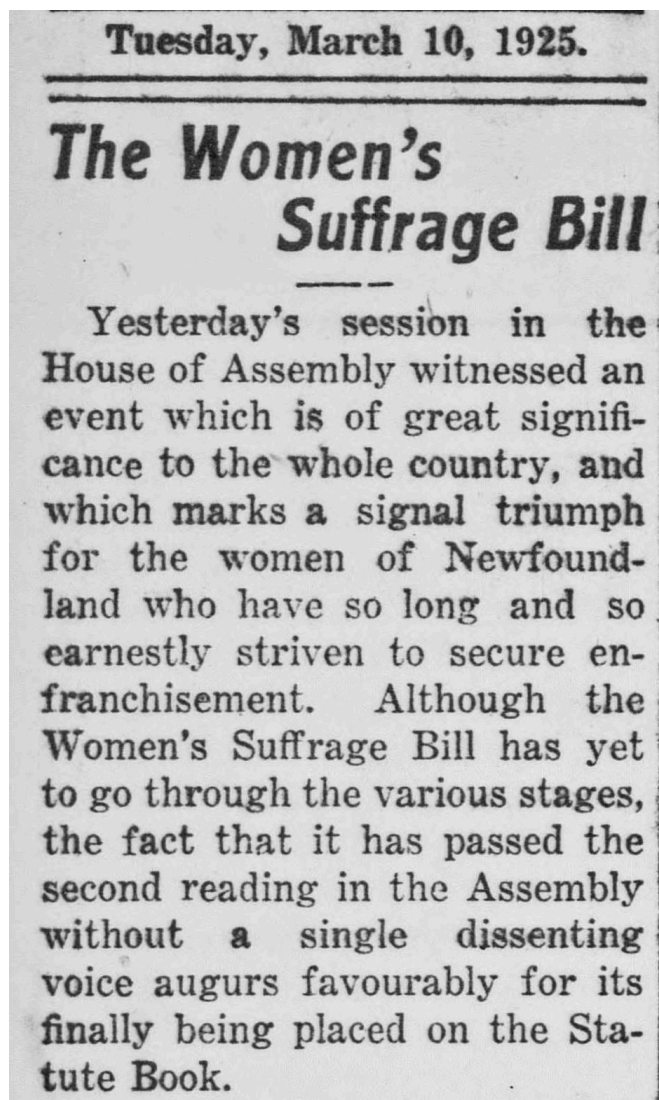


Fig 13. Announcement of the passing of the Women's Suffrage Bill. (The Evening Telegram, 1925-03-10)

## **Conclusion**

The suffrage movement in Newfoundland and Labrador is as much the story of well-known, outspoken women as it is of unknown, unheard, and unrecorded women. All advocated and fought

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