

We Demand: Women's Suffrage in Virginia highlights the achievements of the women who led the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia and the Virginia branch of the more radical National Woman's Party. Largely forgotten today, Virginia suffragists were talented and dedicated women who marched in parades, rallied at the state capitol, spoke to crowds on street corners and at county courthouses, staffed booths at state and county fairs, lobbied legislators and congressmen, picketed the White House, and even went to jail. Their own words, primarily from documents, newspapers, and other materials preserved at the Library of Virginia, reveal their devotion to the cause. At the centenary of woman suffrage, these remarkable Virginians are at last recognized for their important contributions to the fight for women's right to vote.



WE DEMAND

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN VIRGINIA

JANUARY 13–DECEMBER 5, 2020

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VIRGINIA SUFFRAGISTS AT THE FOREFRONT

Pauline Forstall Colclough Adams



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Pauline Forstall Colclough Adams (1874–1957) was the founding president of the Equal Suffrage League of Norfolk in November 1910 and became a vice president of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia in 1911. Disillusioned with the attempt to win a suffrage amendment to the state constitution, she joined the group that became the Virginia branch of the National Woman's Party, which advocated an amendment to the United States Constitution, becoming a founding vice president in 1915. Adams picketed the White House several times in 1917. She was arrested in August and sentenced to sixty days in jail. In February 1919 Adams and about two dozen other former suffrage prisoners left Washington on a two-week cross-country train trip to tell their stories of protest and mistreatment. After ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment 1920, Adams passed the bar exam, became the second woman lawyer in Norfolk, and advocated an equal rights amendment to the Constitution.

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Fannie Stratton Bayly King



Courtesy of Staunton Public Library

Fannie Stratton Bayly King (1864–1951) was a leader of community improvement projects in Staunton and in 1912 became president of the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs. She was elected president of the Equal Suffrage League of Staunton in 1913 and invited prominent suffrage speakers to the city. King later recalled that after she spoke to the Working Men's Fraternal Association, her "male relatives and friends crossed the street or dodged into stores to keep from speaking to such a bold bad woman!" After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, she participated in the founding of the League of Women Voters and served on the Children's Code Commission, which recommended numerous legislative reforms that the General Assembly passed. A strong supporter of public libraries, King donated her house, Kalorama, to the city for use as the public library.

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Elizabeth Dabney Langhorne Lewis



Courtesy of Lynchburg Museums

Elizabeth Dabney Langhorne Lewis (1851–1946) founded the Equal Suffrage League of Lynchburg in 1910 and was a vice president of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia from 1911 to 1920. Believing that a “woman’s qualification for citizenship is as valid as the man’s,” Lewis spoke and organized local leagues in southern and western Virginia and twice addressed committees of the General Assembly in favor of a suffrage amendment to the state constitution. Lewis supported her daughter Elizabeth Otey, who picketed the White House in 1917 in support of a suffrage amendment to the Constitution of the United States. After ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, Lewis helped found the Virginia League of Women Voters and was elected president in 1926. In 1931 her name was added to the honor roll of the national league in recognition of her work on behalf of woman suffrage and the League of Women Voters.

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Sophie Gooding Rose Meredith



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Growing up in Massachusetts, Sophie Gooding Rose Meredith (1851–1928) was educated in Quaker values of peace and racial and gender equality. She married a Richmond lawyer and advocated improvements to the city's public schools as her children grew up. Meredith was a founding vice president of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia in 1909 to support a woman suaffrage amendment to the state constitution. In 1915 she organized the Virginia branch of what became the National Woman's Party to advocate a suffrage amendment to the United States Constitution. Despite being in her sixties, Meredith joined the National Woman's Party pickets at the White House and was arrested in 1918 for demonstrating in Lafayette Park. She paid the fine after her family insisted that she not go to jail. Meredith chaired the Virginia branch of the National Woman's Party until her death, and during the 1920s advocated an equal rights amendment to the Constitution.

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Josephine Mathews Norcom



Josephine Mathews Norcom (1873–1927) graduated from Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (later Virginia State University) in 1889 and taught school in Salem, Lynchburg, Pulaski County, and Portsmouth. A founder of the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Norcom supported many of the causes of the Progressive movement, including public education, public health, and improved living and working conditions for African American women and men. She was a member of the resolutions committee at the 1916 convention of National Association of Colored Women when it endorsed the proposed amendment to the United States Constitution to guarantee women the right to vote, and she spoke on suffrage at women's club meetings. After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, she joined a local Woman's Republican League and likely helped women register to vote in Newport News, where she then lived. Norcom later worked as executive secretary for segregated branches of the Young Women's Christian Association in Cincinnati and Detroit.

VIRGINIA SUFFRAGISTS AT THE FOREFRONT

Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon



Courtesy of Bryn Mawr College, Special Collections

Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon (1890–1979) grew up in a Quaker community in Clarke County and in 1917 went to work as a field organizer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Late in 1918 the association sent her to Virginia to gather tens of thousands of signatures in support of a woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution of the United States. An energetic and capable canvasser, Pidgeon traveled and enrolled supporters until 1920. Early that year she became director of a project headquartered at the University of Virginia to create citizenship schools and directed them until 1926. She earned a master's degree in political science in 1924 and in 1928 joined the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor. Pidgeon directed its influential research division and wrote or co-wrote about 30 of almost 200 reports on women in various workplace settings the bureau issued before she retired in 1956.

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Ora Brown Stokes



Courtesy of A. B. Caldwell, *History of the American Negro: Virginia Edition* (1921)

Ora Brown Stokes (1882–1957) became a teacher after graduating from a segregated school in Fredericksburg and got involved in church and community work in Richmond in order “to hear and answer the cry of the needy and depressed.” She founded the Richmond Neighborhood Association in 1912 and the National Protective League for Negro Girls in 1916. She studied at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy and in 1918 became the first African American woman probation officer in Richmond. Stokes understood the importance of voting rights. After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, she and Richmond banker Maggie L. Walker led a massive voter registration drive that enabled almost 2,500 African American women to register. One of the few African American women to attend conventions of the National League of Women Voters during the 1920s, Stokes became the only African American field organizer for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.

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Lila Hardaway Meade Valentine



Courtesy of Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries

A founder of the Richmond Education Association and the Instructive Visiting Nurse Association, Lila Hardaway Meade Valentine (1865–1921) believed that women could make further progress on social and educational reforms with the right to vote. When about twenty socially prominent Richmond women organized the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia in 1909, they elected Valentine president. An accomplished and persuasive speaker, she traveled throughout the state to advocate woman suffrage and organize local leagues. By 1919 the Equal Suffrage League had more than 20,000 members. Valentine lobbied legislators and spoke before committees of the General Assembly in unsuccessful attempts to convince members to approve a suffrage amendment to the state constitution. Valentine registered to vote after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in August 1920, but was too ill to leave her house to vote in November. A marble bas-relief of Valentine in the Virginia Capitol honors her work.

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Maggie Lena Mitchell Walker



Library of Virginia

A graduate of Richmond Colored Normal School, Maggie Lena Mitchell Walker (1864–1934) taught school and became an officer of the Independent Order of Saint Luke, an African American social service organization. Early in the twentieth century she and the order founded a newspaper, a department store, and a bank. In 1903 Walker became the first African American woman bank president in the country as head of the Saint Luke Penny Savings Bank. She was active in numerous local, state, and national organizations to benefit women and African Americans. Walker also helped organize a 1904 protest against the local streetcar company's policy of segregated seating and advocated voting rights for women. When the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing woman suffrage was ratified, she and Ora Brown Stokes organized a very successful voter registration drive in Richmond. In 1921 Walker sought election as state superintendent of public instruction on the "Lily Black" Republican ticket.

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