



*May 7, 2022 dedication of the William G. Pomeroy Foundation marker noting the historic assembly of Vassar College women in their campaign for women's suffrage in 1908 at Calvary Cemetery. Comments by Bill Jeffway, Executive Director of the Dutchess County Historical Society.*

Thank you, Miriam. President Bradley, families and supporters of the women who we celebrate today, and everyone gathered here to remember.

The actions, the sentiments, and the motivations of the 50 women who rallied here on a fair and warm Monday afternoon, June 8, 1908, deserve our recognition, and our thanks for the profound changes they architected that we enjoy today as a result. Under the leadership of junior year class president Inez Milholland, in the face of a formal ban on so-called political activity on campus by President Taylor, 40 undergraduates, 10 graduates, and a handful of invited suffrage leaders from New York City famously assembled here.

*1908 is a milestone* in the long battle for suffrage because it marked the transition of generations, those who were involved in the campaign from the 1848 Seneca Falls convention had passed. Lucretia Mott died in 1880. Elizabeth Cady Stanton died in 1902. Susan B. Anthony died in 1906. A new generation was stepping up in what would thankfully be “the last mile.”

*This place is a milestone*, because the 1865 opening of Vassar College took aim at one of the specific Seneca Falls grievances which said and I quote, “[Man] has denied [woman] the facilities for obtaining a thorough education - all colleges being closed against her.”

*Their action is a milestone* because its creative and sophisticated way of capturing public and press attention became the hallmark of the moment, such as when in 1913 Inez Milholland rode the white horse in the Washington DC suffrage parade that has become such an enduring symbol of the movement.

But it is not all about the past. The voices of the women who rallied here still speak to us in powerful ways, if we listen, to inform us, and to encourage us to succeed in the unfinished business of addressing injustice and inequality.

It is my job, in effect, to get out of the way, and help us hear their voices and understand the sentiments and motivations that drove the actions they took, which I offer here with great humility.

We recall that the women assembled here were calling for suffrage, but that suffrage was only a means, an essential means, but a means to a greater ambition.

They assembled under a big yellow banner with the words, "Come, let us reason together." Being reasonable did not in any way make these women weak. They felt being reasonable was their strength, as the flames of emotion created great heat, they called on cooler reason to prevail.

Many of the arguments made in the period around the 1865 opening of Vassar College, about the danger of educating women, were recurring in 1908.

The tone, and strategy, of coolness of reason, with a backbone of steel, and persistence in the face of sometimes violent opposition, was set in the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, when the women ended the conference by signing a *Declaration of Sentiments* that was an amplification of the *Declaration of Independence*.

They wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men **and women** are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The declaration ended with the words, "[so as] this day [we] affix our signatures. [We] firmly rely upon the final triumph of the right and the true."

After a failed 1915 referendum, a 1917 referendum was successful in granting women the right to vote in New York State, almost three years before the national right was granted through federal constitutional amendment.

### **Let's look at some of the cracks in the dam of resistance that evolved.**

Relatively quickly after the 1865 opening of the college, and ironic given the ban on such assembly in 1908, another crack in the dam of resistance occurred in 1868 while Matthew Vassar was still alive. Matthew Vassar, who had a great deal of appropriate respect for the astronomer Maria Mitchell, whose extraordinary vision remains beautifully preserved in her observatory today, would have found it hard to tell Miss Mitchell what she might, or might not do. At Mitchell's invitation, in April of 1868, fellow Quaker, Anna E. Dickinson of Philadelphia spoke to an assembly of Mitchell's students at the observatory. Dickinson was a renowned speaker on abolition and suffrage. Four years earlier, she became the first woman to address Congress at the Capitol. President Lincoln was in the audience. Here she gave her popular speech, using what was accepted language of the day, "Idiots and Women" – she examined two qualities that disbarred a person from voting in New York State.

The importance of the Quakers in advancing the cause of suffrage, and the greater cause of the equal participation of women in all aspects of life, can not be overstated. By the mid 19th century Dutchess County had become home to the largest Quaker population outside of Philadelphia.

The Quaker meeting in nearby Pawling in 1766 was the first meeting to ban ownership of an enslaved person. Quakers believed in the equal education and participation of women, reflected in their highly respected co educational boarding school in nearby Millbrook, where Lucretia Mott was first a student and then a teacher. It is not surprising that four out of five organizers of the Seneca Falls convention were Quakers.

Cracks in the dam of resistance continued when in 1880, women were granted the right to vote in school elections in New York State. Cracks in the dam of resistance continued when in 1890, the new state of Wyoming allowed women to vote, followed by Colorado, Utah and Idaho by the time of the 1908 rally.

As the cracks in the dam of resistance expanded, so did the scale of the challenges and needs of the time. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was three years in the future in 1908. But work safety and fairness were a dominant theme expressed at the rally here. Rose Schneiderman, the nationally renowned trade union activist, was not alone in speaking to the issues of safety and economic fairness for working women.

The 1908 rally was a turning point. Although it was not until the end of President Taylor's term and beginning of that of Henry Noble MacCracken in 1915 that there would be some formal loosening of the reigns, change began in 1910.

Some women focused on national level change through constitutional amendment. Some women worked on a statewide basis. And some women worked very literally on a very local basis, and I will wrap up by focusing on the transition from the 1908 rally to the very local activities which are perhaps lesser known.

The 1908 rally was a turning point because by 1910, Vassar English Professor Laura Wylie emerged as the very public leader of the Equal Suffrage League. She was public about it, and the meetings held at the house that she shared with her partner, also a Vassar College professor, Gertrude Buck, was the center of political activity. It helped that they lived off campus, in a house that still stands at the memorial fountain, as they became a hub, a connector of a full engagement of the full local community, diverse in race, economics, and education.

In 1914, the Dutchess County Equal Suffrage league held a rally at the African Methodist Episcopal (or AME) Zion Church, where a young woman named Sadie Delaney read a poem she had written, "A Suffrage Call." While women of color would face obstacles, as men of color did, and do, we can see early in Sadie Delaney's life an interest in the power of words. She went on to international recognition by establishing the field of bibliotherapy, when as head librarian at Tuskegee Veterans Administration Hospital she prescribed reading for Black World War One combat veterans who had physical and mental injury.

The April 1917 formal declaration of war by the US against Germany proved to offer the most convincing, final argument. Women protesting outside of the White House reflected a profound determination. But women driving farm tractors, and I assure you that farm tractors in 1917 were not what they are today, women driving farm tractors,

driving ambulances, and dying in battle in France as a local mother and daughter did while serving in the Red Cross, was persuasive among enough men that the state referendum passed in November of 1917.

Laura Wylie immediately switched hats from heading up the Equal Suffrage League to heading up the Women's City & County Club, which prioritized quality of life, health, and fairness issues that ranged from planning city parks, to milk safety. All the energy that has been devoted to winning the right to vote, was diverted to making those votes effective.

In summary. It is fitting that this marker from the William G. Pomeroy foundation is one of 200 such markers in a National Votes for Women Trail which expands our vision into other geographies and generations. There extends a next tier of historic signs that are only digital in form, but which again help us understand the scale of campaign.

The actions, sentiments and motivations of the women rallied here in 1908 deserve our respect and recognition. In return we take valuable lessons, both in practical form and the intangible quality that is motivation, to continue to pursue "what is right and true" as the women of Seneca Falls stated in 1848.

We do not have to reflect long on the state of our national discourse, to conclude that coolness of reason, a backbone of steel, and persistence in the face of sometimes violent opposition, is no better strategy and rallying cry, and no better way to respect the contributions of the women assembled here, at this spot on June 8, 1908, So we may do well to continue to raise their banner and continue their call, "Come, let us reason together."