

This article is protected by copyright, East Tennessee Historical Society. It is available online for study, scholarship, and research use only.

Suggested Citation:

Risk, Shannon M. "The Suffragists Come to Town: Elizabeth Upham Yates and the 1914 National American Women Suffrage Association Convention in Nashville." *The Journal of East Tennessee History* 86 (2014): 88-95.

The Suffragists Come to Town:

Elizabeth Upham Yates and the 1914 National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention in Nashville

By Shannon M. Risk*



In August 1920, the proposed Nineteenth Amendment focused the nation's attention on the final battle to guarantee women the right to vote in all levels of elections. After over seventy years of efforts to give women the right to the franchise, Congress approved the amendment and sent it to state legislatures for final ratification. Members of state legislatures wore roses pinned to their lapels—yellow for suffrage, and red against suffrage. After a flurry of state approvals, the state of Tennessee found itself at the center of the storm as the possible 36th and final state needed to ratify the amendment. Ratification ultimately depended on the vote of Tennessee legislator Harry T. Burn, a young man from McMinn County who had previously gone on record against women's suffrage. As the final vote was taken, Burn took out a note from his mother, urging him to approve of women's right to vote. Her note read: "Dear Son: Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt. I noticed some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification. Your Mother."¹ He took his mother's advice, and Tennessee ratified the

* The author received her Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maine in 2009. She is an assistant professor of history at Niagara University, held a Canadian-U.S. Fulbright Fellowship in 2008-2009, focused on research of the early suffrage movement in the United States and Canada, and is working on a book length manuscript about Yates. The author would like to thank Dr. David Turpie for his support of this project.

¹ Phoebe F.E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 1920, Harry T. Burn Papers, McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library, Knoxville.



amendment. On A
to the U.S. Constit

An East Tenn
suffrage, but it wa
Six years earlier, M
women's suffrage
in 1890, The Nat
Suffrage Associat
leading suffrage or
and the group hel
to promote its ag
suffragists from
NAWSA leaders h
in Washington, I
put pressure on
the president, bu
targeted southern
attract southern w
the success of the A
they held meeting
Louisville in 1911,

The year 19
year for women
year, Congress de
Amendment. This
referendums on v
percentage of the r
to sign a petition
created by Democ
Shafroth of Color
gained suffrage in
from Pennsylvania
(which became th
Fifteenth Amend

² For a contextual hi
*New Women of the N
States* (New York, I
Woman Suffrage Mo

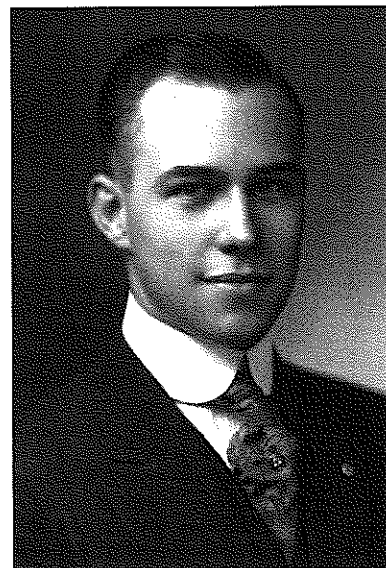
³ For more informat
conferences in the
*Woman Suffrage (In
History of Woman S
of the National Ame
Scrapbooks, 1897-
American Memory*

⁴ Harper, *History of W
Keene, Alice Paul a*

amendment. On August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution.²

An East Tennessean played a decisive role in the struggle for women's suffrage, but it was in Nashville where many of the battles were fought. Six years earlier, Nashville hosted a major women's suffrage convention. Founded in 1890, The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was the leading suffrage organization in the country, and the group held a convention each year to promote its agenda and bring together suffragists from around the country. NAWSA leaders had held their conventions in Washington, D.C. every other year to put pressure on their congressmen and the president, but beginning in 1895 they targeted southern cities. Their goal was to attract southern women to the cause. After the success of the Atlanta convention in 1895, they held meetings in New Orleans in 1903, Louisville in 1911, and Nashville in 1914.³

The year 1914 represented a pivotal year for women's suffrage efforts. That year, Congress debated the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment. This legislation stipulated state referendums on women's suffrage if a small percentage of the male population was willing to sign a petition in support.⁴ The bill was created by Democratic Representative John F. Shafroth of Colorado (a state where women gained suffrage in 1896), and Mitchell Palmer, a Democratic Representative from Pennsylvania. This bill and the Susan B. Anthony Amendment (which became the Nineteenth Amendment) both sought to change the Fifteenth Amendment to include enfranchisement of women. Some suffrage



In August 1920, Harry T. Burn, a congressman from McMinn County, cast the deciding positive vote in the Tennessee legislature which ultimately ratified the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote at the national level. McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library, Knoxville.

² For a contextual history of Harry Burn's vote for suffrage see, Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York, 1993), 34-36, 211; Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, ed., *Votes for Women! The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South, and the Nation* (Knoxville, 1995), 53-70.

³ For more information about these conventions as well as the strategy behind holding conferences in these places see, Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (Indianapolis, 1902), 4:202-220, 236-51, 581-88; Ida Husted Harper, ed., *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York, 1922), 5:55-85, 310-31; *The 35th Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, ca. 1903*, Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911, scrapbook 1, 1897-1904, 118, Library of Congress, also available at, American Memory Project, <http://memory.loc.gov>.

⁴ Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5:411-419, 422-423; Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Urbana, 2008), 48-49.



leaders worried this back-door method to suffrage would embitter the male population towards further political participation by women.

In 1914, suffragists at the state level experienced joy and frustration. Some state campaigns in Montana and Nevada bore fruit and women were granted the right to vote either by referendum or by state legislature. But in many other states, like Nebraska, North Dakota, Missouri and Ohio, male voters and legislators simply refused to budge. States in the West and Midwest saw the closest contests, and those states adopted women's suffrage earlier than in the East. Historians have described a number of reasons for this, but many suffragists believed that the pioneer conditions of the West brought deeper respect for women's contributions. Southern leaders were reluctant to involve women in politics at all, and it was here that the suffragists encountered the greatest challenge.⁵ Suffragists tried to gain different types of suffrage as well: school, municipal, state, and federal voting rights. Some argued women should have political equality with men because they believed that women were more moral than men and could clean up politics if given the vote.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, national suffrage leaders were overwhelmingly from the northern states, but by the 1890s, southern women took a strong role in state suffrage campaigns.⁶ NAWSA was the national conglomeration of many different kinds of suffrage groups. It relied on important grassroots efforts that ultimately determined whether suffrage initiatives failed or succeeded in each state. By the 1910s, suffrage leaders initiated efforts to secure southern support for a national women's suffrage amendment.⁷

A crucial factor in winning southern states to the cause of suffrage was overcoming a strong culture of states' rights. Many southern leaders distrusted national mandates, seeing them as a federal invasion all over again, like during Reconstruction when the North militarily and politically occupied the South.⁸ Suffrage leaders won southern women to the cause of suffrage by connecting voting rights to the "New South"—a culture that encouraged industrialism and a new era of prosperity. The culture also included a social structure based on Jim Crow segregation laws. While arguing for their voting rights, white suffragists in both North and South upheld racial segregation, disfranchisement of African American men at the polls, and a limited role for African Americans in a new and prosperous South.⁹ Overall, suffrage

⁵ Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5:398-438.

⁶ See, Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

⁷ For example, there were all-male, female college graduate, wealthy, Grange, Populist, Socialist, Progressive, Republican, Democrat, Prohibitionist, women's groups (including African American women's groups), and labor suffrage groups that operated independently of and collectively with NAWSA.

⁸ Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5:414, 430-432.

⁹ Wheeler, *New South*, xv-xvi, 136-137, 171, 186.



leaders agreed
white female suf
important tha
Crow segregatio
the voting rig
American men.

In 1914, s
the issue of gl
Americans vie
War with anx
reassured them
United States c
overseas conflic
if women had
would not th
same time, th
debate over w
should have th
did not put th
line through m

It was i
that a group
from around
met at Ryman
Nashville for
annual NAW
The 1914 con
Nashville feat
both norther
men and w
the female ba
crossroads of
in Nashville f
from all over t
leadership sta
at the Ryman
at the state cap

¹⁰ African Amer
networks of m
See, Rosalyn
(Bloomington)

¹¹ National Ame
Women Suffrag
Nashville, Tenn
Suffrage, 5:398
Many States c

frage would embitter the male
tion by women.
perienced joy and frustration.
da bore fruit and women were
m or by state legislature. But
Dakota, Missouri and Ohio,
o budge. States in the West
those states adopted women's
have described a number of
d that the pioneer conditions
en's contributions. Southern
politics at all, and it was here
challenge.⁵ Suffragists tried to
, municipal, state, and federal
ve political equality with men
e moral than men and could

th century, national suffrage
ern states, but by the 1890s,
suffrage campaigns.⁶ NAWSA
erent kinds of suffrage groups.
ltimately determined whether
a state. By the 1910s, suffrage
pport for a national women's

es to the cause of suffrage was
any southern leaders distrusted
i invasion all over again, like
arily and politically occupied
omen to the cause of suffrage
h"—a culture that encouraged
e culture also included a social
While arguing for their voting
uth upheld racial segregation,
t the polls, and a limited role
ous South.⁹ Overall, suffrage

and the Woman Suffrage Question

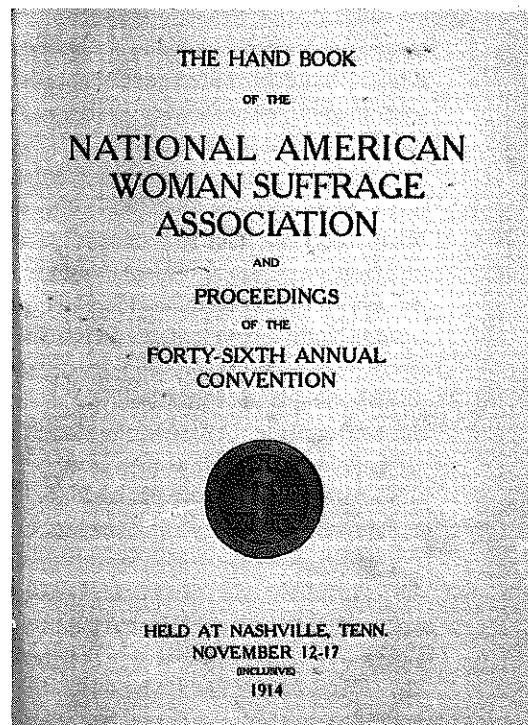
ate, wealthy, Grange, Populist,
ionist, women's groups
bor suffrage groups that operated

leaders agreed that gaining
white female suffrage was more
important than ending Jim
Crow segregation or protecting
the voting rights of African
American men.¹⁰

In 1914, suffragists faced
the issue of global war. Most
Americans viewed the Great
War with anxiety, but many
reassured themselves that the
United States could stay out of
overseas conflicts, and, indeed,
if women had the vote, wars
would not happen. At the
same time, the war reopened
debate over whether women
should have the ballot if they
did not put their lives on the
line through military service.

It was in this context
that a group of suffragists
from around the country
met at Ryman Auditorium in
Nashville for the forty-sixth
annual NAWSA convention.
The 1914 convention held in
Nashville featured a crowd of
both northern and southern
men and women seeking

the female ballot for various reasons. Nashville was a strategic city in the
crossroads of the suffrage battle. The NAWSA held their annual conference
in Nashville from November 12-17, 1914.¹¹ Hundreds of suffrage delegates
from all over the United States traveled to Nashville, with the organization's
leadership staying at the Hermitage Hotel. They held their larger meetings
at the Ryman Auditorium and had a special meeting at Representatives Hall
at the state capital. According to the *Woman's Journal*, "They found Nashville



In November 1914, suffrage leaders met in Nashville for the forty-sixth annual National American Woman Suffrage Association meeting. National American Women Suffrage Association, The Handbook of the National American Women Suffrage Association and Proceedings of the Forty-Sixth Annual Convention Held at Nashville, Tennessee, November 12-17, 1914 (New York, 1914).

¹⁰ African American women organized their own suffrage movements, drawing from their networks of mutual aid in a society increasingly hostile to any gains for African Americans. See, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, 1998); Wheeler, *Votes for Women!*, 71-104.

¹¹ National American Women Suffrage Association, *The Handbook of the National American Women Suffrage Association and Proceedings of the Forty-Sixth Annual Convention Held at Nashville, Tennessee, November 12-17, 1914* (New York, 1914); Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5:398-438; "Suffragists Throng City: Nashville Welcomes Hosts of Women from Many States of Union," *Nashville Banner*, November 11, 1914.

waiting with triangular 'votes for women' pennants and yellow decorations in shop windows and hotels and public buildings."¹² They were warmly welcomed by Nashville Mayor Hillary Howse and Tennessee Governor Ben Hooper sent his greetings.¹³

In order to attract well-to-do southern women to their cause, suffragists made every attempt to include the wealthy and celebrated citizens of Nashville. They held an exclusive party at Wilmore Mansion, the home of Mrs. Benjamin F. Wilson, regent of the Hermitage Association, on the evening of November 15. During the convention, various speakers referenced the "great Andrew Jackson" many times, used a gavel made from wood from a tree at Jackson's home, the Hermitage, and listed a number of Tennessee women involved in the suffrage campaigns. In her speech at the convention, NAWSA's president, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, expressed sympathy for southern women during the Civil War.¹⁴ Although a national amendment could pass without ratification by any southern state, NAWSA leaders were not taking any chances.

Throughout the convention, the female leadership of NAWSA presented their work of the past year in campaigns across the United States. One of those women, Rhode Island Women's Suffrage Association President, Elizabeth Upham Yates, reported as head of the Presidential Suffrage Committee.¹⁵ Yates was born in Bristol, Maine, in 1857, and educated at local schools and in Boston. In 1880, she shipped off as a missionary to China for the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, and stayed for six years. Upon her return, she published a memoir on her experiences, and then turned her attention to lecturing on behalf of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and NAWSA. She started as a lecturer for NAWSA in 1890 and became one of the organization's elders. She was also active in the Maine Woman Suffrage Association and the Maine WCTU. After her father's death in 1901, Yates moved to Rhode Island, a state on the forefront of the suffrage battle. In 1909, she became president of Rhode Island's NAWSA chapter.¹⁶

In Yates' presentation at the Nashville Convention, she encouraged the federal and state governments to pass "presidential suffrage." This measure, through national or state amendment or law, would guarantee women the right to vote for president, or rather, the right to vote for the electors who selected the president. In this way, she believed, women would demonstrate their voting abilities to sluggish male legislators and voting populations. Once they showed their political intelligence, Yates and others hoped other kinds of voting rights would follow. With voting sway in the Electoral College,

¹² *Woman's Journal* 45 (November 21, 1914): 305.

¹³ NAWSA, *Handbook*, 1914, 15-16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-22.

¹⁵ For more information about Elizabeth Upham Yates see, Shannon M. Risk, "Glimpses into the Life of a Maine Reformer: Elizabeth Upham Yates, Missionary and Woman Suffragist," *Maine History* 47 (July 2013): 191-215.

¹⁶ See, Elizabeth Upham Yates, *Glimpses into Chinese Homes* (Boston, 1887); Anthony and Husted, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4:689-694, 907-921.



women increased their
elections. Yates' present
14, 1914, is recounted b

The logic of events
the value of preside
and far-reaching o
potentiality in bring
College, and into
consideration that
fact that over three
honor are filled by
most direct means
for in any state th
women will support
The favorable dec
Illinois leaves no r
constitutionality. I
bare majority vote,
could not secure th
amendment for ful
experiences of suff
were premature, an
have involved have
the cause has been

In view of the
the significance of
full suffrage, the fo

That any state
first secure preside
favorable action fo
by one legislature,
attempting further

By such a pro
vote of women in

—Elizabeth U

¹⁷ NAWSA, *Handbook*, 1914,

¹⁸ NAWSA, *Handbook*, 1914

women increased their political influence over the outcome of national elections. Yates' presentation to the convention at Nashville on November 14, 1914, is recounted below:¹⁷

REPORT OF PRESIDENTIAL
SUFFRAGE COMMITTEE¹⁸

The logic of events during the past year gives emphatic emphasis to the value of presidential suffrage. It is of itself the most significant and far-reaching of any act of voting because of its political potentiality in bringing the voice of womanhood into the Electoral College, and into the arena of Federal legislation. Moreover the consideration that it calls forth from politicians on account of the fact that over three hundred thousand offices of emolument and honor are filled by the presidential administration renders it the most direct means towards the great end of full enfranchisement; for in any state the party most advantaged by its exercise by the women will support their efforts for the full rights of citizenship. The favorable decision the past year by the Supreme Court of Illinois leaves no room for any further contention regarding its constitutionality. It can be granted by any state legislature by a bare majority vote, and this can be obtained by many states that could not secure the large vote necessary to submit a constitutional amendment for full suffrage. Even where that can be obtained, the experiences of suffrage campaigns have proved too often that they were premature, and the great outlay of time and strength that they have involved have resulted in defeats whereby further progress of the cause has been impeded;

In view of the comparative ease by which it may be secured and the significance of its possession as a political factor in obtaining full suffrage, the following recommendations are submitted;

That any state contemplating a campaign for full suffrage shall first secure presidential suffrage. That those states that have secured favorable action for a constitutional amendment for full suffrage by one legislature, shall seek to obtain presidential suffrage before attempting further action for full suffrage;

By such a program it is quite probable we might double the vote of women in the presidential election of 1916.

—Elizabeth Upham Yates, Chairman.

¹⁷ NAWSA, *Handbook*, 1914, 17, 126; Wheeler, *Votes for Women!*, 3-24.

¹⁸ NAWSA, *Handbook*, 1914, 126.

In her address, Yates referred to the recent events in Illinois, where suffragists had actively campaigned for decades. The state governor would only issue a referendum to the male voters to decide their fate, but the suffragists did have powerful allies in the Illinois legislature. The general assembly approved of presidential suffrage to women in that state by a narrow margin of six votes. Opponents of the bill challenged it at the



On November 14, 1914 at the NAWSA Convention in Nashville, Elizabeth Upham Yates pushed for legislation to allow women the right to vote for president, or rather, the right to vote for the electors who selected the president. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., *A Woman of the Century* (Buffalo, 1893), 807.

Illinois Supreme Court. The Court ruled to uphold the new law and as a result, women could vote for president, but they could not vote for members of their state assembly or for representatives to the U.S. Congress. For many suffrage leaders this victory had the potential to demonstrate that women deserved full voting rights.¹⁹

The so-called "premature" suffrage campaigns Yates referred to had happened in a number of places. Suffragists who had successfully lobbied state politicians might not have spent enough time actually convincing the public to favor women's right to vote. If state legislatures approved the franchise for women, they then conducted a referendum to the male voters, who often defeated the measure. But, if women could vote for president, this action could further the ultimate goal of political equality with men.

Yates' address was part of a larger contention from the convention attendees that they should strengthen their Congressional Committee and apply more pressure to

Congress and the president. There had also been a brewing schism not acknowledged by the NAWSA convention leaders about the growing radicalism of Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and other suffragists. Paul wanted to employ pressure tactics, which the American press labeled "militant." Paul and her allies dominated the Washington, D.C. branch of NAWSA and its Congressional Committee, and in 1914 left the NAWSA to form their own group, the Congressional Union. Three of the younger suffragists from Illinois replaced Paul and her associates in NAWSA's Congressional Committee. Though the convention leadership of November 1914 never mentioned this controversy, they empowered the Congressional Committee

¹⁹ See, Mark W. Sorensen, "Ahead of Their Time: A Brief History of Woman Suffrage in Illinois," *Lifelines* (March 1997); Gertrude May Beldon, "A History of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Illinois," (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1913), 9-17.

to work closer with con
Yates grew more sympath
Congressional Union in
Chapman Catt took over
plan" to apply more pre
legislators and leaning
disagreements with Paul
tightened and unified th
the Susan B. Anthony
deemphasized the gradu
Shafroth-Palmer Amend

The Nashville c
out in typical fashion,
hope and spirit as su
new efforts at state lev
convention laid impo
for the rapid advancem
suffrage movement. W
years, the suffrage mov
leaders brought the iss
state legislatures. The fir
Nineteenth Amendmen
with the help from a yo
politician, served as a
in the long struggle for
Nashville Convention
highlighted the intricate
wove in their own con
and nationally to achiev
and were important c
larger effort that result
the Nineteenth Amend

²⁰ Harper, *History of Woman*



recent events in Illinois, where
decades. The state governor would
ers to decide their fate, but the
Illinois legislature. The general
age to women in that state by
of the bill challenged it at the
eme Court. The Court ruled to
new law and as a result, women
r president, but they could not
bers of their state assembly or for
es to the U.S. Congress. For many
ers this victory had the potential
ate that women deserved full

-called "premature" suffrage
ates referred to had happened
of places. Suffragists who had
obbied state politicians might not
ough time actually convincing the
or women's right to vote. If state
proved the franchise for women,
ducted a referendum to the male
ften defeated the measure. But,
ld vote for president, this action
r the ultimate goal of political
men.

address was part of a larger
om the convention attendees that
strengthen their Congressional
and apply more pressure to
also been a brewing schism not
on leaders about the growing
d other suffragists. Paul wanted
merican press labeled "militant."
ngton, D.C. branch of NAWSA
1914 left the NAWSA to form
Three of the younger suffragists
ates in NAWSA's Congressional
ership of November 1914 never
d the Congressional Committee

Brief History of Woman Suffrage in
on, "A History of the Woman Suffrage
of Chicago, 1913), 9-17.

to work closer with congressmen and the president. Elizabeth Upham
Yates grew more sympathetic to the NAWSA and refused to work with the
Congressional Union in Rhode Island. Shaw resigned in 1915 and Carrie
Chapman Catt took over as leader of the NAWSA. Catt created a "winning
plan" to apply more pressure—albeit, polite—on both state and national
legislators and leaning on President Woodrow Wilson. Despite their
disagreements with Paul's tactics, NAWSA
tightened and unified their policy towards
the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, and
deemphasized the gradual approach of the
Shafroth-Palmer Amendment.²⁰

The Nashville convention closed
out in typical fashion, with a renewal of
hope and spirit as suffragists launched
new efforts at state levels. The Nashville
convention laid important groundwork
for the rapid advancement of the female
suffrage movement. Within the next six
years, the suffrage movement unified and
leaders brought the issue to Congress and
state legislatures. The final ratification of the
Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920,
with the help from a young East Tennessee
politician, served as a landmark moment
in the long struggle for suffrage. The 1914
Nashville Convention and Yates' address
highlighted the intricate network that women
wove in their own communities, stateside,
and nationally to achieve their political goals,
and were important contributions to the
larger effort that resulted in the passage of
the Nineteenth Amendment.



Beginning in 1915, Carrie Chapman
Catt led the NAWSA and other suffrage
groups to apply more pressure to state
and national legislators to pass a universal
suffrage amendment. Her "winning plan"
resulted in the ratification of the Nineteenth
Amendment in 1920. Frances E. Willard
and Mary A. Livermore, eds., *A Woman
of the Century* (Buffalo, 1893), 162.

²⁰ Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5:411-412; Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul*, 98-103.