



# The FERRYMAN

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DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
153 Main Street, Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522

JUNE 1993

## DOBBS FERRY WOMEN ORGANIZE HUDSON RIVER EQUAL FRANCHISE SOCIETY IN 1909 FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE

*The Ferryman* has uncovered an interesting circle of events occurring over the past 84 years and involving women's rights, a suffrage society, the Dobbs Ferry Register, a telegram, the Silurian Society, the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, Clara Mead, the Mead House, an eggnog party and Clara's mother, Clara Camp Mead.

The circle begins this way:

The *Dobbs Ferry Register*, in its November 12, 1909 issue, reported the founding of a local women's suffrage organization. The "Women's Revolution" -- in the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony -- was formally established in the river towns with the formation of the Hudson River Equal Franchise Society.

The founding meeting was organized by Mrs. Henry Villard and was held in the home of Mrs. Walston H. Brown, of Dobbs Ferry. Mrs. Villard, an activist in the women's movement in New York City, was elected president of the local group; Mrs. Brown, first vice-president.

According to the *Register*, "Miss Crossett, the daughter of Mrs. E. H. Crossett, President of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Association, presided."

### Send 150 Words

The meeting was also covered by a correspondent for *The New York Tribune*. The correspondent, Irving L. Smith, had received a telegram saying, "Send 150 words on new suffrage society being organized today by Mrs. Henry Villard at Dobbs Ferry. The Tribune."

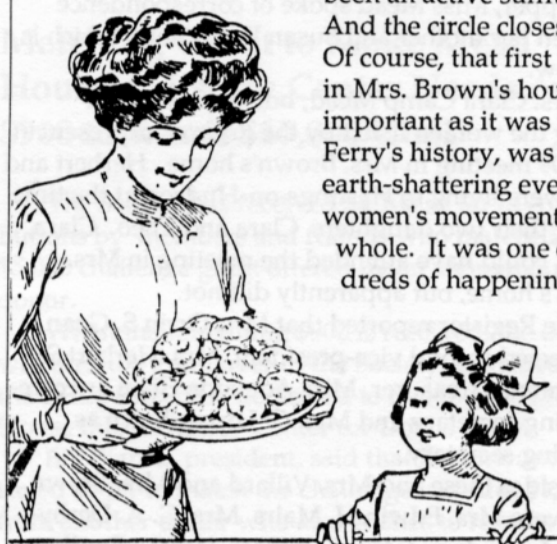
The telegram somehow came into the possession of the Silurian Society, perhaps as a gift from Mr. Smith or a descendant. The Silurians were a group of newspapermen, originally with more than 25 years

of service with New York City newspapers. Today, the Society includes women and practitioners in media other than newspapers among its members, with many fewer years of service in the news profession required for membership in the group.

Several years ago, Albert Wall, a journalist, Dobbs Ferry resident and member of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, bought the telegram at a joint Silurian-Deadline Club - Overseas Press Club fundraising auction. Last December, Mr. Wall brought the telegram to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society's first Clara Mead eggnog party in the Mead House, a 14-room, 19th century residence at 12 Elm Street left to the Society by the late Miss Mead as a bequest.

Upon hearing the telegram, some Society members marveled at the coincidence that Miss Mead's mother, Mrs. Herbert Mead, nee Clara Camp, had been an active suffragist. And the circle closes.

Of course, that first meeting in Mrs. Brown's house, important as it was in Dobbs Ferry's history, was not an earth-shattering event in the women's movement as a whole. It was one of hundreds of happenings that



furthered a genuine grass roots movement both before and after 1909.

And so, it had a definite place in the national movement, as well as being of considerable significance in local history.

But even before the Articles of Confederation and, later, the United States Constitution were written in the 18th century, a few American women were agitating for equal political rights and, especially, the right to vote.

But the protests of women even like Abigail Adams, of Massachusetts (wife of John Adams) and Mrs. Henry Corbin, of Virginia, were to prove in vain -- in their lifetimes. Nonetheless, their efforts bore fruit eventually and, through the inevitability of historic change, women were not to be denied.

Some of the major milestones along the way were the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, the introduction into Congress of a women's suffrage amendment to the Constitution in 1869, winning the right to vote in state elections in Wyoming in 1869 (as a territory), electrifying the nation, and again in 1889 (when Wyoming became a state), in nine other western states between 1893 and 1914, in New York in 1917, passage by Congress of a women's voting rights amendment to the Constitution in 1918 and ratification of the amendment in 1920.

Locally, meanwhile, Clara Mead's mother was an active organizer in Westchester for the women's rights movement, as was her "Aunty Alice," especially in Waccabuc where the Mead family held other property. Mae Pepper, an Historical Society Trustee and friend and neighbor of Miss Mead, recalls how proud Clara was of her mother's involvement in the movement to win the vote for women. According to Ms. Pepper, Miss Mead spoke of correspondence between her mother and Susan B. Anthony which is lost now.

Mrs. Clara Camp Mead, however, was not among the women listed by the *Register* as present at the 1909 meeting in Mrs. Brown's home. Herbert and Clara were living in Hastings-on-Hudson at the time raising their two daughters, Clara and Theo. Clara, Senior, could have attended the meeting in Mrs. Brown's home, but apparently did not.

The *Register* reported that Mrs. Orrin S. Goan was elected second vice-president, Mrs. Herbert S. Carpenter as treasurer, Miss Adelaide Goan as corresponding secretary and Mrs. C. Loring Brace as recording secretary.

Besides these and Mrs. Villard and Mrs. Brown, there were Mrs. Edwin H. Mairs, Mrs. G. A. Derbyshire, Mrs. Sidney J. Jennings, Mrs. Jerome Bradley, Mrs. J. W. Middlebrook, Mrs. M. S. Beltzhoover, Mrs. Trube and Mrs. R. J. H. Powel.

The *Register* commented:

It is earnestly hoped that regardless of sex, all who are interested in the question of equal franchise will join this society (sic) which is to be called the Hudson River Equal Franchise Society. As one woman has so well said: " \* \* \* just as truly as men they (women) can defend their country from its only real enemies -- illiteracy, crime, disease, poverty, intemperance, unthrift and that blindness to real issues and genuine dangers which mark the beginning of national decay."

Unfortunately, the woman quoted above was not identified by the writer.

In the same 1909 issue, the *Register* thought the event at Mrs. Brown's home significant enough to lift two other items on women's suffrage from *The New York Herald* -- one an article, the other a letter.

The article reported on the first annual meeting of the Equal Franchise Society at the Colony Club. It quoted Mrs. Clarence Mackay, Chair of the meeting:

Our Board has repeatedly invited the members of the anti-suffrage societies to meet us in debate, but we have never been able to get them to accept our invitations. It seems a great pity, because, if these ladies and gentlemen were willing to state their reasons for opposing us, we should be very glad to have an opportunity of answering any of their logical objections.

The ballot will mean so much more to self-supporting women than to others that it is absolutely necessary that we should have their complete support. The wage earner needs the ballot so that *she* may express through legislation what *she* feels *her* working day and *her* wage should be. Women earn their own living under men-made laws, and it is a physical impossibility for men to appreciate the conditions under which it is necessary that women should work. (*Ed. note: Italics are mine. Mind you, this was said and reported in 1909!*)

There is another class of women who want the ballot because they need it to protect their home. They are directly affected by the tariff and by all food laws. The mother, the wife, the daughter, is the one who keeps house, and keeping house means making the family income go as far as current prices and restrictions enable it to go.



There is a third class of women who want the ballot because they are ready, willing, competent to give the State service in those offices where women can do the work as well, if not better, than the men. It is because we wish to bring all the women we can into our society that we have reduced the dues.

... It has been repeatedly said by our opponents that suffrage means a spirit of unrest, of dissatisfaction in home ties and home duties. This is not true. We want to keep our homes. We want to protect our womanhood. We want to work for our State.

The letter, written by Elizabeth E. Cook Secretary, Equality League of Self-Supporting Women (*again -- 1909!*), disputed the contention of Dr. Felix Adler, educator and reformer, that women should not be given the right to vote "for the present." She wrote to the *Herald*:

Dr. Felix Adler, in his speech at Carnegie Hall Sunday morning on "The Woman Suffrage Question: An Ethical Point of View," stated that he did not favor giving women votes for the present. He spoke enthusiastically of the need of women's help in matters of government, but advised them not to seek to take part because "things are not what they seem." \*\*\*

Admitting that the problems of government are bound to be more and more those of public health, comfort and safety, problems especially appealing to women, he nevertheless advises them to stand by till men have come to vote wisely and well and then to ask the vote "when the shrine is ready for the priestess."

This ethical point of view is interesting but disappointing to those who had hoped to hear Dr. Adler speak from a practical standpoint. Speaking practically, it seems no more reasonable to say that women should not have votes because so many men have used theirs wrongly or indifferently than to prohibit to all future generations all forms of sport because some others have played so roughly as to injure themselves and their fellows. \*\*\*

It is just because men, long blessed with the franchise, have made such a miserable muddle of government, because they have allowed themselves to be overawed by "the machine"

that we need a new element in politics. We need the women of the country, untrammelled by political traditions, (*Ed. Note: have you heard this in our time?*) working with the earnest but discouraged men voters for the common good of all against the forces of evil and of indifference. Since the chosen workmen have shown themselves unable to build the shrine alone, it is for the priestess to hasten her coming that we may the sooner complete our temple of good government.

If the substance, if not the rhetoric, of the words by Mackay and Cook sound familiar, it's because women still feel aggrieved and discriminated against in 1993, despite the fact that they have had the national right to vote for nearly 73 years.

Certainly, women experience far less inequality today than they did in 1909 when they enjoyed few political and property rights and were denied the fundamental right of a democracy -- the right to vote. We can appreciate that progress to some extent, because the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society micro-filmed the only extant set of the Dobbs Ferry Register and made it available to the public.

By the same token, we can appreciate how far women (and our entire democratic society) still have to go for all to enjoy equal rights and opportunities to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Through local history, we can catch glimpses of how our Village played a role in larger movements of history.

And the circle continues.

-- by Henry Walter

*This is the first in a series of articles on the suffrage movement in Dobbs Ferry*

## Matching Grant to Make Mead House a History Center Needs only \$900 to Reach \$10,000 Goal

The Society has received \$4,100 so far in contributions by members and friends who matched a \$5,000 challenge grant offered by an anonymous donor.

When the remaining \$900 is received, the donor will turn the grant over to the Society, provided that the entire \$10,000 is dedicated to making the Mead House into a History Center for Dobbs Ferry.

Bill Blanck, president, said that the amount collected so far to match the challenge includes \$1,000 from another donor who also wishes to remain anonymous. Most of the money has come as separate gifts of \$5, \$10, and \$25.

# Dobbs Ferry Historical Society

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 My employer's matching contributions form is enclosed.



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