



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



Women who Said “Why Not?”

by Meg Costello

At some point in 2020, we trust, the Museums will be open to visitors. One of our planned exhibits will commemorate the 100th anniversary of American women winning the right to vote.

The title of our exhibit, “Why Not? – Women Gain the Right to Vote” comes from a letter written in 1917 to the *Leviston Journal* by Falmouth native Katharine Lee Bates, the well-known professor, poet, and author of “America the Beautiful.”

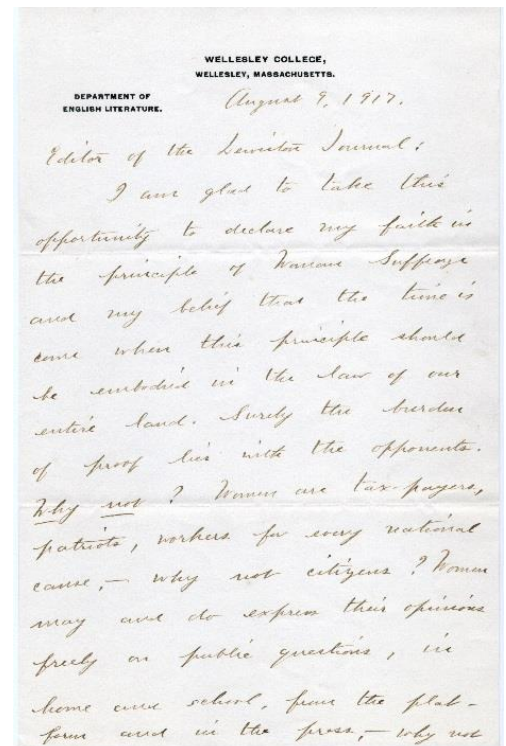
“Why not? Women are tax-payers, patriots, workers for every national cause,— why not citizens? Women may and do express their opinions freely on public questions, in home and school, from the platform and in the press,—why not through the ballot?”

Katharine was not the only Falmouth woman to take a public stand in favor of suffrage. Her own grammar school teacher, Sylvia Donaldson (1849-1937), is another example. Sylvia taught Katharine in the local village school before moving on to a career as an educator in Brockton. In 1923 Sylvia, aged 74, became the first woman

elected to the Massachusetts legislature, where she represented a Brockton district. She was also the first woman to wield the gavel while presiding over a session of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, in the absence of the Speaker.

Katharine no doubt was aware of her former teacher’s accomplishment. As a professor, she herself exerted an influence on students’ opinions. At Wellesley College in the late 1890s, Katharine taught a young woman who would later carry the banner for suffrage in Falmouth. Mary (Dodd) Craig (1874-1959) was born in China to missionary parents, the only daughter amidst seven brothers. She grew up in New York, and at Wellesley, she played basketball and participated in dramatics. After graduation she taught for a year at a black college, Atlanta University, where W.E.B. DuBois was also on the faculty.

Mary married Henry Hamblin Craig in 1900, and by 1910 they were running the Craig House Hotel (later renamed Oak Crest) atop Falmouth Heights, while raising three children. In 1914, Mary was elected to the Falmouth school committee—the first woman to hold elected office in Falmouth. Women had been eligible to vote for school committee members starting in 1907, but few had exercised





Mary (Dodd) Craig, in 1898 (left) and 1932 (right). Published in *Spritsail*, Summer 1992.

that right until Mary's candidacy, when the number of women voting jumped from 10 to 89. It was thought that the increased female turnout pushed Mary over the top. She served two terms, but had to give up her seat when hired to teach English at Lawrence High.ⁱ

Mary was active in several local groups such as the Outlook Club and the Nursing Association, where she came in contact with

other suffrage-minded women. Some of them, like Mary, were transplants to Falmouth. Helen (Stone) Howland (1884-1952) came from Wellfleet. Her husband George, a Harvard graduate, was the principal of Falmouth's Lawrence High School from 1909-1918. When not looking after her two daughters and a son, Helen served as treasurer for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), another group that was an incubator for female activism.

In July 1914 Helen hosted a meeting at her Palmer Avenue home featuring speaker Winona Pinkham, a state organizer for the Massachusetts Equal Suffrage Association. According to the *Enterprise*, the piazza was filled with ladies from Woods Hole, West Falmouth, and the Village. Mrs. Pinkham, who had previously lived in Denver, told her audience how women had secured the right to vote in Colorado, through a statewide referendum in 1893.ⁱⁱ She also dismissed the "frantic" objections of anti-suffragists.ⁱⁱⁱ Inspired by her talk, the ladies present formed a local league to work for equal suffrage. Mary Craig was elected president, and Nellie Burgess secretary.

Nellie (Powers) Burgess (1886-1963) grew up on East Main Street, daughter of Albert Powers, who was for 40 years the expert printer of the *Enterprise* shop. Nellie and her future husband Edgar Burgess were in the same class at Lawrence High School from 1900 to 1904. After graduation, Nellie worked as an assistant teacher at the Falmouth Village School before marrying Edgar, an insurance broker and postal clerk, in 1907. Apparently they had no children. Nellie kept busy with the Outlook Club and Order of the Eastern Star. Sometimes she was called upon to sing for charity—her repertoire included a sweet rendition of "Just a-Wearyin' For You." Nellie and Edgar appeared in at least three plays to benefit the Falmouth nursing association. These were staged at the Elizabeth Theater and directed by Joseph Holland. In 1935 the *Enterprise* listed Nellie as one of several directors of Cape Cod Hospital.

Another woman who opened her doors to the equal suffrage group was Lena (Slawson) Drew (1864-1946). In 1914 she hosted a whist party benefit at her home on North Street in Woods Hole. Lena was born in Ohio in 1865, moved to Iowa in childhood, and attended Iowa College. She married fellow Hawkeye Gilman Drew in 1892 and had one son. Gilman began instructing at MBL during summer sessions in 1901, then served as assistant director at MBL until 1924. Lena herself was far from idle. She was active in the WCTU,





organized and was first president of the Woman's Club, helped form the Falmouth nursing association, and was a founder of the Woods Hole Children's School of Science.

Lena no doubt was acquainted with her husband's secretary, Julia Rogers (c1893-????). In 1914 Julia welcomed to her Gardiner Road home Mrs. Claiborne Catlin of Maryland, who was touring Massachusetts on horseback. The ride was a publicity stunt to promote woman suffrage. Mrs. Catlin addressed large audiences near Falmouth's post office and depot. There's no word on where her horse—a handsome Kentucky thoroughbred—was lodged during her visit.

Another member of the Woods Hole pro-suffrage contingent was Zoulyne (Swindell) Milligan (1877-1963). She was born LaZinka Zoulyne Swindell in North Carolina, graduated from Greensboro Female College, and taught school for nine years. She married John Dean Milligan, 26 years her senior, in 1905, and they had two children. John served as chief pharmacist for the Navy in Woods Hole. The Milligans had a house on "Crow Hill," where Zoulyne chaired a clothing drive for French and Belgian war refugees in 1918. She ran for, but was not elected to, Falmouth's school committee in 1915, where Mary Dodd Craig was already serving. Along with Lena Drew and others, Zoulyne was a founder of the Children's School of Science.



You may have noticed that almost all of our subjects were teachers by profession, with many pursuing acting or singing as a hobby. The most colorful character in our gallery of suffragists was a professional actress and dancer. New Bedford native Mabel (Channing) (Howe?) Robinson (c1873-1958) used the stage name Mabelle Howe. Blessed with a "pretty good contralto," she progressed from chorus to ballet, then to fancy dancing and small speaking parts. She performed in a series of revues at the old Casino in New York City and played on Broadway in "Runaway Girl." Early in her career, the leading lady in one of these shows, Marie Dressler, told Mabel she could wear tights onstage or she could leave. Mabel wore the tights and stayed. Friends later called her "Twinkletoes" for her dancing ability.

Mabel Howe appeared at Shaftesbury Theatre, London, in April 1898, in the smash hit "The Belle of New York," playing the role of Kissie Fitzgarter, a music hall dancer. Back in Boston, she once pulled strings to get a place as an extra on stage near Sarah Bernhardt.

Mabel married George Robinson in 1906. A later account says it was a second marriage for them both, but gives no details about Mabel's first husband. Capt. George Robinson was a ferry captain and member of the Revenue Service. Later he was a sailing coach and captain for the Crane family.

In December 1914, as a Falmouth housewife retired from the stage, Mabel read a paper in favor of suffrage at a St. Barnabas function. Mary Dodd Craig was there and also spoke in favor. The *Enterprise* reported that "The discussion was quite animated at times and the arguments on both sides were well sustained." No vote was taken but it was evident that most of those present were not in favor of suffrage for women.





Mrs. Weeks' Shop, Main Street, Falmouth, c1910. Anti-suffragist Maisie Weeks (behind the counter) was credited with a sense of humor and a gift for friendship. Considering that she belonged to many of the same clubs as Falmouth's suffragists, these qualities must have come in handy.

At least one Falmouth woman actively worked against the suffrage movement. Maisie (David) Weeks (1875-1946) is usually thought of as a pioneer for women in business, given that she owned a successful shop on Main Street for decades and employed several women there. However, from 1913-1915, Maisie is listed as the Falmouth contact person for the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women.^{iv} Lydia (Dillingham) Lawrence (1875-1949) was another professed opponent of the right to vote, somewhat of a surprise considering her eight generations of Quaker ancestors and her own career in real estate.

The latest recorded date of both women's opposition is 1915, so it's possible they may have changed their minds before 1920, when the 19th amendment settled

the question nationwide.^v At that point, many women who had been opposed or lukewarm regarding suffrage likely shrugged their shoulders, sighed, and said, "Oh, well . . . why not?"

ⁱ [For more details about Mary's life, see Sprintsail, summer 1992.](#)

ⁱⁱ Coincidentally, 1893 was the year when Katharine Lee Bates visited Colorado Springs, rode up to Pikes Peak, and was inspired to write "America the Beautiful."

ⁱⁱⁱ [See Francis Parkman, "Some of the Reasons against Woman Suffrage," at the Harvard Library online archives.](#)

^{iv} [MAOFESW Records, 1894-1920, at Mass. Historical Society, viewed online.](#)

^v Many thanks are due to those who assisted in researching this article, including but not limited to Richard Johnson, Tamsen George, Grant Willis, Terry White, Mary Barry, and members of the Wednesday history discussion group. Most of the facts herein were discovered in the *Falmouth Enterprise* digital archive. The women's maiden names and other biographical data were extracted from genealogical databases at AmericanAncestors.org and FamilySearch.org.