

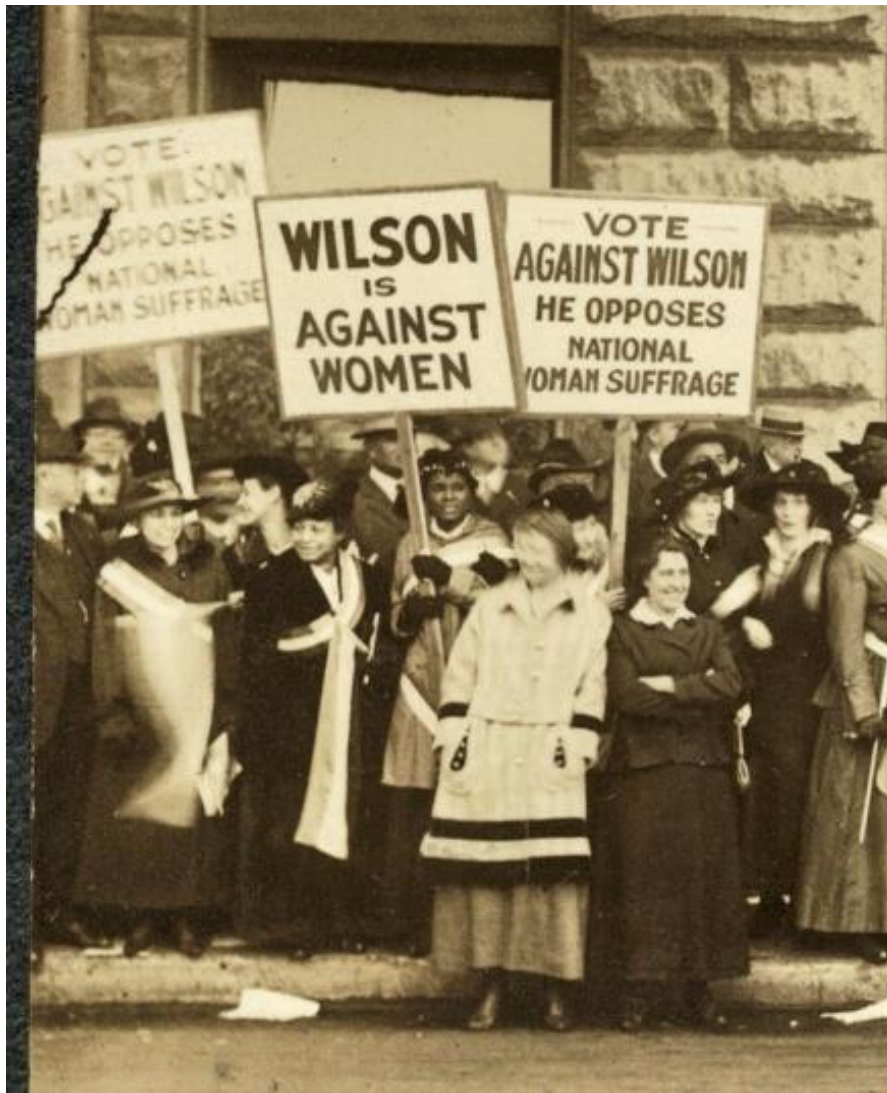
## Women's Suffrage Centennial: Lexington, Virginia, United States

In tribute to the centennial commemorations of the passage of The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the Rockbridge Historical Society will be sharing stories, images, video, and other innovative interactive media related to the push for women's suffrage – as well as its pushback – in local, state, and national contexts. See [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org) for more. This article is written by RHS Executive Director, Eric Wilson, with a condensed version published in the *Lexington News-Gazette*, [HERE](#).

The core change to the nation's foundational legal document was both clear, and broad.

***“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”***

But the struggles to get there – and the century of advances and challenges that have followed since – were anything but simple in delivering on that promise. For all citizens.



The photograph above was taken in 1916, during a campaign stop in Chicago for the re-election of U.S. President and Staunton native, Woodrow Wilson. Three years after the landmark protest led by Alice Paul in Washington, D.C. – the day before Wilson’s first inauguration in 1913, and the first mass political protest the nation’s capital had ever seen – note how the spirited, largely well-to-do cast of women (including two suffragist-bannered African American women under the central sign) have moved to position themselves in front of the men in the background.



This 1911 photo was taken at a protest march after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Disaster, the infamous fire in New York which claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, nearly all of them women, most of them first or second generation residents of the United States. These girls’ banners – both saying ‘Abolish Child Slavery,’ in Hebrew and English – illustrate intersectional pushes for freedom and equity in the era: across lines of gender and age, engaging the increasingly insistent tactics of labor unions, and women’s suffrage protests that would reach new high points in that decade. Perhaps, by 1920, this pair would themselves have been jointly eligible, (minimum age 21, and qualified national origin/citizenship status) to cast their own ballots in that inaugural national, presidential election.

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On June 4, 1919, [The 19th Amendment](#) to the United States Constitution was passed by Congress, guaranteeing American women the right to vote.

Yet would take over a year for the required three-quarters of the 48 states to officially ratify the amendment. On August 18, 1920: Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify, reaching that benchmark for Adoption. The Amendment’s formal legal Certification a week later, August 26, 1920, now recognized as [‘Women’s Equality Day.’](#)

[The Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) would prove the next landmark legislation to further rectify the shortcomings of a core American principle. Recent eulogies to U.S. Congressman and voting rights activist John Lewis again witness how an eye to history remains central to American traditions of advocacy and activism for ever-more democratic inclusion.

The 19th Amendment would thus become law of the land 50 years after the 15th Amendment had mandated the rights of African-American men to vote, 142 years after the Adoption of the U.S Constitution. It represented the broadest extension voting rights in American history. Nevertheless, as with most steps forward, its effective progress would also have to reckon with other stalling, or steps back.

Here in Virginia, women began to exercise their federally guaranteed right to vote on November 2, that year. Virginia's state legislature did not ratify the Amendment for three decades, however, last voting to reject it on February 12, 1920. [Mississippi would be the last state to ratify the 19th Amendment, in 1984].



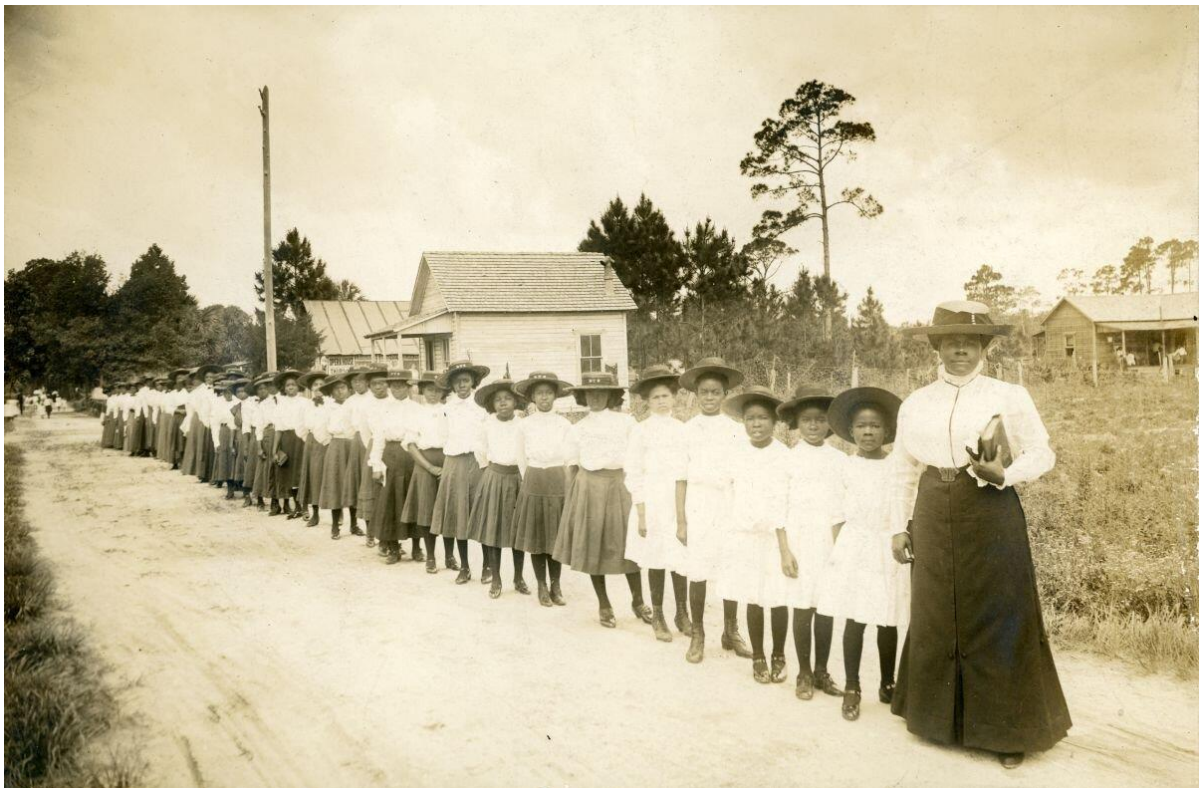
**1920, Richmond [Photo, The Valentine Museum]: First Election Day for Virginia Women. Note the segregation by gender, race, and consistency of social class and race that appears to mark this inaugural opportunity for women's broader political participation, yet still over 30 years before the Virginia State Legislature officially recognized women's formal voting rights by belatedly signing the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1952.**

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This year's centennial provides an engaging, fitting platform to celebrate the continued, gradual extension of the electoral franchise. But those legal achievements and shifts in cultural attitudes also duly direct attentions to the freedoms and restrictions that the United States has variably placed on Americans' access to what's often too singularly described as "The Vote, both historically and still today.

Since the Adoption of the U.S. Constitution – not to mention the more frequently shifting terms of state constitutions, many of which were changed, during the 'Jim Crow' era – voting rights have been variably addressed, affirmed, and sometimes rolled back. Those defining lines would negotiate not only the lines of gender and race, property qualifications, race, literacy and disability, birthright and immigration status, age, and criminal history.

In the chronicles of American democracy, attention has increasingly broadened from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Many centennial retrospectives now also frontline the civil disobedience and violence suffered by Alice Paul and the 'Iron-Jawed Angels:' the 33 women who were arrested for picketing outside the White House during World War I. Beaten and force-fed while in Virginia's Occoquan Workhouse, their highly-publicized hunger strike ultimately helped drive President Wilson to support the federal suffrage legislation. Historians and school curricula have also recently if belatedly highlighted the strategic efforts and sacrifices of Black suffragists and activists like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell: their own democratic achievements now earning wider credit.



Among the pioneers for equity and advancement was Mary McLeod Bethune, pictured here at the school she founded in 1905, The Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Black Girls, later to become Bethune-Cookman University (State Archives of Florida, ca. 1905).

On Nov. 1, 1920 - the night before the first election when American women broadly enjoyed the right to vote -- members of the Ku Klux Klan came to this school in order to threaten Bethune and other local Black women from exercising their new constitutional rights. She persisted. And cast her ballot the next day.

The terrorists would return at the 1922 elections, threatening to burn down her boarding school, but she persisted. Jim Crow laws, intimidation and other voter suppression tactics would continue to bar many Black women and men from effective electoral citizenship.

But in 1935 Bethune founded the National Council for Negro Women to encourage African-American women's participation in civic, political, economic and educational institutions. Today, her 1971 statue stands in D.C.'s Lincoln Park, facing that of 1876 The Freedmen's Memorial, which features Rockbridge native [Archer Alexander](#) (see more on those statues and histories in [RHS-Essays](#)).



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## Virginia and Richmond

As the lenses of history widen to include often-overlooked individuals and organizations from the past, the core messages, means, and media of history-telling also keep evolving, illuminating multiple historical contexts and relevance. Today, museum and virtual exhibits like those noted below stage a more complex understanding of these experiences and social dynamics.

A pair of images illustrates in singular, telling comparison: the re-staging, in color, of an iconic 1915 photograph of Virginia women working for social justice ... in a creative, 're-mixed' palimpsest, with a cast of women representing current "[Agents of Change](#)," across the Commonwealth, photographed this year as part of the statewide commemorations.



Considering these coupled photographs (both from the Collections of the [Virginia Museum of History and Culture](#)), ask yourself: who are some of the Virginia women today who've made positive changes in your communities, whether from decades or centuries past, or still doing so today. [The VMHC crowdsourced the opportunity for anyone to send in their personal nominations](#), and among those RHS supporters who answered our call to witness leaders in our local history, spanning four centuries from the 18<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, nominations came in for: Mary McDowell Greenlee, Eliza Bannister Walker, Ruth Anderson McCulloch, Pamela Hemenway Simpson, Fiorela Geraldo de Lewis, and Ellen Mayock.

In another community-centered collage, the [#BallotBattle](#) exhibit currently at The Valentine Museum adopts the formats of contemporary social media to thread together different primary sources that voice Richmond's family, social, and institutional networks in 1920, bringing authentic yet conversational tone to the import of the issues, and their relevance today:

# #BallotBattle

## Richmond's Social Struggle for Suffrage

The generation of Richmonders born after the Civil War lived through extraordinary economic, technological, political and social upheaval. As these citizens reached maturity and stepped into leadership positions in the city's institutions, the debate over women's suffrage was at a critical turning point.

Between 1909 and 1920, pro- and anti-suffrage advocates fought for their chosen beliefs using every available platform to persuade legislators and the general public. Newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, banners, postcards, speeches and rallies were the weapons of choice on both sides of this battle of ideals.

The city's women supplied leadership for and against women's suffrage, taking some cues from national organizations, but other local groups contributed their opinions. White men entered the public debate on both sides, while many of Richmond's African-American leaders remained quietly supportive.

*#BallotBattle: Richmond's Social Struggle for Suffrage profiles the viewpoints of five prominent Richmonders using Facebook and Twitter platforms to illustrate how Richmond actively engaged in debates. Follow their imagined conversations with surprisingly modern actual quotes noted with quotation marks<sup>(66\*\*)</sup>. Even today, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment, in August 1920, Richmonders can still feel the effects of the battle over the ballot.*

### 1909

**Lila Meade Valentine** @LilaMValentine

🔥 @RTD knows we're SUFFRAGISTS, not suffragettes. Our plan is ACTION! #BallotBattle



**SUFFRAGETTES HERE**

Movement Started to Organize Branch of National Order.

According to a statement issued yesterday, certain women of Richmond, interested in the national suffragette movement will meet next Thursday afternoon to discuss the future welfare of such an organization. It is said that many prominent women are interested in the sending of a petition to Congress asking that the sex be allowed to vote. Similar movements in Virginia have always failed to accomplish anything more than a publication of proposed plans. One of those said to be interested in the revival claims that the time is now ripe for action and that by concerted effort something tangible will be accomplished. It is stated, furthermore, that Mrs. Pankhurst, the most celebrated of suffragettes, will be invited to speak in this city, and that she will be invited to outline a campaign to be carried out in Virginia."

**More Trouble for Harris.**

William Harris, the man who was arrested Wednesday by Detective-Sergeant Williams on a charge of pocket picking, had an...

November 13, 1909

2,825 comments 312 retweets 904 likes

**Maggie Lena Walker** @StLukeMaggie • November 13, 1909  
Replying to @LilaMValentine

Men shouldn't be so pessimistic and down on women's clubs. We're not destroying homes or disgracing the race. We produce more than "elegant papers, beautifully framed resolutions, and pretty speeches."<sup>99</sup> #clublife #bankingonit

### 1920

**Lila Meade Valentine** @LilaMValentine

So proud of these Ladies! Wish I felt well enough to join them! Thx to @StLukeMaggie for your registration efforts! Glad @MrsFDWilliams had a change of heart after 8.26.1920 and recruited women voters. #BallotBattleBuried

November 2, 1920

3,793 comments 6,264 retweets 8,725 likes

**Maggie Lena Walker** @StLukeMaggie • November 2, 1920  
Replying to @LilaMValentine

Happy to pay my \$1.50 poll tax and exercise my new right - especially when so many others can't! @OraStokes @LillianPayne & @MattieLewis led the GOTV efforts.

583 comments 1,681 retweets 1,781 likes

**John Mitchell, Jr.** @FightinEditor • November 2, 1920  
Replying to @StLukeMaggie

So. Jealous. But today we can celebrate that Republicans won the Presidency with Harding. And even TN went for the Rs! I'm breaking down the Richmond vote in Saturday's issue of the @RichmondPlanet.

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## Lexington and Rockbridge

New contexts are emerging in Rockbridge, too.

In June 1921, the first summer after the 1920 elections, the statewide convention of the Virginia Federation of Colored Women would meet here in Lexington. The VFCW was established in the early 1900s to advance civil rights in the prevailing Jim Crow era, and to establish and advocate for institutions that supported social services. Their assured, officially-ribboned delegates crowd together here on the steps and porch of Blandome, the grand home recently purchased by Harry Lee and Eliza Bannister Walker, who hosted as President of the Rockbridge Chapter.



Final three images: Walker-Wood Papers, W&L Special Collections, RHS

Beyond her leadership at the local and state levels, Walker would increasingly show her political leadership and initiative by flexing her muscle in national politics, organizing a May 1931 fund-raiser at First Baptist Church for the re-election of Illinois Congressman Oscar dePriest (the first U.S. Representative to the House, outside the South). Celebrating his personal appearance, all the way from Chicago, a community flyer notes admission at 50 cents, with “Our White Friends are Cordially Invited.” Walker even composed and published original poems championing his leadership, further signaling the importance of local and national political alliances.



CONGRESSMAN  
**OSCAR DE PRIEST**  
OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Will Appear in Person at  
**First Baptist Church**  
LEXINGTON, VA.



**FRIDAY**  
**MAY 15th**  
at 8:30 P. M.

Admission 50c

First and Only Member of  
Colored Race to be elected  
to Congress of the U. S. in  
28 years.

Our White Friends are Cordially Invited

PRESENTED BY

**Rockbridge Walker Federation  
of Colored Women's Club**

Mrs. H. L. Walker, Pres.      Mrs. M. S. Jones, Secy

In civic affairs, a petition archived with her family papers also shows Mrs. Eliza B. Walker, Chairman, and Mrs. Virginia Gilliam, Secretary of Lexington's "Council on Unemployed" protesting the deflation of wages being paid by local businesses, households, and universities, due to "imported servants." Her candid assessments are shrewdly balanced with the joint community stakes she purposefully repeats, throughout. The lengthy petition shows Walker using her political experience and clout to advocate for a range of economic, institutional, and civic responses for more affirmative labor practices:

**"Fellow white citizens of Lexington, we also citizens of the town, though servants among you, feel there should be an allegiance, and protection from you as to our welfare, in the way and allotment of work and service, which are rendered in the town here..."**

**We have our own homes to keep up; taxes, and other living necessities: water, lights, fuel and grocery bills to look after. These expenses must be met in order that we may not come under the care of a relief agency. We do ask that you use your influence so that we may secure the available work to be done here..."**

Fellow white citizens of Lexington, we also citizens of the town, though servants among you, feel that there should be an allegiance and protection from you as to our welfare in the way of the allotment of work and service, which are rendered in the town here.

We find that our places are being filled by imported servants very often cheaper than the accustomed pay to our local servants.

We have our own homes to keep up; taxes, and other living necessities, water, lights, fuel and grocery bills to look after. These expenses must be met in order that we may not come under the care of a relief agency. We do ask that you use your influence that we may secure the available work to be done here.

These Fraternities and citizens homes are our only places to secure work and earn the means of a livelihood. Much could be done through the College President, Faculty and other citizens employing help to relieve these conditions of unemployment.

Therefore, we appeal to you to assist us to get more work that we may be more self-supporting and independent for our own existence.

From small-town Lexington, to the nation's capital, the extension of the electoral franchise for women also enabled other modes of political agency, and community credibility.

In the run-up to the local and federal elections of 2020, RHS will be working with local schools to explore some of these histories. Those perspectives will prompt students to discuss the important roles that voting plays in the practice of citizenship, past and present. As future fellow voters, local histories will also ask them to consider what issues would be most significant for them to cast a vote on: as citizens of a nation at large, or as members of their Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge communities.

As always, local history organizations depend on 'crowd-sourced contributions' from their neighboring residents, and area descendants: photos, letters and scrapbooks, family oral histories. Official records, local newspapers, and period photographs are more spare than expected, here. So even small texts and artifacts from the 'Suffrage Era' will help to chronicle and color the histories of voting, and activism, in greater Rockbridge: across its political, social, religious, and educational dimensions.

Below are four Virginia-tied exhibits and museums that explore those contexts, and connections between local, state, and national perspectives. Whether visited onsite, or browsed and streamed from the comforts and security of home, they provide portals for curiosity and discovery. They also anchor and reward reflections on the generations of women and men who've come before us; along with the strategies, networks and resilience that sustained their abilities to affirm a broader capacity for citizenship through a range of viable, vital political voices.

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**\*\*VMHC "Agents of Change: Female Activism and Virginia Women from Women's Suffrage to Today"**: Period sources are coupled with contemporary issues, complemented by a self-guided 360 Degree Virtual Tour through the displays that honoring centuries of Virginia women who've shaped its growth. [VirginiaHistory.org](http://VirginiaHistory.org)

**\*\*The Valentine: #BallotBattle: Richmond's Social Struggle for Suffrage:** Track Virginia's suffrage debates, in 'Live Time': revealed through the capital city's publications, and family and social networks, engagingly narrated through the visual formats of Social Media today. [TheValentine.org](http://TheValentine.org)

**\*\*Virginia Public Media Documentary: "These Things can be Done."** Free online streaming. Chapters on Virginia Suffragists' Early Tactics, Black Women's Suffrage in Virginia; Modern Perspectives on the Virginia Suffrage Movement. [SuffrageFilm.com](http://SuffrageFilm.com)

**\*\*National Women's History Museum (Alexandria):** "Our Mission: to tell the stories of women who transformed our nation, through a growing state-of-the-art online presence and a future physical museum to educate, inspire, empower, shape the future, and provide a complete view of American history." [WomensHistory.org](http://WomensHistory.org)



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