

A Stepping Stone to Greater Things

by Dr. Margot I. Duley

After three decades of debate about the right of women to vote, there was a breakthrough suffrage victory in Newfoundland and Labrador. It occurred in St. John's in 1921.

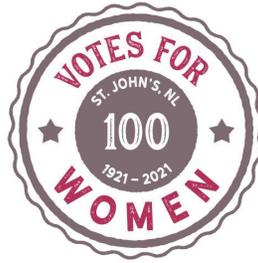
It was championed by reforming Mayor William Gilbert Gosling. His wife, **Armine Nutting Gosling**, led both the St. John's movement and the broader island-wide campaign that culminated in a national victory in 1925. Though the terms of the franchise were limited, in Armine Gosling's words, the St. John's victory was a "stepping stone to greater things." It energized the Women's Franchise League at a dispiriting time because the House of Assembly had recently defeated a broader suffrage bill by a vote of 13-9.

In St. John's women's groups had lobbied diligently for years to improve sanitation in slums, erect better working-class housing, upgrade roads, start child and maternal welfare services, institute TB (tuberculosis) education, and strengthen animal welfare regulations. Some also wanted regulation of alcohol believed to be a factor in domestic violence and poverty.

Ignored, they demanded a municipal vote. Mayor Gosling persuaded his reluctant colleagues to support votes for women, aided by Councillor Charles Pascoe Ayre, whose wife Diana Stevenson Ayre was also a suffragist.

On **August 2, 1921**, the municipal charter was amended to allow some women to vote. All male British subjects over twenty-one could vote. However, in order to qualify, women had to own property or sign leases in their own name. They were also restricted from running for office until 1925.

Attitudes toward votes for women had become more positive during World War One due to the work of the Women's Patriotic Association, that had seventeen branches in St. John's alone, and the nurses and Voluntary Aide Detachment workers who had gone overseas. Nevertheless, there was still resistance.



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Opponents argued that women lacked "political reason" and that family unity would be undermined by women voting their own minds. Their place was in the home. Some also feared that addressing the festering issues in the city would lead to more taxes. The St. John's election of **15 December 1921** was seen as a test case of whether allowing women to vote would lead to social chaos.

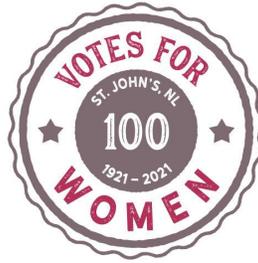
Suffrage leaders realized what was at stake. About 1,080 women qualified to vote in the December 1921 election, forming 18 per cent of the electorate. The female electorate consisted predominantly of wealthier women with property and widows of all classes who had inherited or signed leases.

In addition, about eighty working and middle-class women who ran the little confectionary, grocery and millinery shops scattered throughout the city as sole proprietors were also able to vote, as well as a handful of single working women—teachers, shop and offices employees and factory workers who leased or owned homes. Most single women lived with relatives or in boarding houses due to low wages.

Racially, St. John's was not a diverse city in 1921. "British Subjects" born outside of Newfoundland and Labrador were only 1.2 per cent of the total population of about 36,000.

In legal theory women who were British Subjects by birth, including Mi'qmaq and aboriginal women from Labrador, or by naturalization were eligible, if otherwise qualified. This included the Dominions and Colonies of the British Empire.

How many racial minorities actually resided in St. John's is unknown and the obstacles to participation were formidable. However, there is evidence that a few women from the small but vibrant Lebanese-Syrian and Jewish communities qualified. In a shameful episode in Newfoundland history, Chinese women at the time were barred from entry and adult Chinese men were required to pay a head tax of \$300 (over \$6,000 today).



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Despite the limitations, the vote was symbolically and practically important. The day before the election that December, the first public meeting demanding an island-wide women's franchise without property qualifications took place at a crowded public meeting at the Casino Theatre on Henry Street. Women were urged to vote the next day and to struggle on for full enfranchisement.

On election day women voters proved to be enthusiastic and flooded to the polls in disproportionate numbers. Some needed no persuasion and had already purchased chicken houses and sheds to qualify. The wealthy and widowed Mary Pitts was the first to cast a ballot driven by her coachman and fours.

The results of the election were encouraging: the successful mayoral candidate and the top two vote-getters for Council had endorsed a broad national franchise and improvements in the city.

The Newfoundland Women's Franchise League were energized by this breakthrough and what it demonstrated about women's potential voting power.

They continued the struggle, lobbied and mobilized support from all over Newfoundland. Twenty-thousand signed petitions, the largest petition campaign in Newfoundland's history. **A national bill enfranchising women over twenty-five finally passed in 1925.** It took another 23 years for residents of Labrador to be included in elections. This included Indigenous peoples, though there remained substantial barriers to participation.

The St. John's suffrage victory in 1921 was a "stepping stone to greater things," one that inspires us one hundred years later.

With sharpened vision, we strive for a province where all genders have equal rights and opportunities, recognizing that systems of oppression and discrimination are interdependent and span all social categorizations such as race, class, gender, ability, parental status, size, age and sexual orientation.