



Votes For Women:

The Centennial of Women's Suffrage at Morven Park

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My very first voting experience was a memorable one because I turned 18 on a presidential election day and got to cast my vote on my birthday! I still remember carefully filling in each bubble on the ballot and proudly displaying my “I voted” sticker. I come from a long line of volunteer poll workers, including my father, my aunt, and especially my grandmother. The daughter of Czechoslovakian immigrants, she was born in August of 1920, just days before the 19th amendment would be ratified by two thirds of the state legislatures and put into practice, giving women the right to vote. My grandmother helped people fulfill their civic duty in her small town in Pennsylvania, fully understanding how important it was for everyone to use their own voice at each election. I haven't missed an election since I became eligible, and I often think about the women who fought for this fundamental right.

Women advocated for their right to vote for over 70 years, finally succeeding with the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920, and certification to the U.S. Constitution on August 26, one hundred years ago this summer. The Amendment states: “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.”¹

Westmoreland and Marguerite Davis, the last owners of Morven Park, were serving as Governor and First Lady of Virginia during this time in American history. The Davises, who moved to Loudoun County in 1903, watched the issue of women's suffrage unfold locally with hearings, protests, and efforts to engage the legislature to take action. They undoubtedly also heard the excuses as to why progress could not or should not be made. Some posited, “Women are only going to vote like their husbands, so what's the point?” Others believed the matter ought to be decided on the state level, not federal. Still others, particularly in the American South, were concerned that allowing women to vote would suddenly enfranchise African American women too, threatening the white supremacy that dominated society. Rather than advocating for all, the movement was criticized for only achieving success on behalf of white women.²

We are not certain how Marguerite Davis felt about the suffrage movement because there are no personal records of hers available. We are led to understand that wealthy, white individuals like the Davises already felt empowered with rights, but they were certainly not the only voices in Loudoun County. Many of the Davises' employees living in farm housing made an honest living, but could not afford things like the \$1.50 state poll tax required to

¹ *Nineteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution*, Certified August 26, 1920

² Kirby, Jack Temple. *Westmoreland Davis: Virginia Planter-Politician, 1859-1942*. University Press of Virginia, 1968, page 96.

vote, which was instituted in 1902.³ Such exclusionary practices were the norm, unfortunately. Women in Loudoun County would have been very aware of the wartime picketing of President Wilson's White House or the "Night of Terror" in which jailed suffragettes were brutally mistreated at the Occoquan Workhouse located in nearby Lorton.⁴ Despite the case that women were needed in the war effort, and that their voices should be heard, Congress could not get enough votes to pass the amendment until 1919.

Upon his election in 1917, the number one priority for Governor Davis was World War I. American soldiers were being sent to Europe to support the Allied troops, while war support efforts ramped up at home, requiring every man, woman, and child to pitch in. Some described the women's suffrage movement as a distraction to the war efforts, but others felt that if America cared so much about democracy in Europe, it should care about democracy for women at home. Davis was described to have given "cautious approval" of suffrage, but he was surrounded by many white men in office who did not support the amendment.⁵ Despite the strong urging of the robust Virginia chapters of the Equal Suffrage League, Virginia and many other states in the American South would not ratify this amendment until many years later. It took the Virginia General Assembly until February of 1952, long after women voted and were elected to the state legislature.⁶

The 19th amendment created a ripple effect, as many more people began to campaign for rights. Native Americans, who were still not considered American citizens in 1920, lobbied for citizenship and the right to vote in 1924.⁷ Asian immigrants were also fighting exclusionary practices on the west coast, and African Americans would not see passage of the Civil Rights Act until 1964.

I know that my grandmother would be happy to see that, 100 years later, women are continuing to use their voices and their votes to create positive change in their communities. Morven Park is doing its part by working with young people to show them how to make their voices heard. Visit MorvenPark.org/Education to check out the Morven Park Center for Civic Impact's many school programs and summer youth leadership.

Additionally, the interpretation team at Morven Park is preparing to launch Women's History Month Specialty Tours when the mansion and museums reopen to the public on Sunday, March 1. Every 1:00 p.m. tour on Saturdays and Sundays in March will focus on the women's suffrage movement and the Davises' experiences during that period. Come learn how everyday Loudoun residents were impacted by the women's suffrage movement and

³ "Voting Requirements of the Constitution of Virginia, 1902." *Education from LVA: Constitution of Virginia, 1902*, Library of Virginia, edu.lva.virginia.gov/online_classroom/shaping_the_constitution/doc/constitution_1902.

⁴ "US Women's Suffrage Timeline 1648 to 2016 (U.S. National Park Service)." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/articles/us-suffrage-timeline-1648-to-2016.htm.

⁵ Kirby, page 95.

⁶ "Virginia." *Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission*, www.womensvote100.org/virginia.

⁷ "US Women's Suffrage Timeline 1648 to 2016 (U.S. National Park Service)." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/articles/us-suffrage-timeline-1648-to-2016.htm.

hear what happened locally after women got the right to vote. Learn more at MorvenPark.org/Calendar.



National Woman's Party members outside the White House, January 1919. Beside them, in an urn, burns their Watchfire for Freedom. They are holding a protest banner calling out President Wilson on his lack of support for women's voting rights.

Photo by Harris & Ewing. Records of the National Woman's Party, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000303/>

Caption and Photo found at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/us-suffrage-timeline-1648-to-2016.htm>