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THE VOTES ARE IN

A century after New York ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, a new book recalls the Cornellians who fought for women's suffrage

MARCHING ON: An iconic New York City parade of women's suffrage advocates in 1915

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS




I AM WOMAN: Alumnae activists (from left) Ethel Stebbins 1895, Nora Stanton Blatch 1905, Harriet May Mills 1879, and Isabel Howland 1881

In October 1915, more than 30,000 women clad all in white marched up a three-mile stretch of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, carrying ballot boxes and waving posters demanding votes for women. Leading the procession was Ethel Stebbins 1895—the parade's grand marshal and one of many Cornellians who played roles large and small in the decades-long fight for women's suffrage in the U.S.

Among Cornell's most prominent suffragists were two of its early female graduates: Isabel Howland 1881 and Harriet May Mills 1879. Howland hailed from a reformist Quaker community north of Ithaca, while Mills—who'd go on to an unsuccessful 1920 bid for New York secretary of state—grew up in an abolitionist family in Syracuse. The two crossed paths on the Hill and went on to become leaders of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association, which twice held its annual convention in Ithaca. As women's rights icon Susan B. Anthony once wrote of them: "I am truly glad for the discovery of our two New York girls . . . who promise to take up the laboring oar and pull us to the promised land."

Howland, Mills, Stebbins, and other stalwarts of the suffrage movement are remembered in *Achieving Beulah Land*, a new book published by the University Library that offers snapshots of those Cornellians' efforts as it chronicles one small chapter in the long, nationwide struggle to gain women's right to vote.

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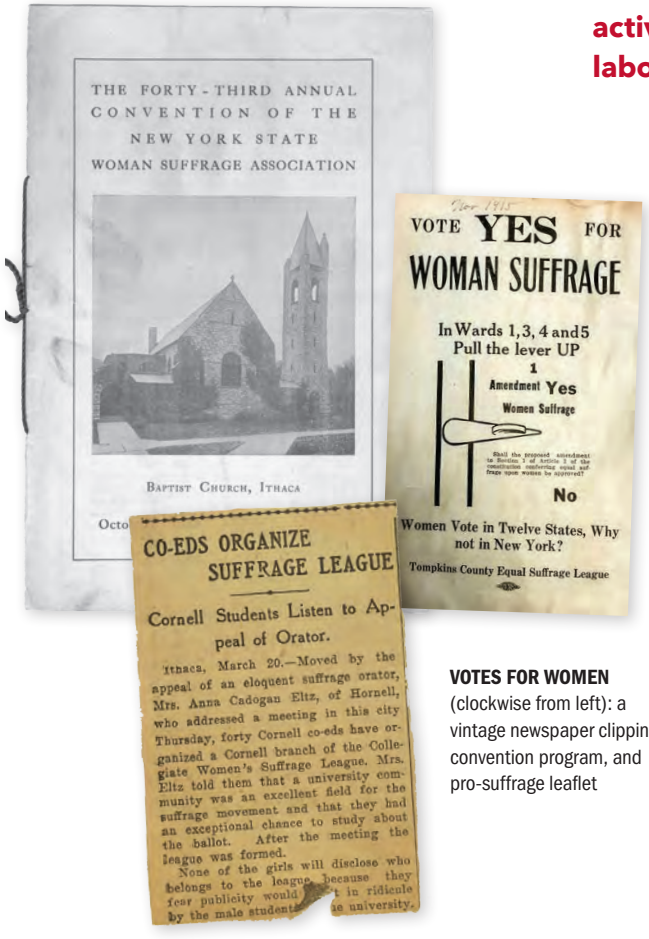

VOTES FOR WOMEN (clockwise from left): a vintage newspaper clipping, convention program, and pro-suffrage leaflet

Released ahead of the centennial of New York's ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in June 1919, it focuses on the efforts of activists in Ithaca and elsewhere in Tompkins County—whose ranks comprised undergrads, faculty, alumnae, and even mothers of students. They include women who were pioneers in other arenas of gender equality on the Hill, such as Emma Sheffield Eastman 1873, the University's first female graduate, who became an avid suffragist in New England; Harriet Connor Brown 1894, the first female staffer on the *Cornell Era* magazine, who advocated for suffrage in her native Iowa and in Washington, D.C.; and Elizabeth Ellsworth Cook 1908, who broke barriers by joining Cornell's all-male debate team and went on to become vice president of the Women's Political Union, a national feminist group.

The authors of *Achieving Beulah Land*—Elaine Engst, MA '72, Cornell's archivist emerita, and Carol Kammen, the Tompkins County historian and a former lecturer on the Hill—parse letters, memoirs, newspaper articles, and other documents to explore stories that represent a microcosm of the nationwide suffrage movement. The book—whose title refers to a biblical promised land that suffragists used as a symbol of their hopes—has its roots in an exhibit that Engst curated in Kroch Library in 2017. (That show, whose content can still be viewed online, marked the centennial of when New York became the first state east of the Mississippi where women could vote.) "This was a radical move ›

PHOTOS: STEBBINS, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; OTHERS, RMC. PAMPHLET AND POSTER, RMC; CLIPPING, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

BACKLASH: An 1899 misogynist cartoon in the *Cornell Widow* depicted "a class meeting in the near future"—the chaotic result of letting women be in charge.

for women," Engst says of the suffrage fight, "to step up and say they wanted something for themselves and they would not be protected by men."

On the Hill, Engst and Kammen note, suffrage activism took many forms—from late-night chats over coffee to the formation of clubs. Perhaps surprisingly, given that Cornell—unlike many of its peers—was officially co-educational from its founding, the University wasn't a hotbed of suffrage activity, and little evidence of what did occur has survived. At Cornell, as elsewhere across the country, enfranchising women was a controversial issue, and students were often reluctant to publicly identify with the cause. In the *Statistics of the Class of 1880*, for example, a third of female seniors reported being opposed to giving women the vote. (It was admittedly a small sample; there were only nine women in the class.) "Being for suffrage," Kammen observes, "was setting yourself outside of whatever social group you were in."

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In the book, she and Engst describe anti-feminist episodes on campus around the time of the state constitutional convention of 1894: "Gertrude Nelson [1895] reported that two women she met in the library have 'started a petition against women's suffrage and have left it in the Library for girls to sign!' . . . She wrote that several of her friends were ready to put down their names. At Sage Chapel, Gertrude noted [a visiting minister] preached, 'that wives should yield to the dominating influence of their husbands.' "

AUTHORS: Elaine Engst, MA '72 (left), and Carol Kammen. Above: Their book.

The Cornell Women's Suffrage Club—the first group of its kind on the Hill—was co-founded in the early 1900s by Nora Stanton Blatch 1905, granddaughter of feminist pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the first American woman to earn a degree in civil engineering. But as Blatch recalled in an unpublished autobiography, the club was hardly greeted with open arms after its creation was announced in a campus newspaper. "The result was immediate and decisive, an editorial attack painting the women members as disturbed human beings, etc., etc.," she wrote. "I forget the wording but it was so violent that with the dawning of the second day all but four members resigned." And as Rochester's *Democrat & Chronicle* observed in 1909: "Forty Cornell coeds have organized a Cornell branch of the Collegiate Women's Suffrage League . . . None of the girls will disclose who belongs to the league because they fear publicity would result in ridicule by male students at the university."

Slowly but surely, though, the suffrage movement touched hearts and changed minds. Among the many Americans whose views were swayed was Cornell's third president, Jacob Gould Schurman, who served from 1892 to 1920. Initially somewhat tepid in his support of enfranchising women, he went on to become an enthusiastic advocate, serving on the executive committee of the Men's League for Woman Suffrage of the State of New York. "We believe that women should vote," Schurman said in a 1915 statement he issued along with other prominent men, "and that the community will derive an appreciable advantage when they do vote."

Arguably the twin highlights of the suffrage movement in Tompkins County came when the state suffrage association held its annual convention in Ithaca—first in 1894, and again in 1911. Kammen notes that even though the first convention fell at a time when Cornell students had a heavy workload, it didn't dim their enthusiasm. "It was exam week, and they still participated," she says. "They greeted people at the train and served as ushers." As the organization's president said in her address that year: "In some regards, Ithaca is a land of Beulah to members of this association. Some turn fondly towards your heights because there stands their alma mater, in which they girded for the struggle for women's liberty." ■

— Cathy Xie '20

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