



The Society Scroll

Newsletter of
The Ocean County Historical Society
26 Hadley Avenue
Toms River, NJ 08753
Phone: 732 341-1880 FAX: 732 341-4372

“Telling The Stories Of Ocean County”

On-Line Extra - October 2011

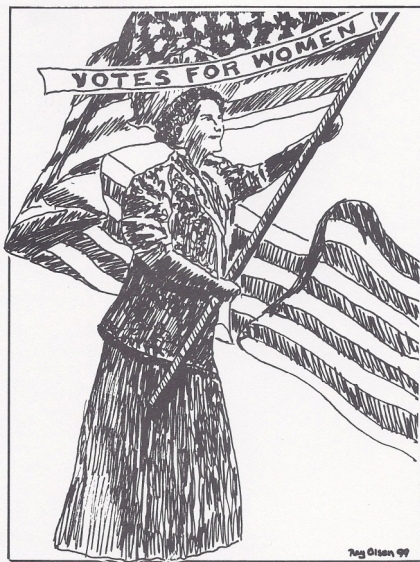
Ocean County Women in the Legislature:
The Struggle for Equality in Representation pp 1-4

by Cynthia H. Smith

Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission
1998

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION



Since the Nineteenth Amendment enfranchised women in 1920, nearly eighty years ago, Ocean County has elected five women to the New Jersey General Assembly and one woman to its Board of Chosen Freeholders. No woman from Ocean County has been elected to the State Senate or to the Congress of the United States. Women have been elected to serve on their local municipal legislative bodies, and some have been elected township or borough mayor, but the numbers have been minimal.¹ None of these women comprise more than half of the eligible voter pool in the county. Furthermore, the statistics belie an election in 1915 which brought statewide, if not national, attention to Ocean County. Upon reflection, this little known election seemed to imply that women in Ocean County, once enfranchised, would share political equality with men, including elective office. To fully understand this supposition, it is necessary to review events that led to that special election.

Chapter 2

A GIANT STEP BACKWARD

Originally, when New Jersey, along with the other twelve colonies, declared its independence from Great Britain, the state's first constitution, adopted on July 2, 1776, stated that voting was open to “all inhabitants.” Further modification of this phrase in subsequent election laws allowed certain women to vote. This was unprecedented at the time: no other state gave women this right nor did the United States Constitution, ratified in 1788. In 1790, it was reinforced by another state law specifically citing “he” or “she” in reference to voting privileges.² Although by 1892 women cast about 25% of New Jersey votes, their participation in the elective process was not always looked upon with favor by some men:

...Nothing can be a greater mockery of this invaluable and sacred right, than to suffer it to be exercised by persons, who do not even pretend to any judgment on the subject.³



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A seemingly minor referendum held in 1807 rescinded the right for the next 113 years. A special election conducted to select the site for the new Essex County court house was so corrupt (some voters, both male and female, voted 4 to 5 times) that it precipitated the all-male state legislature to enact a law limiting voting to “free white male citizens.” Obviously, suffrage took a giant step backward as women virtually became non-citizens once again.

¹ An analysis of Ocean County’s 1996 municipal elective posts indicated that of the 33 municipal mayors, 4 were female (12.1%), and of the 192 townships or borough legislative board seats, 38 were held by women (19.8%).

² Anne Firor Scott and Andrew MacKay Scott, *One Half of the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 5-6.

³ Attributed to William Griffith, a lawyer said to be “in favor of constitutional reform.” From an article by John T. Cunningham, “Votes for Women (again!),” *Yesterday Today in New Jersey*, August/September, 1995, p. 4.

If you wish to learn more about “Ocean County Women in the Legislature: The Struggle for Equality in Representation”, this publication is available for sale at the Museum book store.