



SHEDDING NEW
LIGHT ON THE

Suffrage Centennial Celebration

BY HON. HENRY S. COHN

ON AUGUST 26, 1920, US SECRETARY OF STATE BAINBRIDGE COLBY declared that the 19th Amendment, which prohibits federal or state governments from denying anyone the right to vote based on sex, had been ratified by the necessary 36 states and was now adopted into the federal Constitution. This year marks centennial celebration of this event, which was also the theme of the American Bar Association's Law Day program in May.

There have been two recent developments in this celebration that are of interest to the Connecticut bar. First, the state archivist, Lizette Pelletier, has released materials relating to Connecticut's role in the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Second, a new book on the role of imaging in the fight for ratification has been issued by the University of Chicago Press, titled *Picturing Political Power*, by Allison K. Lange, a professor at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Worcester, MA. Lange addressed the Connecticut Historical Society in November 2019 and will speak at the annual meeting of the Connecticut Supreme Court Historical Society on April 29, 2021.



Image credit: The Library of Congress

Suffrage Centennial Celebration



The documents from the archivist show that Connecticut's role in adopting the 19th Amendment was full of controversy. In the 1870s, some people in public positions opposed the right of women to vote. Joseph R. Hawley, a former Connecticut governor and chairman of the 1876 Centennial Convention in Philadelphia, tried in vain to prevent Susan B. Anthony from speaking at the convention at a Fourth of July program. Anthony rushed to the stage and gave her address, which she called a "Declaration of Rights of Women in the United States." Another opponent of suffrage was the Reverend Horace Bushnell, who in 1869 published *Women's Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature*.

Many Connecticut citizens favored suffrage and attended meetings and rallies in support of it. The leader of the pro-suffrage movement in Connecticut from the 1870s until her death in 1907 was Harriet Beecher Stowe's half-sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, whose efforts were backed by her husband, John Hooker. John drafted the Married Women's Property Act, passed by the General Assembly in 1877, removing the common law

provision of coverture. He also trained and supported the admission to the Connecticut bar, Mary Hall. John Hooker wrote that the right of women to vote was the most important issue of his day.

Unfortunately, both Isabella and John died before 1920. In the summer of 1920, the suffragists turned to Connecticut for our state to be designated the "perfect 36th"—the state that would, by legislative action, complete the necessary ratification to make the 19th Amendment part of the Constitution.

Although our General Assembly was willing to ratify, three men stood in the way of this accomplishment. The first was J. Henry Roraback, who controlled patronage in this state. He feared that giving women the vote would increase the pool of voters and diminish his political power.

The second opponent was the man known as "Senator No," Frank Brandegee of New London. He had earned his nickname by voting in the US Senate against any federal progressive legisla-

tion, including income taxation, direct election of senators, and child welfare laws. He had repeatedly issued statements in the Senate mocking the suffragists for "bleating around here about their saving democracy by forcing their way into caucuses and conventions."

The third major opponent of ratification was the governor, Marcus Holcomb. Governor Holcomb had served as a superior court judge until he turned 70. He then ran for and won the governorship in 1914, 1916, and 1918. As governor, he was seen as the protector of the home front during World War I, looking out for food supplies for Connecticut residents and watching out for residents who might be German spies. For these activities, he was everyone's "Uncle Marcus," revered as a hero. Holcomb's public stance was that he would not call a special session of the legislature in 1920, and that any ratification vote should occur in 1921 at the regular session established by the Connecticut Constitution.

Although suffragists and others called on Governor Holcomb through the summer of 1920 to hold a special session, he

remained adamant. Writing to a prominent businessman in New Haven who had asked Holcomb to act, Holcomb declared: "A special emergency cannot be manufactured by insistent and persistent appeals. Otherwise, in these temperamental times, the General Assembly would be in continuous session."

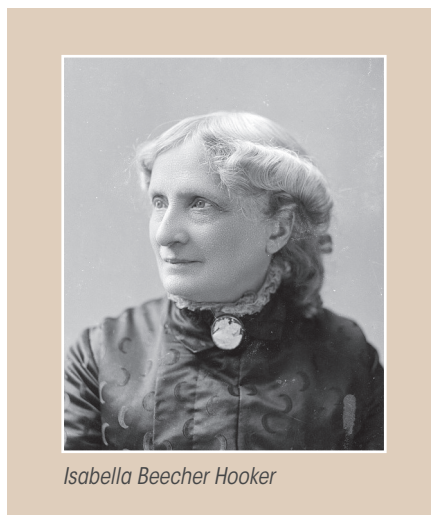
The suffragists gave up on Connecticut and moved on to Tennessee. In a special session on August 9, 1920, the Tennessee State Senate ratified the 19th Amendment. Then, on August 18, 1920, by a mere one vote, the Tennessee House of Representatives ratified. On August 24, 1920, Tennessee Governor Albert Houston Roberts certified to US Secretary of State Colby that Tennessee had ratified, and, on August 26, 1920, Colby announced the adoption of the 19th Amendment. Tennessee claimed the honor of being the 36th state to ratify.

It was after Secretary Colby's announcement of adoption that Connecticut played an important role. Connecticut Governor Holcomb learned in early September that Tennessee's House of Representatives, on a motion to reconsider, had taken another vote, and this time overwhelmingly rejected ratification. Holcomb then received two letters informing him that a Tennessee group opposed to suffrage had gone to court to argue that Colby's announcement of the adoption of the 19th Amendment was defective.

Governor Holcomb agreed at last to call a special session, but he inexplicably stated that the purpose of the special session was to reconcile differences between the Connecticut election laws and the provisions of the 19th Amendment. But, when a vote was taken on September 14, 1920, both houses of the General Assembly did more than merely change the election laws; they voted to ratify the 19th Amendment. Because of the disparity between Governor Holcomb's announced call of the legislature and the vote that occurred, Governor Holcomb was forced

to call the legislature again into special session on September 21, 1920, to legalize the ratification vote. Connecticut became the 37th state to ratify.

Connecticut's ratification vote, coming after the announcement of Tennessee's ratification by Secretary Colby, rendered moot the pending court challenge to Tennessee's ratification. This was recognized by Justice Louis Brandeis in *Leser v. Garnett*, 258 U.S. 130 (1922). The documents released by the state archivist demonstrate that Connecticut, though slow to respond, did play a role in securing the vote for women.



Isabella Beecher Hooker

Professor Lange's excellent book takes a look at another aspect of the struggle of women to obtain the right to vote: the role of imagery in the suffragists' campaign. Throughout most of the 19th century, images of heroic males, such as George Washington, dominated books and magazines. The exceptions were portraits of Martha Washington and of the opera singer Jenny Lind, whom P.T. Barnum of Connecticut had brought to the United States. According to Lange, activist women became the subject of cartoons that portrayed them as "man-hating harridans" and home-wreckers.

Among the examples Lange gives is a cartoon of Susan B. Anthony as a disolute Uncle Sam, published when she cast

her vote in the 1872 presidential election. It was captioned: "The woman who dared," which would have been taken as an insult to her. In the background are suffragists rallying under the glance of a policewoman, and two men, one who appears homeless and the other struggling to care for an infant.

The suffragists fought back first by following Frederick Douglass' advice regarding African Americans. In an address delivered in Boston in 1861 entitled "Pictures and Progress," Douglass pointed to pictures as a "mighty power" that if used correctly would lead to a "wondrous conquest."

With Douglass' words in mind, the National Woman's Suffrage Association raised funds and, beginning in 1881, published a six-volume work edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and entitled *History of Woman Suffrage*. These books displayed photographs that made women look equal to men in leadership roles. Several other photographs, published separately from the *History*, especially one of Susan B. Anthony at her desk, also improved the image of the suffrage movement.

After 1913, when Alice Paul formed the Women's Party, cartoons, lithographs, and photographs in the media became more favorable to women and were able to offset the still-present anti-suffrage forces. Lange sets forth the images used by the suffragists and the response in the press to the massive parade for women staged by Alice Paul in 1913.

Lange concludes: "Though the suffrage movement seems distant, their visual campaign illuminates the roots of today's gendered political imagery and its constraints." ■

Hon. Henry S. Cohn is a Connecticut judge trial referee assigned to New Britain. He has given two lectures on suffrage, one at the fall meeting of the Association for the Study of Connecticut History and another at a program sponsored by the Connecticut Women's Centennial Commission.