



The "Justice Bell" and the Strafford woman who envisioned it, Katharine Wentworth Ruschenberger, toured every county in Pennsylvania in 1915.

Another bell proclaimed liberty throughout the land.

By William C. Kashatus

Today marks the 90th anniversary of the certification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. It was the culmination of one of the most controversial chapters of American history, spanning nearly 70 years.

Of all the names associated with the women's suffrage movement, Katharine Wentworth Ruschenberger's is one of the least known. But her brilliant idea of a Liberty Bell replica dedicated to female suffrage — and her generosity in paying for it — were instrumental in the campaign for the amendment.

At the turn of the 20th century, many Americans believed the vote would make women more worldly, less feminine, and less able to play their primary roles: wife and mother. In fact, the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage called the suffragists "radicals bent on destroying American values and replacing them with socialism."

In Pennsylvania, the strength of the suffrage movement was tested in 1915, when a referendum was put on the ballot. It would determine whether the commonwealth would become the first state east of the Mississippi to grant women full voting rights.

Local suffragists joined with the 70,000-member Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association to launch a statewide campaign for the measure. One member, Katharine Ruschenberger of Strafford, devised a plan to bring more attention to the struggle: She would have a bronze replica of the Liberty Bell cast, by the Manley Bell Co. of Troy, N.Y., and cover the \$4,000 cost.

Ruschenberger called it the "Justice Bell" out of her belief that women's suffrage was a matter of social and political justice. Like the Liberty Bell, it was inscribed with the words: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto

all the inhabitants thereof." There was also an addendum: "Establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty."

Ruschenberger had the bell's clapper chained to the side until such time as women could vote. That highlighted the irony of being an American who was denied the inalienable rights guaranteed by the Founding Fathers because of her sex.

Between June 15 and Nov. 2, the day of the referendum, the Justice Bell traveled the state, stopping in all 67 counties. Newspapers reported that "enthusiastic crowds" greeted the bell, chanting, "Father, brother, husband, son, vote for Amendment Number One!"

On Nov. 2, 1915, women were stationed at every precinct in the state. The suffrage issue was the only one facing voters, and registration was unprecedented.

The referendum ultimately lost by 55,686 votes out of 826,382. Thirty-three of Pennsylvania's 67 counties had voted for it, but Philadelphia, plagued by corruption and prejudice against the more radical elements of the suffrage movement, voted against. The women of Pennsylvania would have to wait five more years to vote.

On Sept. 25, 1920, a month after the ratification of the 19th Amendment, Ruschenberger freed the Justice Bell's clapper. Joining other suffragists, Gov. William C. Sproul, and Philadelphia Mayor J. Hampton Moore in the square behind Independence Hall, she watched her 17-year-old niece ring the Justice Bell for the first time. The long struggle had finally ended.

Today the Justice Bell resides at the base of the bell tower of the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge National Historical Park, in keeping with Ruschenberger's last request before her death in 1943.

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