

Blanche Ames: Suffrage Leader

As a suffragist, Blanche Ames organized and led many in the fight for equality. We will examine a few examples of how Blanche organized and led in the fight for women's suffrage.

In 1914 Blanche is appointed treasurer of the Massachusetts Suffrage Organization and in May 1914 Blanche founded and became President of the Easton Women Suffrage League.¹ Involved in both groups, with the same goal, Blanche held and hosted many events. She presided over a suffrage rally that was held at Oakes Ames Memorial Hall in Easton, MA and over 700 people attended; great success.² Towards the end of 1914 suffragists across Massachusetts were pleased to hear that the question of women's suffrage was to become a ballot question on November 2, 1915. Blanche's fight for suffrage was just beginning.

On January 13, 1915, Blanche hosts a suffrage meeting inside her two story ornate library at Borderland to organize and plan for the coming year and the ballot question. Oakes records that day in his diary:

"Wednesday, 13 January 1915

A heavy snow, driven by high winds.

I never heard the wind blow with such violence as it did last night and before daylight this morning. The fields were white with snow. When Blanche began final preparations for her entertainment, I surely felt hopelessness rouse within me.

Fully forty people were present at the suffrage meeting which was held in the library at about 2:45. At lunch we thought it would be indeed remarkable if 20 people came after a storm which the papers say is the worst in the records of the Weather Bureau. So, when Blanche introduced Mrs. Park she was surprised to face nearly twice the number of people we had estimated would attend. The guests were from Brockton and the meeting was held to stimulate enthusiasm for suffrage in the social leaders of Brockton. The last guest departed at about 5:45 and at 6:15 Mrs. Park went away. "³

Close to 40 people braved the winter weather and attended Blanches' meeting. *The Brockton Enterprise* describes this suffrage meeting:

BROCKTON DAILY ENTERPRISE, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13, 1915

SUFFRAGISTS HEAR MAUD WOOD PARK

Gathering at Borderland, the Home of Mrs. Oakes Ames

BROCKTON WOMEN ATTEND

Vote in National House Has Not Disheartened Them

Two-score suffrage enthusiasts from this city braved the storm of Wednesday to attend the at-home tendered by Mrs. Oakes Ames of North Easton to suffrage workers of Brockton and the Easton's at her beautiful home, Borderland, North Easton. Notwithstanding the inclement weather the event proved most enjoyable, the guests being given cordial greeting by the hostess, who was assisted by Mrs. Maud Wood Park of Boston, one of the leading suffrage workers of Massachusetts.

Many of the ladies made the trip in their own autos while others went by trolley, motor cars sent by Mrs. Ames conveying them from the end of the trolley line to Borderland, about two miles away. The gathering was held in the luxurious library, which was decorated with palms. A cheery fire glowing in the fireplace made sharp contrast with the scenery outside, where the shade trees were ridged inch-deep with snow.

Following a few words of introduction by Mrs. Ames, Mrs. Park gave an interesting address on suffrage work and spoke at length on what she termed the woman movement, showing a bit of the history of the suffrage movement in this country, referring to Susan B. Anthony and her work; and the criticism which she was obliged to endure. She also referred to the work in Australia and New Zealand, saying that in the latter country, of 89 percent of women on the voting list, 84 percent turned out to vote.

Mrs. Park exhibited a map showing the suffrage states, those that have partial suffrage and those that have no woman suffrage. She said that she considered the vote in the national legislature Tuesday as really a gain for the suffragists and not a failure, and expressed herself as very much pleased with the result.

Mrs. Park answered many questions from her audience, including some concerning the "ignorant vote," so-called, and showed that some of the women who are not ignorant are just the ones who need the vote. She told of the sentiment growing in the south in favor of equal suffrage because of industrial problems. The questions touched also upon divorce in suffrage States, numbers of women and men in prison in these States, industrial laws and conditions. She said that industrial conditions are not the same in Massachusetts as in Colorado and laws should not be the same. Mrs. Park emphasized the fact that each woman should not consider herself only. When considering as to whether she ought to have the vote, but to consider the matter in a broad way and whether by voting she could help other women.

Following the address the guests were given an opportunity to meet Mrs. Park. Buffet luncheon was served in the spacious dining room. Palms and cut flowers were used in decorations throughout the house.

The guests present included Mrs. Maud Wood Park of Boston, Miss Almeda Bagley of Norwood, campaign leader for Plymouth County; Miss Etta L. Jacobs, president of the Brockton Equal Suffrage Association; Mrs. E. W. Gardner, president of the Brockton Woman's Club; Mrs. D. E. Brown, secretary of the Brockton Equal Suffrage Association; Mrs. Elsie Gardner Burselely, campaign leader for Brockton; Mrs. L. Evelyn Harriman, Miss Elizabeth Laird, Mrs. Charles S. Millet, Miss Lucia Millet, Mrs. S. H. Gardner, Miss L. Frances Estes, Mrs. James Kenney, Mrs. C. E. Lovell of Whitman, Mrs. S. H. Huggon, Mrs. Thomas Crowell, Mrs. Evie Cross Daniels, Mrs. Earl P. Blake, Miss Jennie H. Richmond, Mrs. Charles K. Richmond, Mrs. Francis E. Shaw, Mrs. John S. Kent, Mrs. W. M. Nute, Mrs. George W. R. Hill, Mrs. Ira W. Holbrook, Mrs. George A. Torrey, Mrs. Norman H. Shaw, Miss Hazel Wing, Mrs. Anna P. Boynton, Miss Amy Sherman, Mrs. Charles A. Tinkham, Mrs. Frank A. McLaughlin and Mrs. William A. Hogan, all of Brockton; Miss Mary E. Lamprey, librarian at the North Easton Public Library, Mrs. E. Kelley and Mrs. Robert Porter of North Easton.⁴

As a result from this meeting, Blanche and her suffrage groups were able to organize over 45 events leading up to the November 2nd election day.

The January 13, 1915 suffrage meeting held at Borderland illustrates the hard work, planning and the resolve Blanche had to get the suffrage question passed.

In early 2020 many local organizations came together to recreate that meeting. Led by Katherine Honey of the Southeast Massachusetts STEM network, student Olivia Pierce of Oliver Ames High School, who created a script and directed a short reenactment, Ezra Werb and Laura Bahr who edited and compiled the video. Visit: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FM7EMd_xgo0 to check out the video.

On November 2, 1915 the men of Massachusetts vote no on the ballot question that would have allowed women to gain the right to vote. Once the measure failed Blanche symbolically rang the bell that now sits on top of the Ames mansion everyday day until women across the nation got the right to vote.

Being a woman of action, Blanche did not let this get her down. She continued to organize and rally. Author Anne Biller Clark writes, "Since Blanche was primarily a doer rather than a writer, her activities for suffrage and perspectives on reform must be traced through newspaper accounts."² Blanche

continued to do suffrage work in 1916 and in 1917 there was a senate race in Massachusetts that gained Blanche's full attention. The following excerpt is taken from the Easton Journal, 1995:

One of the most outspoken and powerful opponents of a federal amendment (on women's suffrage) was John Wingate Weeks, the state's junior senator, who proclaimed, "I would not vote for the suffrage amendment if the whole state of Massachusetts urged me to do so." Despite her sympathy with the Republican Party, Blanche as chair of the congressional committee of the state suffrage association, headed a campaign to defeat Weeks and elect David I. Walsh, a suffragist.

Under her leadership Walsh became the first Catholic and only the fourth Democrat in the history of the state to be elected to the senate. A dispirited Weeks attributed much of the reason for his defeat to the suffragists while a joyous Blanche danced around the library table with election returns in her hand.⁵

Blanche was able to rally her suffrage troops and oust an incumbent senator and install a senator who favored suffrage. The following year, President Wilson called a special session of Congress to consider women's suffrage. Once again Blanche rallied her suffragists to commence a letter writing campaign to the Massachusetts Congressional delegation, resulting in over 5,000 letters and telegrams.

"In a bipartisan effort, senators approved the national suffrage amendment with **two votes to spare**, 56 to 25. A few minutes later, Vice President Thomas Marshall joined prominent suffragists for a signing ceremony in his office in the Capitol. The amendment had passed a major hurdle; now it would go to the states for ratification." ⁶ On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment and on August 26, 1920, President Wilson signs it into law. It is said, that after the 19th amendment became law, a few months later, President Wilson comes to Boston and Blanche presented the President with a bouquet of yellow flowers.

For real change, you need courageous leaders who organize. Blanche was such a leader at a time in which our nation needed to recognize and enfranchise women. Though Blanche's story is a story in Massachusetts, her efforts had national implications; supporting and campaigning for a new senator who ended up voting in favor of suffrage, which passed the senate by a slim 2 vote margin; Blanche and the strong women of Massachusetts accomplished that.

¹ Kenneally, J., 1993. *Blanche Ames and Woman Suffrage*. Friends of Borderland.

² Clark, A., 2001. *My Dear Mrs. Ames*. New York: P. Lang.

³ Ames, Oakes. *Diary*, 1915.

⁴ BROCKTON DAILY ENTERPRISE, 1915. SUFFRAGISTS HEAR MAUD WOOD PARK. 14 January 1915.

⁵ EASTON JOURNAL, 1995. BLANCHE AMES FOUGHT TO VOTE. 29 September 1995.

⁶ Senate.gov. 2021. *U.S. Senate: Woman Suffrage Centennial*. [online] Available at: <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/People/Women/Part3_TheLastTrench.htm> [Accessed 8 January 2021].