

First in the Nation

In 1919, UNH convened a women's School for Citizenship that proved a model for the nation

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BOSTON POST PHOTOGRAPH, JULY 11, 1919, WITH CAPTION "WOMEN TAKING COURSE AT THE SCHOOL FOR PROSPECTIVE WOMEN VOTERS."

It was an adventure, they said. What had seemed like a short research project ended up consuming a whole semester for [Nicole Ruane](#), lecturer in humanities, and two [humanities](#) dual majors, Annelise Papinsick '21 and Virginia Walsh '21. The charge? Find out what there is to know about a women's School for Citizenship held at

UNH in 1919 (then called New Hampshire College) during the runup to the 19th Amendment's ratification, extending the vote to women.

Michele Dillon, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, had put out the call for help with historical research after UNH had been contacted by the New Hampshire Women's Foundation. The School was the first of its kind in the nation, the Foundation said. They wanted to mount a plaque on campus to commemorate the event, but details were few.

Dillon's curiosity was piqued. Why was this school held at UNH? Who was involved? How was it received? Not only did she love the idea of a plaque, but she wanted it to be displayed prominently and to include a QR code that cell phone users could use to link to a website explaining the history.

The Team



“One of the great things about this project was that the three of us learned about the material, did the research and made determinations of what to do together as we hit different stages of information. It was like an adventure! We did not know what we would find.”

—Nicole Ruane, lecturer in humanities



“I now feel infinitely more knowledgeable about the history of women's suffrage. It was not as simple as ‘women argued for the right to vote and got it’ — there was a lot of planning, strategizing and balancing revolution with acceptability, as well as racial tensions.”

—Annelise Papinsick '21



“One of the most memorable parts of the project was when we searched through heaps of census records to attempt to locate possible evidence of suffragists of color in New Hampshire from 1900-1920. Reading those primary sources made it all feel super real and impactful. I am really proud of this project! It was a great way to end my college experience at UNH.”

—Virginia Walsh '21

In stepped Ruane. She was teaching a humanities capstone seminar in which students were conducting advanced research on topics concerning New Hampshire women. Perfect. Papinsick and Walsh were interested, and all three decided to work as a team on the research and website.

When Google returned just two short articles in an opening search, the researchers thought there wouldn't be much to find on their topic. Turns out there was.

Over 60 sources later, which include newspaper, magazine and journal articles as well as books, the team found that an event launched from the brain of Portsmouth, N.H., suffragist Mary Inez Wood became a model for the nation, educating a generation of women as they prepared to execute their new right to vote.

The women's School for Citizenship was a 4-day event held in July 1919, comprised of three, three-hour seminars daily, punctuated by meals at which vigorous discussion took place. Over 200 women from around New Hampshire, Boston and beyond gathered at New Hampshire College to learn from instructors and guest speakers, both female and male, that included suffrage movement luminaires such as Antoinette Funk of Chicago. The event was non-partisan so time was carved out for presentations of both Republican and Democratic platforms. The women learned about topics such as town and country government, reconstruction problems, child welfare, bills and how they are enacted, law and its limitations, and national problems. Several lectures were dedicated to the responsibilities of citizenship. Students lodged in Smith Hall or with local families and, as one paper reported, political debates lasted well into the night.

Wood, who was active in promoting women's causes, said she was inspired by Nancy Schoonmaker of the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association who had been delivering lectures on government. "Let's have a school for citizenship!" Wood said, to help women learn about their rights and responsibilities as voters. She brought the idea to New Hampshire College's President Ralph Hetzel who was enthusiastic, the Portsmouth Herald reported.

The School was a huge success, according to news accounts in all the prominent New Hampshire newspapers, including the Manchester Union where it was featured as front-page news four days running. At least five papers in Boston provided coverage and articles appeared as far away as South Carolina, South Dakota, Michigan, Wyoming and Pennsylvania.

Those involved in organizing and teaching the School, clearly realizing they were on to something, wanted to replicate it far and wide. Suffrage leaders and educators throughout the nation agreed and set to work.

"In the end, hundreds of similar programs took place all over the country and the League of Women Voters held several schools to train leaders to hold their own local schools," says the team on their [project website](#). "The League had a plan for every state as well as a correspondence course for Alaska."

For New Hampshire, which boasts the first in the nation primary, it seems there is another first to herald.

But whether or not the School for Citizenship was inclusive was on the researchers' minds.

Knowing there was a rift between some white suffragists nationally on the role that Black women should play in the suffrage fight (some were quite bigoted and

exclusionary), the team looked for evidence of Black women organizing or attending the School. They were not able to obtain a list of School registrants, however, and their research to identify Black New Hampshire suffragists was not fruitful. Nor was the team able to identify any involvement of indigenous women or other women of color.

DRILLING WOMEN RECRUITS FOR VOTING ARMY

They Caught the Political Bee Quickly When Sent to School in New Hampshire to Learn Men's Grand Old Game of Politics—Dropped Knitting and Crocheting When They Heard About "the Don't Give-a-Damn Session" of Congress



SCENES AT DURHAM, N. H.
Top, at Left—School of Citizenship in Session. At Right—Mrs Nancy Schoonmaker, Teacher of Practical Politics. Middle, at Left—Alexander Murline, chairman Democratic State Committee of New Hampshire. At Right—Mrs Mary I. Wood, Organizer of the School. Bottom, Left—Prof James Richardson, Dartmouth. Right—Some of the Attendants.

FROM THE BOSTON GLOBE, JULY 13, 1919.

Without the registration list, it is impossible to know who the women were that attended the School, but it may have been limited to middle- and upper-class women. One Boston newspaper quoted a School instructor saying, "The great pity of this first school

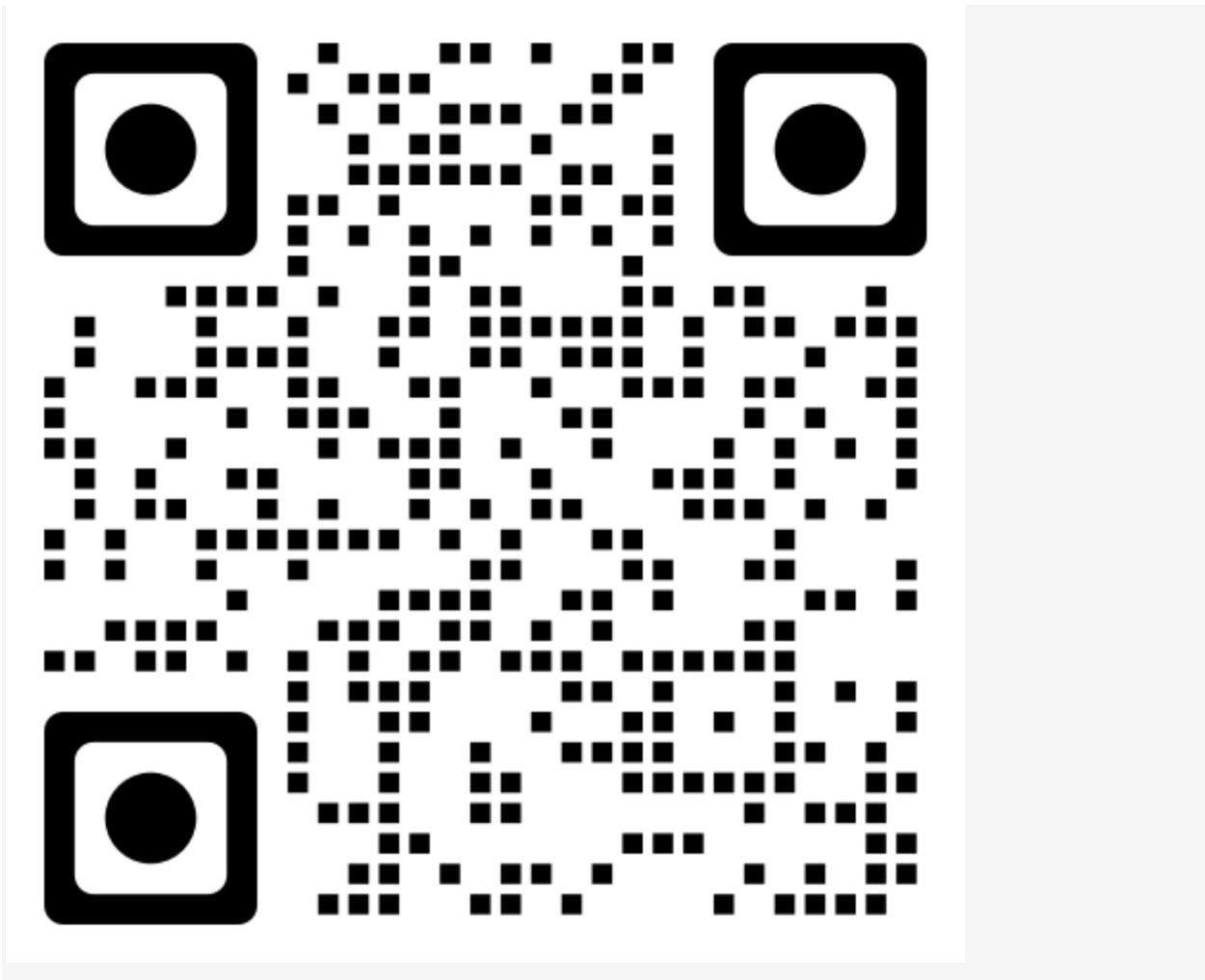
for women voters is the absence of the woman worker, the very poor woman. She should be here."

For the women who did attend this and the schools that followed, it was an exciting opportunity. Perhaps men were in as much need of citizenship education as women, but women proactively seeking instruction at this time could serve several purposes, the researchers found. One was to promote the idea to men — who, let's not forget, would be the ones voting on ratification — that women were ready for this right. Another was to ensure that women were confident they understood the issues so that their voting decisions would be made independently of husbands or male relatives. The schools could allow women to demonstrate that they were not radicals, as many anti-suffragists feared, but reasoned and reasonable women. And, of course, women could exult together in preparing for the joy and responsibility that many were so looking forward to in the vote.

Plaque Inscription

School for Citizenship

From July 8-11, 1919, 200 women from across New Hampshire attended the nation's first School for Citizenship at New Hampshire College (now UNH) to study the duties, rights and responsibilities of citizenship in preparation to exercise their right to vote resulting from the impending ratification of the U.S. Constitution's Nineteenth Amendment, in New Hampshire (September 1919) and nationwide (August 1920). Due to the School's success, it became a model adopted at state and private colleges nationwide.



“The impression from our sources is that the information they were learning, and *the feeling of having a right to have an opinion about it*, was new and exciting to many of them,” says Ruane.

Ruane, Papinsick and Walsh have been invigorated and inspired by this project, they say. In addition to the School’s [website](#), the team developed Wikipedia pages dedicated to some of the women involved, including [one on New Hampshire’s Mary Inez Wood](#). They hope that more people will be as impressed as they have been when learning about the contributions and talents of these impactful women.

The School for Citizenship plaque is in production now and will be installed this summer in Murkland Hall’s courtyard, on the lawn adjacent to Thompson Hall. A ceremony will take place in the fall at a time to be determined.

“I am delighted that the plaque will be at such a central place on campus,” says Dillon. “To me, the School represents the promise of democracy, even as it may have been uneven in whom it served. It’s exciting to see that UNH played a foundational role in women’s suffrage.”

- [WRITTEN BY:](#)

THE COLLEGE LETTER



University of New Hampshire

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