

# Recognizing Tompkins County's Suffrage Pioneers

A commemorative marker project  
of the  
Tompkins County Historical Commission  
2020

Tompkins County  
Historical Commission

• SUFFRAGIST •  
Juanita Breckenridge Bates  
1860 - 1946

*"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."*

-Nineteenth Amendment  
of the U.S. Constitution  
Ratified August 26, 1920

We celebrate the rich history of the movement in Tompkins County to obtain the vote for women and recognize the local women and their allies who helped make the drive for the women's vote reality. These women described themselves as suffragists, people who believed in peaceful, constitutional campaign methods, although they were called by their opponents many derogatory names, including suffragette.

In Tompkins County, as throughout New York State and across the nation, women fought to achieve the right to vote. More than a half-century of tireless advocacy brought about ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920, which gave women the legal basis to exercise their right to vote. It would be some decades before the vote was fully extended to all, and even longer for women to achieve full citizenship.

Many people in Tompkins County actively supported the suffrage movement, and were committed to winning the vote for women. They formed advocacy organizations, held community meetings, canvassed throughout the county and across New York State, linked with Prohibitionists and Grange members, and organized and conducted two state conventions of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association that were held in Ithaca in 1894 and 1911.

Partnering with property owners, the Tompkins County Historical Commission has erected building markers recognizing eleven local individuals key in the drive for women's suffrage. These markers are placed in public areas related to these honorees—near where they lived, where they studied or preached, or at a building named in their honor.

## **Juanita Breckenridge Bates, 1860 - 1946**

**Breckenridge Place - 100-108 W. Seneca Street, Ithaca**

Rev. Juanita Breckenridge came to Tompkins County in 1892 to serve as minister of the Brooktondale Congregational Church. She married Frederick Bates, Town of Caroline Supervisor, and relocated to Ithaca where her husband served for a term as mayor. Their home on North Tioga Street served as a hub for women's activities. As a suffrage leader, Juanita Breckenridge Bates was active in the Political Study Club, City Federation of Women's Clubs, Ithaca Woman's Club, and the New York State Woman Suffrage Association. In 1920, she served as the first president of the Tompkins County League of Women Voters.

## **Lucy Hawley Calkins, 1864 - 1940**

**Beahtee Center - 318 N. Albany Street, Ithaca**

From a reform-minded family, Lucy Calkins came to Ithaca in 1895, when her husband became president of the Ithaca Salt Company, living at 510 N. Albany Street (now demolished.) She supported temperance and suffrage, becoming one of the founding members and president of the Political Study Club. Calkins hosted meetings in her home and spoke throughout the county. She was a New York delegate at National American Woman Suffrage meetings in 1898, 1908, and 1913; chaired the Tax Suffrage Standing Committee of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association in 1913; led the Tompkins County Woman Suffrage Association, the Board of Child Welfare, and the City Federation of Women's Clubs, and was the second president of the Tompkins County League of Women Voters, about which she wrote a short history.

## **Robert T. Jones, circa 1850 - 1932**

*The First Baptist Church in Ithaca - 309 N. Cayuga Street, Ithaca*

Rev. Robert T. Jones served as pastor of the DeWitt Park Baptist Church from 1880-1915, and welcomed the annual conventions of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association in 1894 and 1911. He delivered the invocation at the 1894 convention and prayers at the 1911 meeting, bold actions in the face of some pastoral opposition. In 1894, as a member of the Tompkins County Political Equality League, Rev. Jones was among those elected to carry the local petition that urged the elimination of the word 'male' from the New York State Constitution during the constitutional convention.

## **Cyrus Heizer, 1849 - 1914**

*First Unitarian Society of Ithaca - 306 N. Aurora Street, Ithaca*

Rev. Cyrus W. Heizer was Minister of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca from 1901 until his death in 1914. The Unitarian Society was the site of many suffrage meetings, including the 1894 New York State Woman Suffrage Association conference, and significant community meetings thereafter. In 1912, Rev. Heizer preached a series entitled "Let Woman Live Out her Own Life," voicing impassioned support for women's equality. "I do not see why we should talk of manhood suffrage or womanhood suffrage. It is human suffrage," he said. "...Woman's cause is man's; they rise and sink together." Let her make herself her own, he wrote, "to give or keep, to live and learn." His sermon was published in 1913 as a pamphlet for the Equal Suffrage Club.

## **Libbie Jayne Sweetland, 1869 - 1958**

*Dryden Village Hall - 16 South Street, Dryden*

Running on the Democratic-Prohibition Party ticket, Libbie Jayne Sweetland, of the Village of Dryden, in 1899 was elected to serve on the Educational Administrative Board for the towns of Dryden, Groton, Lansing and Caroling, beating a male candidate running on the Republican ticket. Republicans swept all other elections in Tompkins County that year, and her defeated opponent wrote to complain that Republicans had not voted their ticket, but bolted for a woman.

## **Helen Brewster Owens, 1881 - 1968**

*The First Congregational Church of Ithaca*

*309 Highland Road, Ithaca*

Daughter of a Kansas suffrage pioneer, Helen Brewster married Frederick Owens. The couple moved to Ithaca when he was hired as a math professor at Cornell. Helen pursued graduate studies, receiving a PhD in mathematics in 1910. She lived at 110 Westbourne Lane. While teaching mathematics at Cornell and Wells College and raising two daughters, she served as chair of the Resolutions Committee of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association (1910); officer of the Political Study Club (1910-1916), and organized the College Equal Suffrage League at Cornell in 1911. She was the first president of the Tompkins County Suffrage Association when it was formed in 1913. Owens campaigned for suffrage in Kansas and New York, and was hired as organizer and chair for the Empire State Campaign Committee's Sixth District.

## Carrie E. Bouton 1853 - 1917

The Clinton House - 306 N. Cayuga Street, Ithaca

Carrie E. Richardson moved with her parents from New Hampshire to the Town of Caroline and later taught at Ithaca's Central School. In 1882 she married DeWitt Bouton, a lawyer and newspaper owner. They lived at 413 N. Cayuga Street. As Mrs. Carrie Bouton, she headed the 1894 Tompkins County Political Equality League and the Tompkins County Temperance Society, and that year attended a meeting in Ithaca with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other state suffrage leaders in preparation for sending a petition to the New York State Constitutional Convention that would remove the word 'male' from the state constitution. That attempt failed. She was committed to social reform, in 1899 leading a campaign against "houses of ill fame" in Ithaca, calling for an end of the practice of shielding men's identities while jailing women for the crime of prostitution.

**The Clinton House also played a significant role in the local Women's Suffrage movement, serving in 1894 as headquarters of the 26th annual convention of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association. (The annual convention of the NYSSWA returned to Ithaca in 1911.)**

## At Cornell University

### James Oliver, 1829 - 1895

Professor and chair of the Cornell mathematics department from 1871 until his death in 1895, James Oliver supervised five of the department's first six graduate students in math, three of them women. Active in reform activities and passionate about ethical issues, he was a member of the early 1870s Liberal League and Radical Association, and of the Tompkins County Political Equality League. He participated in the 1894 local petition drive to strike the word 'male' from the New York State Constitution. At the 1894 convention of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Association in Ithaca, he delivered remarks in support of granting women the right to vote, before introducing speaker Susan B. Anthony.

### Nathaniel Schmidt, 1862 - 1939

Invited by Cornell President Jacob Gould Schurman to create a Department of Semitic Languages and Literature at Cornell, Professor Nathaniel Schmidt and his wife Ellen, both Swedes, were active and enthusiastic supporters of women's suffrage. Professor Schmidt was a charter member and vice president of the state Men's League for Woman Suffrage. He participated in the 1913 suffrage campaign, testifying before the U.S. Congress; and was a major speaker at a 1914 conference, and in 1915 at the Cornell Conference on International Relations, an event focused on hope for peace in Europe but with suffrage overtones. Schmidt frequently attended suffrage meetings, introducing speakers, speaking, and writing articles for the local newspapers and other publications.

*Harriet May Mills, 1857 - 1935*

*Isabel Howland, 1859 - 1942*

Educated at Cornell University, Harriet May Mills (Class of 1879) and Isabel Howland (Class of 1881), both from activist reform families, became pivotal leaders of the statewide women's suffrage movement. Both Mills and Howland served as secretaries of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Association and then as presidents. They brought the NYSSW's conventions to Ithaca in 1894 and 1911, and Mills served as the association's president at the 1911 convention. Mills and Howland were key figures in organizing and carrying out the 1894 petition drive to amend the New York State Constitution by eliminating the word 'male'. Following elimination of that hard-fought but unsuccessful campaign, Susan B. Anthony praised and credited Mills and Howland as the next generation who would "pull us to the promised land."

Mills ran for New York secretary of state in 1920 with unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate Eli Smith. A building is named in her honor at the New York State Fair, and her house in Syracuse (now a halfway house) has a New York State historical marker. "Opendorp," Isabel Howland's home in Sherwood, NY, is now part of the Howland Stone Store Museum and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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