



This was Nevada Series

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Frances A. Williamson: Pioneering Nevada Suffragist

The current exhibition celebrating Women's History month on the campus of the University of Nevada in Reno features a section on Nevada women who laid the foundations for the state's suffrage campaign, 1910-1914. This movement gave Nevada women the vote several years before their sisters in the Mid-West and the East. Frances A. Williamson was the founder of the state's first feminist organization.

Born Frances A. Slaven in Canada in 1842, she came to Austin, Nevada in 1863 to teach school. Within two years, she had moved up to the principalship of the school. On June 28, 1868, she married John R. Williamson, a former Lander County Sheriff who was the proprietor of a hardware store in Austin at the time of the marriage. Six children were born to the couple over the next eight years, but four of them did not survive infancy and the oldest son, John, died in Carson City in March 1891. Three years later, April 28, 1894, she suffered another tragedy, the suicide of her husband. He had previously taken an active role in community and state affairs, serving as Austin's Superintendent of Schools, 1872-1878 and Lander County Assemblyman, 1885-1887, before moving up to the State Senate in 1890. His son's death and business reverses in the early nineties unnerved him and he was unwell for some time before he took his life.

Mrs. Williamson had periodically taught school and worked in her husband's business after her marriage. She took a prominent part in Austin's social life, but her view of the world extended considerably beyond the purview of Austin and Pony Canyon. In the spring of 1886, she published a book, *The Age of Shame*, a series of essays on politics, society, fashion, religion, morals, domesticity, and other current topics. Issued by W.B. Smith Publishers of New York City, the book was not a best seller, but is one of the first books published by a Nevada woman.

Six months after the death of her husband, she and two friends, Mrs. L.A. Weller and Mrs. Charles Lund, organized the Lucy Stone Non-Partisan Equal Suffrage League. Some seventy-five women and fifty men turned out for the initial gathering in Austin's courthouse on November 30, and Mrs. Williamson spoke on the purposes of the group and touched upon the careers of Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Beecher Stowe, pioneer social reformers and champions of Woman's rights.

A measure seeking a constitutional amendment giving women the vote was scheduled to be considered in the 1895 legislative session. In December 1894, editor Alan Bragg of the *Reno Evening Gazette* opened his columns to readers desiring to comment upon the reform. Mrs. Williamson was among the first to seize the opportunity, extolling her personal philosophy in public for the first time. She felt that Nevada was "morally obligated" to grant women the vote because of the "hardships and privations" of pioneer life they had shared with their menfolk. She also noted that women had partial suffrage in twenty-five states and full rights in two others, Wyoming, and Colorado, and could see no reason for Nevada not doing likewise. Comments on the Thirteenth Amendment, which prohibited "slavery or involuntary servitude," and an analysis of the way the ideals of the American Revolution had been corrupted indicated a political sophistication and a reading of history beyond the ordinary.

The legislature approved the suffrage measure that year, and Mrs. Williamson continued to write occasional letters to the editor expanding upon her views. In May 1895, she took a leading part in the founding of the Nevada State Suffrage Association. When the group was formally organized in late October, she was elected president. She and her daughter, Mary Laura, journeyed to Washington D.C. in January 1896, to attend a gathering of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. While there, she joined other suffrage supporters who appeared before a Senate committee considering a constitutional amendment extending the vote to women.

For the next two years, Frances Williamson took to the lecture circuit, speaking in Winnemucca, Austin, Elko, Eureka, Ely, Hamilton, Pioche, Panaca and Delamar. She took up collections to pay her expenses and organized local women to carry on the work. On September 25, 1896, she attended the second annual meeting of the Nevada Suffrage Association in Carson City, reporting on her work and introducing delegates from nine counties. The matter of votes for women was not an issue in the 1896 fall elections, but the women had their supporters. On February 1, 1897, Mrs. Williamson presented a petition with 1,352 signatures to the Nevada Senate and was given the floor to present her side of the issue. She presented constitutional and historical arguments in favor, answered several objections, and asserted that she and her sisters did not want to dominate political affairs. As to women being willing to fight in wars should they get the votes, she answered that was “not a normal and necessary condition” and made the point that many men did not fight either. The measure passed the Senate by a vote of 9 to 5 but failed in the Assembly 16 to 14. On reconsideration, a tie resulted still a defeat. The amendment again went down to defeat in 1899 and was not an issue again until 1911.

In May 1897, Mrs. Williamson and her daughter began publishing the Nevada Citizen in Reno. A monthly publication, the newspaper followed the progress of the Woman’s Movement nationwide, advanced suffrage arguments and provided the enterprising suffragist with a forum for her social and economic views, few of which were probably shared by most Nevadans. The paper suspended publication in December 1897, and she left the state, settling in Oakland, California, where she took up suffrage work again. She later became president of the Alameda County Equal Franchise Society and her home became something of a salon for women seeking to present ideas and programs of every sort. She died in Oakland on December 21, 1919 at the age of 77. Her remains returned to Austin where she was laid away next to her husband and children on New Year’s Day, January 1, 1920.

Nevada Historical Society

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