

## Why West Virginia Was the State That Had to Be Won

West Virginia's vote in 1920 was number 34 of the 36 states needed for ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, which gave women the right to vote. But after West Virginia's ratification, there were just two more states that ratified the amendment, Washington State and Tennessee. There were no other possibilities in 1920, and had West Virginia failed to ratify, this might have postponed women gaining this precious right to a distant future. That's why West Virginia's vote had to be won! And key to victory or defeat were the actions of three Romney political leaders: Governor John J. Cornwell, State Senator Garnett K. Kump, and Delegate J. Sloan Kuykendall.

When Democratic Governor Cornwell convened West Virginia's special session on February 27, 1920, he was convinced that ratification of the amendment was going to happen, whether or not West Virginia voted to do so. That definitely was the view of leading suffragists, including Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, who reportedly had pledges from the governors of Delaware, Connecticut and Washington to call special sessions in March. And as each of these states, including West Virginia, had Republican legislatures, which, to that point had a perfect record of supporting ratification, the amendment's passage appeared to be certain by the end of March.

As it turns out, however, of those three states, only Washington ratified the amendment, and it did so on March 22 with a unanimous vote, reflecting that the state had already granted women suffrage in 1910. Meanwhile, Delaware convened after Washington State voted, with the thought it would be the final state needed, but it wasn't until June that they voted, and with a loss. The kidnapping of their House Speaker by oppositionists demonstrated what ends the antis would go to, to kill the amendment; and the Connecticut governor, heavily influenced by a powerful

political boss, and believing that states should ratify only through the state process that included referendum votes of the male electorate, refused to hold a session, thereby removing Connecticut from contention.

West Virginia looked like a sure thing. Polling of legislators conducted through the summer of 1919 to early 1920, and the unanimous support by the Governor, the eight-member West Virginia delegation in Congress, as well as the two main political parties and President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, caused some supporters to believe that the vote in the West Virginia legislature would be unanimous.

But they had not foreseen the lengths the antis would take to turn a sure thing into just a one-vote victory. Oppositionists flooded the capitol, bringing in distorted messages about how women's voting could destroy families, and possibly even democracy! And anything that could result in more black voters, or reduced profits for corporations, or harsher laws regarding prohibition, or more ethical politics that would take power away from political bosses, were all arguments, among countless others, real or imagined, they used to prevent women from gaining the right to vote. And they had the big bucks and influence to make their case. Dirty money from New York made its way to Charleston, as claimed in Charleston newspapers, and some West Virginia politicians were not above temptation for either monetary gain or promises of personal advancement.

After pre-session lobbying by antis (who were fully geared up for a desperate battle in West Virginia), former political supporters arriving in Charleston conveniently cited West Virginia's failed 1916 referendum as the reason why they could not go against the will of their male constituents and vote for ratification. In 1916, 72% of West Virginia's vote was solidly against women gaining the right to vote, and in Hampshire County, represented by Delegate J. Sloan Kuykendall, that total was a huge 84%! Although he was personally in favor of women gaining the right to vote, he

didn't want to go against his constituents and was the first to come forward to make the recommendation for having a new state referendum. The odds of its passage in 1920 were somewhat better than they were in 1916, because of the tremendous efforts by women to support the war effort in World War I. Indeed, this was a major reason why President Wilson began supporting a federal amendment for women's right to vote. But if Delegate Kuykendall's bill had been successful, this would have granted the vote for women in West Virginia only, not in the remaining states that had not already granted women the right to vote, as a federal amendment would have done. Fortunately, for women across America, the legislature voted for the federal amendment.

On March 3, the legislature voted 47:40 in the House of Delegates and on March 10 it passed by a 15:14 vote in the Senate. And a deciding vote was made by State Senator Garnett K. Kump, who withstood heavy pressure from his Romney neighbors, because his friend, Governor Cornwell, asked him to, and because it was the right thing to do.

For more details of this dramatic legislative session, which the Associated Press at the time claimed to be one of the most dramatic in the history of the West Virginia legislature, see the August 19 issue of the Hampshire Review.

But West Virginia's vote and Governor Cornwell had an even stronger impact on ratification than what was thought at the time. For as luck would have it, on March 10, the day West Virginia ratified, Governor Cornwell was at a conference in Nashville, Tennessee, at the same time and place as Governor Albert H. Roberts of Tennessee. West Virginia's ratification and his coincidental presence was front-page news in the Nashville newspapers. Governor Cornwell was interviewed about the next steps in West Virginia for women to exercise their vote, and Governor Roberts was pointedly asked when he was going to hold a special session. He responded that he would call a special session only after the

necessary 36 states had ratified, and then only to deal with the logistics of registering women. From then on, the Nashville, Tennessee newspaper, which was so strongly supportive of women's voting rights that it was described as the "official" suffragist newspaper, became part of the campaign to pressure the governor into calling a special session. Ultimately, on June 25, Governor Roberts, after learning from President Wilson that his state did not need to wait a year before voting on the federal amendment, as proscribed in his state's constitution, caved to the pressure that he received from the press, suffragists, and President Wilson, and indicated he would call for a special session in early August after the state's August 5 primary, and in time to allow women to have a vote in the November 1920 election.

Note: Tennessee decided two times on ratification, once for, on August 18, and once against on August 31. The latter vote to rescind was fortunately rejected by the U.S. Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, as there are no do-overs for federal amendments once a yes vote is submitted.

But the all-out corrupt ratification war in Tennessee, as described in an eye-opening New York Times article on August 26, the official anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment becoming part of the constitution, makes it hard to conclude that women would have gained voting rights anytime soon had it been left up to the three remaining states that had refused to call special sessions in 1920. Those were Florida (a deep-Red state), and Connecticut and Vermont (both run by fervently anti-ratification governors). Even had there been pro-suffrage governors in charge of each of those states, would any of those state legislatures been able to withstand the incredible onslaughts, which turned what appeared to be comfortable majorities in both West Virginia and Tennessee into slim victories?

Fortunately, West Virginia, the state that had to be won for 36 states to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920, was won.

Mrs. Catt understood the magnitude of West Virginia's decision, joyfully declaring, "Suffrage is won! The words are simple, but they thrill as few words do or can." Women finally got the right to vote. And it could not have happened without the people interred in the Indian Mound Cemetery who we are honoring here today.

Luanne Smith

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