Delegates to the convention of the fledgling State Temperance Alliance of Minnesota expected little controversy as they gathered in Red Wing’s Music Hall on September 1, 1874. But while the male-dominated assembly readied a pre-November election temperance campaign that would choke off the alcohol trade they despised, Julia Bullard Nelson, Harriet Duncan Hobart, and Elizabeth C. Hutchinson were engineering an insurrection that boldly placed woman suffrage on the agenda.1

Hobart and Hutchinson possessed solid temperance backgrounds and were properly credentialed for the gathering, but Julia Nelson carried even more weight among conventioneers. They knew her as a temperance saint abused—“basely and vilely insulted”—by an Anoka saloon owner on July 11, 1874. During that incident, Nelson appeared with anti-liquor protesters in front of James McGlauflin’s tavern. The owner manhandled them into the middle of the street. Nelson returned, only to be shoved back onto the roadway. She confronted McGlauflin, citing her lawful right to stand where she pleased. Saying, “I’ll show you about law,” the angry barkeeper came at her with more force. Roughed up but not injured, the determined Nelson filed suit against the “rumseller.”

On July 31, a six-man Anoka jury issued a “no cause for action” verdict in the case.2

As the Red Wing temperance meeting convened, the trio of women knew they could count on support for woman suffrage from one critically important male delegate—convention chairman Phineas A. Jewell, of nearby Lake City. The influential Jewell gave a short speech favoring woman suffrage, noting “that the work of Temperance Reform could not be prosecuted to a successful end without their co-operation, their votes.” Nelson, Hobart, and Hutchinson placed a concise 30-word statement before the temperance alliance’s platform and resolutions committee:

Resolved: That sex should be no barrier to the exercise of the elective franchise, and we hail with pleasure the signs of the times, which indicate the approach of woman’s suffrage.3

“[U]pon its reading,” wrote a newspaper reporter, “many of the male delegate [sic] rose at once, earnest to have something to say against its being adopted.” These indignant men viewed the proposal as a brazen, unwarranted detour from their true purpose. Nelson chided convention-goers, according to news reports, saying “She was sorry the temperance boat was so small that they could not take women along.”4

Consternation reigned in the Music Hall as the proceedings lurched toward chaos. “The discussion of the question waxed so intensely warm,” observed one newspaperman, “[that] in order to quell the feeling, the
Hutchinson Family singing troupe sang a Kansas Woman’s Suffrage song. . . .” Phineas Jewell then stood and asked them to sing a song made popular during the Civil War, “Tell My Mother that I Die Happy.” The Hutchinsons took the edge off the fiery debate, but the well-known singers, of whom Elizabeth Hutchinson was a member, nurtured a broader agenda. To them, support for woman suffrage came naturally. In 1855, a branch of the New Hampshire family had moved to Minnesota Territory’s McLeod County and founded the village that carried their name. From the outset, women in Hutchinson possessed voting privileges on “all matters not restricted by law.”

Following the failure of the original resolution, temperance alliance delegates managed to cobble together a suffrage statement that praised women for their role in the movement while looking forward to a time when they could vote. Words alone, to the three suffragists, meant little. But for the first time in Minnesota, a formal resolution for action on woman suffrage had been supported, if only tepidly, at a public meeting. Hutchinson, who had followed Nelson as a speaker for woman suffrage during the convention’s opening session, returned the next day with her family singing group. With temperance now the delegates’ sole focus, the Hutchinsons sang an anti-liquor tune, “O ye sellers of rum in our city.” Nelson had composed the lyrics. Happy conventioneers demanded an encore.

**Julia B. Nelson’s Aggressive Efforts** to compel the 1874 State Temperance Alliance of Minnesota convention to address woman suffrage was a notable opening skirmish in Minnesota’s half-century struggle to secure voting rights for women, but was not Nelson’s first public effort on behalf of the cause: she organized what is believed to be Minnesota’s first debate on woman suffrage, staged in 1869 at Red Wing’s Good Templars Hall. Ignoring the suffocating Victorian-era strictures that corseted American women of her time, Nelson (1842–1914) made major contributions to three important American social and political movements: woman suffrage, temperance, and civil rights for African Americans. By 1881, the year in which she assisted in organizing the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA), Nelson, then 39 years old, had braved 14 challenging years as an administrator and teacher of freed Black children in Texas and Tennessee schools. During her last three decades of life, Nelson headed the MWSA for seven years (1890–96), frequently worked on its executive board, and served as a paid state and national lecturer for the group. Simultaneously, she worked for the Minnesota WCTU as superintendent of the state’s Franchise Department to secure voting access for women, and as a lecturer, organizer, and later as editor and business manager of the WCTU newspaper Minnesota White Ribbon (1902–06).

Nelson’s colleagues, first in Minnesota and later nationally, came to view her as emblematic of the woman suffrage crusade. Celebrated for her oratorical skill, writing talent, and dynamic promotion of women’s rights, Nelson served as both field marshal and foot soldier in America’s fractious suffrage army. Indeed, in their 1902 History of Woman Suffrage, Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper made clear their choice for Minnesota’s principal suffragist—Nelson—noting it was she “who for twenty years has been the rock on which the effort for woman suffrage has been founded in this State.”

“On a darkish night in June of 1857 the steamer Henry Clay landed at the town of Wacoota and from that boat stepped my father Edward Bullard, who had been down the river and brought back with him some horses,
some cattle, and two awkward school girls, one of whom was myself.” So begins Nelson’s account of her family’s migration to Minnesota Territory and a small sawmilling outpost at the head of Lake Pepin. Parents Edward and Angeline Bullard had moved from their Denmark, Iowa, home to join George W. Bullard, Edward’s successful brother and a founder of Wacouta (present-day spelling), situated on the Mississippi River five miles southeast of Red Wing. The Bullards established a river valley farmstead on what today is known as Bullard Creek.9

Fifteen years old upon her arrival in Wacouta, Julia enrolled in Red Wing’s Hamline University, the territory’s first institution of higher learning. In a rarity for American universities of the era, Hamline admitted women. She came within two terms of graduation but, at age 19, became the first woman in Goodhue County to earn the top category of three teaching certificates—a “first” grade certificate—issued by the county superintendent of schools. She began a teaching career in Minnesota and Connecticut that lasted from 1861 to 1866.10

While at Hamline, Julia met Ole Nelson, a year her senior, who joined the patriotic group of 120 students and teachers from the school who volunteered to fight in the nation’s fratricidal civil war. Stationed in swampy bayous along the Mississippi at Helena, Arkansas, Ole Nelson was among the hundreds of Sixth Minnesota Infantry Regiment soldiers ravaged by malaria. He survived the war, returning in June 1865 to his Belvidere Township farm south of Red Wing. He and Julia married on September 25, 1866.11

Nelson gave birth to a boy, Cyrus, in August 1867, but the infant died before his first birthday. Tragedy continued when, five months after Cyrus’s death, Ole succumbed to the effects of wartime disease at age 27. Devastating as the losses were, Nelson persevered. Now 26, she answered a call from the American Missionary Association (AMA), a leading antislavery group, to teach formerly enslaved people in AMA-sponsored freedmen schools. Prior to the Civil War, most states in the South had made it illegal to educate slaves. With the war’s end, northern teachers were needed in the South to handle that task for Black residents. In September 1869, Nelson left Red Wing for her teaching assignment in Houston, Texas. Friends gathered at the steamboat landing to provide a proper send-off, but foreboding about her future in the South turned it into a melancholy, almost funereal farewell. A parting hymn wafted over the water as her steamer moved past Barn Bluff.12

Nelson with a pupil in Columbus, Texas. She was a schoolteacher in freedmen’s schools in Tennessee and Texas in the 1870s and 1880s.
Clearly comfortable in her uncommon role as a single, self-sufficient professional woman, Nelson shrugged off fear of the Klan—thanks, in no small part, to protection offered by the Black community in which she worked—and commenced a letter-writing campaign exposing KKK election strategies and promoting her civil rights agenda. Her missives went to newspapers holding editorial views favorable to the work of northern teachers in the South. Newspapers would often print her letters in full. A lengthy front-page example of a Nelson newspaper communiqué is found in a December 1870 letter fired off to the Frederick Douglass–owned *New National Era* in Washington, DC. There, she reported that the Klan and its supporters hoped “to re-establish the law of the six shooter.” But Black community members organized and stood up for their rights, and Nelson reported witnessing “Hundreds of colored men marching up to the polls on equal footing with those who think them unfit to breath [sic] the same air, go to heaven . . .”13

A woman of some means—the family farm and property in Red Wing served as a source of income—she broadened her cultural horizons in the summer of 1873, touring Europe en route to the Vienna Exposition before returning to Red Wing to lecture about her adventures. Still deeply committed to the education of underserved Black students, Nelson began teaching in Tennessee Society of Friends schools over a 12-year span, beginning in 1875, taking a two-year break (1880–82) for family and personal business. During this pause from teaching, the *Minneapolis Tribune* printed an 1882 article about Nelson, titled, “A Lady Farmer,” a detailed look at her broad knowledge of farming methods, which added that she was a “warm advocate of woman suffrage.” The Tribune also reported on an updating of Nelson’s 240-acre Belvidere Township operation conducted with the help of former students, “three faithful negro men.” One of the workers and former students, Jeremiah Patterson, would go on to rent the farm, marry Verna Gaylord, a white woman from a neighboring farm, and start a family.14

Nelson’s reputation in Minnesota as an effective woman suffrage and temperance advocate grew through the 1880s, even as she continued her teaching in Tennessee. During summers at home and during her 1880–82 interlude in Minnesota she traveled the state advocating for suffrage and temperance. Ethel Hurd’s *Woman Suffrage in Minnesota* observed, “[Nelson’s] work for suffrage in Minnesota was closely interwoven with that of temperance.” In September 1881, while attending the state WCTU’s annual meeting held in Hastings, she again held talks with temperance women about creating a state woman suffrage organization. Nelson and 13 other like-minded colleagues, including Harriet Duncan Hobart, her ally at the raucous 1874 Red Wing temperance meeting, planned to weave permanent links between the WCTU and woman suffrage efforts in Minnesota. These temperance advocates believed creating a cooperating suffrage organization would benefit both movements, and it was here that the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association was born.15

Notable women at that Hastings suffrage conclave, along with Nelson, included Sarah Burger Stearns of Duluth, an early state suffrage advocate; the aforementioned Harriet Hobart, just beginning a record 13-year run as president of the Minnesota WCTU; Minneapolis-based Amanda (Mrs. A. T.) Anderson, a temperance promoter.
with a commitment to woman suffrage and close friend of Nelson; and Harriet E. Bishop, the storied St. Paul
educator of Minnesota settlement days. Yet, neither the
temperance nor suffrage gatherings captured the attention
of the Hastings Gazette, because the newspaper failed
to discover, or chose not to cover, what would prove to be a
historic assembly of temperance women dedicated to Min-
nesota women's voting rights.16

**Julia Bullard Nelson** and other early leaders of
Minnesota's woman suffrage movement were far from
representative of their time and place. America's so-called
“Gilded Age” (roughly 1875–1912), with its rigid Victorian
social strictures that excluded women from nearly every
aspect of public life, was no golden era for woman suffrag-
ists. These remarkable reformers languished in political
anonymity, laboring in full knowledge that most of their
contemporaries viewed them as an irrelevant cadre of
social outliers who had embarked upon a hopelessly quix-
otic mission.

As they lived through the last decades of the nine-
teenth century, Nelson and Sarah Stearns fully understood
the Minnesota anti-suffrage culture described by the
ornate phrasing of Minnesota historian William Watts
Folwell: “The Minnesota electorate, restrained by immem-
orial tradition and by the surviving conviction that
Sacred Scripture excluded women from independent pub-
lc activities, was slow to welcome the innovation.” This
“ancient prejudice,” as Folwell called it, would stubbornly persist.17

“The advocates of suffrage in Minnesota were so few
in the early days and their homes so remote from each other, that there was little chance for cooperation, hence the history of the movement in this State consists more of personal efforts than of conventions, legislative hear-
ings and judicial decisions.” This illuminating statement
by the MWSA's then-president, Sarah Stearns, accurately
characterized the state's small, loosely organized band of
suffragists during the 1880s. During this quiescent period,
Nelson stood out among the few spreading the suffrage
gospel.18

Other roadblocks, some of their own construction,
stood in the Minnesota suffragists' way. Among those
aligning against MWSA initiatives were male and female
traditionalists, increasing numbers of naturalized male
immigrant voters, influential society matrons and their
sisters of privilege, and dedicated enemies of the WCTU,
who likened suffrage advocates to holier-than-thou
prohibition backers. Some members of the suffrage and
temperance movements, convinced of the righteousness
of their cause, could be their own worst enemies. Critics
labeled them overly judgmental, sanctimonious, and
pompous, adjectives occasionally applied to Nelson. She
didn't care. In standing up for her beliefs, Nelson never
took a backward step.

Nelson enjoyed the spotlight and the influence it
brought to her and the movement. To friends and col-
leagues, she was now simply “Julia B.”—a name first
applied in her early years. In 1881, organizers of the
popular annual Methodist camp meeting at Red Rock
(present-day Newport) chose Nelson as the main speaker
for its annual Fourth of July temperance event, but her
remarks centered on suffrage. Outdoor worship at sum-
mer camps had become popular with Minnesotans during
the post–Civil War years, Red Rock among the most popu-
lar. A Pioneer Press reporter took interest in Nelson’s views
and looks: “She is an ardent woman suffragist, but not of
the Susan B. Anthony type . . . she is rather comely . . . and
[does not avow] that all men are brutes and a discredit to
society.” Nelson's demeanor while advocating for women's
rights allowed her to overcome a common public view that
saw suffragists as self-righteous and overbearing.19

Tactical suffrage work, meanwhile, continued. In
the absence of president Stearns, vice president Nelson
chaired the September 1882 MWSA state convention in
Minneapolis. Nelson endorsed Stearns’s written plan to
bring their suffrage arguments directly to Minnesota
legislators. Nelson further advised delegates to beware
of increasing European immigration, also a concern of
Stevens. They believed that once the newcomers became
naturalized citizens, the men could bring Old World
prejudices about women to Minnesota voting booths: “Legislators and members of Congress were as a class
better able to grasp the merit of the question [suffrage]
than were foreign-born voters, in whose native countries
women are oppressed,” a journalist paraphrased Nelson
as saying. Earlier, when a controversy arose about the
fairness of a vote consequential to Minnesota suffrag-
ists, Stearns had similarly offered no sympathy for the
“ignorant classes who could not, or did not read their bal-
lots.” (Anti-suffragists argued that a deceptive ballot was
used in passing the 1875 constitutional amendment that
enabled women to vote on public school–related issues.)
But such detail did not trouble Stearns. Minnesota women
could vote, at least where schools were concerned, yet
they believed legislative action was preferable to risking a
popular vote by ill-informed voters.20

National suffragists shared the troublesome view of
immigrant voters expressed by Nelson and other Min-
nesota suffragists. While a strong advocate for Black
civil rights, Nelson saw immigrant men as likely to be
ill-educated traditionalists who opposed the extension of women’s rights. At their 1886 convention, National Woman Suffrage Association officials called on Nelson to read her poem “Hans Dunderkopf’s Views of Equality.” Written in the heavy German dialect of an undereducated immigrant, “Dunderkopf” was a caricature that had become popular public performance fare. Demeaning and cruel by present-day standards, poems and jokes delivered in dialect and produced typically at the expense of the nation’s African Americans and expanding immigrant population were, in the 1880s, proven audience pleasers, and reflected the sentiments held by suffragists who believed immigrant attitudes established barriers to enacting woman suffrage.21

Nelson took an active part in the first MWSA statewide campaign during 1883–84 to organize suffrage clubs, and, in March 1884, she was MWSA’s sole representative at the NWSA national convention in Washington, DC. Two years later, 43 years old and a school principal, Nelson addressed a US House judiciary committee hearing on woman suffrage as a Minnesota suffragist and “law-abiding citizen and taxpayer” who had “beg[n] Teaching freedmen when it was so unpopular that men could not have done it,” and noted that a man in her job received nearly four times more pay.22

As her activities increased in 1888, so did Nelson’s reputation. In March, she took part in an unprecedented demonstration of woman power, the International Council of Women, a conference of woman suffrage leaders from nine countries around the world. Held in Washington, DC, the assembly lived up to its leaders’ assertion that “the time has come when women from all over the world should unite in the just demand for their political enfranchisement.” A buoyant Nelson praised the gathering
for “uniting womenhood [sic] of the world and for the uplifting of humanity.” After working through a weeklong agenda, Nelson returned to Minnesota inspired by the power of women’s unity. In June she was selected to address the Indianapolis convention of the Western Association of Writers, a prominent literary society. In its coverage of the event, one newspaper described her as “well known as a writer and lecturer upon temperance and woman suffrage.” And in September, voters at the state WCTU convention in Red Wing elected Nelson as their vice president and her friend Harriet Hobart as president. In November, Nelson and Hobart attended the national WCTU convention in New York City. And throughout 1888 and 1889 Nelson toured Minnesota as a paid lecturer on behalf of the WCTU, and in the process, worked in plugs for woman suffrage.23

Susan B. Anthony’s energizing appearance before MWSA’s Minneapolis convention in October 1889 previewed a new strategy for the evolving American suffrage movement. Anthony asked convention goers to enlist in a state-by-state drive to construct a network of suffrage strongholds that would create momentum for a constitutional amendment. South Dakota would achieve statehood in November 1889, and suffrage was on the ballot the following November. MWSA opted to “throw its weight into South Dakota.” Nelson was appointed and funded to travel, speak, and recruit as the territory prepared for statehood. Delegates left the MWSA convention with Anthony’s admonition ringing in their ears: “Don’t leave anything to the chivalry of man, because you won’t get it.”24

Lingering winter weather and a tight schedule faced Nelson on March 31, 1890, as she left Red Wing by train, heading to Milbank, South Dakota, for a speech that evening. It was an opening salvo in a seven-month grassroots effort that brought, along with Nelson, the nation’s most powerful suffrage speakers and organizers to the state. Fought mostly during the region’s hottest and driest summer on record, the South Dakota offensive mutated into a long, painful slog. As fall approached, fatigue and frustration beset suffrage workers. Emma Smith DeVoe, veteran lecturer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, refused to make any more appearances in remote schoolhouses and lobbied for work in the relative comfort of towns. Reassigned to cover DeVoe’s schedule, a peevéd Nelson wrote an official, “If she wants the glory of being met by a brass band let her have it. I’d rather have the time to speak.”25

Nelson believed the South Dakota suffrage effort was in trouble, predicting the state’s southeast was “where the battle is thickest and here’s where we shall meet a Waterloo.” Nelson’s prediction was accurate—South Dakotans dealt the national movement a crushing defeat, opting against the vote for women by more than a two-to-one margin. Undeterred by the setback, Anthony and Nelson detoured to Fremont, Nebraska, on November 12 to attend that state’s 10th annual convention. Then, with the
MWSA convention looming just one week away, Nelson headed back to Minnesota. Armed with ample supplies of courage, tenacity, intellect, and strength, she intended to bring the vote to Minnesota women by the turn of the century.26

Delegates to the annual MWSA convention, held in St. Paul, chose Nelson as their president on November 19, 1890. Nelson immediately set in motion an ambitious lobbying operation in the Minnesota Legislature. A St. Paul Daily Globe reporter saw potential in Nelson’s powerful presidential address to members while also pointing to an obvious MWSA weakness—“never more than thirty ladies present and ten of those did the talking.” To fire up MWSA’s small and fractious base, Nelson began a monthlong journey lecturing at local societies. She also convinced MWSA board members to shift annual conventions to cities outside the Twin Cities.27

In February 1891, Nelson, acting personally as MWSA’s political action committee, took the battle to the state capitol. With the help of Amanda Anderson, she convinced Sylvanus A. Stockwell, a progressive Minneapolis Democrat, to introduce a bill enabling women to vote in municipal elections. Nelson spent several weeks meeting with legislators while at the same time authoring a small free newspaper, The Equal Rights Herald, and writing a leaflet, “Points on Municipal Suffrage,” which was placed on the desk of each legislator. Unfortunately, the house committee indefinitely postponed action on the bill.28

Despite continued setbacks, Nelson remained undeterred through the 1890s, prowling the halls of the Minnesota state capitol during the biennial four-month legislative sessions, gathering support for various bills that would bring to Minnesota women a voting status equal to that of men. MWSA pushed for differing forms of woman suffrage, including suffrage for women in municipal elections (1891), suffrage for women with educational qualifications (1893), suffrage for women on all questions relating to the liquor traffic (1895), and suffrage for all tax-paying women (1897). Yet none of these suffrage measures gathered enough support for success. Nelson’s efforts, however, yielded some gains for legislation that increased the status of women in Minnesota law. Successful efforts included providing county officials with power to appoint a “female” as deputy in county offices—which Nelson wryly noted in her history of the MWSA was “presumably of the human species”—and increasing from age 10 to 16 the legal age of consent (for sexual activity) for the protection of girls.29

Nelson found ample time to address suffrage issues when the state legislature was not in session. Her words resonated during dozens of meetings and speaking engagements in Minnesota and across the nation. One Washington, DC, suffrage newspaper celebrated Nelson’s achievements on the eve of her testimony before a US Senate committee: “Mrs. Nelson is an all-around woman. She is a philosopher, takes the world in a genial way . . . as a lecturer, adapting herself to place and people, logical and persuasive, she is unsurpassed: as a writer she wields a ready pen; as a woman she is generous and unselfishly devoted to the reforms in which she is engaged.” NAWSA also recognized Nelson’s skills. Beginning in February 1894, she traveled on its behalf through Kansas and Missouri for 10 weeks, lecturing and organizing local affiliates. She opened her six-week NAWSA-backed visit to New Mexico Territory on April 1, 1896, and assisted in establishing the first territorial suffrage association there. Nelson then moved to Oklahoma Territory and a seven-week assignment. But despite her efforts, none of these states or territories adopted woman suffrage.30

Back in Minnesota for the summer of 1894, Nelson enlisted Ignatius Donnelly, a legislative ally from the 1893 state senate suffrage battle, to bolster her campaign for superintendent of Goodhue County schools. But during a Cannon Falls People’s Party campaign stop, Donnelly chided Nelson for not showing enough gratitude for his organization’s support. Nelson in turn skewered Donnelly for his tepid backing of suffrage. “When I held up the woman suffrage plank of the platform . . . I must have had the heaviest part of the load if that plank is so heavy that all the men in the People’s party together can’t carry it.” A long shot in a Republican stronghold, Nelson was defeated.31

Nelson remained frustrated by six years of minimal success with Minnesota lawmakers and offered a blunt rejoinder to the 1897 legislature when a tax bill failed to treat married women fairly. Lecturing a senate committee, Nelson called for an end to “the [legislative] methods of Robin Hood and his merry men,” and declared as “reprehensible” the “present custom of collecting taxes from women to make public improvement about which they have neither vote nor veto.”32
It is worth noting that while serving as MWSA president Nelson maintained close personal relationships with her Black friends and protégés while displaying her very public commitment to racial equality. She did so even as other national suffrage leaders severed ties with their African American allies in an effort to bring white women in the Jim Crow South on board. Nelson led WCTU’s outreach efforts with the state’s Black community and made speeches to Black congregations in St. Paul, including Pilgrim Baptist Church. Her friendship with William H. Richards, a former student teacher, and by the 1890s a law professor at Howard University, lasted throughout her life. In May 1897, Nelson and her former student, Jeremiah Patterson, opened Equal Rights Meat Market in Red Wing. Considering the times, this Black-white business partnership was astonishing.

Staggered by a continuing series of ignominious defeats as the twentieth century approached, national and state suffragist movements stalled. Nelson’s term as MWSA president ended in April 1897, her major goals unfulfilled. Worse, in 1898, Minnesotans approved a constitutional amendment that made future amendments to the state constitution nearly impossible, thus blocking a primary path to woman suffrage. Nonetheless, Nelson’s belief in the cause persisted. As the century turned, she assisting in editing MWSA’s *Minnesota Bulletin* from 1902 to 1906 as well as also editing and serving as business manager of the WCTU’s monthly magazine, *Minnesota White Ribbon*.

Internal divisions regarding MWSA’s future direction burst into public view during the October 1911 convention, described in the *Minneapolis Tribune* as “one of the liveliest rows that ever featured a political convention of any sort in the state.” A contest for the presidency brewed between supporters of the formidable incumbent, Emily E. Dobbin, whose relations with the executive committee had frayed, and challenger Alice Ames Hall, a St. Paulite active in the Minnesota Federation of Women’s Clubs. Helping referee the disputes was Nelson, “whose kindly eyes,” wrote the Tribune reporter, “have looked at all sorts of trouble . . . in political campaigns for more years than most of the delegates had even seen.”

Hall’s victory triggered an angry walkout by Dobbin supporters. Nelson had backed the more progressive Dobbin during the contentious convention floor fight, and she soon reached a decision that must have shocked the Minnesota suffrage hierarchy. The 69-year-old MWSA charter member and 30-year veteran of the organization resigned. Looking for a new path to suffrage, Nelson joined with other MWSA defectors to form the Minnesota Equal Franchise League. In just a month, the league attracted 360 members, most from existing MWSA affiliates. That number soon doubled. Nelson represented the Equal Franchise League on its national executive board and traversed the state as a recruiter. In November 1913, Nelson joined four other Equal Franchise League colleagues heading for the NAWSA convention in Washington, DC. The league had continued paying dues as an auxiliary MWSA member; thus their representatives were eligible to attend. The Minnesotans planned on taking part in a post-conference “suffrage school” led by Alice Paul,
the movement’s controversial but rising star, who with Lucy Burns founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage in 1913 (later the National Woman’s Party), which split from NAWSA a short time later.36

Years of intense advocacy and travel were beginning to take their toll on Nelson. In hopes of clearing up recurring bronchitis issues and acting on her doctor’s advice, Nelson wintered in Florida following the convention. On May 18, 1914, she wrote “[I] cast business cares and worries aside” for five months. She added, “Am saving what little strength I have for the Suffrage work.” When contacted to take part in a fall North Dakota suffrage campaign, Nelson felt ready.37

Prior to the trip, Nelson undertook a meaningful pilgrimage to the October 16–17, 1914, MWSA convention in Minneapolis. Nelson confided to Ethel Hurd, the influential Minneapolis suffragist, that she “deeply regretted” her decision to leave the organization she helped create. Nelson gave a brief address renewing her allegiance to the group. On the 19th, Nelson took an afternoon train to Fargo and that night held a meeting in nearby Mapleton. A photo feature on Nelson’s arrival carried in a Fargo newspaper inelegantly labeled her the “Grand Old Woman of Minnesota Suffragists.”38

After the demanding two-week whistle-stop tour filled with speeches, rallies, and travel, a fatigued Nelson headed home to Red Wing. Illness soon set in, the malady developing into acute pneumonia. The North Dakota expedition was the last battle in her 40-year struggle for woman suffrage and equal rights for all. On December 24, 1914, Julia B. Nelson died at age 72. She had gone down fighting.

Julia Bullard Nelson labored simultaneously at both state and national levels as a driving force in three major American social and political movements. Though many devoted their life’s work to both temperance and woman suffrage, none also worked for Black civil rights in the Reconstruction and early Jim Crow era, as did Nelson. Hers is a record of service unmatched in Minnesota’s woman suffrage history, and her single-minded, steadfast leadership at the dawn of the state’s movement rightfully earns her the description as “the rock on which the effort for woman suffrage has been founded in this State.”39

Notes

1. “Proceedings of the State Temperance Alliance,” Grange Advance [Red Wing], Sept. 9, 1874, 10; Ethel Edgerton Hurd, Woman Suffrage in Minnesota: A Record in Its Behalf since 1847 (Minneapolis: Minnesota Woman Suffrage Organization, 1916), 4. Hurd erroneously labels that gathering as a Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) affair. The WCTU of Minnesota was formed in Minneapolis on September 6, 1877, becoming the state’s dominant anti-liquor group. Julia Wiech Lief, “A Woman of Purpose, Julia B. Nelson,” Minnesota History 47, no. 8 (Winter 1981): 307. Lief, the great-niece of Nelson, possessed Julia Nelson’s diaries and letters at the time she wrote her article; the location of these primary sources is no longer known. Harriet Duncan Hobart would become the longest-serving president of the Minnesota Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (1881–94); see Frederick Johnson, “Hobart, Harriet Duncan (1825–1898),” MNopedia, Minnesota Historical Society, http://www.mnopedia.org/person/hobart-harriet-duncan-1825–1898.

2. Quotation from Rev. J. B. Tuttle, a Baptist clergyman representing Anoka at the convention, Red Wing Argus, Sept. 3, 1874, 4; Anoka County Union: “That Line,” July 21, 1874, 3;


5. “Proceedings of the State Temperance Alliance,” 10; Philip D. Jordan, “The Hutchinson Family in the Story of American Music,” Minnesota History 22, no. 2 (June 1941): 113–15. The prov- ision that women of Hutchinson could vote “in all matters not restricted by law” was granted during a community meeting vote on November 21, 1855. Although not delineated, the restriction placed on that right might have been in defer- ence to state and federal law.


10. Lief, “A Woman of Purpose,” 304; Curtiss- Wedge, History of Goodhue County, 1055; Alumni Association, Hamline University, 180–83. On the grades of teaching certificates, see General Laws of the State of Minnesota, 1877, Chapter 4, “County Superintendents of Schools,” Sec. 7 (St. Paul: Ramsey & Cunningham, 1877), 135.

11. Alumni Association, Hamline University, 180, “War Record,” 249–52; Lief, *A Woman of Purpose*, 304. For details of the travails of Ole Nelson’s Sixth Minnesota Infantry Regiment while stationed at Helena, Arkansas, see Board of Commissioners, Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865 (St. Paul: Minnesota Legisla- ture, 1891), 321–24.


Red Wing Republican followed Nelson's progress through the state in 1888 and 1889.


34. General Laws of Minnesota for 1897, Chapter 185, 345–46, https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1897/0/General+Laws/Chapter/185/pdf/. Folwell, History of Minnesota, 4:335, explains, “the new amendment [required] a majority of all votes cast at the election [emphasis added] to ratify an amendment.” That impossibly high standard meant a full suffrage amendment to the Minnesota Constitution would never be enacted. The MWSA would need to develop other strategies. Stuhler, Gentle Warriors, 33–34, 59–70, considers the changes coming to MWSA.


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