

The “Antis”

Minnesota Women Opposed to Female Suffrage

Hannah Dyson

LAVINIA GILFILLAN was a modern woman. She supported women’s education and petitioned the University of Minnesota’s Board of Regents in 1902 to allow her to raise funds for a campus building dedicated to women students. She devoted her time to philanthropic work to improve the lives of women and children. She participated in various organizations

around the Twin Cities, including the Peripatetics (a women’s study club) and the Society of Fine Arts. A patron of the arts, Gilfillan hosted concerts for the Thursday Musical, as well as art auctions at her home, 222 Clifton Avenue in Minneapolis. She was also an anti-suffragist.¹

In most respects, Gilfillan was indistinguishable from Minnesota’s woman suffrage leaders fighting for the ballot. For the most part, this group of anti-suffragists and suffragists came from the same middle-to-upper class and believed in the same causes, such as prohibition, protecting the welfare of children, and public health reforms. These like-minded women disagreed, however, over how to best achieve their desired reforms.²

Although Minnesota’s anti-suffrage leaders were well-off and typically held more conservative views than their suffrage counterparts, they did not oppose the vote

because they opposed the “modern woman.” In fact, many anti-suffragists encouraged women’s involvement in public life, education, philanthropy, and business. Instead, the antis, a common nickname for the anti-suffragists, fought against equal suffrage because they argued for the power of female nonpartisanship, the importance of preserving their vision of US democracy, and the necessity for division of labor between men and women based on their “natural” strengths. They didn’t believe that women were inferior, just different; they believed gender differences helped society to thrive.

Women themselves led and supported the anti-suffrage movement. Although some contemporary critics characterized the anti-suffragists as “puppets of more powerful male forces,” historian Thomas Jablonsky

Anti-suffrage postcard, 1920.



coined the phrase “conservative activists” to describe them, implying their opposition to votes for women was based on their autonomous beliefs about American democracy and citizenship. Another historian, Susan E. Marshall, identifies anti-suffragists as “a privileged urban elite of extraordinary wealth, social position, and political power.” She asserts that their platform was antimodern and their primary concern was maintaining the status quo, but she refers mainly to East Coast anti-suffragists. Historian Manuela Thurner provides an alternate view: anti-suffragists were not retrogressive society women fighting against progress but rather activists who ardently believed that women could best improve society when remaining nonpartisan. Lavinia Coppock Gilfillan more closely represents the later definition, although both types of anti-suffragists participated in the Minnesota movement.³

Exploring Minnesota’s anti-suffrage personalities, their organizational activities, and their complex, sometimes contradictory rhetoric illuminates why not all women wanted the ballot. Anti-suffrage and the women who championed it have little space dedicated to them in the broader discussion about suffrage in the United States, especially in the Midwest. Yet broadening the scope of the suffrage movement to include anti-suffragists furthers the understanding of how different women positioned themselves in society during the Progressive Era.

THE ANTI-SUFFRAGE CAUSE came to Minnesota in November 1913, when nationally known anti-suffrage lecturer Bertha Lane Scott (Mrs. William Forse Scott) traveled to the Twin Cities to facilitate the creation of anti-suffrage organizations. Once a suffragist herself, by 1909 she had



Mrs. William Davis and Lavinia Coppock Gilfillan, right.

switched sides and was vice president of the Guidon Club, an anti-suffrage organization based in New York. The movement was most successful in the eastern states, and anti-suffragists hoped to extend their influence westward, where suffrage victories had occurred more frequently—Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Washington had all granted equal suffrage by 1910. Characterized as a woman with a fierce personality and ardent zeal, Scott hosted conferences and lectures during her Twin Cities trip, outlining the anti-suffrage cause and sharing plans for creating an anti-suffrage movement in Minnesota. Among the attendees was Lavinia Gilfillan. By the end of 1913, three anti-suffrage organizations had been founded: the Minneapolis Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women, the St. Paul Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, and the Minnesota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.⁴

The leaders of the new anti-suffrage associations were prominent and well-connected Twin Cities socialites who took up activist causes. They came from and married into

powerful and wealthy families. Gilfillan’s husband, John Bachop Gilfillan, served as both a state senator and US representative. As president of the Minnesota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, Gilfillan brought vision and determination. Ella Pennington and Florence Carpenter, president and vice president, respectively, of the Minneapolis association, brought oratory skills that some believed Gilfillan lacked. More than just an anti-suffragist, Pennington, the wife of Edmund Pennington, an executive with the Soo Line Railroad, considered herself a patriot and was involved in the national preparedness movement after World War I broke out in Europe in 1914. Carpenter served as a trustee of New York’s Wells College, her alma mater (class of 1887), and she enjoyed golf, horseback riding, and music. In addition to anti-suffrage activities, Carpenter, Gilfillan, and Pennington collaborated closely on philanthropic work and other pursuits. Gilfillan and Carpenter sponsored and hosted balls for young debutantes. They also shared an interest in seeing that women received a quality college education.⁵

Nationally, relations between suffragists and anti-suffragists were often hostile, but not in Minnesota. Unlike the case on the East Coast, Minnesota women on both sides of the issue participated in the same clubs and social circles. To maintain cordial ties, several women's clubs chose not to directly address the suffrage issue to avoid alienating members. Gilfillan, Carpenter, and Clara Ueland, a leading figure of Minnesota's woman suffrage movement in the 1910s, discussed literature, history, and philosophy together in the Peripatetics study club. According to historian Barbara Stuhler, Ueland admired Carpenter and felt comfortable sending her daughter, Anne, to Wells College, knowing that Carpenter was a graduate. Anne Ueland seems to have admired Carpenter's intellect, writing in a letter that she considered her a "fluent creature." During the 1915 legislative session, where suffrage was a highly contested topic, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* noted, "both suffragists and 'antis' smiled pleasantly at each other."⁶



Ella Pennington

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Minnesota niceties, however, did not prevent the occasional accusation from breaking out on either side. Anti-suffragists critiqued the most liberal suffragists, who took part in the feminist and socialist movements, as well as the militant strategies brought to the United States by east coasters Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, who had worked on suffrage in Great Britain. Ella Pennington decried liberal suffragists this way: "[T]he emotional nature of woman has carried many Suffragists to the disgraceful conduct of the Militant, and the repelling doctrine of the Feminist. Where would emotionalism carry these women in the Political Arena?" Nonetheless, Pennington also made sure to acknowledge the good work to which many suffragists were committed. Although anti-suffragists were social reformers, they typically held more conservative views than



Florence Carpenter

many suffragists and felt socialist and feminist ideas threatened a successful democracy.⁷

For anti-suffragists, successful democracy looked very similar to the status quo. Women engaged in public life, but their influence lay primarily in the domestic and philanthropic spheres while men worked in the political sphere. This gender balance of work tied into men's and women's supposed natural talents, thereby enabling the United States to prosper. Women were not considered less important because of their position in the domestic sphere. In fact, the domestic sphere was seen as the "bulwark against social disorder." According to Carpenter, women "play their part in public affairs . . . by their immense influence upon public opinion." They exerted this influence through philanthropic efforts and through rearing children to have strong morals and beliefs.⁸

Young people also participated in the anti-suffrage movement. Both the Minneapolis Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women and the Minnesota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage had junior auxiliaries. A newspaper article written by a college woman laid out the appeal of anti-suffragism to young adults: "The situation is dangerous. We often hear the remark that women will get the vote if they try hard enough and persistently enough; and if they do get it, they will play havoc with it for themselves and society." Young anti-suffragists believed equal suffrage threatened traditional womanhood by forcing women away from their familial and loving natures and into the corrupt world of politics.

Tessie Wilcox Jones, the face of the younger generation of anti-suffragists in Minnesota (and the daughter of Herschel V. Jones, publisher of the *Minneapolis Journal*), warned in a pamphlet titled “The Philosophy of Anti-Suffrage” that the United States would face a similar fate to the Roman Empire if women were enfranchised. Jones quoted journalist Margaret Bissland, who claimed that only “through her motherhood and her domesticity, does woman safeguard the whole nation.” Thus, both younger and older anti-suffragists presented domesticity as instrumental to stabilizing and maintaining democracy.⁹

By 1915, anti-suffrage associations focused on educating the public about their cause. They sought to dispel misunderstandings about their platform circulated by suffragists. In her anti-suffrage pamphlet, Tessie Jones addressed possible reader misconceptions concerning anti-suffrage supporters: “You have heard of the anti-suffragist as a woman of leisure, knowing nothing of industrial problems, little of the ills of society, and caring less. . . . Espousing a retrogressive cause, she is a slave to the tyranny of convention, a parasite in the existing economic order, and a menace to society and democracy.”¹⁰

To combat the “woman of leisure” stereotype, Jones and other antis strove to clarify that they encouraged women to participate in public life, just not in politics. They explained that they did not oppose voting because they viewed women as less intelligent. Rather, they maintained that suffragists viewed the vote as a solution to social problems, whereas antis did not. Backing up their claims with statistics comparing suffrage states to non-suffrage states, antis argued that suffrage states were no more successful than non-suffrage states at passing laws that women championed, such as prohibition.

Florence Carpenter asserted that Illinois women had been less successful than Minnesota women in shutting down saloons even though they were enfranchised. Ultimately, the anti-suffrage cause represented the desire to maintain prosperity in society through nonpartisanship and separate spheres for men and women.¹¹

In many ways, the anti-suffrage education platform mirrored the action plan of the suffragists. In this regard, Minnesota anti-suffragists seem to have been influenced by New York anti-suffragists. In contrast to Minnesota anti-suffrage activists, antis in other states were “very reluctant to use suffragist techniques to fight enfranchisement.” These techniques included participating in debates and engaging with state legislators.¹²

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Addressing various women’s groups and city communities, Minnesota antis hoped to extend their message and influence throughout Minnesota. The anti-suffrage headquarters at the Meyers Arcade on Ninth and Nicollet in downtown Minneapolis provided a venue for women to explore the cause. In addition, Lavinia Gilfillan traveled throughout the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota to speak on anti-suffrage. She and other antis tailored their message to each audience. When Gilfillan addressed 60 young women from the Minnesota Business College, she explained, “The Anti-Suffragist also believes in women in business, in public life, but she does not believe in women in politics.” Outreach

fostered burgeoning anti-suffrage communities in Excelsior, Long Lake, Winona, Stillwater, Duluth, St. Cloud, and others. Although the movement remained mostly urban in Minnesota, organizations in rural Minnesota provided crucial support.¹³

Anti-suffragists also used racist and xenophobic arguments to oppose the vote. During a 1914 debate, Carpenter expressed concern about “masses of foreign born women, even more illiterate than their men; masses of ignorant Black women of the South; masses of indifferent and corrupt women in our cities” taking part in the vote. To the antis, these “ignorant” and “corrupt” women posed a threat to society because they supposedly did not have the education required to vote. Anti-suffragists didn’t want

the vote for themselves because they viewed it as a responsibility and a burden, not a right. They expected voters to be well researched and educated about the American political system, and antis believed they did not have time for this in their already busy schedules. Anti-suffragists assumed that African American women, immigrants, and prostitutes were uneducated and indifferent to learning the voting process. They also believed that corrupt businessmen and politicians could manipulate these women to vote a certain way. Not surprisingly, anti-suffragists were not unique in their racism. Both regionally and nationally, suffragists were also guilty of excluding people of color and debating the amount of influence



Meyers Arcade, 920 Nicollet in Minneapolis, headquarters of the anti-suffragists, 1910.

African American women would carry in elections.¹⁴

Anti-suffragists increased their visibility at the 1915 Minnesota State Fair, distributing literature in English as well as in German and Scandinavian languages. According to the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, the literature was widely popular. Anti-suffragists also hosted public events, including the Flower and Garden Fete held on August 17, 1915, with animal competitions and a sale of flowers, candy, and dairy products. Red and pink roses, the symbol of anti-suffrage, decorated the fair and were sold to attendees. The successful event raised more money than expected.¹⁵

When the Minnesota Legislature focused on suffrage in 1915, the anti-suffragists changed their tactics. Despite their reluctance to engage in politics, Gilfillan led a group, all wearing red roses, to the state capitol on January 12, to make the anti-suffrage sentiment visible to legislators. The antis sat in the gallery alongside their suffrage counterparts, watching senate proceedings take place. At adjournment for the day, the antis were approached by a senator from Hennepin County who invited them to speak with other senators. To their

surprise, the senators requested that the antis hold a public hearing before the Senate Elections Committee on their reasons for opposition. Gilfillan agreed. Although the anti-suffragists usually chose to let men speak for them in the political sphere, they decided to speak for themselves during the hearing. Gilfillan explained away any possible contradictions by insisting that it was their patriotic duty to meet the senators' request. Speaking to fellow anti-suffragists, Gilfillan summarized their 1915 legislative efforts: "We, who believe in men speaking for us at the polls, did not ask their assistance that day. . . . It was said our arguments fitted the demand of the hour, and the Senators who wanted us to have the hearing were very glad we had come."¹⁶

At the hearing, anti-suffragists from communities around Minnesota attested that they were not interested in receiving the ballot. Perhaps because of their testimony, the suffrage bill failed in the senate. Almost immediately, however, another bill was introduced that proposed giving women the right to vote in presidential elections. The antis quickly mobilized against this bill. Speaking against statutory law, Gilfillan

asserted that "right to modify the Government is a power inherent with the people" and should not be decided by the legislature. This bill, too, failed. By the end of the 1915 legislative session, prospects looked bright for the anti-suffragists.¹⁷

US entrance into World War I in 1917 brought a halt to anti-suffrage activity. As suffrage gained victories across the country, Gilfillan responded: "When our soldiers are safely home and the war against autocracy won, anti-suffrage can again logically take up the question of votes for women." Meanwhile, the anti-suffragists turned to patriotic work supporting the home front. Gilfillan became the head of the machine knitting division for the Minneapolis chapter of the Red Cross, producing socks and other clothing for soldiers abroad. She also worked with suffragist Clara Ueland on the home economics committee, educating homemakers on food conservation. Anti-suffragists condemned those suffragists who refused to participate in the war effort or who prioritized the suffrage cause over fulfilling their patriotic duty.¹⁸

After the war ended, Minnesota's anti-suffrage activity never resumed in earnest. One of the few allusions to an active anti-suffrage movement appeared in a short paragraph in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* calling for the house to delay voting on a suffrage bill introduced in early 1919 by state representative Theodore Christianson Jr. that granted Minnesota women the right to vote in presidential elections regardless of the outcome of the federal suffrage amendment. Surprisingly, when Minnesota set about ratifying the Nineteenth Amendment, no mention was made of an anti-suffragist presence at the capitol, nor was a documented statement given by any anti-suffragist when the amendment

was ratified on September 8, 1919. Both in Minnesota and nationally, anti-suffragism peaked from 1911 to 1916. The main anti-suffrage associations left standing prominently after World War I were on the East Coast. On October 5, 1919, the Minneapolis College Women's Club moved into the old anti-suffrage headquarters at Meyers Arcade, signaling the end of the movement in Minnesota.¹⁹

Minnesota anti-suffragists opposed the ballot for women because they believed it could jeopardize US democracy and women's place in society. They believed that preserving domestic womanhood and a non-partisan position was the best way to achieve the social reforms that both suffragists and anti-suffragists sought. As Florence Carpenter put it, a woman "is very much more potent because she is non-partisan. She is now able to approach any public measure with an unprejudiced mind because she is not bound to party lines." Anti-suffragists opposed the vote not because they were antimodern or antiwoman but because they believed they could best fulfill their patriotic duty without the vote. The anti-suffragists' belief in patriotic duty best explains why, when women gained the right to vote with the Nineteenth Amendment, Lavinia Gilfillan and countless other anti-suffragists voted, too.²⁰ □

Notes

1. "Round about the State," *Stillwater Messenger*, Apr. 19, 1902, 2; "November 22 Date Set for Artists' League Auction," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1911, 26; "Thursday Musical," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1915, Society section, 2.

2. Barbara Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 93.

3. Manuela Thurner, "Better Citizens Without the Ballot: American Anti-Suffrage Women and Their Rationale During the Progressive Era,"

Journal of Women's History 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 34, Jablonsky coinage cited, 39; Susan E. Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 5.

4. "Anti Woman Suffrage Club Will Be Organized Here," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 11, 1913, 11; John William Leonard, ed., *Woman's Who's Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada, 1914-1915* (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914), 723; 63rd Congress, 2nd session, House of Representatives Document No. 298, 106; Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood*, 26. Scott (1860-1938) was an active anti-suffragist from New York State who lectured nationally on that topic.

5. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 95; Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association Records, 1894-1923, M508, microfilm reel 14, MNHS; "Duffle Bags Made for State Soldiers," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 19, 1916, 14; Leonard, ed., *Woman's Who's Who of America*, 162; "Society," *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 28, 1906, Dramatic and social section, 4; Nick Steffel, "The Minneapolis Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women," Hennepin County Library Tumblr, <https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/137898946993/the-minneapolis-association-opposed-to-the-further>.

6. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 95; "Red Roses and Yellow Jonquils Symbolize the Suffrage Battle," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Mar. 5, 1915, 1.

7. Ella Pennington, "Woman the Helpmate," Pamphlets Relating to the Women's Suffrage Movement in Minnesota, 1899-1920, JK1896, MNHS (hereafter cited as Pamphlets), 2.

8. Susan Goodier, *No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2; Florence Carpenter, "A Fair Share for Women," Pamphlets, 2.

9. "A College Woman Tells Why She Is Opposed to Equal Suffrage," *Pioneer Press*, Pamphlets; Tessie Jones, "The Philosophy of Anti-Suffrage," Pamphlets, 2; Margaret Bisland, "The Curse of Eve," *North American Review* 177 (July 1903): 117. Jones (1886-1967), an active clubwoman, was, with her father, a patron of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. See Jones Family Papers, MNHS, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00910.xml>.

10. Jones, "The Philosophy of Anti-Suffrage," 1.

11. Carpenter, "A Fair Share for Women," 3.

12. Goodier, *No Votes for Women*, 10.

13. "Well-Known Women Will Assist at Anti-Suffrage Tea on Monday Afternoon," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1915, 14; "Mrs. Gilfillan Addresses Girl Students of Business," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 11, 1914, 12; Lavinia Gilfillan, "Report of Committee on Legislation for the Session 1914-1915," Pamphlets, 1.

14. Quoted in Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 97.

15. "Literature in Foreign Languages Distributed by Anti-Suffragists," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Sept. 8, 1915, 2; "Flower and Garden Fete," *Cannon Falls Beacon*, Aug. 27, 1915, 1.

16. Gilfillan, "Report of Committee on Legislation," 1, 2. Unfortunately, Gilfillan did not record the name or political party of the senator who approached her.

17. Gilfillan, "Report of Committee on Legislation."

18. Gilfillan, "Report of Committee on Legislation," 4; "Firemen Here Knit 6,000 Pairs of Socks," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 21, 1918, Women and War Work section, 4; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 152-54; "Anti-Suffragists Score Idea of Votes for Women as War Work Reward," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, May 13, 1917, Society section, 15. It's important to note that Emmeline Pankhurst was a staunch supporter of the war and a major recruiter of women volunteers.

19. "Women Ask Delay," *National Advocate*, Mar. 15, 1919, 4. Christianson (1883-1948) served five terms in the Minnesota House, was governor of Minnesota from 1925 to 1931 and later represented Minnesota in the US House and Senate. The bill he introduced in 1919 did not give women the right to vote for state, county, or municipal offices, which would only come to Minnesota with full federal suffrage. This passed in March 1919 (Laws 1919, Chapter 89). Minnesota was the fifteenth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, ensuring full suffrage for women; see Linda A. Cameron, "Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in Minnesota," MNopedia, <https://www.mnopedia.org/event/ratification-nineteenth-amendment-minnesota>; Allison Lange, "National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage," *National Women's History Museum*, Fall 2015, <http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition>; "College Women to Have Club Room in Loeb [sic] Arcade," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1919, Society section, 6.

20. Carpenter, "A Fair Share for Women," 2; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 224-25; "To the Women Voters of the 4th Ward," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1922, 13.

Images on p. 163, 167, MNHS Collections; p. 164, scanned from p. 94, Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, via St. Paul Pioneer Press; p. 165 (left, *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, March 5, 1915), Minnesota Newspaper Hub, MNHS; p. 165 (right), Hennepin County Library.



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