Please do not refuse to sign the bill bringing “Woman Suffrage” before the people. Discussion will not harm the truth. We cannot stave it off.

Edwin S. Williams, a young farmer from Rice County, sent this plea to Governor Horace Austin on March 8, 1870, urging him to sign the first woman suffrage bill approved by both bodies of the Minnesota state legislature. Ignoring the plea, Governor Austin vetoed the bill. In doing so, he defied the state constitution. This little-known episode in the fight for woman suffrage in Minnesota reflects the trials facing the movement in other states and clearly illustrates the conflicting attitudes and political gamesmanship responsible for delaying its success.

In 1869, however, Representative John Lathrop, a Republican from Olmsted County, introduced the first woman suffrage bill in Minnesota. As the anti-suffrage St. Cloud Journal reported, “The wrongs and rights were duly debated, by both men and women—the latter being invited to speak for themselves. . . . Notwithstanding their eloquent appeals, and their touching portrayals of ‘man’s inhumanity to the better half of creation, the bill was defeated by a vote of 21 to 22.” A reconsideration vote also failed to pass.

Anti-suffragists argued that the majority of women had no interest in voting or were afraid of being compelled to do so. They posited that women’s sphere was the home and family; political activity, the realm of men. Politics, they believed, would degrade women, as summed up in the Minneapolis Daily Tribune: “The souls
a bill proposing that suffrage be extended to every person of at least 21 years of age who had lived in the United States for a full year and in the state of Minnesota for a minimum of four months. This included natural citizens, immigrants who declared an intention to become citizens, Native Americans, and mixed-race individuals who agreed to comply with US customs and laws. The Minnesota House of Representatives passed the bill on February 15 by a vote of 33 to 13.  

On the face of it, supporters might think the representatives an enlightened group of men, but their motives suggested otherwise. The legislators were quick to publicly explain their reasons for voting as they did.
Representatives Albert R. Hall, a Republican from Hennepin County, and John Louis McDonald, a Democrat from Scott County, admitted that they voted for the bill on the house floor because they wanted the people to decide the issue, but neither would support it in a public vote. The action of the representatives in passing the bill was ridiculed in the newspapers: “The House has passed the proposed woman’s suffrage amendment to the Constitution, with the proviso that women shall be allowed to vote on the question of its adoption—their ballots to be received in separate boxes, and counted by themselves. This is, indeed, carrying the joke a little too far, and it is sincerely to be hoped that the Senate will preserve the State from the ridicule and odium sure to follow the adoption of such a measure.”

Disregarding such opinions, the Minnesota Senate passed the bill on February 24 by a vote of 12 to 9. Like their counterparts in the house, the senators justified their actions by insisting that the decision be left to the people. While the desire for a public vote may sound democratic, lawmakers believed that the public would overwhelmingly vote against the measure, thereby ending the matter once and for all. As Senator Dana E. King, a Republican from Meeker County, stated: “This question has been and will continue to be agitated until it has been authoritatively settled by the only tribunal which has the power to settle it forever—the people. . . . For this reason I shall vote to submit this question to the voters of the state in the strongest confidence that their verdict will be such as will put this question forever at rest, and stamp it, as I believe it to be, one of the greatest follies and humbugs of the age.”

After its passage by the house and senate, the bill landed on Governor Austin’s desk for his consideration. He opted not to sign it—a direct violation of the state constitution. The bill itself clearly stated this: “This proposed amendment shall be submitted to the people of the several districts of this State for their approval or rejection, at the next general election for the year Eighteen Hundred and Seventy (1870) and each of the legal voters of the State, in their respective Districts may at such Election vote by ballot for or against such amendment and for the purpose of voting upon the question of the amendment proposed by this act, Females [sic] as well as males shall be taken and deemed legal voters.”

Senator William Lochren of St. Anthony publicly decried Austin’s veto as “without effect,” saying that the governor didn’t have the right to veto the bill and that the decision would be in the hands of the legal voters the following November. But the veto held, and the public vote never took place. Had voters accepted the amendment, Minnesota would have been the first state since 1807 to grant suffrage to women through a popular electoral vote, regardless of property ownership or marital status. (New Jersey’s state constitution allowed some women the right to vote until 1807).

Meanwhile, the governor defended his action by citing illegals inherent in the language of the bill. The bill would allow women to vote on the measure, but under
Minnesota’s existing constitution, they were not legal voters. Austin also believed that there was little public support for woman suffrage, and that therefore the bill was premature. In private correspondence to a Mrs. W. C. Dodge, Austin wrote: “Our bill was so framed, its illegality was so possible, that it would have very much jeopardized the success of the measure... The bill was known to be defective while in the hands of the legislature, and it was kept so no doubt for the purpose of beating it, by those who voted for it, but who would not if they had thought it a valid bill.”

In the same letter, Austin pointed out another strong reason for delaying a public vote: “3/5 of our population are of foreign birth and are hostile to the measure to a man, and most of them bitterly so.” He believed that, even if approved by a vote of the people, the decision would be struck down in the courts. He had defied the state constitution in the hope that a better bill would be brought forward in a future session. If Governor Austin thought a successful bill would be forthcoming in the next legislative session, he must have been disappointed. No other full-suffrage amendment proposal would pass both house and senate and arrive on a governor’s desk until the state ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Minnesota’s suffragists continued to submit petitions and lobby the state legislature, but it wasn’t until the 1875 session that they achieved their first small victory when a constitutional amendment passed, giving women the right to vote in school elections. The scope of the measure was enlarged in 1885 to permit women to vote for county school superintendents. Encouraged, in the early 1890s, women pushed without success for municipal suffrage and the right to vote on the liquor question. The next positive step came in 1898 with the passage of a constitutional amendment allowing women to vote on library issues.

The next two decades brought more delays. Suffrage amendment proposals introduced during legislative sessions after 1900, if they made it out of committees and to a vote, generally met with some success in the house but failed in the senate. Finally, in 1919, Representative Theodore Christianson of Dawson introduced House File 222, a statutory bill for an act to grant women the right to vote, but only in presidential elections. It passed the house by a landslide vote of 103 to 24 on March 5; the senate passed it on March 21 by a vote of 49 to 11. After its approval by the governor on March 24, Minnesota women could vote for presidential electors.

Just over five months later, on September 8, 1919, the Minnesota Legislature voted to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, becoming the fifteenth state to do so. Even though it was expected that the federal Equal Suffrage Amendment, granting full suffrage to women nationwide, would gain the necessary state approval, Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist signed the Minnesota presidential suffrage bill into state law on September 22.

The State of Tennessee ratified the federal amendment on August 18, 1920, giving it the two-thirds state approval needed. US secretary of state Bainbridge Colby certified the Nineteenth Amendment on August 26, 1920, five long decades after the first Minnesota female suffrage bill to pass both house and senate met with Governor Austin’s well-intentioned veto pen.

Notes

This article is an extended version of the author’s “Minnesota Female Suffrage Bill, 1870,” MNPedia, https://www.mnpedia.org/things/minnesota-female-suffrage-bill-1870.
1. Epigraph: Edwin S. Williams, Northfield, letter to Governor Horace Austin, Mar. 8, 1870, Records of Governor Horace Austin, State Archives Collection, box 154,114.4F, MNHS.
2. A. R. Hayden profile, Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, https://www.leg.state.mn.us/legdb/fulldetail?id=13262; Journal of the House of Representatives, State of Minnesota, 1866 (St. Paul: M. J. Clum, Printer, 1866), 26; Journal of the House, 1867 (St. Paul: M. J. Clum, 1867), 27; Journal of the House, 1868 (Minneapolis: Tribune Printing Company, 1868), 41, 47. Little is known of Spaulding and Graves. Stearns helped organize one of Minnesota’s first women suffrage associations, in 1869, and was later the first president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association. Representative John Seboshi, a Republican from Hennepin County, presented the 1867 petition, which bore 200 signatures of both men and women. The Speaker of the house appointed a special committee of five (Representatives Seboshi, J. K. Randall, Charles A. Wheaton Sr., Charles J. Felch, and John A. Reed) to review it, but it went no further. Representative John Hechtmann, a Republican from Hennepin County, presented the 1868 petition for Graves and 349 other “strong-minded” women. It was referred to the committee on elections, but it failed to result in a bill.
3. “Alas! Alas!!” St. Cloud Journal, Mar. 4, 1869, 2; Journal of the House, 1869 (St. Paul: Press Printing Company, 1869), 116, 200–202, 214–15; John Lathrop profile, Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, https://www.leg.state.mn.us/legdb/fulldetail?id=13543. Representative Abner Tibbitts, a Republican from Wabasha County, presented a petition on February 2. Six days later, Representative Lathrop introduced House File 91 for woman suffrage. The ensuing floor debate, as reported in newspapers, showed the contempt with which many lawmakers viewed the measure. Despite several attempts to table the bill, house members cast their votes on February 24. Following the bill’s defeat, several requests were made to reconsider the bill. It was finally tabled when it failed to get the support needed in the reconsideration vote on February 25.


7. House File 123, House and Senate Bills (Legislative Set), Minnesota State Archives Collection, box 107.C.19.1B, MNHS.


10. House File 123, House and Senate Bills (Legislative Set).


12. “Twelve Bills Vetoed by Governor Austin”; Governor Austin to Mrs. W. C. Dodge, Mar. 14, 1870, Horace Austin and Family Papers, 1857–1953, State Archives Collection, box P2854, MNHS.


Copyright of Minnesota History is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission: contact us.

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, contact us. Include the author’s name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers
- You do not need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html
- You should, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers
- You do not need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You do need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. Contact us for more information.

About Illustrations
- Minnesota History credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. Minnesota History itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see MHS Library FAQ.