

THE STORY OF WISCONSIN'S SCHOOL SUFFRAGE LAW

by Alura Collins Hollister of Mukwonago

written for the Good Citizenship Department of the Freeman, 1919

In our Summer 2019 *Landmark*, author Ruth Page Jones wrote:

“In 1884, suffragists approved a campaign for full suffrage and appointed Alura Collins to lobby the legislature. Collins, the state’s first female lobbyist, wrote two bills, one for full suffrage and one for school suffrage. However, only a revised school suffrage bill passed both houses. Lawmakers then required the measure to be placed on the ballot in 1886. Although voters approved the bill, its vague language gave hostile officials an excuse to deny women at the polls. The issue then went to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. In 1888, the court decision limited women to voting only for school officers on separate ballots in separate boxes. But, without laws requiring districts to provide separate ballots or boxes, most women still could not vote. Another Supreme Court decision two years later sent the bill back to the legislature for rewording. The legislature, however, took no action.”

Fortunately, Alura Collins Hollister recorded her experiences in securing the vote for women. Her account appeared in the Theodora Youman’s column “Good Citizenship for Women,” published in the *Waukesha Freeman* on May 8, 1919.

For this story, we have added a few explanatory notes to help clarify Mrs. Hollister’s account.

Alura Collins Hollister’s Recollections

In 1884, the Wisconsin Woman’s Suffrage Association, at its annual convention, decided to send one of its members to Madison for the next legislative session to try to secure some form of suffrage for the women of Wisconsin. I was chosen for that work and began my preparations for it very soon. As soon as possible, I secured names of all legislative nominees and began to send out a hectographed letter, asking each one to let me know his opinion of Woman Suffrage and if he was willing to work for any form of it.

(The hectograph is an early process of duplication. It was also called gelatin duplicator or jellygraph. It involved the transfer of an original document, prepared with special inks, to a pan of gelatin or a gelatin pad pulled tight on a metal frame.)

I received answers from a very few and only part of these had given any thought to the subject: but a few had and their promises of earnest co-operation sent me to Madison with great hopes for results.

My first experiences were very bewildering to a novice in such work. The legislature was deeply interested in electing our U.S. Senator; and it was quite two weeks as I now remember it, before the election was accomplished; and in the meantime, it seemed as if nothing was done, except the appointment of committees.

(At the time of writing this memoir, U. S. Senators were chosen by the state legislature, not by the direct vote. In February 1875, the Wisconsin State Legislature elected Angus Cameron to the United States Senate. He served from March 4, 1875 to March 3, 1881. He served a second, separate term from March 14, 1881 until March 3, 1885.)

I very soon learned that even those who believed in suffrage for women were not willing to give any time or thought to the preparation of bills. They thought school suffrage was all we ought to ask for and they had no advice or suggestions to make for even that.

After appealing to those who had professed themselves friendly and to several lawyers, including our attorney general, I made up my mind that I must depend upon myself. I then gave up on the legislature and the turmoil of electing a senator and betook myself to the State Law Library and spent two weeks there, studying the wording of the School Suffrage laws of all the states which had school suffrage.

The conditions in other states seemed so different from our state, and I was at my wit's end to know how to write the bill to be of most service to us. When I finally wrote the bill, which became our present law, I was very doubtful about its correctness in wording but trusted that the several lawyers, some of national reputation even then, who are members of our legislature, would discover any mistakes and correct them. But they were all busy men and noticed nothing peculiar in wording. They thought school suffrage wouldn't upset anything very much, so the bill came safely through the committees.

There was also a resolution for an amendment to our State Constitution for woman suffrage, which received consideration at the same time. We had a fine committee hearing and quite a few of our pioneer suffragists came from different parts of the state to attend it

and several of them spoke. The progress of a bill through the legislature was a slow, tedious affair, but gave time for educational work. I had a few petitions but managed generally to get one introduced each day and a few times had several introduced in one morning. Even if a petition contained but two or three names, its record in the minutes counted for us.

Often the members of the legislature found a few brief words, a hectograph copy, on each desk in the morning; perhaps in regard to taxation without representation or the need of both the father and mother element in the state as in the home. In some way generally the subject was placed before every member at every morning's session, as briefly and forcibly as possible.

I had many pleasant experiences. Many wives of members of the legislature were good friends of mine and were as interested in our success as if they had long been suffragists. Woman suffrage was debated that winter in many parts of the state and also at the State University, and the debaters wrote to me for leaflets and information generally on woman suffrage.

It wasn't all pleasant, however. There were many unpleasant experiences but these are mostly due to ignorance, and I've long ago forgotten most of them.

Toward the last, we had a great mass meeting in the assembly chamber one evening addressed by Helen M. Gongar of Indiana, a most earnest and forceful speaker and a most charming personality. Then when the bill and the resolution were to be voted upon, Frank M. Nye of Polk County, a brilliant young lawyer, gave a wonderfully strong argument for Woman Suffrage.

The School Suffrage bill passed the legislature of 1885. The reso-



FRANKLIN NYE OF POLK COUNTY
WAS AN EARLY SUPPORTER OF
WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

lution to amend the Constitution was defeated, and I was told I ought to be very thankful to get so near school suffrage. The State Suffrage Association very much feared the bill would be defeated at the general election in November 1886, but to our great surprise it passed. At the next regular school meetings held in all county districts the first Monday in July, women voted in small numbers throughout the state. I was the only woman at the school meeting at Dodges Corners that year.

When the legislature of 1887 met, I was again present. By that time, people had begun to see that the school suffrage law might be made far-reaching. Several members of the legislature spoke to me about its wording and were sorry, for they felt sure there would be trouble about it; and there was trouble. Our rural schools are cared for by the school meetings held in July each year, but our city schools generally are governed by votes cast at the regular spring elections. There was no provision in the school law for separate votes cast by women at these elections, consequently these votes were not received.

Soon there was a determined effort to find the full meaning of the law as little groups of women all over the state offered their votes at a regular fall election for County Superintendent and State Superintendent of Public Schools. These votes were not accepted. Then Rev. Olympia Brown, our president, commenced suit that the real meaning of the law might be reached. Finally a decision was given that the law meant just what it said, that women in Wisconsin should be entitled to vote on all school matters, and the next legislature provided for separate ballot boxes, and now women in Wisconsin voted at any election which has any measure pertaining to schools.

It has been a long hard pull, but it has been worth all it has cost. Many a good building has been built because the women voted for it. More men attend school meetings now than used to in the old days. But for persistent effort, the school bill would have meant nothing



HELEN GONGAR OF INDIANA
ADDRESSED SUPPORTERS IN
THE ASSEMBLY CHAMBER.
SUBMITTED PHOTO

except to the women in the rural districts. And those persistent efforts are due largely to Rev. Olympia Brown.

Obituary of Alura Collins Hollister

Alura Collins Hollister died in 1936. Her obituary, reproduced below, recalled her extraordinary life.

Alura Collins Hollister was born Dec. 31, 1850, in Providence, R. I., the daughter of Dr. Wm. Penn Collins of that state and Mary Cassey of Aberdeen, Scotland. Dr. Collins was of the Quaker faith and the teachings of her childhood made her gentle, kind and tolerant all through life. In 1855, the Collins family came to Prospect Hill, where the doctor taught at the Valley School, at which the daughter, Alura, taught in later years.

From Prospect, they moved to Mukwonago, where Dr. Collins built a home just south of the village, a home that Mrs. Hollister dearly loved and where she spent the last years of her life.

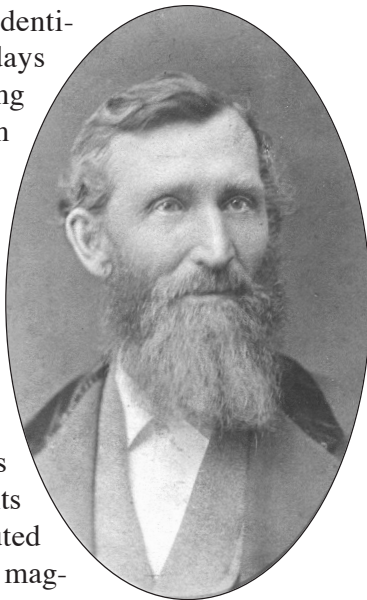
The Collins home was one of affection, harmony and understanding, to all of which Alura was a potent contributing factor. She was a student by nature; and at 14, she began her work of teaching, which continued, with an interim for professional study at the Whitewater Normal School, of which she was an early graduate, to the time of her marriage in 1886 to Alfred N. Hollister. For several years, she taught in the Milwaukee schools. Scores of men and women look back with affection and gratitude to the days spent in her classes.

The 50 years of the Hollisters' married life were spent in Mukwonago, Big Bend and the old Hollister farm in the town of Vernon. To them were born four children. Their second son, Clark, was for many years an invalid; and his mother's untiring devotion to him was a source of inspiration to all who knew her. When, after years of invalidism, he grew stronger, married and was established in his own home, she rejoiced; and when, last year, he passed away, much of her joy in living went with him.



REV. OLYMPIA BROWN FILED A
LAWSUIT TO HELP DETERMINE THE
FATE OF SCHOOL SUFFRAGE.
SUBMITTED PHOTO

In public life, Mrs. Hollister was identified with equal suffrage in its early days and helped to draft the state law granting school suffrage to women, was active in the W. C. T. U. and other prohibition organizations and in church work, first in the U. & U. Church in Mukwonago, of which her parents were charter members, and later in the Big Bend Baptist Church. When her son's illness claimed a large share of her time, Mrs. Hollister turned to the tending of her flowers, a hobby she had always loved. Her garden was proverbial for its beauty, and only recently she contributed an article to the Wisconsin Horticulture magazine.



On October 6th, 1936, with their children, grandchildren and friends about them, Mr. and Mrs. Hollister celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. Shortly after, Mrs. Hollister began to fail and the end came quietly in the early morning hours of Sunday last, Nov. 15th. She is survived by her husband, a son, Will, of Troy Wis.; two daughters, Mrs. Guy Austin and Mrs. John Stacy, both of Chicago; 15 grandchildren; 3 great grandchildren; a brother, W. Penn Collins of Denver, Colo.; and a sister, Mrs. DeWitt Edwards of Mukwonago, besides a large number of other relatives and friends.

Funeral services were held yesterday afternoon, Wednesday, at 1 o'clock at the Powers Funeral Home, Rev. A. N. Brown officiating. Mrs. Lloyd Dewey sang. Interment was in Rural Home Cemetery, Big Bend.

The Mukwonago Chief of Nov. 19, 1936.



INTERESTINGLY, WE COULD NOT LOCATE A PHOTO OF ALURA COLLINS HOLLISTER. THE ABOVE PHOTO IS OF HER FATHER, DR. WILLIAM PENN COLLINS, A HOMEOPATHIC PHYSICIAN OF MUKWONAGO. HE PRACTICED FROM 1858 - 1885.

PHOTO FROM THE WAUKESHA COUNTY MUSEUM