

## Temperance and Suffrage - Connected Movements

The woman's suffrage movement in the U.S. began in 1848 with the first woman's rights convention and the writing of the Declaration of Sentiments that outlined the need for expanding women's rights, including the right to vote. In the years up to 1880 the suffrage movement struggled to gain a foothold in American women's lives. The arguments it presented for the rights for women simply weren't persuasive enough to move beyond a central core of supporters.

In the 1870's the woman's temperance movement began and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded. In its early years the focus of the WCTU was primarily about persuading people to abstain from alcohol and persuading women to work for change on the local level. By the 1880s when Frances Willard became President of the WCTU, this focus changed, and the organization shifted to a broader agenda of social reforms and a general goal of empowering women for life in the public sphere. This shift included supporting woman's suffrage.

Under Willard's leadership the link between the woman's temperance movement and the suffrage movement grew. And, as the WCTU itself became the largest organization of women in the U.S. (with 300,000 members by 1890) this connection became more and more important. By comparison, in this same time period, the suffrage organizations had memberships of about 20,000. The WCTU's work for suffrage provided the suffrage movement with a grassroots constituency. And, the WCTU brought its local organizing methods - including holding regular meetings, keeping records and studying the local situation, providing lecturers, publishing materials, lobbying local legislators, creating petition campaigns - all of which expanded the movement into communities the suffrage activists had trouble reaching.

The connection to the WCTU also provided a new and successful means of arguing for suffrage - through its focus on "home protection" or women as a benevolent influence. Willard first began calling in the 1870s for a "home protection" ballot that would give women voting rights on issues pertaining to the home - school board elections and liquor licenses. Her argument: certainly women should have the ability to act in protection of their home; this was part of their traditional role, not outside it.

This argument brought many women to support the suffrage movement. Women were not necessarily persuaded to act in their own interest, or that they deserved the right to vote as a matter of fairness or justice. But they were willing to advocate for suffrage if they felt it would protect their homes and families. Willard also used the "home protection" argument to extend the WCTU's reform work in an ever-expanding number of areas. Of course, it was this expansive argument that led to the greatest opposition to suffrage - that of the brewers and distillers organizations - and the politicians who they supported.

It is interesting to note that the 18th Amendment (Prohibition) was ratified in January of 1919 (and went into effect one year later) and the 19th Amendment (Woman's Suffrage) was passed in June of that same year. Prohibition passed without women's votes - and suffrage passed once the threat of women voting for prohibition no longer mattered.

For more information, you can visit the Frances Willard House Museum in Evanston, Illinois (where I serve as the Director) or the Willard House website - [www.franceswillardhouse.org](http://www.franceswillardhouse.org).

**By Lori Osborne, Director, Frances Willard House Museum  
Member, League of Women Voters of Evanston**