



Delaware General History

Delaware Suffragists Biographies – Provided by Anne M. Boylan, University of Delaware

There were a handful of Delaware Suffragists who played a large part in the national suffrage movement. These women played an important part in the long and difficult struggle to get the amendment proposed and passed in congress.

Mabel Vernon - One of the leaders of the National Women's Party was Delawarean Mabel Vernon. Vernon was born in Wilmington to a newspaper editor. While attending Swarthmore College, she met Alice Paul, who would become a leader in the NWP. Once Vernon graduate from college, she became a teacher until Paul asked her to work as an organizer for the Congressional Union for Women Suffrage and the NWP. Vernon organized local protests and nationwide tours and ended up becoming an accomplished speaker. In 1916 she led a group of activists who unfurled a banner and heckled President Wilson during a speech to Congress.

Catherine Boyle – Catherine Magdalen Thornton Boyle, the second of seven children of Irish immigrants Catherine Shields Thornton and Patrick Thornton, was born in Delaware in 1879. Hers was a working-class family; her father was a fireman, and two brothers worked as laborers in a cotton mill. In January, 1900, in a Roman Catholic ceremony, she married Thomas Boyle of New Castle, Delaware, a moulder in a steel mill. Although the 1900 census found her still living with her parents, by 1910 she and her husband were renting quarters in Wilmington, Delaware and by 1920, they had purchased a home on Yonge Street in New Castle, Delaware,





where her mother and brother Henry joined the household; Boyle lived the rest of her life in New Castle. She bore six children, three of whom survived infancy: Thomas, Jr. was born in 1902, Catherine (later Burrows) in 1904, and Bernard in 1916 (he died in 1923). Thomas, Jr., a spinner in a rayon mill, along with his wife and five children, returned to live with his parents during the Depression of the 1930s.

Boyle began contributing to the Congressional Union, predecessor of the National Woman's Party (NWP) in 1915. During the flu epidemic of 1918, Boyle used her nurse's training; she opened her home to "twenty-seven men working in a powder factory and nursed them all through influenza because no doctors could be found for them." It seems likely that Boyle joined the wartime production effort during that time because by 1918, Boyle was employed by the Bethlehem Steel Company's plant in New Castle, Delaware. There, she was in contact with militant suffragists, most notably Florence Bayard Hilles, who, despite her pedigree as the daughter of a high-ranking politician, "donned a working women's uniform and became a munitions worker." Together with eight other Delaware women munitions workers, Boyle and Hilles traveled to Washington, D.C., in June, 1918, in an unsuccessful effort to meet with President Woodrow Wilson. In their appeal to the president, they stressed the dangerous nature of their work and their desire, through the right of suffrage, to be "recognized by our country as much her citizens as our soldiers are."

Boyle returned to Washington in January, 1919, with Florence Bayard Hilles, Adelina Piunti, Mary E. Brown, Annie Arniel, and other Delaware women to participate in the watchfire movement at the White House in support of woman suffrage. Carrying banners and setting





watchfires, suffragists from the NWP protested, picketed, and burned copies of President Wilson's speeches. At some point, Boyle posed for a studio portrait in Wilmington, formally dressed and holding a tricolor suffrage flag. Impending changes at the New Castle work place may have reinforced Boyle's interest in militant suffragism. The plant was preparing to transition to postwar production and very likely trim its workforce. It seems plausible that Boyle and her coworkers anticipated or may have already been informed of upcoming layoffs. Indeed, the plant downshifted just a month after Boyle joined the 1919 protests.

Given the choice of a fine or jail time for starting fires on the White House grounds, Catherine Boyle willingly served five days. Conditions in the jail were deplorable and the days tedious. Many pickets became ill and experienced rashes, vomiting, and excruciating pain. After her jail time, she returned to Wilmington with Mary E. Brown and Naomi Barrett; all three were guests of honor at a luncheon honoring NWP Delaware chairman Florence Bayard Hilles at the Hotel du Pont. A local newspaper described the three as looking "none the worse for their experience, but proud that they had been imprisoned for the cause of political freedom for women."

Following the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, Boyle worked as a nurse in Delaware, both in maternity care and in private-duty work. Her husband Thomas succumbed to pneumonia and bronchitis in February 1943. Catherine Boyle died on March 11, 1955; after a funeral Mass, she was buried at St. Joseph's on the Brandywine cemetery in Wilmington, Delaware. In writing her obituary, her family happily claimed her as "a pioneer in the women's





suffrage movement” in Delaware and “a member since its beginning of the National Woman’s Party.”

Annie Arniel – Annie Arniel was among the first suffragists jailed for three days on June 27th, 1917, for picketing the White House – choosing prison rather than pay a fine of \$25. A factory worker living in downtown Wilmington, Delaware, she was recruited by Mabel Vernon and Alice Paul for membership in the National Woman’s Party. She served a total of eight jail terms for suffrage protesting and served a total of 103 days, including: 3 days June, 1917; 60 days in the Occoquan prison in Virginia, August-September, 1917 for picketing; 15 days for Lafayette Square meeting, and five sentences of 5 days each in January and February, 1919 for the watchfire demonstrations. During one of her arrests when she was picketing Congress, she was knocked senseless by the police. While picketing she held one of the more notable banners that read: “As our boys are fighting for democracy abroad, is it a crime to ask for democracy in our own country?” She also argued after one of her arrests that “We were good enough to work in the steel plant and help load shells for the battlefields of France, but we are still not good enough to vote it seems. Can anyone see justice in this? We are protesting against the unjust delay of the Senate in passing the Susan B. Anthony suffrage amendment and why shouldn’t we? She said the rations served in prison made her so weak, she fainted for the first time in her life.

Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson - Alice Ruth Moore, educator, author and social activist, was born on July 19, 1875 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Patricia (Wright) Moore and Monroe Moore. She attended public school in New Orleans and enrolled in the teacher





training program at Straight University in that city in 1890. Two years later she graduated and began teaching in New Orleans.

Moore developed her literary skills while teaching and soon became a prolific writer. Her first book, *Violets and Other Tales*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1895. Later that year she published *The Goodness of St. Rocque, and Other Short Stories*. Through her career Alice Moore wrote four novels, two volumes of oratory, dramas, newspaper columns, two collections of essays, poems, short stories and reviews, many of which drew on her extensive knowledge of Creole culture. In all of these collections, Alice Moore proved to be a perceptive critic of American society.

Alice Moore was married three times. Her first marriage was to Paul Laurence Dunbar, the poet. Dunbar noticed her picture and one of her poems in the *Boston Monthly Review* in 1895, and was instantly infatuated. They began a two year correspondence and finally met in February 1897. They were married on March 6, 1898 in New York City, New York and moved to Washington, D.C. The marriage initiated a tumultuous relationship and they separated in 1902. As husband and wife they shared literary pursuits and celebrity status in Washington, but their life together was marred by Paul's physically abusive treatment of Alice. In one incident she was sent to a Washington, D.C. hospital where she nearly died after his attack.

After the separation Alice Moore Dunbar moved to Wilmington, Delaware. She worked at Howard High School in an assortment of positions, and was involved in several intimate relationships with both men and women. She secretly married fellow teacher Henry A. Callis





in 1910, but divorced him shortly after. It was not until her third marriage in 1916 to Robert J. Nelson, a journalist and political activist, that she was involved in a stable relationship.

Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson had worked with social and cultural organizations since her youth in New Orleans. Her marriage to Nelson, however, seemed to encourage greater involvement in the public arena. She became active in Delaware and regional politics as well as in the civil rights and women's suffrage movement. During World War I, for example, Dunbar-Nelson served as a field representative of the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Later she served on the State Republican Committee of Delaware. From 1929 to 1931 she was executive secretary of the American Friends Inter-Racial Peace Committee.

Dunbar-Nelson was co-editor with her husband of the *Wilmington Advocate*, the local African American newspaper. She wrote initially for the Advocate and then became a successful syndicated columnist. Dunbar-Nelson's career peaked in the 1920s and early 1930s when she wrote reviews and essays for newspapers, magazines and academic journals. She also continued to write stories, poems, plays and novels. Her work reached a national audience which made her a popular public speaker.

In 1932 Alice Dunbar-Nelson moved to Philadelphia when her husband became a member of the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission. Soon afterwards her health began to deteriorate. In September 1935 she was admitted to a Philadelphia hospital for a heart ailment. She died there on September 18, 1935 at the age of sixty.





Emma Belle Gibson Sykes - Emma Belle Gibson Sykes was an exceptional woman: an active member of Delaware's African American community throughout her life, a suffragist who hosted the first meeting of the Wilmington Equal Suffrage Study Club at her home, a teacher at Delaware's only four-year high school for black students, a founder of the Wilmington Branch of the NAACP, a life-long devotee of the Republican Party, a choir director at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, the first woman in the Episcopal diocese of Delaware to be elected to a church vestry board, and the first African American hired to work at the New Castle County Register of Wills office. When she died in 1970, a local newspaper summarized her accomplishments by describing her as a "community leader."

Emma Belle Gibson was born on October 8, 1885 in Christiana, Delaware, a village ten miles from the state's largest city, Wilmington. Her parents, Henry Harrison Gibson and Esther Ann Brown, both born in Virginia, had relocated to Delaware, where her father worked as a teamster at a flour mill. Of her parents' four children, only Emma and her older brother, John Madison Gibson, survived to adulthood. Education was clearly a priority for the Gibson family, for her parents made the sacrifices necessary to send John and Emma Belle into Wilmington each day so that they could complete their high school educations at the state's only four-year high school for African American children, the Howard School. Upon graduation from Howard High School in 1903, Emma Gibson began teaching at the school. In 1907, she joined St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, where she sang in the adult choir, and later directed the children's choir. Her 1911 marriage to George J. Sykes, a North Carolina-born dentist who had attended Talladega College in Alabama and received his dental training at Howard University in Washington, D.C., required that Emma Gibson Sykes resign her regular teaching post, but she





remained on the school's staff as a substitute and evening school teacher of business subjects until 1939. The Sykes' had no children.

Together, Emma and George Sykes immersed themselves in the lives and concerns of Wilmington's small African American middle class, most of whom lived within a few blocks of each other on the city's East side. Before her marriage Emma Gibson Sykes had boarded at the home of another Howard High School teacher, Caroline B. Williams, at 202 East 10th Street. The married couple moved to their own home-plus-dental-office at 208 East 10th, where they lived for the rest of their married life. Next door, at #206, lived Edwina Kruse, Howard High School's highly regarded principal, along with Latin teacher Anna Brodnax, and Alice Gertrude Baldwin, who taught pedagogy and headed the school's Normal Department. Down the street, at #201, was Nellie Nicholson (later Taylor), Howard's Mathematics teacher. A short distance away at 916 French Street lived the school's inspiring English teacher, the writer and journalist Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar (later Dunbar-Nelson), who had moved to Wilmington in 1902 and who became a dear friend. These neighbors were central actors in founding the Wilmington branch of the NAACP, initiated in 1914 and chartered in 1915; George Sykes served as founding secretary, with Emma evidently doing most of the record-keeping necessary for tracking membership dues. She later served on the executive committee with Blanche Williams Stubbs, while George did a stint as branch president. The branch pursued a variety of lines of attack on Delaware's demeaning segregation laws and practices, from preventing screenings of the racist documentary "The Birth of a Nation," in Wilmington, to protesting the treatment of blacks in courtroom proceedings, to advocating for African American women rape victims, to lobbying local newspapers to capitalize the word "Negro." Because Delaware did not disfranchise African





American men, the group appears not to have devoted resources to the matter of women's voting rights.

At a meeting called for Thursday, March 19, 1914, at the Sykes home, Emma G. Sykes took the lead in forming the Equal Suffrage Study Club and agreed to serve as the new group's vice-president. Her involvement in the woman suffrage movement took place within an existing dense network of co-workers, neighbors, friends, political activists, and co-religionists. Along with Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar, chosen as president, Howard High School teachers Alice G. Baldwin, Nellie Nicholson, Caroline B. Williams, and Helen Anderson formed a key part of the group, as did Emma Sykes's co-communicant at St. Matthew's Church, Blanche W. Stubbs. Initially, the group planned only "a campaign of education" on the suffrage issue, but by May it had joined with white suffragists to march—separately—in Wilmington's first suffrage parade. Their work continued through two unsuccessful campaigns, one in 1915 for an amendment to the state's constitution, and the other in 1919-20 to persuade the state legislature to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

During the latter campaign, in the spring of 1920, just as a special session of the state legislature was meeting in Dover to consider and vote on ratification, Emma Sykes wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Wilmington Sunday Morning Star*. Signing it "E.G.S.," she directly addressed the racist arguments made by a member of the state House of Representatives, John E. McNabb, who opposed ratification on the grounds that it would enfranchise black along with white women. Invoking the sacrifices of the "mothers and sisters" of African American soldiers





who “went over to France, and who gave up their lives” in the First World War, she decried the “use [of] the [N]egro women as an excuse” for ratification’s possible failure. Black women have, she wrote, “enough burdens to bear without having this other unnecessary one laid at their door.” Where they were already voting, she argued, African American women vote “to the satisfaction of all and for the benefit of all.” Despite their marginalization within Delaware’s suffrage effort (during the ratification campaign, white suffragists avoided any appearance of joining forces with black suffragists), Sykes closed her letter with praise for two “noble suffragists” who had refused to “exclude the colored women” and had suffered “criticism, jail terms and hunger strikes” for their commitment to women’s full citizenship. The issue of enfranchising African American women was one among many—including school taxation—that led the legislature to defeat the ratification effort in June, 1920.

Once ratification succeeded nationally, the Suffrage Study Club mobilized African American women to register and vote. Emma Sykes was a staunch Republican, and remained so throughout the post-suffrage decades, serving the party on ward-, city-, and state-level committees, and eventually being appointed as clerk in the New Castle County Register of Wills office, the first African American woman to hold such a position. She remained active in the Wilmington branch of the NAACP and devoted time to the Delaware Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, working initially to raise funds for the group’s Industrial School for Colored Girls, later renamed in honor of Howard High School’s esteemed principal Edwina Kruse; during the 1940s, Sykes was appointed treasurer and chairman of the school’s volunteer board. The “colored” YMCA/YWCA on Walnut Street in Wilmington was another of her interests, and she raised funds for war bonds during the Second World War.





But it was to Howard High School and its students that she was particularly committed. As an alumna she helped found and sustain the Alumni Association. As a teacher, she worked with others to secure funding for a new school building in 1921, pursued advanced training so that she could introduce a business education course in 1922, and in the 1930s joined the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, along with her colleagues Caroline Williams and Anna Brodnax. The Alumni Association honored her for her contributions in 1963.

At her death on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1970 (George having predeceased her in 1960), Emma Gibson Sykes left a will in which she carefully listed bequests. Among them was a five-year scholarship fund for Howard High School graduates "in good standing," \$200 to secure new drapes for the Walnut Street Y, and \$100 to the rector of St. Matthew's Church.

Florence Bayard Hilles – Florence Bayard Hilles was perhaps Delaware's best-known National Woman's Party (NWP) activist. Unlike Delawarean Mabel Vernon, whose work as a paid organizer for the Congressional Union (CU) and the NWP, took her away from the state for long stretches, Florence Bayard Hilles devoted herself to the cause in Delaware and for Delaware. Born on October 17, 1865 into a distinguished Delaware family, Florence Bayard could count among her male relatives and ancestors a large group of prominent politicians, five of whom served as U.S. Senators, including her grandfather, James Ashton Bayard, her father Thomas Francis Bayard, and her brother, Thomas F. Bayard, Jr. As a girl, she lived part of the





year in Washington, D.C., where her father served as Secretary of State under Grover Cleveland; as a young woman, she traveled to Great Britain after her father's appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James. About a month after his death, in October, 1898, she married a lawyer, William S. Hilles, in a small Episcopal ceremony. William Hilles died in 1928. Although her mother had borne eight children, five daughters and three sons, Florence Bayard Hilles had one daughter, Katharine Hilles (later Callery).

Hilles' initial suffrage activism can be credited to Mabel Vernon, who opened a Congressional Union office Wilmington in 1913. As Vernon later recalled it, she was giving a suffrage speech at the 1913 Delaware State Fair, when Hilles, who was there to exhibit her prize show dogs, signed a card stating "I believe in woman suffrage." Possessed of wealth, position, a talent for leadership, and a sense of the injustice of women's second-class status, as well as close ties to Delaware's Democratic Party, Hilles was uniquely positioned to press for both a state and a national suffrage amendment. On May 2, 1914, Hilles organized and led Wilmington's first suffrage parade in which the African American Equal Suffrage Study Club, led by Blanche Williams Stubbs, marched separately. A week later, on May 9, Hilles headed Delaware's delegation (including Annie Melvin Arniel and Annie Stirlith McGee) to a major national parade in Washington, DC. Soon, Hilles was serving as Delaware chairman of the CU and then president of the Delaware branch of the NWP and a member of the Party's executive board. After participating in the "Suffrage Special" cross-country railroad trip in April-May, 1916, she joined Mabel Vernon and others in confronting President Woodrow Wilson on behalf of a national amendment on December 4, 1916. As Vernon recalled, Hilles' large winter coat





served as camouflage for a banner Vernon unfurled as Wilson spoke at a joint session of Congress. The banner read: “Mr. President, What Will You Do for Woman Suffrage?”

When militant suffragists, frustrated by the lack of movement in Congress on a federal suffrage amendment, organized the “Silent Sentinels” to picket directly in front of Wilson’s White House, Hilles joined them. She was part of the “grand picket” of the White House on a rainy, freezing Inauguration Day, March 4, 1917, and on Bastille Day, July 14, 1917, she was among a group of sixteen White House pickets arrested and charged with blocking traffic. With the United States at war with Germany in an effort “to make the world safe for democracy,” Hilles used the occasion to connect the cause of woman suffrage to that claim, telling the judge:

For generations the men of my family have given their services to their country. For myself, my training from childhood has been with a father who believed in democracy and who belonged to the Democratic Party. By inheritance and connection I am a Democrat, and to a Democratic President I went with my appeal. What a spectacle it must be to the thinking people of this country to see us urged to go to war for democracy in a foreign land, and to see women thrown into prison who plead for that same cause at home.

The women were convicted, but refused to pay a fine. All sixteen were sentenced to sixty days at the Occoquan workhouse in Virginia. After serving three days, they received a presidential pardon.





Seeking to call attention to her claim on that occasion that her “services as an American woman are being conscripted ... to help win the world war for democracy,” in April, 1918, Hilles went to work at the Bethlehem Steel munitions factory in New Castle, Delaware, near her country home, filling ammunition shells with explosive powder. The women she met were friendly and hard-working, all of them self-supporting and most with families. Among them were Adelina Piunti and Catherine Boyle. Laid off from their jobs due to a lack of material, Hilles and Boyle, along with eight other Delaware women munitions workers, traveled to Washington, D.C., in June, 1918, in an unsuccessful effort to meet with President Woodrow Wilson. In their appeal to the president, they stressed the dangerous nature of their work and their desire, through the right of suffrage, to be “recognized by our country as much her citizens as our soldiers are.”

Hilles did not return to munitions work when the lay-offs ended, but in January, 1919, a group of Delaware suffragists, including munitions workers Adelina Piunti, Catherine Boyle, and Naomi Barrett, as well as long-time activists Mary E. Brown, Annie Arniel, and Annie McGee, participated in the watchfire protest at the White House and were arrested. There is no record that Hilles joined the group on that occasion, though at a lunch on January 22, she welcomed three of them back to Wilmington after they had completed their sentences. Soon thereafter, she left for France to support the work of the American Commission for Reconstruction.

Following Congressional approval of the 19th Amendment, Hilles turned her energies to the task of state ratification. By March of 1920, with the amendment only three states short of





victory, Delaware found itself in the nation's collective eye. Suffragists and anti-suffragists from across the nation descended upon the state capital, Dover, during a ratification battle that lasted into the summer. Florence Bayard Hilles and Mabel Vernon, working together with other state suffragists, led the effort to convince state legislators to bring the amendment up for a vote. They failed. With other suffragists, Hilles then traveled to Tennessee, which on August 18, 1920, became the thirty-sixth and final state to ratify.

Like the NWP itself, Hilles had a complicated relationship to African American suffragists. On at least two occasions, the Wilmington Equal Suffrage Study Club participated in CU and NWP-sponsored activities: marching separately in the 1914 Wilmington suffrage parade and welcoming Hilles as a speaker in April, 1920. Yet in a 1915 speech to the Delaware legislature endorsing a proposed state suffrage amendment, Hilles cited the example of "a colored man ... who can neither read nor write [but] ... simply because he is a man, can vote" as an argument for enfranchising "a mighty army of women, armed with education." Dismissing any concern about "giving the franchise to colored women," she asked, "'Don't you know that this is a white man's and a white woman's State and always will be?'" Then, during the epic contest between suffragists and anti-suffragists over Delaware's ratification of the federal amendment, she infuriated a co-worker by inviting the Equal Suffrage Study Club to join the NWP. "I tried to tell her how we have always (with great difficulty) kept ourselves clear of the negro question," Pennsylvanian Dora Kelly Lewis fumed, "but she didn't like my saying anything that implied the least criticism of her action." Lewis believed that opponents of ratification would use the invitation's implications to "wreck all our hopes."





Florence Bayard Hilles remained an active member of the NWP and soon became a passionate advocate for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Described in 1928 as “one of the most popular speakers in the Woman’s Party,” she traveled, spoke and wrote regularly on the need for an ERA, particularly as regards women’s economic rights; she vigorously opposed all protective legislation and championed the value of women’s unpaid labor in the home. From 1933 through 1938, she served as the party’s National Chairman, and later as honorary chairman. In 1943, the NWP dedicated the new library at its headquarters in Washington, DC in her name. Throughout, Hilles gave time to other commitments, including the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Wilmington Business and Professional Women’s Club, the Birth Control League, the Delaware affiliate of the Children’s Bureau, the Foreign Policy Association, and several garden clubs and historical societies. In Delaware, she was also known as an outdoorswoman, winning golf and tennis titles, and, in later life, raising rare flowers at her country home, Ommelanden.

Hilles died in a Philadelphia hospital on June 10, 1954 at the age of 88. Mabel Vernon and Alice Paul of the NWP attended her funeral at Wilmington’s Old Swedes (Episcopal) Church on June 12.

Blanche Williams Stubbs - Blanche Williams Stubbs was born in Wisconsin, on February 29, 1872, the tenth child (of fifteen) and eighth daughter of John Ebenezer Williams and Elizabeth Bisland [variously spelled Bicelander, Bislander, Bieslander, and Berland]. John E. and Elizabeth B. Williams, both of whom had been born in Pennsylvania, moved the family among Wisconsin and Illinois before settling in Marquette, on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, which





became the family home. John Williams prospered as a barber, an occupation that provided opportunities unavailable to African American men in other arenas. Among Blanche Williams's siblings, one brother and two sisters followed their father into the barbering/hairdressing field; others pursued training in nursing, dentistry, master plumbing, and teaching. Tragedy struck the family in 1887 when Blanche was fifteen years old; her fifty-two-year-old mother died of cancer. Elizabeth Williams was buried in the family plot at Park Cemetery in Marquette. The following year, John E. Williams was remarried in Chicago to a Virginia widow, Neeton A. Perry; by 1900 they were living in Philadelphia, along with his two youngest sons. Some members of the family remained in Marquette; others relocated to Chicago, Illinois; St. Paul, Minnesota; St. Louis, Missouri; Fargo, North Dakota; and Montreal, Canada, as well as Wilmington, Delaware. John Williams died in Montreal in 1911 and was buried in Marquette.

Blanche Williams entered Howard University in Washington, D.C., graduating in 1892. Upon graduation, she settled in Wilmington, Delaware, to teach at The Howard School. It seems likely that the school's renowned principal, Edwina Kruse, a stern educator of Puerto Rican and German ancestry, who was widely revered for her rigorous standards, had recruited her. In Washington and in Delaware, Blanche Williams would have had her first encounters with legal segregation and the perverse inequalities it imposed. Wilmington's Howard School, which had been founded by the Delaware Association for the Moral Improvement and Education of Colored People, a group organized by whites in 1866, was, by the 1890s, black-run and the first Delaware school to provide a full curriculum to its students. It offered the only four-year high school course for African Americans in the entire state. Blanche Williams taught at the school for over five years, resigning shortly after marrying J. Bacon Stubbs of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, in December, 1897. Undoubtedly the couple had met at Howard University, as J.B.





Stubbs earned his medical degree there. During their marriage, which lasted until his death in 1935, Blanche W. Stubbs bore three children: Jeanette (Jean) (later Jamison); Elizabeth (Liddie) (later Davis); and Frederick Douglass Stubbs.

Blanche Stubbs's activism was broad, deep, and life-long. In 1912, she and her husband joined with other African American Wilmingtonians, including Howard High School teacher Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar (later Dunbar-Nelson), to found the Garrett Settlement House, named for the city's famed abolitionist leader, Thomas Garrett. Incorporated in 1913, with a building at Seventh and Walnut Streets, a short walk from the Stubbs family home at 827 Tatnall Street, the settlement was the only such agency serving the city's African American community. Its offerings included a kindergarten and playground; domestic science, art, and music classes; athletic training; lectures on African American history; and meeting spaces. Blanche Stubbs became the settlement's first director and served in that capacity until 1949, when her church, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, took over the work and erected a new building on the site. Along with her husband, she was an early and consistent supporter of the Wilmington Branch of the NAACP, chartered in 1915. Like other educated African American women of her era, Blanche Stubbs devoted time to women's club work, providing leadership to the City Federation of Colored Women. In 1916, she presided over a meeting of several local clubs at the Garrett Settlement House which resulted in the creation of the Delaware Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, an affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). She became the Delaware Federation's first president. During her two-year term, the number of affiliated clubs increased significantly and membership grew to 250. The Federation focused its





work on the needs of African American youth; in 1919, it founded the Delaware Industrial School for Colored Girls.

Blanche Stubbs's suffrage activism emerged from within this matrix of community engagement, concern about African American children's education, interest in racial uplift, opposition to racially discriminatory policies, involvement in women's clubs, and efforts to advance the status and rights of African Americans. By the time she attended the organizational meeting of the Wilmington Equal Suffrage Study Club in March, 1914, at the home of Emma Belle Gibson Sykes, a co-communicant at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and a teacher at Howard High School, Blanche Stubbs was part of a dense network of activist women in her adopted city. Other founding members included the club's president, Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar, Alice G. Baldwin, Nellie Nicholson (later Taylor), Caroline Williams, and Helen Wormley Anderson (later Webb)—all of them teachers at Howard High School. When Delaware's suffragists organized Wilmington's first mass suffrage parade on May 2, Blanche Stubbs served as marshal for the "colored" section, which marched separately from white suffragists. Not long after, in early June, 1914, the club announced, in addition to its semi-monthly meetings, a series of lectures on the topic of suffrage and "questions of municipal, state, national, and international interest," the first of which considered "The World Wide Woman Movement and What it Means To The Negro."

Blanche Stubbs voiced her views on black women's suffrage in several ways, most notably in a lengthy letter published in the *Wilmington Evening Journal* on February 23, 1915. At the time, the state legislature was debating an amendment to the state constitution that





would have enfranchised Delaware's women (the state did not formally disfranchise black men, despite its segregation laws). Addressing the editor's assumptions about African American voters' loyalty to the Republican Party, an assumption shaping the debate, Stubbs reviewed the history of that loyalty, and argued that "the vote of the colored women cannot be counted on as an asset to any one party." Black women, she insisted, might be Democrats or Republicans, and held opinions "just as diversified as those of the white women," with whom they had been "joining hands ... in every reform movement" since 1848. Revealing her own assumptions about class differences between whites and blacks and among African Americans, she contended that a black woman's "vote is not half so great a menace to the country as that of the poor, illiterate immigrant women who have not been reared under our flag and constitution, and with our language and customs their birthright." The editor should "study ... [N]egro women as a whole, not simply one class, and that the lowest, before making any more prophecies." In July, 1916, as the Congressional Union (CU) was recruiting ward-level suffrage support in Wilmington, she opened the Garrett Settlement House for CU's use and presided over an organizing meeting. Later, on June 3, 1920, one day after the Delaware State Legislature had refused to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, she scheduled a public lecture at the settlement house on "The Equality of Men and Women." With suffrage won, Blanche Stubbs turned her attention to protesting southern states' disfranchisement of black women. In 1921, she was part of a six-woman delegation led by Alice Dunbar-Nelson that confronted the National Woman's Party chairman, Alice Paul, on the Party's refusal to support African American women's voting rights.

During the 1920s, Blanche Stubbs was active in Republican Party politics, both nationally and locally, and served as state chairman of the black-led National Republican Women's





Auxiliary Committee. In addition, she attended at least one Pan-African Congress in New York (in 1927). As NAACP branch Vice-President, she and her husband (who chaired the Executive Committee) worked with Lewis A. Redding and his son Louis Lorenzo Redding, a Harvard Law School graduate who became the first African American admitted to the Delaware bar, in efforts to mitigate the routine humiliations of segregation. In 1925, the group successfully kept local theaters from screening the racist film “The Birth of a Nation.” In 1927, in her capacity as director of the Garrett Settlement House, she lodged a formal complaint with Wilmington’s Park Commission over an incident that occurred when she took a group of her students, aged three to twelve, to use playground equipment at a local park. They were denied access. Her action sparked a major NAACP-led protest against segregation in public parks. In later years, her daughter Jean Stubbs Jamison, as president of the NAACP’s Wilmington branch, led the effort to integrate all of Delaware’s public accommodations.

Alongside public accomplishments, the post-suffrage decades brought personal sorrows. Between 1919 and 1931, nine of her remaining siblings died; in 1935 her husband died of pneumonia at age 67. In 1947, her son, Frederick Douglass Stubbs, a highly regarded Philadelphia thoracic surgeon, died at age 41. A Wilmington elementary school, dedicated in 1953, bears his name. She continued her work as director of the Garrett Settlement until it closed in 1949. Blanche Stubbs took ill and died on March 11, 1952, at the home of her daughter Jean Jamison in Wilmington, following her eightieth birthday dinner celebration. She and her two daughters—Jean and her sister Elizabeth Stubbs Davis, an anthropological researcher and teacher—had just returned from a cruise to Central and South America. Along with her daughters, she was survived by her youngest brother Hugo.





At her death, Blanche Williams Stubbs was eulogized as one of the most prominent women in Wilmington's African American community. Her broad commitment to social justice and her associations with Emma Belle Gibson Sykes, Alice Baldwin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson bore fruit in women's clubs, women's suffrage, and NAACP activities in her adopted city. For her work and contributions to the civic life of Wilmington, she was honored by the Alumni Association at Howard University in June 1951.

Mary R. De Vou - Mary R. de Vou of Wilmington, one of Delaware's suffrage stalwarts, joined the cause when it first organized in the mid-1890s, remained faithful through ratification in 1920, and chronicled the state's suffrage history.

The daughter of James Laird de Vou II and Anna Yarnall de Vou, Mary Ruth was born on April 29, 1868. She had one brother. Both the de Vou and Yarnall families had long and distinguished histories in Delaware and Philadelphia. James L. de Vou, a businessman and civic leader, provided a comfortable lifestyle for his family.

Mary attended public school in Wilmington, graduating from Wilmington High School in 1887. She then attended Wilmington Friends School for a year before going to Wellesley College. She graduated from Wellesley in 1892 and returned to Wilmington, where she remained for the rest of her life. She did not have a career but focused on civic and club activities. Mary did not marry.





Although the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement began to work for suffrage in Delaware in 1888, activity picked up in the mid-1890s, spurred by the prospect of a state constitutional convention in 1897 and the possibility of including suffrage for women. Mary was an original member of the Delaware Equal Suffrage Association (DESA) founded in 1896. She participated in a petition drive that gathered signatures from 1,228 women and 1,592 men. Suffragists presented their petitions to the constitutional convention and were granted a hearing, but the convention did not approve of votes for women.

After this setback, Mary remained active, emerging quickly as a leader. She was first elected recording secretary of DESA in 1897 and remained on the board in various capacities through 1920, usually as secretary or auditor. She also frequently held office in the Wilmington Equal Suffrage Association (WESA), again primarily as secretary. Mary often served as press chair of both organizations and kept detailed records of suffrage activities.

She participated in at least three marches. She marched in the parade in Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913, just before President Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, that was disrupted by hecklers. In Wilmington, she organized and marched in the college division in the city's first major parade on May 2, 1914. And she took part in a parade in Philadelphia on October 22, 1915.

Mary also appeared before various government bodies and officials. In 1912, she was part of a WESA delegation that asked the Wilmington Charter Commission for woman's suffrage in the new city charter. In January 1914, she was a member of a group of Wilmington





suffragists who spoke to a committee of the Delaware House of Representatives about a proposed woman's suffrage amendment to the Delaware constitution. The next January she participated in a meeting with state senator-elect James B. Hickman.

Although she had some contacts with the Congressional Union (CU), Mary had a strong sense of boundaries that kept her firmly in the DESA camp. In the fall of 1913, she and other DESA leaders opposed the CU's plan to have Emmeline Pankhurst speak in Wilmington. Despite their protests, Mrs. Pankhurst did indeed come to the city. In July 1917, as suffragists met to consider how to respond to the pickets who had been arrested, Mary strongly articulated the DESA's position of opposition to picketing and refused to sign a letter to Florence Bayard Hilles expressing sympathy with her imprisonment while expressing disapproval of picketing.

When ratification came, Mary was overjoyed. She said, "The stigma of inferiority which had been placed up on the women of the nation is now forever wiped out. . . . The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in Tennessee has brought about one of the most magnificent triumphs for right and justice that has ever been known. I wish that Delaware could have had that honor."

Mary had a strong interest in history, and her service as secretary and press chair of DESA and WESA made her the logical choice to be appointed by DESA to compile the Delaware entry for Ida Husted Harper's *History of Woman Suffrage in the United States*. She also wrote "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Delaware," published in H. Clay Reed's *Delaware: A History of the First State*, which is one of the standard sources on suffrage in Delaware.





The other main focus of Mary's life was the New Century Club, which she joined in 1893. Here again she showed leadership ability, joining the executive committee in 1894. She served as corresponding secretary from 1928 to 1932 and was the club's press contact to the *Wilmington Morning News* for sixteen years. In addition, she taught classes, gave talks, and served on committees. She remained a member of the club throughout her life.

Other affiliations included the Natural History Society of Delaware, which Mary joined in 1898 and on whose board she served. An avid botanist, she let her garden grow wild so that she could study the plants that appeared. She was active in the Delaware Association of College Women (now the American Association of University Women). Mary belonged to the First Unitarian Church in Wilmington, where she taught Sunday school and served as secretary of the board of trustees for twenty-six years. And, in 1931 she was on the organizing committee for the Birth Control League of Delaware (now Planned Parenthood of Delaware). Mary had a strong interest in genealogy and local history, and belonged to the Historical Society of Delaware, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and other lineage societies.

Mary died on September 29, 1949. The local newspaper eulogized her, saying "We are going to miss the old spinster whose bright eyes, stiff spine, and proprietary manner proclaimed her for what she was." Mary is buried in Wilmington and Brandywine Cemetery.





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