

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of June 9 – 15, 2019

Votes for women! This was the cry of many women across the U.S. 100 years ago, and oh, they were so close to achieving it. The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving full suffrage to most women, was approved by the U.S. Senate on June 4, 1919, and then sent to the states to be ratified. Wisconsin was the first state to ratify the amendment, voting yes on June 10 and turning in the paperwork to the correct office in Washington, D.C., on June 13, just moments before Illinois did.

The whole process of passing and then ratifying the amendment took several years. On January 10, 1918, the U.S. House of Representatives had passed the amendment, but the U.S. Senate subsequently did *not* pass it, so at that time the amendment went no further. This failure was noticed right here in Vernon County.

At the Viroqua High School baccalaureate service held on May 19, 1918, at Viroqua's Methodist Episcopal Church, the following resolution was offered and unanimously adopted: "Whereas the House of Representatives has passed the woman's suffrage amendment, be it resolved that we, the people of Viroqua, assembled in a union service on the occasion of the sermon to the class of 1918, urge our United States senators from Wisconsin to take prompt and favorable action in this matter of the woman suffrage amendment."

The resolution was then signed by officers of the Vernon County Suffrage Association. This seems a bold political statement to come out of a high school baccalaureate service. Women's suffrage must have been very much on the minds of local people.

One reason for this might have been that Ada James, one of Wisconsin's most famous suffragettes of the early 20th century, lived right nearby in Richland Center. From 1911 to 1919, she criss-crossed the state campaigning for women's right to vote. Since she lived so near to Vernon County, I assume that she came here as well, maybe speaking at women's organizations or handing out leaflets at the county fair, but I haven't found any proof of that. Let the museum know if you have evidence that Ada James campaigned for women's suffrage in Vernon County.

In late May of 1919, one year after the suffrage resolution was made at Viroqua's baccalaureate service, the 19th amendment was reintroduced to the House of Representatives. It again passed there and was sent on to the Senate, which this time also passed it. After Wisconsin and Illinois ratified the new amendment, many other states also agreed to it, and the amendment officially entered the U.S. Constitution in August of 1920.