

Commemorating Ellen Martin's Vote during Women's History Month

Prior to 1920, American women were not enfranchised to vote in the majority of elections in the United States. There were various assumptions made by society about women's voting rights including that they were not educated enough to vote, they would only vote as their husbands did, or that they were uninterested in politics. Voting rights were determined election by election; at the city level for local elections, at the state level for statewide elections and at the federal level for Presidential elections. Women's suffrage had been a battle hard fought by many activists for the right to vote in every election.

A woman from Lombard became the first woman to vote in Illinois on April 6, 1891. On that day local suffragist Ellen Martin used her wit and courage to cast a ballot in a local election. Ms. Martin, a resident of Lombard and a Chicago attorney, based her legal claim to vote on the words of the town charter. The charter deemed that residents of Lombard, over the age of 21, would be allowed to vote in local elections.

On April 6, 1891, wearing two sets of spectacles and legal brief in hand, Ms. Martin demanded the right to cast a ballot. She stated her case on the fact that the town charter enfranchised ALL citizens, with no mention of sex. The polling judges were completely stunned and reacted with shocked astonishment. "Mr. Marquardt was taken with a spasm, Mr. Reber leaned stiff against the wall, and Mr. Vance fell backward into the flour barrel." Shock and awe aside, under the majesty of the town charter, the judges were forced to allow her to vote.

After Ms. Martin voted, another fourteen women followed her to the poll on that election day. The victory was short-lived in Lombard for soon after the town council changed the charter to read that only men were allowed to vote. Ms. Martin's actions must have stirred something in Illinois however, because just four months later the state charter was altered to allow women to vote in local school elections.

In Illinois, women were enfranchised to vote statewide in 1913 and the annual tally for Lombard's elections proved how important it was. In 1912, 223 votes were cast, in 1913 225 votes, but in 1914 when women could now vote, 562 votes were cast in the ballot box.

Ellen Martin was an advocate for women's rights but for a personal reason as well. In Illinois, attorneys were required to be registered voters to argue a case in court. By not being a voter, Ms. Martin was prevented from the full practice of her profession. It is unknown whether or not her vote allowed her to advance in her own career and she returned to her native New York State and died in 1916, never living to see the 19th amendment passed in 1920.

~ Lombard Historical Society