

## SUFFRAGE ORGANIZATION IN NS: COUNCIL OF WOMEN

By: Gloria Stephens 2017

**1893 – COUNCIL OF WOMEN-** The objective of the organization was to: “improve the lives of children and women and to fight for women’s vote”. The idea of having something organized for women started years before 1893 by Hannah Norris in 1870 who started the ‘Woman’s Baptist Missionary Aid Society in NS. This advanced to become the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1878. The organization promoted legislation for married women to own property in 1884. By 1891 the WCTU seriously took up the suffrage cause with Edith Archibald as President. This was the first active Women’s Movement; Local Council of Women of Halifax (LCWH). Edith Jessie Archibald (1854- 1936) was the daughter of a diplomat which served her well when she was ‘put in charge’ of the Provincial Red Cross Department for the relief of Canadian prisoners of war after 1918. She was also an active member of the Royal NS Historical Society, Halifax Ladies Musical Club, the Children’s Hospital and Rainbow Haven Camp. In between times, she wrote extensively and published. She has been honoured for all her accomplishments with a plaque on the building of the Local Council of Women, at the corner of South Park and Inglis Streets. Edith made the first attempt for a ‘suffrage bill’ in the legislature for the vote for married women who were property holders in 1893, which was passed but the Attorney General, James W. Longley completely ignored it and rejected it for 20 years.



EDITH ARCHIBALD

These progressive women did not give up and in 1894 an Executive Committee met at Government House, Halifax, to organize a ‘women’s suffrage act’ with President Emma MacIntosh. The Secretary was Anna Leonowens with other members; Eliza and Mary Ritchie, Charlotte McInnes, May Sexton and Agnes Dennis. Anna became president in 1895 and the ‘Women’s Suffrage Association’ was formed in March of that year. Anna was famous for the ‘King and I’ and the Art School held in the Acadian School on Argyle Street, Halifax. Agnes Dennis was LCWH President 1906 to 1920. Dr. Eliza Ritchie, daughter of Judge Ritchie, was the first Nova Scotian female professor to teach at Dalhousie University and the first woman on the Dalhousie Board of Trustees. Lady Ritchie was also instrumental and using her influence to bring about the first ‘Children’s Protection Act’ in 1893, while living in Ottawa. Between 1892 and 1895 the group presented 34 petitions and 6 suffrage bills to the Nova Scotia legislature, the last one in 1897.



ANNA LEONOWENS



ELIZA RITCHIE



MAY SEXTON



AGNES DENNIS



LADY ABERDEEN

June 1897, the National Council of Women met in Halifax with presentations from Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor General at the time, and an American woman; Mary Wright Sewall who was a member of the International Council of Women, (ICW). The ICW was organized in 1888, by Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the USA.

The Halifax group were encouraged to carry on and by June 11, 1914, had an active ‘Suffrage Club’ who met in Wright’s home on Young Avenue. The first president in the Halifax unit was Emma MacIntosh. February 22, 1917 they again presented a suffrage petition signed by 41 women’s organizations and again the issue was completely ignored by the Premier at the time.

Before this date, George Henry Wright (1849-1912) born in Dartmouth, NS, became a real-estate developer, philanthropist and writer of ‘travel books’. He was a victim of the Titanic sinking, 1912. In his Will he gave 66,000 to charities and his house on the corner of Young Avenue and Inglis Street to the Council of Women for their use. *(Inglis Street was named after Major General John Inglis’s grandfather. John fought in the battle of Lucknow and a Halifax Street is named Lucknow in honour of him. Young Avenue was named after Sir William Young a NS politician.*



LAURA BORDEN

A 24 year struggle ended in Nova Scotia, April 21, 1918, when Premier George Henry Murray passed the Franchise Act giving women the right to vote in Nova Scotia provincial elections. The first province to do so in Canada. A month later, the Prime Minister, Robert Borden passed the Canadian Suffrage Act allowing all Canadian women to vote. Borden’s wife, Laura, was a former President of the Canadian Council of Women. The first woman to be elected to the House of Assembly was Gladys Porter, February 1, 1961, 43 years after the Act was passed.

The Local Council of Women in Halifax established many worthwhile organizations such as: Victoria School of Art and Design, Art Gallery of NS, Nova Scotia Red Cross, Children’s Hospital, Forrest Hall, Dalhousie’s first women’s residence, Halifax VON, and anti-TB League.

The Council of Women considered promoting nursing services to outlying districts as a memorial to Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. At the annual meeting in Halifax, May 1896, a formal request was made: “Dominion and Provincial governments to take the matter into serious consideration to remedy the present state of medical care in isolated areas of Canada.”

Lady Aberdeen and six other members were asked to form and work out details as to how this could be accomplished. By 1897 they recommended ‘Order of Nurses’ for the districts. At the time nursing was considered chartable within the sphere of the church. Nurses in hospitals were typically ‘working class’ with little or no education and seen as part of every women’s role in life. Nurses were to be dedicated and unquestioning subordinates to doctor’s orders. Lady Aberdeen first thought to call these ‘nurses’ “Home Helpers” who were to go into homes doing “all sorts of mercy and kindness” and not to interfere with or be in competition with Private Duty nurses. The Order became the ‘Victoria Order of Nurses’ (VON).