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Andover Stories: League of Women Voters celebrates 90 years

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The Suffragists won the right to vote in 1920. Women were finally to have a voice, but it needed to be an educated and an up-to-date voice. The Suffrage Association that had worked so hard now had a new mission and, to that end, needed a new name - The League of Women Voters of Andover.

Winifred Brigham (referred to Mrs. Frank L. Brigham in publications of the time) would be the League's first president, helping to steer the League in "promoting the success of democracy by helping the individual citizen to understand and accept responsibility for his government...The League works for governmental actions representing no special or party interest, but in the public interest."

Many of the early members of the Andover League were college-educated faculty wives from Phillips Academy. These women were very familiar with the concept of study groups and paper writing, and thus in the years from 1920-1930 the League would begin using a format that would become their trademark. Study groups were started, small discussion meetings were held and public meetings with expert speakers were arranged. Members listened, they argued, they learned, sought more information and became prepared to cast their educated vote.

The study groups or research groups would be the heart of the process. Members, then and now, work hard to understand legislation, raise questions and participate in town matters. Many topics have been researched over the years. In the beginning studies were on issues close to the members: child labor laws, women's prison reform, education and environmental concerns. In the 1920s, the League was instrumental in town zoning, public kindergarten, libraries in the schools and formulating the town charter.

The town charter failed the first time it went to vote, but the League women were determined. Members knocked on doors and went to people's living rooms to explain the need and the provisions in the charter. At the next election, the charter passed. The League has always taken credit (or blame) for this success.

In 1933, 150 members attended the Annual Meeting where regulation of public utilities and unemployment were on the program. The 1930s also saw the discussion of the Town Meeting Warrant. These warrant meetings were held at the Punchard High School and were open to the public. In 1936 there were extensive meetings to discuss the junior high school format - the addition of home economics, shop, art and music classes. There were discussions about why the public was not allowed at School Committee meetings and whether married women should be hired as teachers.

The League's study topics have grown over the years, with members concerning themselves with more than just local topics. During wartime, foreign affairs, government and its operations, and immigration would be added to the list. Every decade of Andover's history had new concerns to be reviewed. The 1950s saw welfare and penal reform, the 1960s concern was for open space and special education, the 1970s the Central Business District, and the 1980s studied parking and traffic, emergency medical services and the town's master plan. From the 1990s to the present, members have studied such topics as recycling, youth services, affordable housing, pay-as-you throw trash collection, domestic violence and the workload of the appointed boards. The topics are broad and never ending - creating enough work for the League of Women Voters to have stayed in "business" for 90 years. As Virginia Cole (LWV of Andover president, 1957-59, 1992-94) said in February 1999, "The work of educating voters and getting them to vote is as important as it was in the beginning. The League cannot stop for a minute."

"Andover Stories" is a weekly column about interesting local people and events, told in anticipation of the Andover Historical Society's 100 anniversary in 2011.