

Harriet Bird: Examining a Female Anti-Suffragist

Why did some women in the late 19th century debate so passionately against their own right to vote? This is a question I had not considered before diving into my research about the many notable women of Yarmouth. I had always thought that the Women's Suffrage Movement consisted of women fighting united to try to break free of men holding them down and refusing to give them the right to participate in our country's democracy. While there were many brave women who did fight to change the law, and who I can thank for my right to vote as a woman today, a person's political ideas do not depend on their gender, class, or race. Not every woman was united against every man in this issue. Everyone thinks differently and Suffrage is just one example of the many ways history is more complicated than it appears at first glance. I stumbled upon someone that changed my perspective on Women's Suffrage and history forever, and I want to share her story with you.

Mrs. Harriet Bird is one of the most interesting and thought-provoking women in Yarmouth history. She was born Hattie Williamson in Yarmouth in 1864, and lived in the home her father built, and is still standing today at 73 West Elm St (See image 2) (2). Harriet graduated from Yarmouth High School in 1881, where she was very involved, and even read the class poem at her graduation. She went on to attend Wellesley College where she earned a bachelor's of science degree; she graduated in 1885. Her plans after college were highlighted in the "Wellesley College Class of 1885 Statistics for '88-89" (1) where she describes her hopes of becoming a teacher in Portland. Harriet accomplished this before settling down in Yarmouth with her husband, and transforming into Mrs. George Bird. Once married, she did not continue teaching. Instead she became deeply involved in many community organizations and clubs in Yarmouth. Harriet had the idea that she wanted a way for people to get involved and to help make their town a better and more beautiful place, so she founded the Yarmouth Village Improvement Society in 1911, and served its president for 21 years (3). She was an active member of the Women's Club in Yarmouth and is one of the only Maine women ever honored by becoming a member of the Civic Association of Washington for her community service efforts (1).

Harriet Bird, an intelligent, well-educated and deeply involved community member, was also one of the most outspoken leaders against the effort to include women in the right to vote.

She spoke many times at the Men's and Women's Clubs in Yarmouth, was the President of the Maine Anti-Suffrage Association where she organized and attended many protests (see image 3), and attended and spoke at many out of state conventions and meetings about Anti-Suffrage as a representative from Maine (1). She was very well known within the Anti-Suffrage community of New England, and was notorious for her detailed speeches regarding why women should not have the right to vote. One of the main points in her rhetoric was the differences in male and female psychology and biology. She explains her thoughts in 1914, stating that female suffragists were women, “rebellious against nature,” and that, “God created men and women with varying functions, obligations, and duties” (1). Here she explained her belief that men and women are given their varying jobs in society, and for there to be a functioning society, people need to stick to their roles. Another example of this is when, in this same speech, she stated that, “The happiness of the home and cost of living are women's duties, they should stick to them and not bother with politics” (1). Harriet was happy with her life and the role that society had put her in as a woman. She married a Maine Supreme Court Justice, and lived in a beautiful house on West Elm Street. Harriet was seen as a pillar in the Yarmouth community, and in her obituary, the first words used to describe her were, “widely acquainted”(3). She did not feel at all constrained by her lack of voting rights. She even went as far as to say, “Good housekeeping is even more difficult than political life”(1). She did not want anything to change. She had flourished in a traditional women's role, and did not understand why others would want to break “out of the box”.

During this time period, women were battling for their rights. As roughly half the population, why wouldn't women have wanted the right to vote? They were making up an ever-growing percent of the workforce. They took care of their homes; they gave birth to and raised the next generation. They were forming their own opinions, and becoming increasingly politically active. Harriet shared her own political opinions - advocating for better health, food, morals and education of children, abolishing child labor, establishing juvenile courts, safer working conditions for women, and less legal discrimination against women. She had strong opinions, so why wouldn't she want to voice them in the form of casting a vote? Harriet Bird is an enigma full of contradictions who fascinated me the more I learned about her.

Something notable I learned about Harriet's life is that she wasn't fighting against Suffrage when the movement was just sprouting; she was giving speeches and attending

conferences from 1914 to 1916 (1). The first state to grant Suffrage was Wyoming in 1869, when Harriet was 5 years old. Colorado followed in 1893, with Idaho, and Utah not far behind, granting women's suffrage in 1896 (5). By the time Harriet became active in the world of Anti-Suffrage in 1914, eight more states (all in the western half of the United States) had granted Women's Suffrage. She started making speeches and attending protests when she saw the traditional world she thrived in changing with the women's right to vote. She viewed the west through a critical gaze; she saw them as lawless and less civilized. When speaking of these western women who had a right to vote as of 1914, she declared them as, "being obsessed with their own importance and overrating their part in the good that has been accomplished" (1).

A difference of opinion on Suffrage existed generationally between women in the United States. While conducting research for this essay, I had the privilege of reading Annie Sillin's winning essay for the 2020 Wellcome Prize. She detailed the life of the woman for which this prize was named - Elsie Wellcome. Elsie Wellcome was Harriet's pro-suffrage counterpart. They debated frequently regarding Women's Rights and were both seen as leaders in the community (4). In her essay, Annie sums up Harriet Bird's thinking by stating, "Worried about the possibility of social upheaval and anarchism, Bird made it clear that in order to maintain stability, women must remain where they always have - in the home, having nothing to do with politics" (4).

Despite their differences of opinion, discourse between Wellcome and Bird was civil, respectful. As a matter of fact, their debates frequently ended with cake and lemonade! This is far from the heated political debates which have become commonplace in today's world. Both women were similarly passionate about helping the community. This was exemplified by their mutual involvement in the Village Improvement Society (1).

In closing, I wanted to highlight the significant age difference between these two women. Elsie was born in 1893 and graduated from high school in 1912 (4). With 31 years between them, they essentially grew up in completely different political environments. I believe that these differing environments are responsible, in part, for the differences in their views. When Harriet was in high school, the states that had granted Women's Suffrage were few and far between, but 30 years later (when Elsie was graduating from the same high school) Suffrage was gaining more traction, with ideas of women breaking out of their roles following closely behind (5). Another way to think about this is that the 1950s and the 1980s are only 30 years apart. Think of the

advancements made during that time period, not just in feminism but in every aspect of society. Ideas about women's roles shifted; medicine and technology advanced tremendously. A lot can change in 30 years - Elsie Wellcome and Harriet Bird are proof enough of that. Their relationship did not consist of two women of the same era debating over women's right to cast a ballot. It was a middle aged woman who stood for tradition, defending the past, debating a bright, young feminist who was fighting for the future.

It is easy to judge Harriet Bird through a modern lens, thinking of her as unintelligent, and backward for her beliefs. While I do not agree with many of her opinions, I am grateful (despite her efforts) that national Suffrage was granted in 1920 (5). Bird was a smart, determined woman who cared enough about her community to fight for what she believed was right. She thought that women getting to vote was the first step towards greater freedoms for women, and therefore great societal change (she was right). This scared her. She thought the world functioned perfectly well as it was, and didn't see a need to change it. Throughout Harriet's life, things had changed drastically, and rapidly. Harriet Bird's story is complex because, through arguing against women's suffrage, she became a female political leader herself. Through the stories of individuals like Harriet Bird, we see that history is complicated, and no issue is ever as black and white as it first seems. I feel fortunate that I got a chance to learn more about this significant woman's life, even though her views regarding suffrage couldn't be any more different than my own. Learning about Harriet Bird taught me so much about a moment in history I hadn't yet considered: women opposing the right to vote.

Works Cited:

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2. House Research Files, 73 West Elm St. Yarmouth Historical Society, Yarmouth, ME. 10 September 2021.
3. Local History Files, George and Harriet Bird, Yarmouth Historical Society, Yarmouth, ME. 10 September 2021.
4. "Elsie Wellcome" by Annie Sillin. Wellcome Prize Winning Essay 2020. Yarmouth Historical Society, Yarmouth, ME. 10 September 2021.

5. 100 Years of the Women's Vote: Suffrage Map. (2021). By Jenn Brandt. Retrieved 23 September 2021, from <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/100-years-of-the-womens-vote/media/suffrage-map>



Image 1: Harriet Bird



Image 2: Harriet's house from 1864-1919 (73 West Elm St)

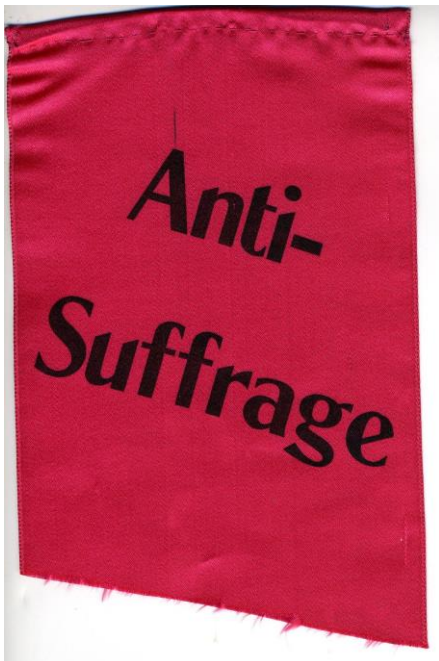


Image 3: Harriet Bird's badge from an Anti-Suffrage protest