How American women won the right to vote: a Tennessee perspective (part one)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 26, 2026)

The Women's Suffrage Museum in downtown Knoxville is scheduled to open in 2028 or early 2029. Wanda Sobieski, founder of the museum, recently gave a talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge on the history of the suffrage movement and plans for the museum being completed at 706 S. Gay St. According to its flyer, this museum that has more than 1,000 artifacts will tell the story of "one of the longest, most arduous and ultimately most transformative movements in American history" that won the right to vote for 27 million American women citizens in 1920.

Sobieski is also founder of the law firm Sobieski, Messer and Associates and the Suffrage Coalition, which is dedicated to honoring men and women who have worked to win the right to vote for women in Tennessee. Carolyn Krause heard her talk and gives a summary in this three-part series. This article focuses on Harry Burn, and some of the information comes from Wikipedia.

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Many Tennesseans, including schoolchildren, have heard of Harry Burn. Many Knoxville residents have seen the Burn Memorial, erected in 2018 on Market Street near Charles Krutch Park. The memorial depicts young State Representative Harry T. Burn and his mother, Febb Burn. It commemorates the historic moment on Aug. 18, 1920, when 24-year-old Burn, who had opposed women's suffrage, made the risky decision to change his mind. He cast the decisive vote to ratify the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution after receiving a letter from his mother encouraging him to "be a good boy" and "vote for suffrage." Because Burn switched his vote, the amendment was finally ratified by the required 36 states, granting 27 million American women citizens the right to vote.

August 18 is now Febb Burn Day in Tennessee, and fifth-grade schoolchildren learn about her and her son, Harry, in their Tennessee history textbooks.

Here is the wording of the 19th amendment: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." These few words caused a firestorm during and after the ratification process.

Ratification of the 19th Amendment "was the single biggest political change ever to happen in our history," said Wanda Sobieski in a talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge. "It was a big deal that we, Tennessee, a southern state, ushered in the right to vote for more than half the citizens of the country. I co-founded the Women's Suffrage Coalition whose purpose was to put a monument in downtown Knoxville to bring attention to the fact that Tennessee has a great history for women's suffrage. We started by erecting in 2006 a Tennessee Woman Suffrage Memorial in Market Square for three Tennessee women suffragists."

Three Tennessee women suffragists. The life-size bronze statue commemorates Lizzie Crozier French, a Knoxville native whose story will be partly told in the third article of this series; Anne Dallas Dudley, a Nashville native who was founder and president of the Nashville Equal Suffrage League, president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association and then vice president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, a Bolivar native who grew up in Memphis and became an author, publisher and one of the earliest public advocates for women's suffrage in the American South. In 1872, she called the first public meeting for suffrage.

"In 2018, we erected the statue of Burn and his mother. We also digitized Harry Burn's papers, including the telegrams he got, some of which were threatening and others that were ugly, while he was considering the vote and while they were trying to get him to reverse his vote. Our coalition raised the money to digitize the papers for the McClellan Collection so that they remain freely available on the worldwide web. During the pandemic, we made a resolution unanimously passed by the Tennessee Legislature to make Aug. 18 Febb Burn Day in Tennessee." Now, the Burn story is taught in fifth grade all across the state.

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Story of Harry Burn. Burn was a high school graduate who worked for the Southern Railway while serving in the Tennessee General Assembly as a representative of McMinn County. He explained that while he generally favored the 19th amendment, he sensed that most of his constituents did not. Burn worried that he might not be re-elected if he voted for the amendment. Many of his constituents had told him to oppose it.

His political mentor, a state senator also from Burn's hometown of Niota, delivered a racist, anti-suffrage speech denouncing suffragists as indecent and childless. His mother learned about this speech. Not sure of where her son stood on the suffrage question, Febb wrote him a long letter asking him to vote in favor of the amendment.

Burn received his mother's letter the morning of the crucial Tennessee House's vote on the amendment on August 18, 1920. Lawmakers displayed their allegiance by wearing yellow roses for ratification or red for opposition; Burn wore red. However, he kept his mother's letter containing the command "vote for suffrage" in his coat pocket during the voting session. Burn voted "aye," breaking the tie in favor of ratifying the amendment.

When they heard about Burn's decision, a group of anti-suffragists became enraged. Sobieski said that a riot ensued for a couple of hours. The governor worried about Burn's safety and assigned the sergeant-at-arms to guard him and called in the National Guard to restore order. By that time, Burn had escaped the chamber by climbing out of the window. He walked carefully along a four-inch ledge and then climbed back through a window to the state library's attic where he hid until it was safe to come out, according to Sobieski.

The next day, according to Wikipedia, Burn was accused of bribery and misconduct for his change in vote. "He responded to attacks on his integrity and honor by inserting a personal statement into the House Journal, explaining his decision to cast the vote: Suffrage was a right he felt morally obliged to support, especially as it would 'free seventeen million women from political slavery' and 'he knew that a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification.'

"A grand jury was called to investigate the accusations of bribery. Burn narrowly won reelection to a second term in the House after a grueling campaign back home in McMinn County."

Because Oak Ridge is partly in Roane County, readers may be interested to know that Burn later had Roane County connections. In 1923, Burn was admitted to the Tennessee Bar and practiced law in Rockwood. In 1951, he became president of the First National Bank in Rockwood. He served as a delegate for Roane County to the Tennessee constitutional conventions in 1953, 1959, 1965 and 1971. However, Burn never lived in Roane County; he lived in Niota in neighboring McMinn County.

"Right now, there are politicians and ministers, unfortunately, who are calling for the right to vote to be rescinded from women and to let only men in the country vote once again," Sobieski said. "With that in mind, we decided it was time to take the more than 1,000 artifacts we gathered in the process of our research and the stories we found on what happened in Tennessee and create a lasting museum to hold what we uncovered.

"We thought we had created lasting memorials when we erected monuments to Harry and Febb Burn and the three women suffragists from Tennessee, and I hope we have. But these memorials are just not enough."

Next: A brief history of the women's suffrage movement in the United States. If you wish to make a donation to the Women's Suffrage Museum, write a check to Suffrage Coalition, Inc. and mail it to Suffrage Coalition, Inc. P.O. Box 14322, Knoxville, TN 39714 or direct your donation electronically on the womenssuffragemuseum.org website.

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Thank you, Carolyn, for insight into the movement of women's suffrage.

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Febb Burn, whose letter caused her son to change his mind and support the 19th Amendment



Harry Burn, the 24 year old who followed his mother's advice to "be a good boy" and "vote for suffrage"