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

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 9, 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 Women's 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 suffragists in Tennessee, especially a woman in Knoxville.

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One of the achievements of the Women's Suffrage Coalition founded by Wanda Sobieski has been the digitization of the papers of Tennessee contributors to the suffrage movement. They include Harry Burn, who cast the deciding vote that enabled 36 states to ratify the 19th Amendment, giving American women citizens the right to vote, and Lizzie Crozier French, a Knoxville suffragist who helped lead the movement at the state and national levels.

"We raised the money to digitize these papers for the McClellan Collection on the condition that they remain freely available to everybody on the worldwide web," Sobieski said. The website link to the papers is https://cmdc.knoxlib.org/digital/collection/p265301coll8/search. "It's not enough just to preserve the history. We must inform people about the history of the suffrage movement and use it to empower the future. If our next generations don't know what it cost to enfranchise women, they won't value the right to vote as much as they should.

"Currently, that right is under attack. Right now, there are politicians and ministers, unfortunately, who are calling to rescind the right to vote from women, and let only men in the country vote once again.

"So, with that in mind, we in the Women's Suffrage Coalition decided it was time to take the more than 1,000 artifacts we had gathered in the process of our research and the stories we learned about the history of the suffrage movement in the nation and Tennessee to create a lasting Women's Suffrage Museum."

In her talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge, Sobieski mentioned key women from Tennessee who participated in the suffrage movement. Sobieski talked about Sue Shelton White from Memphis. "She was a stenographer who worked in the courts," she said. "She joined the National Women's Party (NWP), co-founded by Alice Paul in Washington, D.C., and became editor of its weekly Suffragist Magazine. She was arrested and jailed seven times for suffrage actions in D.C. She may be the only suffragist from Tennessee who was arrested."

Alice Paul decided that two women suffragists who had been arrested and jailed multiple times could better contribute to the movement by conducting a "Dixie tour." The idea was that the women would speak throughout the South to let people know about the NWP's picketing of the White House to ask for the right to vote for women citizens and the unchivalrous arrests and imprisonment of the demonstrators.

In 1917 Paul chose Maud Younger, an NWP leader and effective orator, and Joy Young to make the speaking tour. Maud Younger was an independently wealthy socialite from San Francisco who helped to financially support the suffrage movement. Although a millionaire, she was dedicated to improving the lives of women in the working class. She chaired the NWP's lobbying and legislative committees. She had driven from California in her own car to join NWP in Washington – unusual for women at the time to drive and to even own a car.

"They started their Dixie tour by driving to Memphis," Sobieski said. "They were scheduled to go through nine cities in Tennessee, and then on through the South, spreading the word about what was happening."

When lawyers and judges in Memphis learned that two women were coming there to speak about the suffrage movement, they met and decided the women "needed to be shut up because whatever they had to say was probably seditious since it was wartime," Sobieski said. "So, th men met with property owners and got the women's contracts for the halls and lodging canceled, so when they arrived, they had no place to stay and no place to speak."

Some of the men notified the city councils of the Tennessee cities where they learned the women planned to speak. "They convinced the city councils to pass resolutions that no women should be allowed to speak in public about suffrage

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anywhere, and it worked in Memphis and in most of the nine cities. One exception was Jackson, which had an anti-suffrage mayor, but he believed in the freedom of speech called for in the First Amendment, so they got to speak in Jackson.

"Then they made their way to Knoxville, where they met Lizzie Crozier French, a suffragist who lived in Knoxville. They were scheduled to speak in Market Hall in the center of Market Square. They had reserved the hall for their program but found out their hall contract had been canceled. Anti-suffragists made sure that the suffragists' contracts for meeting spaces and lodging were canceled to discourage them."

Lizzie Crozier French, however, had a plan to ensure that Maud Younger and her companion could stay and speak in Knoxville. She offered them a room in her home to stay in. Her grandfather had donated the land for the Knoxville courthouse, so she tried to get permission from a judge to allow the women to speak in his courtroom. The courthouse committee made them give their speeches in advance and then reluctantly agreed that the speeches were not seditious as charged. They were granted the right to use a courtroom.

During this time, according to the newspapers, there were several weeks of hot controversy in Knoxville over whether the women should be allowed to speak at all. After they gave their entire speeches, Sobieski said, "they were cross-examined for two hours by the anti-suffragist attorney general. He determined that what they had to say was not seditious. So, the committee approved their use of the courthouse, and they thought they had won that battle.

"But on the night of Nov. 27, 1917, as they were walking from Lizzie's home to the courthouse downtown, Maud Younger recorded in her unpublished autobiography that they really expected to be shot. They were aware of all the opposition to them speaking. When they got closer to the courthouse, they saw a crowd of about 500 people standing in the grisly rain waiting to hear from them.

"When they had just about arrived, out from behind the courthouse came the sheriff and 10 armed deputies. The sheriff said he didn't care what the courthouse committee had to say. He was not going to let them use the courthouse.

"It looked grim at the moment. Then the Central Labor Council, which had learned about what was happening, sent what some authors describe as 80 armed men to defend the suffragists. They chased the sheriff and his deputies into the courthouse and locked them inside, so they could do no harm. Then they circled the courthouse to create a barrier between them and the suffragists.

"Maud Younger climbed the steps onto a little platform and she said, 'Well, the sheriff has the courthouse, but I've got the audience.' She told them what had been happening to the women in Washington, D.C. and in New York. She described the recent beatings of the jailed suffragists at the Occoquan Workhouse by the guards under orders by the prison superintendent, what came to be known as the 'Night of Terror.'

"Some women prisoners were hospitalized because they had suffered concussions or heart attacks. Lucy Burns, an NWP co-founder, was angel-cuffed to the jail bars; she had to stand there all night with both hands up above her head. A few of the other prisoners who could see her from their cells stood in solidarity with her and just held onto the bars all night long with her."

For an hour the crowd listened to Younger while standing and shivering in the cold November rain outside the Knoxville courthouse. As they heard her stories, many said, "I can't believe it!" Sobieski said that "five men from Knoxville that we've not been able to identify went together as a delegation to speak to the Southern Delegation in Washington, D.C. about the brutal treatment of women in the nearby Occoquan Workhouse."

The Dixie tour met some resistance in Chattanooga, but "the sheriff backed off, and they got to give their speech," Sobieski said. "They reported that during the rest of their travels through the South, they encountered very little resistance.

"In December 1917, a steady stream of protests and resolutions from the South had a material effect in releasing the suffrage prisoners from the Occoquan Workhouse and the district jail in Washington, and in transforming overnight the sentiments of the Southern delegation.

"My personal theory is that the events of Nov. 27, 1917, here in Knoxville changed the course in the effort to get the word out in the South about the women's suffrage movement and reasons why women should have the right to vote."

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Another story Sobieski told was about Tennessee Rep. Thetus W. Sims, who served West Tennessee as a Democratic member of Congress. He led the opposition to the passage of the 19th Amendment in Congress on more than one occasion. But in 1917 his wife and daughter Marie, a ballerina who performed in Washington, both joined the National Women's Party.

After the Nov. 27, 1917, event in Knoxville when Maud Younger was allowed to speak and was well-received, Sims changed his mind and decided to vote in favor of the amendment in the House of Representatives. He tried to influence all the Southern delegations to vote on behalf of suffrage.

In 2018 Congressman Sims, who had just broken his shoulder, refused to have it treated so he could use all his time to try to influence the Southern delegation before the vote; he credited his daughter Marie as much of his inspiration.

The irony is that Marie married Louis Brownlow, a Knoxville resident and grandson of a congressman. He later became commissioner of police for the District of Columbia. He issued the order to the D.C. police to start arresting the suffragists at the gates of the White House.

"That family probably had a pretty interesting Thanksgiving dinner that year," Sobieski quipped.

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 an excellent series on the history of the women's suffrage movement and the people who made it happen.



Lizzie Crozier French, who provided a lot of effort at the state and national level to support the women's suffrage movement

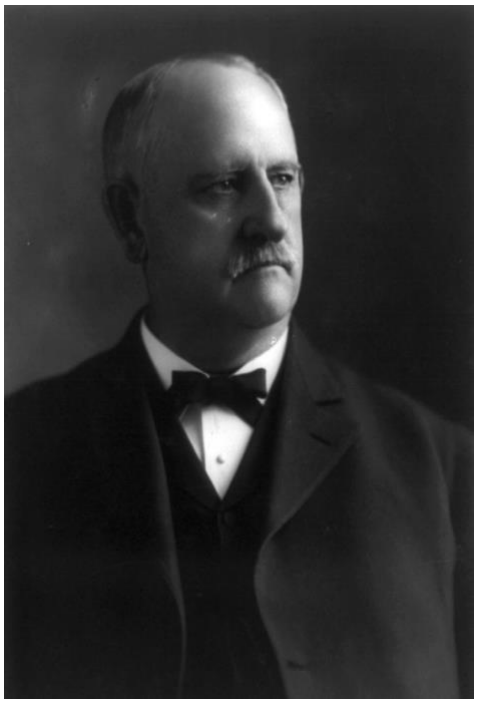
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Maud Younger (National Woman's Party)

Maud Younger, who, along with Lizzie Crozier French, was in Knoxville on November 27, 1917, when Younger gave a speech that helped turn the tide for the movement in the South



Thetus Sims who was moved by Younger's speech in Knoxville to vote in favor of the 19th amendment

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Wanda Sobieski speaking for League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge, will open the Women's Suffrage Museum in Knoxville, at 706 S. Gay St., in late 2028 or early 2029