

## Unit 4 Document Set 1: Woman Suffrage at Statehood Debates of the Constitutional Convention

*Quotations from the debates were taken from Official Report of the Proceedings and Debates of the First Constitutional Convention of North Dakota assembled in the city of Bismarck, July 4<sup>th</sup> to August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1889 (Bismarck: Tribune, State Printers and Binders, 1889)*

Seventy-five members of the 1889 constitutional convention met in Bismarck from July 4 to August 17. The members of the convention were mostly Republicans and just nineteen Democrats. Fifty-two of the members were born in the United States. F. B. Fancher was elected President of the convention. Fancher later served as governor of North Dakota (1899 -1901). P. 276.

On July 8, Henry B. Blackwell addressed the convention. Blackwell was a Boston businessman and supporter of woman's rights. His wife, Lucy Stone had scandalized the nation when she refused to take Blackwell as her last name when she married. Blackwell and Stone devoted their lives to abolition and rights for women and were founders of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA).

The fight for woman suffrage was progressing in the United States and national organizations such as AWSA focused on new states as important battlegrounds for woman suffrage. At the conclusion of his lengthy address to the convention, Blackwell said:

“Give us woman suffrage in the body of the Constitution or a clause empowering the legislature to take that step when the judgement of the public will sustain it. . . . I trust you will give Woman Suffrage candid and earnest and enthusiastic support.” (p. 41)

Members of the convention agreed that woman suffrage should not be included in the constitution, but should be a matter for the legislature to decide. Supporters of woman suffrage were content to let the legislature decide the matter; opponents asked to have any bill for woman suffrage that passed through the legislature submitted to a vote of the people for ratification.

Woman suffrage was often compared to the prohibition clause of the constitution which would be submitted to the people for a vote. Samuel H. Moer, a Republican lawyer from La Moure, suggested that woman suffrage should be handled in a similar manner, that any bill passed by the legislature for the extension of suffrage should be submitted to the people for a vote.

John W. Scott, a Republican lawyer from Valley City, agreed and said:

“I believe that this is a matter of great importance – that the question as to whether or not there shall be woman suffrage is of equally as much importance as anything that will come before the people of this State. I regard it as being a matter of far great importance than prohibition, which we will submit to the people for their acceptance or not.” (p. 277)

Scott noted that the question of woman suffrage could be brought to the legislature at any time, but should be ratified by the people.

“the question is not one that has been sufficiently thought of by the public, or demanded sufficiently by the public for us to take this step at this time. There has been no serious discussion of the question – it has only been agitated by a few, and so far as I am personally concerned I should be willing to leave it to the women of the State themselves, provided they would get out to vote – to leave it to them to say whether or not there should be woman suffrage.” (p. 277)

Robert Pollock, a lawyer from Cass County, noted that the proposition to have suffrage before the legislature not in the constitution was favored by the franchise committee. However, Pollock did not favor bringing the vote to the people because the voters who would vote on the issue would not include women. (p. 279)

Lorenzo Bartlett, a farmer from Ellendale, and one of the oldest members of the convention (born in 1829) brought social issues to bear on the debate.

“. . . in all my travels wherever I have been, if the question was put to a . . . crowd of ladies as to whether or not they wanted to vote, they have always said no. The answer to that made by the advocates of the theory [of woman suffrage] is that the ladies are enslaved. They have lived so many years and they don't know what they do want, simply because they are enslaved. I ask every gentleman here, and every woman here, if by their experience there is true happiness in those families where they are calling for female suffrage. What is your life's experience? Echo answers every time, that where two parties fight with one another in the same family, that happiness does not follow. . . . Three years ago in St. Paul, the women of America who believed in woman suffrage met in convention and they had a lady reporter that reported that convention. There were there 500 of the most talented women in America. I don't deny their talent and ability, but I do deny most emphatically that the principle they advocated would bring any happiness into the world. The lady who reported that meeting wrote me and, said she: 'In their countenances you could see intelligence, but you could also see sorrow and woe. They are anything but happy people, and their countenances show that their homes are not happy.' Show me one single individual family that is in favor of woman suffrage - I mean those who make a business of it – and how are their children? Do they raise a family equal

to those who don't believe in it? No. That is life's experience of those who have noticed these things. . . . [A]nd unfortunately it will come in a great many cases, that very moment if the man is a republican the woman will become a democrat, or if the man is a democrat the woman will become a republican. Anything that brings discord and sorrow into the family is not for the best interests of the people." (p. 280)

Mr. Moer's amendment – to place question of woman suffrage to the vote of the people passed 35 to 25.

Ezra Turner (a Republican farmer from Bottineau) offered another amendment that would allow legislature to decide on woman suffrage, but deny women the right to hold elective office. Turner argued that if women were not happy when they asked for the franchise, it might be because they were "enslaved" and

"persons who are enslaved are not usually very happy. . . . Is there any reason why these women should be happy when they are deprived of their just rights and privileges, and are compelled to obey laws in which they have no right to cast a vote or say whether these laws shall prevail? Is it not reasonable that these women should be unhappy when they see their sons dragged from their protection, under the influence of those who are following what they hold to be an unlawful business, dealing out that which destroys the manhood of their sons, and which curses and blights - [Turner was interrupted and reminded to stick to the subject.] (p. 283)

"Holding these views as I do, I am anxious that this amendment should pass, so that the right of the franchise may by the Legislature be extended to women, but not the right to hold office unless the voice of the people so declare." (p. 284)

Turner's motion lost.

On the forty-third day of the convention the question of school suffrage for women came forth for debate. Women had had the right to vote on all matters relating to school issues since 1883 under territorial law and a woman, Linda Warfel Slaughter, had held the elective office of Burleigh County Superintendent of Schools as early as 1878. The new constitution had a clause to continue the right of school suffrage for women. However, the details were subject to debate.

Lorenzo Bartlett offered an amendment to make the constitution limit school suffrage to "any single woman" instead of "any woman." (p. 573)

Rueben Stevens (R., Lisbon) opposed Bartlett's motion stating:

"I hope this Convention will not offer a premium on old maids. . . . I haven't any use for them." (p. 573-4)

The limited vote suggested some problems. Mr. Moer asked if the amendment meant that women could vote on school issues at the state level, such as state superintendent of schools, or would be limited to local school issues. (p. 574)

Eugene Rolfe (Republican from Minnewaukan) asked if women would have to show their ballots to prove that they had voted only on school matters and not on other issues and offices before the voters. If so, their right to a secret ballot would be impaired. (p. 574)

William Rowe (Republican from Monango) explained that

“There can be a separate ballot box for the women, and it will not be necessary for them to exhibit their ballots.” . 574.

Reuben Stevens (Republican of Lisbon) said that it would be

“absurd to say that women are entitled to vote for school directors and not for school superintendent and other school officers. If they are entitled to vote for school director as they are now allowed to do under our territorial laws, it is on the principle that they are entitled to have something to say in the government of our common schools. . . . Whatever little education I have I owe to my mother, and not to my father. I say the women of this country are interested more in the subject of education than the men, and I say they should be entitled to vote on this question, and if they vote on any branch of it, they should vote on all of it.” (p. 575)

The measure passed. Women were to have separate ballots and right to vote on state superintendent of schools.