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Lily Thompson and the Woman Suffrage Movement in Mississippi

by Heather Kuzma

In 2020, the United States is celebrating one hundred years of the federal amendment allowing women to vote. Many years prior to the adoption of the amendment, Mississippi was home to woman suffrage supporters with an organized movement statewide by 1897. The movement emphasized reform as its main purpose but utilized white supremacy as a tool to achieve this goal. Lily Wilkinson Thompson, one of the outspoken voices of the statewide movement, was a driving force behind the efforts in Jackson and helped create an organized and successful faction of the Mississippi woman suffrage movement.

Lily Wilkinson Thompson

Lily Gabrielle Wilkinson was born in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, on March 9, 1867. She was the daughter of William Clemments and Gabrielle Flowers (Barnes) Wilkinson.¹ Her father was an immigrant from Ireland who worked as a merchant. Her mother was a native Mississippian.² Lily attended Whitworth College in Brookhaven, Mississippi, graduating in 1884. On February 18, 1891, at age twenty-three, she married Charles H. Thompson in Grenada, Mississippi.³ During the first years of their marriage, the couple lived in Copiah County while Charles worked as a traveling salesman.⁴

By 1910, Charles was working as an insurance agent in Jackson, Mississippi. The Thompsons set up residence in Jackson with their

¹ "Thompson, Lily Wilkinson," In *Who's Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada, 1914-1915*, edited by John William Leonard. (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914), 813.

² 1800 U.S. census, Crystal Springs, Copiah County, Mississippi, population schedule, roll 646; page 253A; Enumeration District 026; digital image, Ancestry.com.

³ "Thompson, Lily Wilkinson," *Who's Who of America*, 813.

⁴ 1900 U.S. census, Beat 5, Copiah, Mississippi, population schedule, page 9; Enumeration District 0047; FHL microfilm 1240806; digital image, Ancestry.com.

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four surviving children, James Wilkinson (b. 1894), Primrose (b. 1896), Cynthia (b.1904) and Sarah Summers (b. 1907).⁵ Upon moving to Jackson, Lily Thompson became an active member of the Jackson community. She served in leadership roles in several organizations including the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Chaminade Club.⁶ She was an especially active member in the local and state suffrage movement, a cause she supported even when living in Copiah County.⁷ Thompson was an avid writer on many topics and used her communications skills to further the suffrage cause.⁸

The Mississippi Woman Suffrage Movement

The Mississippi woman suffrage movement first organized state-wide as the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) in 1897. The movement lost strength in the following years and the statewide organization took a hiatus from organized meetings until 1906.⁹ Early in the history of the organization, Nellie Nugent Somerville, the state president at the inception of the MWSA in 1897 and again from 1908 until Thompson assumed the role in 1912, wrote a pamphlet detailing the goals and reasons behind the suffrage movement in Mississippi. She stated, "The keyword of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association is Service . . . the Mississippi suffragists work for the ballot by taking an active interest in the upbuilding of their State, especially in education, in philanthropy and in the great work of sanitation and prevention of disease."¹⁰ Along with reform in education and healthcare, the Mississippi suffragists worked toward safeguarding children and increasing opportunities for women. Somerville mentions this feminist agenda in her pamphlet when she discusses the importance of having women

⁵ 1910 U.S. census, Jackson Ward 1, Hinds, Mississippi, population schedule, roll T624_742, page 10B, Enumeration District 0017, FHL microfilm 1374755, digital image, Ancestry.com.

⁶ "Thompson, Lily Wilkinson," *Who's Who of America*, 813.

⁷ *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Meridian, Mississippi, May 5, 1897, Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi, <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/6/rec/19>.

⁸ "Thompson, Lily Wilkinson," *Who's Who of America*, 813.

⁹ "Mississippi." In *History of Woman Suffrage Vol. VI*, edited by Ida Husted Harper, 326-341, (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), 326-327.

¹⁰ Nellie Nugent Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*, Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi, <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/117/rec/10>.

in leadership roles. Two of these agendas include women serving on boards of public institutions as well as requiring women physicians in insane asylums.¹¹ Aside from the ultimate goal of woman suffrage, the Mississippi woman suffrage movement also emphasized other causes in hopes that they would not only lead to woman suffrage, but also the general advancement of women.

Even with this seemingly benevolent agenda, one cannot overlook the undertone of white supremacy that permeated the woman suffrage movement throughout the South. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler writes of this phenomenon in her book *New Women of the New South* stating, "From the 1890s until approximately 1910, the argument that the enfranchisement of women (with qualifications that would in effect restrict the suffrage to white women) would restore white supremacy without the risks involved with disenfranchising blacks was central to the strategy of Southern suffragists."¹² The movement in Mississippi was not immune to these sentiments. In Somerville's article, she cites postwar changes as one reason Mississippi women desired the vote. She wrote, "Was not the war caused by politics? Was not the horror of reconstruction a game of politics? So Southern women pondered as they were forced to take the places of their own slaves."¹³ This can also be seen through the cooperation of the MWSA and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), an organization that worked to uphold prewar Southern ideals. Many of the leaders of the MWSA including Somerville were members of the UDC.¹⁴ Thompson served in the leadership of both organizations. In 1912, the MWSA voiced a desire to join forces with other women's organizations to work towards women-focused legislation. The MWSA eventually allied with both the Federation of Women's Clubs and the UDC.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the southern woman suffrage movement worked for a marginalized community while putting down another. Wheeler explains that "despite their indignation at the powerlessness and degradation implicit in their own disenfranchised state, many supported and none challenged the movement to restore white political supremacy."¹⁶

¹¹ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

¹² Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xv.

¹³ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

¹⁴ Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 109.

¹⁵ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 330.

¹⁶ Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, xv.

It is unfortunate that the movement took this contradictory stance as it taints its success in reforming other aspects of southern society.

Thompson's Leadership Role in the MWSA

Thompson was a founding member and leader of the MWSA. At the birth of the statewide organization in 1897, Thompson served as corresponding secretary alongside the president, Somerville, and vice president, Belle Kearney.¹⁷ Not only was Thompson involved at the beginning of the organization, but she was also present for its rebirth. In 1906 former vice president Kearney called for a meeting to reorganize the MWSA after a six-year hiatus. Thompson attended the meeting via telephone. Others participating included Hala Hammond Butt, who had served as president during the hiatus, Mrs. Edward Sloan, Dr. Delia Randal, and Somerville. These six women breathed new life into the organization and elected the new board with Kearney as president, Somerville vice president, and Thompson as treasurer. Thompson assumed the role of superintendent of the press the following year. It would be her longest running position with the MWSA.¹⁸ Somerville believed that utilization of the press was integral to the success of the movement stating, "The importance of the press cannot be overestimated."¹⁹ Thompson was charged with this task and was successful in building the presence of the MWSA in the press.

As superintendent of the press, Thompson published many articles in local newspapers. When Thompson was first elected to the role, she wrote to most of the editors in the state and was successful in convincing twenty-one of those editors to discuss suffrage in their papers.²⁰ In one of her early articles published in September 1907, she wrote:

As long as Mississippi women have access to the tax list, and the penitentiary, may they not justly have access to the polls? Would not the ballot in the hands of women af-

¹⁷ *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association.*

¹⁸ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 326-327.

¹⁹ Nellie Nugent Somerville, *Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association: Address of the President*, Flora, Mississippi, April 10, 1912, Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/129/rec/10>

²⁰ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 327.

ford them the quickest, quietest, most dignified method of effecting legislation, for is not an ounce of voting worth a pound of petitioning? ²¹

Utilizing her relationship with the press, Thompson attempted to distribute information regarding the woman suffrage movement to as many Mississippians as possible.

Moving up the ranks of the MWSA, Thompson was elected vice president in 1908 with Kearney serving as president. Thompson's involvement with the press continued, however, even with her increased leadership role in the suffrage association. In 1912, Thompson was elected president of the MWSA following Somerville's tenure. Thompson declined re-election in 1913 citing demands at home. Annie Kinkead Dent followed Thompson as president. ²² Even as Thompson stepped down from her leadership role, she continued to be an outspoken leader for the cause. She joined other suffrage activists including Somerville, Kearney, and Dent to speak to the Mississippi House of Representatives on January 22, 1914. ²³ Of the women who spoke that day, Kate Power of the *Jackson Daily News* wrote, "England may prefer her brand of suffragists, but it is with our own gently-bred ladies in the lead that the South will ere long achieve the ends for which she aims." ²⁴ Although Thompson focused her efforts on the movement in Jackson in the following years, she melded her state and local roles by serving as MWSA district president for Jackson. ²⁵ As the suffrage amendment became a possibility, Thompson worked with the MWSA's Ratification Committee created in 1919. Under the leadership of the Ratification Committee chairman, Janie Turner Saunders, Thompson took responsibility for the Jackson press and wrote prolifically in support of ratification until

²¹ "Women Are Wanting a Say," *The Lexington Advertiser*, September 20, 1907, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024271/1907-09-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

²² "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 328-332.

²³ *Ibid*, 336.

²⁴ Kate Power, "Woman's Suffrage and the Solons," *The Lexington Advertiser*, January 23, 1914, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024271/1914-01-23/ed-1/seq-3/>.

²⁵ *Ballots for Both: Thirteenth Annual Convention of Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Court House, Starkville, April 13-14, 1917; Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/edm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/121/rec/1>.

the amendment was adopted nationally.²⁶

Although Thompson was a pioneer and leader of the state suffrage movement, it was her efforts which created an organized and significant movement in Mississippi's capital, Jackson. Such a city, where much of the legislative efforts and statewide events took place, called for a dedicated group of local activists. Under Thompson's direction such an organization became a reality.

Jackson and the Equity League

Even prior to the creation of a state suffrage association, Thompson was involved in suffrage activities at the local level. At the first state suffrage convention in 1897, Thompson was representing her home town of Crystal Springs.²⁷ By 1910, Thompson was writing a weekly column in the *Jackson Daily News*.²⁸ Thompson described this paper as having "the largest circulation of any paper in the state."²⁹ At this time, Thompson became very active in supporting the local suffrage movement in Jackson. After serving as president of the MWSA from 1912-1913, Thompson left the leadership of the state association and focused her efforts on the movement in Jackson.

At Thompson's suggestion, the woman suffrage supporters of Jackson met to create an organized group.³⁰ Although Jackson already had many dedicated suffragists, the city did not boast an organized group that gathered at regular meetings. Named groups of suffragists were present in surrounding states such as the Era Club in New Orleans and in Mississippi such as the Civic Improvement Club of Greenville.³¹ Thompson recognized this deficiency, and in 1911, called for the woman suffrage supporters of Jackson to gather in hopes of forming a more formal organization. A meeting to these ends was held in October 1911. At the following meeting in November, the first officers were elected. Thompson was cho-

²⁶ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 337.

²⁷ *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*.

²⁸ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 329.

²⁹ *Sixth Annual Report of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association 1910*, Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/77/rec/23>, 18.

³⁰ *Equity League Minutes 1911-1914*. Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/243>.

³¹ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

sen president with Mrs. C. C. Warren serving as vice president, Elizabeth Richardson serving as secretary, and Mrs. V. R. Howie as treasurer.³²

In 1912, with Thompson serving as state president of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, she did not resume her role as president of the Jackson organization. One of the last actions before Thompson left her post was the adoption of a constitution on May 17, 1912. Under the leadership of Mrs. E. J. Edmonds, 1912 was a significant year for the organization. Not only did the organization adopt a constitution, but on June 4, 1912, during the same meeting at which Edmonds was elected president, the organization was named the Equity League.³³

As an auxiliary of the MWSA, the Equity League raised funds for and awareness of the movement while supporting the mission of the state organization. The MWSA advocated for active local groups to support the state organization. During Thompson's MWSA presidency, she addressed the importance of local involvement to the success of the MWSA by emphasizing the success of the Equity League. In her presidential address in April 1913, she stated, "The Equity League of Jackson held its initial meeting about a year and a half ago with the charmed number of three present and at the next meeting there were six; at the next twelve, and today the enrolled membership is over two hundred."³⁴ Thompson was proud to emphasize that the club she had organized was successful in bringing people to the cause. The Equity League membership was active in Jackson but, like Thompson, many members also served in leadership roles of the MWSA further melding both organizations. Aside from increasing membership, the Equity League also worked hard raising funds, spreading the movement's agenda in the press, and supporting legislative efforts.

The Equity League: Host of Major Suffrage Events

Thompson and her fellow Equity League members undertook the planning and execution of many of the major suffrage events that

³² *Equity League Minutes 1915-1916*. Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/176/rec/7>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Jackson, Mississippi, April 15-17, 1913; Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/109/rec/12>, 15.

occurred in the state by raising funds and support. Possibly this was due to the mere fact that they were based in the capital city, but the success of these events was definitely due to the dedication and leadership of the Equity League members. Like all Mississippi suffragists, the Equity League spread its message through positive events and newspaper articles. As stated earlier, one of the main goals of the Mississippi suffrage movement was to earn the vote by "taking an active interest in upbuilding of their State".³⁵ Therefore, the Equity League worked in its community promoting a positive image that would draw people to the suffrage movement. With these events, the League hoped to gain support for the cause as well as to raise funds.

In 1912, the official fundraising events of the Equity League began when it held its first Motion Picture Benefit cooperating with Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Carleton, proprietors of the local theater, the Dixie.³⁶ Motion picture benefits continued to be a favorite fundraiser of the League, which held several others including the suffrage play "Your Girl and Mine" at the Istrione theater in 1915.³⁷

With assistance from Thompson as state president of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, the League established a suffrage headquarters at the Mississippi State Fair for the first time in 1912.³⁸ Other than funds collected by Thompson in her role as state president, the League took charge of the entire operation including planning, raising funds, and staffing. In her speech at the state convention that year, Thompson discussed the issue of funds stating, "Many difficulties loomed in the way, the most terrifying being the ogre of no funds, but at the last good fairies appeared to wave with magic wands."³⁹ Without the support of the Equity League this first appearance at the Mississippi State Fair would not have happened. The Equity League pulled off a successful event gaining support for the cause as well as raising a large amount of funds. During the fair, several hundred names of suffragists were collected and after expenses were paid, the League made a profit of forty dollars.⁴⁰ Thompson was very enthusiastic about the outcome

³⁵ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

³⁶ *Equity League Minutes, 1911-1914*.

³⁷ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*. Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi;

<http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/286/rec/6>.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*.

of the fair stating, "The value of this enterprise is too apparent to be questioned."⁴¹ The first appearance of the suffrage movement at the state fair was a success and would be repeated for years to come.

In 1913, the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association state convention was held in Jackson with Thompson presiding. The event took place in the senate chamber of the State Capitol and was coordinated by the Equity League. This convention was a great success with the largest turnout in the history of the association.⁴² The president of the Equity League, Mrs. E. T. Edmonds, spoke along with Thompson who gave the MWSA presidential address.⁴³ The election of officers for the following year took place at the convention. At this convention, Thompson refused reelection to focus on demands at home solidifying her continued involvement with the movement in Jackson.⁴⁴

When Thompson declined reelection as state president in 1913, she was able to turn her focus on the flourishing suffrage movement in Jackson. That year was again busy for the Equity League. In 1913, the Mississippi suffrage movement was represented in a parade in Washington, DC. The League provided funding for a float and a purple and gold banner carried in the parade.⁴⁵ Mrs. Harmon Thompson, an Equity League member who was residing in Washington with her husband, managed the arrangements.⁴⁶ Meridian native Fannie May Witherspoon, the daughter of a Mississippi congressman, rode on the float carrying the banner with a gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Gibbs.⁴⁷ Participation in the parade was applauded by the MWSA as "... a new and splendid opportunity to show its colors."⁴⁸ Presence at such an event brought the Mississippi suffrage movement to the national stage. This occasion was not Mississippi's first interaction with the national suffrage movement. Although southern suffragists recognized themselves as different from their east coast counterparts, the Mississippi suffragists were supportive of the national movement. In her departing 1912 MWSA presidential address, Somerville was careful to make this distinction stating, "Many southern suffragists desire some kind of southern fed-

⁴¹ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 331.

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*.

⁴⁶ *Equity League Minutes, 1911-1914*.

⁴⁷ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 330.

⁴⁸ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 13.

eration, tho not in any sense against the National.”⁴⁹ As early as 1901, speakers from the National American Woman Suffrage Association such as Carrie Chapman Catt gave speeches around the state, a tradition that would continue throughout the life of the movement.⁵⁰ Mississippi suffragists worked hard to represent the state at national conventions, sending a representative as early as 1899.⁵¹ In 1911, five of the board members from the MWSA including the president, Somerville, and Equity League member, Sarah S. Wilkinson, attended the National convention in Louisville, Kentucky.⁵² Each following year that the MWSA was active, a member was elected to attend the national convention. The MWSA and the Equity League were long in correspondence with the suffragists of other states and abroad. The Equity League was often sent tokens of support for their efforts at state fairs including pennants sent from California and Kansas to be displayed at the fair in 1912. The Equity League also extended its support to the suffragists in other states including a letter sent by Thompson to Ohio in 1912 in support of the upcoming election.⁵³ Not only were the suffragists of Mississippi working with the national movement, but correspondence from Europe was also being received by the MWSA. In addressing this cooperation, Thompson stated, “This friendly intercourse of suffragists all over the world is one of the pleasant signs of the swift acceleration of the movement.”⁵⁴ In 1915, Mississippi was represented in the leadership of the National American Woman Suffrage Association when Somerville was elected vice president.⁵⁵ The MWSA and the Equity League worked with suffragists from all over in support of woman suffrage.

Along with supplying funds for events such as the parade, the Equity League’s continuing fundraising efforts brought in significant

⁴⁹ Nellie Nugent Somerville. *Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association: Address of the President*, Flora, Mississippi, April 10, 1912.

⁵⁰ “Mississippi,” *History of Woman Suffrage*, 326.

⁵¹ *Minutes of the Second Annual Convention of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 5-6, 1899; Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/50/rec/13>, 10.

⁵² Lily Wilkinson Thompson. “Suffrage for Women,” *Jackson Daily News*, October 21, 1911, p. 2.

⁵³ *Equity League Minutes*, 1911-1914.

⁵⁴ Lily Wilkinson Thompson and Ella Biggs, *Third Quarterly Report: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, 1912-1913*, Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/141/rec/3>.

⁵⁵ *Equity League Minutes*, 1914-1915.

revenue for the state association. In 1913, the Equity League's success was reflected in the MWSA treasurer's report at the state convention. The Equity League was credited with bringing in \$70.80 with only the \$83.00 dues collected from members throughout the state being a larger revenue source.⁵⁶ It was indeed a successful year for the Equity League.

The MWSA state convention was again held in Jackson in 1914. Similar to the previous year, the group gathered in the senate chamber of the State Capitol. The Equity League acted as the host—planning and executing the events.⁵⁷ One of the members of the state legislature, Representative Norman Albert (N. A.) Mott from Yazoo County, spoke on the final day of the convention.⁵⁸ Mott had long been a supporter of suffrage, publishing articles supplied by the MWSA in the newspaper he edited.⁵⁹ The year of the convention his support was evident because he had presented a suffrage measure at the legislative session earlier that year.⁶⁰

In 1915, Thompson hosted Dr. Anna Shaw, a leader in the national suffrage movement, when she came to Jackson to deliver a speech. The speech was coordinated by the Equity League and scheduled to coincide with Shaw's address at the MWSA state convention in Greenville. Shaw arrived in Jackson on April 4, 1915. She spent that evening in the Thompsons' home. Shaw's address took place the following evening in the House of Representatives' chamber, a venue that was filled almost beyond capacity. Thompson boasted that this audience "was composed of the most prominent, the most intellectual, the most cultivated and influential of Jackson's citizens." Shaw was accompanied on the stand by her hostess, Thompson, as well as Frederick Sullens, editor of the *Jackson Daily News*. Joining them were Mrs. J. W. Tucker, former president of the Equity League; Mrs. Ella O. Biggs, current president of the Equity League; Mrs. Carleton, treasurer of the Equity League; and Dr. E. T. Edmonds, pastor of the First Christian Church. Mrs. Carleton opened the event by leading the crowd in singing "America" after which Dr. Edmonds offered a prayer. Thompson presented Sullens with a speech

⁵⁶ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 23.

⁵⁷ "A Program Issued by the Suffragists," *Jackson Daily News*, May 19, 1914, p. 5.

⁵⁸ "Suffragettes Begin Meeting At Jackson Today," *The Hattiesburg News*, May 26, 1914, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87065167/1914-05-26/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁵⁹ "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 330-331.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

praising the Mississippi press and Sullens's work with the *Jackson Daily News* in particular.⁶¹ The *Jackson Daily News* was very supportive of the suffrage movement, and Thompson had worked closely with Sullens for many years.⁶² Following Thompson, Sullens introduced Shaw—praising both the woman and her cause. Of Shaw's almost two-hour speech, Thompson recounted "Dr. Shaw captivated her hearers and held them spell bound . . . She created a profound impression."⁶³ Thompson saw Shaw's visit as a resounding achievement for the Equity League. She wrote: "In every way Dr. Shaw's initial visit to Jackson was a brilliant success and for bringing her here, the cause of woman suffrage owes a lasting debt of gratitude to the Equity League."⁶⁴ With the work of Jackson's suffrage supporters and the Equity League, Jackson welcomed one of the biggest names in the national suffrage movement and hosted the national leader with great success.

In the fall of 1915, the Equity League for the first time coordinated a suffrage section in the parade marking the opening day of the Mississippi State Fair. The group was preceded by a banner which read "Women Vote in 12 States. Why not in Mississippi?" The two women carrying the banner were followed by four women wearing white with yellow sashes. Thompson was among the women who marched. The original plan for the parade was for twelve women to march representing each state in which women could currently vote. Unfortunately, only six women were able to march. Even so, the Equity League was pleased with how the section was received.⁶⁵

Following the parade, the Equity League again represented the suffrage movement at the Mississippi State Fair under the management of Mrs. J. W. Tucker. Many women and girls worked throughout the fair to distribute literature and "Votes for Women" badges. It was estimated that five thousand badges were pinned, an accomplishment that made the Equity League quite proud.⁶⁶

One ongoing project of the Equity League was to collect enrollment cards. These cards read, "I believe in the right of suffrage for women, and I hereby enroll myself as a member of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage

⁶¹ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915.*

⁶² "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 329.

⁶³ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Equity League Minutes, 1915-1916.*

Association.”⁶⁷ Those who signed the cards showed their support for the movement without being dues-paying members. The Equity League members worked hard to gather signatures on the cards and even held contests.⁶⁸ Often, these cards were collected at events such as the state fair.⁶⁹ During her MWSA presidential speech, Thompson discussed the cards. She said, “I regard the signing of these cards of utmost importance . . . next year the definite aim be not to double or thribble [sic] the enrollment membership but to at least quadruple it.”⁷⁰ These cards were a way to calculate how many supporters the movement had, and collecting the cards at events provided a means to monitor the success of the event in gaining new supporters. By the end of 1915, the League had collected around 231 enrollment cards.⁷¹

After the United States entered World War I in 1917, the state suffrage organization turned its efforts towards supporting the war.⁷² In 1918, the Equity League again hosted the MWSA for a one-day convention in Jackson at the state house, but no convention was held in 1919.⁷³ Even so, the call for woman suffrage was not unheard. In the following year, a federal amendment was on the horizon, and efforts redoubled with much of the work falling to local organizations such as the Equity League.

The Equity League: Relationship with the Press

Following Thompson’s lead, the Equity League played an active role in presswork. By 1913, the Equity League had assumed responsibility for editing a column in the *Jackson Daily News*. Under the editorship of Fred Sullens, the newspaper was an advocate for the suffrage movement, publishing the Equity League column as well as other suffrage news. Having a column in one of the major newspapers in Mississippi was seen as a triumph by the Equity League and the MWSA.⁷⁴ This relationship continued and is exhibited by Sullens’s presence and par-

⁶⁷ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*.

⁶⁸ *Equity League Minutes, 1911-1914*.

⁶⁹ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*.

⁷⁰ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 13.

⁷¹ *Equity League Minutes, 1914-1915*.

⁷² “Mississippi,” *History of Woman Suffrage*, 333.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 333-334.

⁷⁴ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 27.

ticipation in events hosted by the Equity League.⁷⁵ The cozy relationship with the press allowed the Equity League to reach a broad audience. The organization could educate and rally supporters of their cause on a regular basis, not just at one-time events. Thompson had long been an advocate for the use of the press to further the movement, and the active involvement of the Equity League in such endeavors enhanced her efforts.

The Equity League: Supporters of Women's Rights Legislation

From the early days of the woman suffrage movement in Mississippi, the reasoning behind gaining suffrage for women was to give women the ability to actively support certain causes. The movement cited health and education as being in the forefront of its political agenda.⁷⁶ For years, the women of Mississippi, through their clubs and organizations, had passively participated in politics by urging the men in leadership roles to support agendas that were important to them. Therefore, it was not out of the question that women could appeal to their male representatives and be heard, but without the vote women felt removed from fully participating in the political realm that made decisions which affected their lives. Referring to the Mississippi movement, Nellie Nugent Somerville wrote:

The Mississippi suffragist . . . believes the best and quickest way to uplift the State is to give women the ballot, substituting direct power for indirect influence. We believe the majority of Mississippi men will admit the justice of our position, but not the expedience. While patiently waiting for them to come to our point of view we will lend a hand in the upbuilding of our state.⁷⁷

In Mississippi, politics was not unknown to women, but their success without a vote may have worked to their detriment in convincing skeptics and even supporters that women required the vote. As the suffragists who called the state capital home, it often fell on the Equity League to coordinate supporters and lobby legislators when legislation important to women and the suffrage movement was on the table.

⁷⁵ *Equity League Minutes 1914-1915*.

⁷⁶ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

The Equity League was called to action in this respect in 1914 when a bill important to the suffrage movement was submitted in the Mississippi House of Representatives. The bill, introduced by N. A. Mott, sought an amendment to the Mississippi Constitution giving the right to vote to the women of the state.⁷⁸ Such a bill had been called for by Thompson in her presidential speech the year previously.⁷⁹ The Equity League promoted the bill to legislators and gathered crowds to pack the galleries when the bill was discussed. During one such discussion on January 22, 1914, referred to as the ‘suffrage hearing’ by the Equity League, six women spoke before the legislature in joint session. As referenced earlier, Thompson was among these women. Unfortunately, the bill failed, and no amendment was made to the state constitution.

Although not as significant as the 1914 legislation, the suffragists of Mississippi continued to work for women’s rights when they lobbied in 1915 for legislation that would allow women to serve as leaders of educational institutions. In 1916, the suffragists were successful when a resolution was brought before the legislature that would have made women eligible to serve in leadership positions of state educational facilities. Somerville, past president of the MWSA, and Mrs. J. W. Tucker, a longtime member and leader of the Equity League, were present for the debate at the state capitol. The debate turned toward women’s involvement in politics generally and therefore to the suffrage question. The argument became heated, pointing out the controversial nature of the suffrage question in Mississippi. One senator questioned: “Don’t you think women would purify politics?” The reply: “Would a hog purify a wallow?”⁸⁰ This exchange verified that not all Mississippians were as amenable to woman suffrage as Somerville had hoped when she wrote, “. . . the public attitude toward woman suffrage is not so much a hostile one as it is interrogative.”⁸¹ Although opposition was openly expressed, there was never an organized opposition to the suffrage movement in Mississippi.⁸²

The Equity League continued to work in Jackson supporting legisla-

⁷⁸ “Mississippi,” *History of Woman Suffrage*, 336.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁸⁰ “Miller Speaks Hastily,” *The Columbus Commercial*, March 23, 1916, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87065028/1916-03-23/ed-1/seq-2/>.

⁸¹ Somerville, *How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote*.

⁸² “Mississippi,” *History of Woman Suffrage*, 335.

tion that aligned with the suffragists' mission. While the state suffrage association was busy with war work in 1918, a bill that again would have amended the state constitution in its favor was introduced. With the state association occupied, the Equity League worked in Jackson to gain support. Unfortunately, the vote resulted in a tie, and again the measure failed.⁸³ Even without a victory gaining women the vote, the suffragists saw the success of much legislation that supported their mission of "upbuilding the state." Working together with other women's clubs and organizations, bills were passed that increased the age of consent and improved child labor restrictions, for example.⁸⁴

The Equity League: A Final Push to Ratification

As witnessed with the reaction to the 1916 bill allowing women to serve as leaders of educational institutions, the woman suffrage issue was a topic of heated discussion in Mississippi politics. Even so, the topic became an even hotter issue when the federal amendment became a possibility. In 1918, the national and state suffrage associations sent out a joint letter urging the suffragists of the state to intensify their efforts as a federal amendment was on the horizon. The MWSA president, Marion Bankston Trotter, admitted, "For lack of a perfected suffrage organization in Mississippi we must depend on individual effort . . . In towns where there are suffrage leagues . . . the requests can be more perfectly carried out."⁸⁵ Thus, the Equity League was called to action. At this time, Thompson, who was serving as MWSA district president for Jackson, was the link between the local Jackson effort and the state, working to achieve the same goal.⁸⁶

Throughout the years, the Equity League stayed positive believing that the hard work invested in each event brought more support to the cause. Despite these efforts, Mississippi as a state did not adopt suffrage for women until the federal amendment allowed all American women to vote. This failure was disappointing for many of the supporters of the movement including Thompson who worked ardently both in Jackson and with the state organization to encourage Mississippi to support

⁸³ Ibid, 336-337.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 337.

⁸⁵ Marion Bankston Trotter, "To the Suffragists of Mississippi," Lily Thompson Collection, Special Collections, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi; <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/suffrage/id/287/rec/17>.

⁸⁶ *Ballots for Both: Thirteenth Annual Convention of Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association.*

ratification. The *Jackson Daily News*, the newspaper most supportive of the movement in Jackson, expressed the anticlimactic victory in an article titled “Didn’t Celebrate Suffrage.” The article printed August 29, 1920, reads, “Jackson was probably the only one of the larger cities of Mississippi that didn’t celebrate the granting of suffrage to women on Saturday by the ringing of bells and blowing of whistles.”⁸⁷ Although the women of Mississippi could now vote, it was not due to the support of their state – an outcome that was likely bittersweet to Thompson and her fellow suffragists. It is clear in the Mississippi chapter of *History of Woman Suffrage: 1900-1920* (a chapter to which Thompson was the main contributor) that the women of Mississippi were disappointed with the outcome: “Thus was banished forever the dream of Mississippi suffragists that the women would receive the ballot from the men of this great state.”⁸⁸

The Thompson Family

Not only was Thompson involved in the woman suffrage movement, but her family also took part. In November 1907, the Thompsons hosted a five-day conference at their home. Mr. Thompson was one of only three men in attendance. Their children also took active roles. Thompson’s daughters were often present at meetings supporting their mother and providing entertainment. At the state convention in 1913, Thompson’s daughter, Sarah Summers, read a statement titled “Equal Suffrage Baby” to the audience. Primrose Thompson also participated in this meeting serving as an usher and presenting a “Votes for Women” apron to the keynote speaker, Mrs. Royden Douglass.⁸⁹ Aside from Thompson’s immediate family, enrollment records of the Equity League mention many Wilkinsons and Thompsons—extended family members.⁹⁰

After the Amendment

Thompson was dedicated to preserving the history of Mississippi’s woman suffrage movement. This interest began as early as 1910 when as superintendent of the press she worked on a statement regarding

⁸⁷ “Didn’t Celebrate Suffrage,” *Jackson Daily News*, August 29, 1920, p. 7.

⁸⁸ “Mississippi,” *History of Woman Suffrage*, 341.

⁸⁹ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, 4, 9.

⁹⁰ *Equity Minutes, 1915-1916*.

the history of the movement for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.⁹¹ She continued this mission by contributing much to the Mississippi chapter in *History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. VI* (pp. 326-341) published in 1922.⁹² Thompson passed away in 1942.⁹³ Over the years, Thompson worked to preserve the movement's history by gathering papers, minutes, and other memorabilia relating to the movement. In 1958, this collection was donated to the University of Mississippi by Mrs. DuAine Morgan.⁹⁴ In celebration of the 90th anniversary of the suffrage amendment, the university made many of these items accessible online at <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/suffrage>. The finding aid for this collection quotes Thompson: "Original articles are of immense value. Mississippi people are interested in what Mississippi men and women think on the question, rather than what is being done elsewhere."⁹⁵ This statement accurately reflects Thompson's dedication to presswork throughout the movement and her passion for preserving suffrage history through text. Without her leadership and hard work, the Mississippi suffrage movement, especially in Jackson, would not have been as substantial.

⁹¹ *Sixth Annual Report of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association 1910*, 19.

⁹² "Mississippi," *History of Woman Suffrage*, 326.

⁹³ "Lily Thompson," *U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current* [database on-line]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

⁹⁴ *Finding Aid for the Lily Thompson Collection (MUM00446)*, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford, Mississippi; https://olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/archives/finding_aids/MUM00446.html.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*