

CENTENNIAL OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE  
1917 — ✨ — 2017  
IN NEW YORK STATE



# VICTORY

BY ANTONIA PETRASH

Albany native Harriet  
Burton Laidlaw  
strategized to secure  
the vote for women  
in New York.

In 1915, despite almost seventy years of struggle, the ratification of a national amendment granting women the right to vote was still a distant dream. Most of the pantheon of early suffrage leaders—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone—had died, their goals unrealized. While other dynamic leaders had risen to take their place, the movement was often beset by rivalries and conflicts, including a passionate disagreement between those who believed in following the state-by-state method—winning piecemeal—and those who favored an all-out push for a national amendment.

But the state-by-state method simply wasn't working. When Carrie Chapman Catt assumed leadership of the Woman Suffrage Party of Greater New York in 1909 only four states allowed women full suffrage, all of them in the West. By 1915, when she began her second term as President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), that number had only risen to eleven. Within the next few years a rising tide of young, educated professional women would clamor for change, including the more radical members of the National Woman's Party led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns.



in 1917

*Laidlaw's handbook encouraged women to educate themselves about the political process and immerse themselves in rallies and fundraising activities.*

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Left: *Carrie Chapman Catt*, 1909  
 Right: *Harriet Burton Laidlaw*, 1913

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#### Winning New York

Carrie Chapman Catt was a pragmatic strategist who recognized the validity of both methods. Although she favored a national amendment, she also believed that simultaneously pursuing the state-by-state method could hasten passage of the amendment. New York state was the key. Since New York boasted the largest population, and thus the largest number of representatives in Congress, enfranchised New York women could “tip the balance” in favor of a national amendment.

New York state was divided into twelve campaign districts;

New York City was the largest, and was in turn divided into sixty-three assembly districts, and 2,127 election districts. The New York City Woman Suffrage Party, under the leadership of Mary Garret Hay, assigned leaders in each of these districts, who were in turn supervised by a Manhattan borough chairperson. The goal was to identify and try to influence every elected official throughout the state. But to achieve that seemingly herculean goal Catt would need a host of dedicated supporters and volunteers to help organize the effort. She turned to one of her most trusted

lieutenants, Harriet Burton Laidlaw, who had recently authored an influential handbook outlining a plan for suffragists to organize and win.

Harriet Burton was born in Albany in 1873. When the state Constitutional Convention was held there in 1894 suffragists descended on the city, campaigning unsuccessfully for an amendment that would remove the word “male” from voter qualifications, thus allowing women to vote. Harriet worked as a page at the convention. Listening to the speeches and reveling in the heady atmosphere of change nourished in her a

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budding passion for political activism. After graduation from Albany Normal School, she taught in the New York City public schools for twelve years. In 1905 she married banker James Lees Laidlaw. She could not have found a better partner—James's passion for political equality for women matched her own. Their daughter Louise was born a year later.

### Wisdom and Foresight

In 1908, Harriet became secretary of the College Equal Suffrage League, (CESL), an organization formed to engage young college women in suffrage work, thus enabling them to “pay their debt to the pioneers” of the movement. Her work there caught the eye of Carrie Chapman Catt, who was impressed with both Harriet's passion and organizational skills. In 1911, Harriet had been Acting Manhattan Borough Chairperson of the New York City Woman Suffrage Party; in 1912, Catt wrote her, imploring her to take over that important job officially: “I sincerely believe that your tact and sweetness, wisdom and foresight would bring the rest of the city to the standard of Manhattan.” Catt's flattery worked; Harriet assumed the post officially in 1912 and held it for four years.

Suffrage work in the Laidlaw household was a family affair. In 1910, James helped organize the New York Men's Suffrage League, and paraded with the group up Fifth Avenue, cheerfully



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enduring the jeers and insults of spectators. He was president of the national Men's League for Woman Suffrage from 1912 to 1920, and a strong believer that the suffrage issue was a simple one of equality and justice. In November 1912, he helped Harriet organize the Torchlight parade, a stunning celebration of recent suffrage victories in Michigan, Oregon, Kansas, and Arizona. Men were invited, and encouraged to bring friends. Thousands of men, women, and children carried yellow pumpkin-shaped lanterns from 58th Street, down Fifth Avenue to Union Square. *The New York Times* reported over 400,000 people watched while a “long river of fire” marched into the gathering dusk.

Daughter Louise was also enlisted to work in the campaign. She accompanied her mother throughout the

city, and watched her climb soapboxes to give speeches on street corners, in parks, and factories. Louise distributed suffrage leaflets, and marched with her parents in parades. In 1911 and again in 1914, Harriet and James traveled through the Western states where women already enjoyed the vote, urging support for legislators who would vote for suffrage for their eastern sisters, and enlisting men in the Men's Equal Suffrage League.

### Suffrage Referendum

Harriet's 1914 handbook, *Organizing to Win by the Political District Plan*, offered a step-by-step blueprint for victory. “The Woman Suffrage Party's voice must be heard in undeviating demand for the submission of the woman suffrage amendment to the voters,” she wrote. Women must educate themselves

*Harriet and James Laidlaw, seen in the foreground on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, were both part of the suffrage delegation to the House Rules Committee in 1914.*

Right: Suffragists, including Harriet Laidlaw, supported the war effort as the U.S. entered World War I.

Below: Parades and marches were an important part of the path to women's suffrage. Suffragists marched in Washington on the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration.



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about the political process, and at the same time immerse themselves in rallies and fundraising activities, she believed. In typical Harriet fashion, she also advised that while engaged they should still remain "dignified, gracious, tactful and earnest."

As Manhattan Borough Chairperson, Harriet took pains to acquaint herself with the leaders and captains throughout the city. She joined them in parades and block parties, outdoor concerts and benefit balls. She campaigned on Long Island where she and James owned a summer home in Sands Point, holding fundraisers on the front lawn. While she was described as "friendly and outgoing," she

was not afraid to speak her mind and had little patience for women who opposed votes for women, calling them "ultra society women."

In 1913, the New York State Legislature had placed on the ballot a vote on a suffrage referendum in the form of an amendment to the State Constitution; voting would take place in 1915 and if the measure failed it could not be voted upon again for two years. In January of that year suffragists canvassed all of New York City's 661,164 registered voters. Hundreds of women spent hours visiting shops and homes, trudging through office buildings, making a personal appeal to voters. "Victory in 1915" was the slogan.

On the evening of the election, November 2, 1915, suffrage leaders gathered at the headquarters at East 34th Street in a heady cloud of optimism. But the promise seen in the early returns soon dissipated, and by midnight it was obvious the measure had been soundly defeated by 194,984 votes. There was

huge disappointment and some tears, but no admission of defeat. When asked how long the loss would affect the cause Carrie Chapman Catt replied, "Only until we get a little sleep. Our campaign will be on again tomorrow morning—and forever until we get the vote." Two days later, in a "roll up your sleeves" spirit, the National Association held a massive rally at Cooper Union where \$100,000 was pledged for the new campaign. The new motto was "Victory in 1917." As Vice-Chairman of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party, Harriet was off again touring the state, encouraging district leaders to hold fast to the work at hand, posting messages on billboards, distributing flyers to churches and military installations, and holding block parties and teas.

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, suffrage leaders faced a crucial decision. Should they put suffrage work aside and throw all their efforts into support for the war? Anti-suffrage groups were

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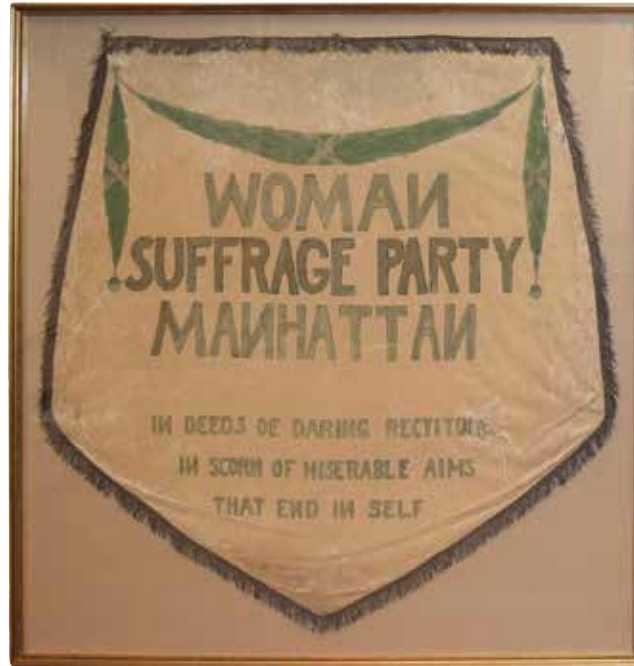
already accusing them of being unpatriotic and disloyal for continuing to campaign for the vote while men were fighting overseas.

But suffragists had put their efforts aside during the Civil War, believing that when the war was over they would be repaid for their loyalty with the vote. They would not make the same mistake again. They pledged to continue their work for suffrage, while simultaneously making it very clear that they supported the war effort as well. Harriet engaged volunteers to help with the state military census. While they were busy enrolling people at military depots they distributed suffrage literature, wearing suffrage buttons. They joined the National League for Woman's Service, where they ran can-tees for soldiers, and offered classes in food conservation.

### Unprecedented Canvassing

In 1916, to counteract another damaging claim by anti-suffragists that "most women didn't want the vote," suffragists in an unprecedented move canvassed the entire state. They traveled through small towns and large cities, ringing doorbells of the rich and the poor, collecting over a million signatures on a petition. On October 17, 1917, the Procession of Petitions marched down Fifth Avenue, with placards carrying all the names of women who had signed. Women did want the vote—that was very clear.

Harriet and other suffrage



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leaders approached Election Day 1917 apprehensively, still stung by accusations from anti-suffragists of disloyalty to their government, still reeling from their 1915 defeat. Yet, the movement had again been placed on the ballot for a vote—there was no turning back.

This time they were not disappointed. On November 6, 1917, New York voters passed woman suffrage by 102,353 votes; the majority came from New York City. A major turning point for the national fight had been reached, the balance forever tipped. With New York's forty-seven representatives in a Congress of 435, the two-thirds majority required for a national amendment was finally within sight. On August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution

became the law of the land.

Around 1930, the League of Women Voters unveiled plaques, now displayed at the Capitol building in Albany, honoring those of "distinguished achievement" in the woman suffrage movement. Both Laidlaws' names were inscribed on the New York tablet. James was the only man accorded that honor. Harriet continued to work for other humanitarian causes until her death in January 1949.

In the reference area of the Port Washington Public Library, near the Laidlaws' home in Sand Point, there is a banner Harriet carried in parades. It is embroidered with the fitting line from "The Choir Invisible," a poem by George Eliot: "In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn of miserable aims that end in self." ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

A collection of Harriet Burton Laidlaw papers was donated by her daughter to the Schlesinger Library at Radcliff University and is available on microfilm at the Long Island Studies Institute, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York. Harriet's pamphlet, *Organizing to Win by The Political District Plan*, is included in the papers. A scrapbook containing clippings about the Torchlight and other parades is housed at the New York Historical Society, New York City. Columbia University archives also has a privately published book about the life of James Lees Laidlaw.

Correspondence of the New York Woman Suffrage Association can be found at the New York Public Library archives at the 42nd street branch. Some books consulted were *Winning the Vote: The Triumph of the American Woman Suffrage Movement* by Robert P.J. Cooney Jr. and *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life* by Jacqueline Van Voris.

Information about the Laidlaws' life on Long Island can be found in the Port Washington Public Library's history collection, primarily *Discovering Sands Point: Its History, Its People, Its Places*, by Joan Gay Kent.