

Martha H. Mowry, MD: Pioneer in Medicine, Suffrage Movement

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One hundred years ago, on Jan. 6, 1920, Rhode Island ratified the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. It would become federal law in August 1920. Rhode Island physician **MARTHA HARRIS MOWRY, MD**, (1818–1899), was a leader of the suffrage movement in the state and although she did not live to see the Amendment's passage, her lifelong advocacy for women's rights helped lay the foundation for this historic milestone.

Dr. Mowry was the first woman medical practitioner in the state, according

2020 marks the Centennial of the 19th Amendment, which prohibits states from denying the right to vote on the basis of sex.

in Boston, particularly in laboratory dissections. In 1850, she worked at a medical college in Boston (probably the New England Female Medical College) with "Drs. Cornell, Page, Gregory and others," according to *Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred-Seventy Biographies*, published in 1893 by Francis E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore.

At the same time, The Providence Physiological Society, founded in 1850, sponsored monthly lectures and meetings, attended mostly by women, for 12 years. According to Rhode Island Historical Society records, "Many lectures were given by



Martha H. Mowry, MD, from "A Woman of the Century: A Crowdsourcing Project of the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries." [www.marykatemcmaster.org/woc/items/show/29]

the Society's members, including Dr. Martha H. Mowry, one of the first female physicians practicing in Rhode Island and president of the Society for several years. Topics of lectures ranged from anatomy lessons to discussions of women's rights."

In 1850, Dr. Mowry was an organizer and among the speakers, who also included Frederick Douglass and Sojourner

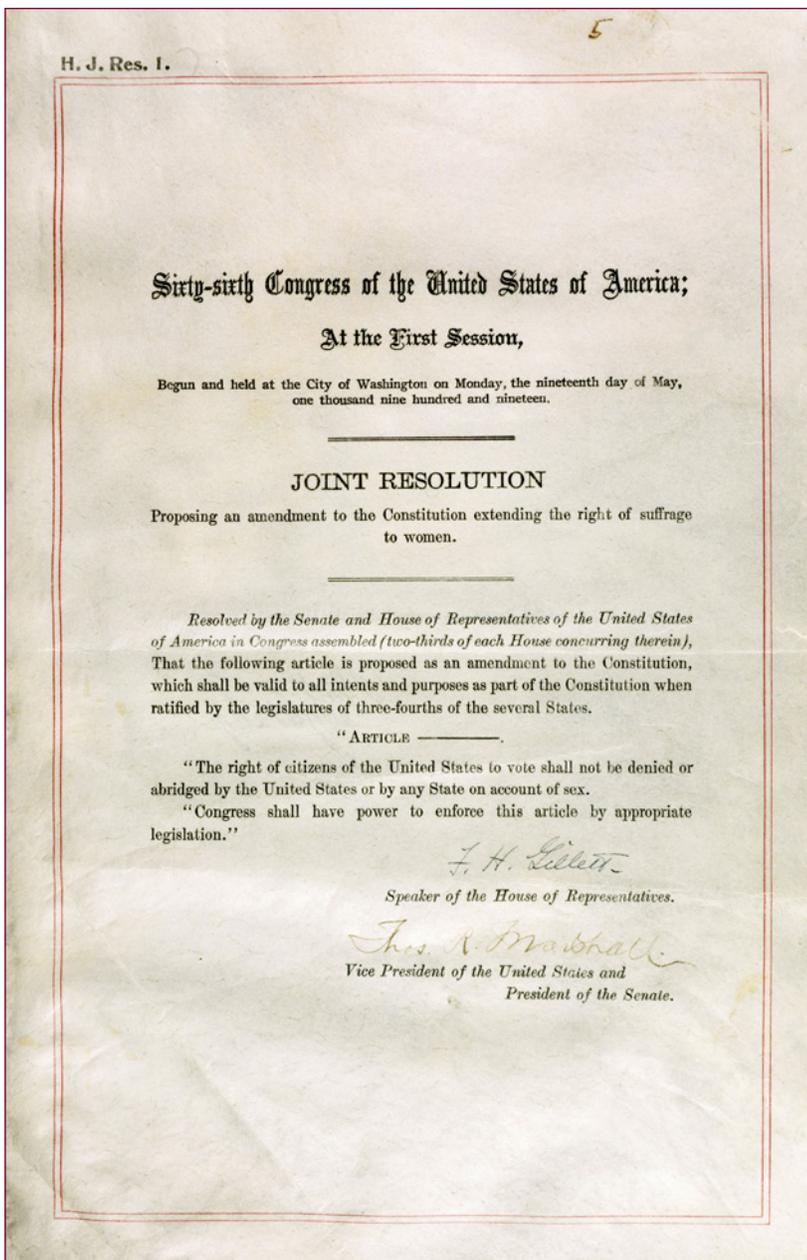


Headline of Washington Evening Star, August 26, 1920: "Suffrage proclaimed by [Bainbridge] Colby [Sec'y of State]...50-year struggle ends in victory for women" [CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

to an article in the 1971, Vol. 54, issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*, by Dr. Seebert J. Goldowsky, its editor-in-chief. He wrote she began to study medicine in 1844 as an apprentice with Drs. Briggs, Fabyan, Fowler and Mauran, who advised her to continue her studies



A group of suffragettes from the Congressional Union for Woman's Suffrage standing in front of the organization's National Summer Headquarters, 128 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI, circa 1914. [CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PHOTO BY ERNST & THUOT, NEWPORT, RI]



Joint Resolution presented to the 66th Congress of the U.S. on May 19, 1919, proposing an amendment to the Constitution extending the right of suffrage. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

Truth, at the first National Woman's Rights Convention held in Brinley Hall in Worcester, Mass. The "History of Woman Suffrage," (Vol. 1 1848-1861) edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, quoted *The New York Tribune* about the event: "Above a thousand persons were present, and, if a larger place could have been found, many more thousands would have attended." The editors wrote that: "The debates on the resolutions were spicy, pointed and logical, and were deeply interesting. As there was no phonographic reporter present, most of the best speaking, that was extemporaneous, cannot be handed down to history."

Speakers argued for the right to vote, to own property, to be admitted to higher education, medicine and other professions. The formal acknowledgment of Dr. Mowry's entry into the medical profession was accomplished several years later, in 1853, when she was awarded an MD diploma from an allopathic medical school in Philadelphia, after examination by a committee of physicians who visited her in Providence. She was then appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children in the fledgling Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. During her first address at the college, among her auditors was Nantucket

native Lucretia Mott, an abolitionist, social reformer and leader of the women's suffrage movement. The two were of like minds and began a lifelong association which first began at the 1850 Woman's Right Convention.

Following a brief tenure as an academician, in 1854 Dr. Mowry returned to Providence at the wish of her father, a merchant whose wife had died shortly after the birth of Dr. Mowry. She opened a medical practice at 22 South Main Street. "Her father presented her with a horse and chaise, and since then, for nearly 40 years, she has constantly kept one or two horse in use in her rounds of practice," wrote Richard M. Bayles, in the *History of Providence County, Rhode Island* in 1891.

Dr. Mowry was also a trustee of the Woman's Educational and Industrial Union of Providence, a member of the Rhode Island Woman's Club, and vice-president for her State of the Association for the Advancement of Women. She worked closely with the leaders of the Rhode Island Woman's Suffrage Association, formed in 1868, who included suffrage luminaries Paulina Wright Davis and Elizabeth Buffam Chace.

Dr. Mowry practiced medicine on South Main St. until 1880, when she partially retired from practice, "but the demands upon her seemed so pressing that she consented in 1882 to resume work under limitations absolving her from going out nights, except in extreme cases," Bayles wrote.

Upon her death in 1899 at the age of 81, Dr. Mowry was eulogized by her sister suffragettes at the 32nd annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association held in Feb. 1900 in Washington D.C. She was hailed as a pioneer in the suffrage cause and in many reforms for human welfare, as well as in promoting professional, medical and scientific work for the women of the United States.

She achieved much in her lifetime, paving the way for women in the medical profession and fighting to break the boundaries of social, gender, political and economic inequalities. Perhaps her only regret was never having cast a vote in a presidential election. Yet her work has allowed women to do this for one hundred years - a lasting legacy. ❖