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Elizabeth U. Yates was born in Bristol in the 1850s. After serving as a Christian missionary in China in the 1880s, she had a long career as a woman suffragist. From Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, *A Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred Seventy Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading Women in All Walks of Life* (Buffalo: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), p. 807.

# GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF A MAINE REFORMER: ELIZABETH UPHAM YATES, MISSIONARY AND WOMAN SUFFRAGIST

BY SHANNON M. RISK

*Raised in a religious family in Bristol, Elizabeth Upham Yates spent much of her adult life as a reformer. While in her twenties, Yates spent six years in China serving as a Methodist missionary trying to spread the gospel and Western culture. Upon returning to the United States she became involved in two domestic reform movements, temperance and women's suffrage. She was active in the women's suffrage movement from the 1890s until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and ran for lieutenant governor of Rhode Island in the election of 1920. Yates was never a nationally renowned figure in the suffrage movement, but the success of the movement was due as much to Yates and other state suffrage leaders like her as it was to the national suffrage leaders. The author is an assistant professor of history at Niagara University. She earned her bachelor's degree in history from the University of Northern Iowa and her master's degree and Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maine. She was awarded a Fulbright fellowship for the 2008-2009 academic year to study in Canada.*

**W**HEN STUDYING social movements like the struggle for women's suffrage, historians often focus on the leaders. Women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Carrie Chapman Catt garnered much of the attention in their day and historians have likewise emphasized the work of these leaders of the women's suffrage movement. Indeed, the movement needed dynamic national figures like these women, but the movement also required women like Elizabeth Upham Yates, who often labored without the recognition afforded Anthony, Stanton, and Catt. Looking at the life of a lesser-known suffragist has merit. Her story demonstrates the impor-

tance of state-level leaders to the national women's suffrage movement. Yates gained political savvy through education, missionary work, and suffragism, and ultimately strove to become lieutenant governor of Rhode Island after women gained the vote.

Yates was born in 1857 in Bristol, Maine, a town consisting of five settlements, including Round Pond, her family homestead since 1742. Though a bit off the beaten track, Bristol was on the coast, and therefore had constant contact with the greater world. During the colonial era, the region had been the site of international conflict between the English and French and their respective Native allies. Members of the Yates family were the first white settlers at Round Pond and the patriarch, James Yates, often went on military expeditions, fighting for the British, while his wife, Jenny, fended for herself and their nine children against the threat of Indian attack. After 1814, the battles in the region came to a close, the Native peoples had been tragically reduced, and the mostly Anglo-American inhabitants were free to pursue culture and commerce. Round Pond was a place of oil production, granite harvesting, and sail making.<sup>1</sup> It was also a place where women led predictable lives as wives, mothers, and homemakers from one generation to the next.

Yates and other women of her generation inherited the thorny legacy of a male-dominated republic that gave few political rights to women, and did not expect women to act politically. But from the founding days of the United States, some women vigorously sought entry into the political dialogue with the few tools they had, namely using the petition and moral suasion. The moral suasion campaigns included writing scathing political editorials and novels, the latter with seemingly innocuous heroines, but which often expressed political sentiments. Women's rights activists also attempted to guarantee their legal and property rights through contracts, such as the prenuptial contract. Women began their political rally through charity societies, safely cloaked under religious affiliation, and then expanded into the political realm through their work in temperance, abolition, and the movement to gain women the vote.

Women in Maine were no exception. Religious revivals swept through Maine in the 1810s and 1820s, providing a new role for many women in the church as community missionaries. In the 1820s, Maine women formed temperance societies, often bolstered by the church, and aimed their efforts at changing the drinking habits of men.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, women also became involved in anti-slavery politics and labored on the Underground Railroad.<sup>3</sup> Involvement in

reform movements led to a political awakening for many women. By the 1850s, women in Bangor, Ellsworth, and Rockland, for example, petitioned the state legislature to give them the right to vote.<sup>4</sup> Because of these movements – revival, temperance, abolition, and suffrage – some women re-imagined their public image, from one of woman the silent helpmeet to one of woman the protector of the meek.

Yates' parents, ship captain Alexander Yates and Elizabeth Thompson Yates, seemed to provide a nurturing environment in which to develop her talents. Part of that nurturance involved an early education in the Methodist Church. Captain Yates served as a trustee for the local Methodist church in Round Pond. Her family was devout, and the Yates children combined the sea-going nature of their father's profession with the desire to spread their religion. Elizabeth lived abroad as a missionary, and it is possible that her siblings also went out into the world as missionaries. Both of her brothers traveled to Africa, where they undoubtedly worked to spread the Christian gospel. In fact, her brother Samuel never returned home; he died in Africa in 1885.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth clearly treasured the early example set by her father, "whose prayers," she wrote, "have ever been my strength and inspiration."<sup>6</sup> For the rest of his life, she remained devoted to her father, always returning home after her latest adventure.

Although there is not much information about Yates' early life, according to Bristol historian Peter Hope she attended the Pond school and Kent's Hill High School.<sup>7</sup> She excelled in public speaking, and, with her parents' support, attended elocution training at the Boston School of Expression, probably in 1879. In the 1880 census, Yates listed her profession as lecturer. She was later licensed to preach by the Methodist Episcopal Church, a rare honor for women of her time. Missionary spirit was high in Maine by the 1870s and 1880s, and Yates seized the opportunity to travel to China to serve as a missionary. She stayed there for six years, from 1880 to 1886.<sup>8</sup>

Yates was by no means the first American female missionary to travel to China. There were many women who traveled from the United States to foreign lands as missionaries from different churches, as early as the 1810s and 1820s. By the nineteenth century, the expansion of European empires made it possible for European and American women to travel as missionaries with relative safety. Through their religion, women could engage the outside world in an acceptable "feminine" manner. They could administer to the poor, sick, and downtrodden, even in lands far away, in the spirit of Christian mission. Yates came from a family that



Yates served as a Christian missionary for six years in Peking, China. The experience of trying to win converts while living as an outsider in a foreign country prepared her well for a career as a woman suffrage activist back at home. From M. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1900): 2: 20.

seemed very supportive of her path in life and, as a Methodist, the apparatus was in place by the time Yates came of age. The Methodist Episcopal Church founded its first mission in 1819, and by 1858, the Woolston sisters, Beulah and Sarah, were sent to China as its first female missionaries. The church had a missionary organization for women, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS). In 1869, a group Boston women founded the New England branch of the WFMS and sent their first missionaries to India that same year. Despite such efforts, even by 1880, Yates was still one of the first twenty women from this organization to travel abroad.<sup>9</sup> She was the only woman from Maine to go to China on behalf of the WFMS in the first thirty-seven years of its existence.<sup>10</sup>

Her six years of missionary work centered on the community in and around Peking (modern-day Beijing). There is no surviving account of her long voyage to China, but previous American female missionaries noted it took 147 days of sailing to reach coastal China from the U.S. east coast. For those based in remote interior areas of China, the journey in-

cluded a difficult overland leg as well. Her role as a missionary in China was both traditional and path-breaking. On the one hand, she was a single woman living by herself far from her home. On the other hand, she focused her efforts on domestic life in China, something Western society believed was the realm of women. She made predictable observations one might expect from a Victorian woman from America. For example, she deemed non-Christian homes ones of squalor and destitution, while those households that embraced her religion were described as simple but tidy.

She performed a kind of social work. She made daily rounds, responding to anyone who seemed interested in hearing the Christian gospel. She also led prayers and hymns, assisted with the mission schools, and accompanied a female doctor, Estella Akers. She paid particularly close attention to the lives of girls and women, weighing cultural expectations for females in China. She believed that Christianity could serve as a liberating force for Chinese women, especially to abolish the practice of bound feet, to free both men and women from the opium pipe, and to eliminate polygamy. Yates wrote, "How wonderful! What the charms of the Taoist priests, ethics of Confucius, and merit of the Buddhist faith have failed to do for the elevation of woman, the gospel of Christ has accomplished." It was the typical argument that Western culture would save non-Western women and girls. The missionaries constantly compared Chinese and Western cultures, in terms of women's lives, and typically, in their minds, the latter won out. Yates did, however, consider the topic of arranged marriages, admitting that often the couples in arranged marriages she observed in Peking seemed just as happy as any couple in America that had married for love.<sup>11</sup> Whatever their intentions, female missionaries like Yates were a colonizing force alongside their male counterparts in government, commerce, or the military.<sup>12</sup>

Yates learned sufficient Chinese to converse with potential converts, and she often traveled from Peking to the Chinese countryside on horseback. According to WFMS historian Frances Baker:

Miss Yates made many country trips in 1884, from Tientsin as a central point, at one time sitting thirteen hours in the saddle. She also superintended five day schools. In 1883 she went to Tsun Hua for evangelistic purposes, and remained there alone, with no other foreigner, for six weeks, instructing the women and organizing a day-school.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps it was a sign of Christian humility that Yates did not write about the trials of being a female missionary in China. Other nineteenth-cen-

ture sources portray a very difficult existence for the female missionaries there. They were often the only white woman living on the outposts of a white colonial settlement. Some wrote of their extreme loneliness, and a few adopted Chinese daughters to ease these feelings and also to perform mission work within their own households. They often worked long days with little sleep or diversion. Their lives involved danger and exposure to disease. Some missionaries died in service, while others faced political unrest. Many female missionaries returned to the United States earlier than expected in order to recuperate from exhaustion. For example, the first female missionaries for the WFMS, the Woolston sisters, returned to America in 1882, "much broken in health."<sup>14</sup>

The first missionary women had great difficulty penetrating into Chinese society for converts. They often thought, if only they had more women and more resources, they could achieve mass conversion. For example, Laura Askew Haygood, a missionary living in Shanghai, wrote an appeal back to her countrywomen and men in the United States in 1885, asking for a joint stock company to be established so that money could be raised to build a home for female missionaries and to improve the fledgling school system. Haygood utilized modern business principles to encourage her fellow Methodists to aid this enterprise. Each investor in the joint stock company would possess her or his own joint stock certificate. Haygood ensured her readers and potential subscribers that God looked on with approval.<sup>15</sup> Although Haygood, Yates, and others learned the Chinese language and adopted some local customs, they sought to fashion an American version of the proper Victorian life at their posts in China, enshrined in homes for female missionaries and schools where these values were inculcated to the next generation of Chinese.

Yates lived in China just before the era of the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1900), when the Chinese made yet another attempt to expel the British and other foreigners. Her words portray an intelligent, respectful people who were, perhaps, not always quite so eager to hear the word of Christ. She talked of the destruction caused by opium abuse at every level of society. And, although many female travel writers abhorred the conditions under European imperialism in foreign lands without actually condemning the colonizing country, Yates did exactly that. She assailed the British government, which had much sway in China, for forcing the opium trade on the Chinese and also blamed the British directly for the aftermath of addiction, poverty, and despair. She wrote, "The British government receives a yearly revenue of over thirty million dollars from the opium trade. Who can estimate the revenue of misery it brings to the hearts and homes of China!"<sup>16</sup>



Although Yates primarily proselytized in the area around Peking, she did sometimes travel by horseback into rural areas of China to evangelize. From M. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1900): 2: 459.

In the years leading up to the Boxer Rebellion, Yates failed to understand that the Chinese saw foreign missionaries as an invading force of imperialism as well. She had the comforting image of a docile people, not easily linked to the violent eruptions less than fifteen years later with the Boxer Rebellion, which sought to expel all foreigners, especially evangelical missionaries. Perhaps missionaries' daily toils were too pressing for them to stop and observe the boiling pot of the political storm ahead. Yates fretted over the missionary's dilemma: if they fed the hungry, whom, only *after* eating praised the Christian god, was it false praise? "Let us judge of such in charity," Yates wrote. "May they not, in all sincerity, wish to espouse a cause which brings them needed help?"<sup>17</sup>

Such an overseas adventure was bound to shape the woman, six years older, who returned to the United States. Was she as exhausted as other women who had worked for the WFMS were upon their return to the United States? She never said so. Yates wrote a memoir of her experiences, *Glimpses into Chinese Homes*. She sought publication of her book

immediately upon return to the United States, and it was published a year later in 1887. But then what? She could have stayed involved with the WFMS, but instead she retired from missionary work upon returning to the United States. For a well-educated woman in late nineteenth-century America, the times were perplexing. On the one hand, she was tied to a religion that defined women's role as society's caretakers. But she had moved beyond passivity, probably long before she got on the boat to China. Perhaps seeing the vast gender inequalities in China heightened her sense of such things back in the United States. Compared to their middle-class counterparts in the United States, female missionaries in China had a remarkable freedom of movement and initiative. A biographer can only infer why Yates may have sought a political outlet for her energies away from the comforts of home, but it is clear the next chapter in her life brought her to two domestic reform movements.<sup>18</sup>

After returning to the United States, Yates became involved in the two largest women's progressive movements of her time: temperance and suffrage. As a result of her activism she became a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The WCTU was run by the dynamic Frances Willard, whose name was also interlaced with the actions of the WFMS. The WCTU emerged in the years following the Civil War, when women perceived that demon alcohol was intruding into their homes. If woman's place was in the home, they reasoned, she should have a right to protect that home from the problems often associated with male alcoholism. Maine was an early leader in the temperance cause before the Civil War; by the late nineteenth century temperance fervor had spread across the United States and into Canada. Female temperance crusaders emerged again, stronger and more militant than they had been before the war. Willard took the helm of the WCTU in 1879 and shaped it into an international organization. The WCTU was probably familiar ground to Yates: a large organization of female reformers united in their desire to change the world around them. For the WFMS, the goal was to win converts for Christ; for the WCTU, the goal was to win converts to temperance.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the popularity and success of the WCTU, Yates was increasingly drawn to the suffrage movement, which suited her speaking talents and leadership skills. By the 1890s, the women's suffrage movement had been around for nearly five decades. The first women's rights convention had convened in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. Beyond requesting the rights to divorce, to retain their earnings, and to have custody of their

children, the convention attendees also resolved that women should have the right to vote, a daring statement considering women's legal rights disappeared after marriage in most states. By the 1850s, women suffragists held conventions throughout the American Midwest and East, headed by Lucy Stone, Paulina Wright Davis, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Although the Civil War diverted the suffragists' efforts, they remained true to their cause, afterwards organizing in the western territories and states.

They had had some success by the 1890s in everything but the national vote. More women obtained a college education and more were entering the workforce outside the home. Some could vote in school and municipal elections, and by 1896, women in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho could vote for president. Yates entered this dynamic movement in 1890 and became a lecture circuit speaker for the suffrage cause. Though she maintained her home in Round Pond, Maine, and cared for her father when at home, she found the time and resources to travel around the country in the 1890s to appeal to audiences both friendly and hostile. It was not unlike her previous career in missionary work. Yates, long accustomed to appearing before a skeptical audience, used her sense of humor to diffuse tension and state her case.<sup>20</sup>

To travel the lecture circuit on behalf of women's suffrage in the 1890s was not as rough as it once had been. Suffragists began canvassing the country in the 1850s. These suffrage lecturers usually traveled in wintertime, a traditional season to provide indoor entertainment to those in rural towns shut in by winter cold. They relied on horse and buggy, stagecoach, and sometimes, as Anthony recorded, their own two feet to get them to their next speaking engagement. The suffragist speakers depended on the kindness of strangers to help them reserve drafty lecture halls, barns, or even people's homes. This was also true for their food, shelter, and speaking fees. Anthony wrote often about sleeping on couches, and later, in train stations, in between engagements.<sup>21</sup>

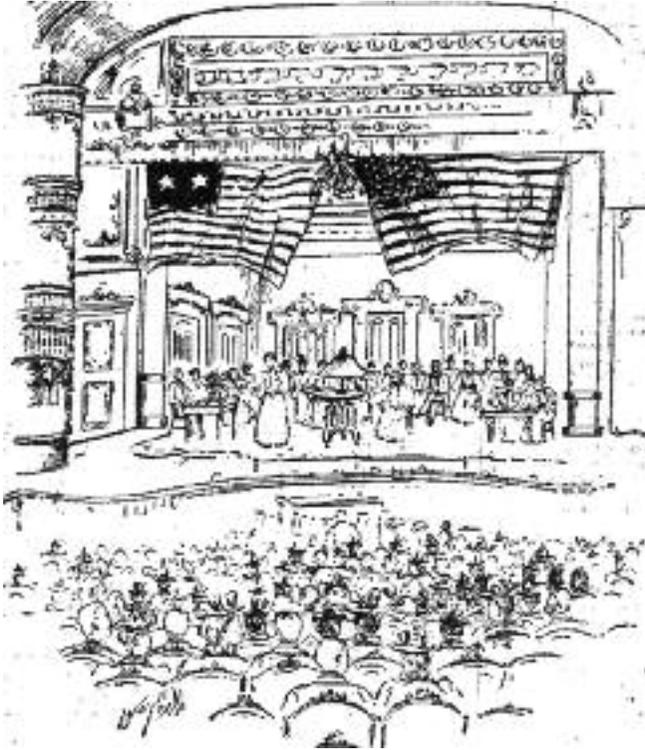
The lecture circuit was brutal in those early days for other reasons as well. The idea of woman suffrage, of women having any political voice, was not popular in the 1840s and 1850s. Anthony recalled being mobbed in the streets, having her image burned in effigy, and, as she spoke on-stage in Albany, New York, watching the mayor seat himself next to her, with a rifle laid across his lap, just in case things got out of hand. The suffragists were called horrible names, blamed for all that was wrong with society, and told to go back to their homes and obey their husbands. Often, it was assumed that they were bitter old maids who could

not find husbands and so decided to spoil things for everyone else.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1890s, a lot had changed for suffrage lecturers thanks to the efforts of their predecessors and the vocal support of many prominent men.<sup>23</sup> Women suffragists could now rely on an audience that had some inkling of why women might want the vote. Lectures were still the height of entertainment in most rural places, and Yates and her colleagues had a template to use when designing their speeches, planning their lecture routes, and even what they would wear. (Anthony made it a practice to dress demurely in black, save for her bright red shawl.) Yates could rely on a national organization, NAWSA, to support her travel monetarily, produce literature that she could hand out, set up her lecture schedule, arrange for housing and meals, and assure a professional, corporate image to stand behind her.<sup>24</sup>

The women's suffrage movement was in transition at the end of the century. The elder stateswomen were withdrawing, and Anthony was actively training what she called her "lieutenants," those who would take up the push for the vote in the twentieth century. Yates was part of that new generation and often worked alongside Anthony. Younger suffragists, however, were not necessarily more radical than their predecessors. Whereas Stanton, Stone, and Anthony had cut their hair short and donned bloomers in the 1850s, the younger suffragists of the 1890s increasingly adopted the idea of maternal suffrage. Women, if given the vote, could do what women supposedly did best: clean house of all political disorder. Whereas the former generation argued for the vote based on women's equality with men, the younger generation embraced society's definition of female domesticity and applied it to their politics. It was a strategy at a time when women were entering what was previously believed to be male terrain: to break down walls while appearing to be feminine.<sup>25</sup> Yates operated within this idea of femaleness, because in many respects, it did allow her greater entry into politics. She spoke on behalf of NAWSA at suffrage conventions and rallies, Chautauqua gatherings, agricultural fairs, and at-home visits. She traveled around the United States, to every region of the country, and even into Canada. Thanks to her speaking ability, by 1894, Yates had become a prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement. In that year she spoke at the NAWSA national convention in Washington, D.C.<sup>26</sup>

Although she traveled frequently, Yates still made her home in Maine in the 1890s, and worked with suffragists from the Maine Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA), including Lucy Hobart Day, Helen Coffin Beedy, Harriet Spofford, Dr. Abby Fulton, Sarah Hamilton Fairfield, and



Yates delivered the closing address on the first day of the 1895 NAWSA convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Her speech was well-received by the audience in attendance, as well as the local press. From the *Atlanta Journal*, February 1, 1895, p. 6.

Hannah Johnston Bailey. The Maine suffragists had also come a long way. Founded in 1873, MWSA initially relied on the leadership of men. By the end of the nineteenth century, the organization had an all-female executive body, with some men still lending support as board members. In the 1890s, MWSA made a push for suffrage through petition drives. Yates never submitted a petition herself, but there were people from her region who did. Records do not survive of the signers of the petitions, but it would not be a stretch to imagine her name on such a petition.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1890s, the strategy of MWSA was to push for the vote at the municipal level. If women could vote in city elections, perhaps they could demonstrate their abilities to male voters. In doing so, perhaps they would then be granted the vote in state and national elections as well. Yates played an important role in the state organization. At the 1895 annual meeting in Augusta, she was chosen by her colleagues to

represent Maine on the NAWSA executive committee and to attend the NAWSA annual convention. At the 1896 meeting in Portland, Yates was again selected as a delegate to the national convention. According to *The Woman's Journal*, for the 1896 MWSA meeting, the lecture hall was filled to capacity, and it was the best meeting the organization had to date.<sup>28</sup> But not everyone agreed with Yates and her colleagues. There were also anti-suffragists in these years, mostly based in Portland, the largest city in the state. Yates and her rural suffragist colleagues represented an organic movement that relied on a grassroots structure of local leaders in both the countryside and city.<sup>29</sup>

In late January and early February 1895, Yates attended NAWSA's national convention in Atlanta, Georgia, the first time the national organization held its annual conference outside of the nation's capital. She had been selected by MWSA as one of their delegates to the convention. On January 31, the convention's opening day, she gave the closing address of the night. Speaking in front of the NAWSA convention audience that night, she demonstrated her excellent speaking ability and her charm. The South had always been a tough sell for woman suffragists. As she often did on her speaking tours, though, Yates tried to win over the local members of her audience, some of whom may have been skeptical of giving voting rights to women. As such, she lavished praise on the South. "I feel like the man who came South for his lungs and lost his heart," she proclaimed. She had "fallen in love with the people of the South." Had she the right to vote, she continued, she might have voted for a southern man for president, perhaps Atlanta's own Henry W. Grady, the famed newspaperman and industrial booster of the New South.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, given her skill at flattery, the local newspapers praised Yates, especially her eloquence and wit. The *Atlanta Constitution* wrote of the humor that infused her speech. Anti-suffragists would soon be an extinct species, like the mastodon, she predicted.<sup>31</sup> She had a "prophesy of the next world's fair of 1992 to be held in Atlanta, in which a mummy of the last anti-suffragist would be displayed."<sup>32</sup> But, there was much more to her speech than flattery and humor. She had a compelling message for her audience in Atlanta: the right to vote was not a masculine activity. "There is something else for women to do than to sit at home and fan themselves 'cherishing their femininity.' Womanliness will never be sacrificed in following the path of duty and service," Yates argued. Her speech was well received by those in attendance. The *Constitution* proclaimed "it was evident that the audience had fallen in love with her and that Maine was not so far removed in sympathy as it was in

the distance of intervening hills and valleys.”<sup>33</sup> As *The Woman’s Journal* rightly noted, “the city papers vied with one another in eulogies, and she was at once secured for a Southern tour.”<sup>34</sup>

Yates spoke again in Atlanta two nights after her speech at the NAWSA convention.<sup>35</sup> On February 2, she spoke at a meeting of a local debating society, the Saturday Night Club, in front of an audience said to be quite hostile to the idea of the women’s vote. Yet, once again, she charmed her audience. “The large and cultured audience,” the *Atlanta Constitution* reported:

listened with rapt attention to the eloquent and logical plea in favor of the enfranchisement of woman which this gifted lady so forcibly presented...before she closed, however, it was apparent that the club was strongly in sympathy with the innovation she proposed and she was greeted with applause time and again during her address. It was probably the ablest argument in favor of woman suffrage that has been made in Georgia.<sup>36</sup>

Yates’ language was carefully chosen. She presented the idea of a voteless woman as a piece of property – as chattel. Certainly she was addressing an all-white audience in Atlanta, and there can be no mistaking her comparison of voteless women to slaves. She also made an effort to say that in places like Colorado, where women already had some voting rights, only the “best” women voted. Yates, of course, said this to assuage the fears of a nascent segregationist society: women’s suffrage need not be black suffrage.<sup>37</sup>

Her speech during the Atlanta convention pleased the NAWSA leadership so much that immediately after the close of the convention, Yates spent three months traveling the southern states on behalf of NAWSA, alongside the few prominent southern suffragists such as Kentucky’s Laura Clay. The NAWSA leadership hoped to gain ground in the southern states by calling for suffrage for educated white women at the very moment that black men in the South were being disenfranchised.<sup>38</sup> The suffrage lecture circuit was still backbreaking work. Working alongside southern suffragists sometimes required careful navigation; old wounds had not fully healed from the Civil War era. The southern suffragists were quite clear on their intent to exclude African American women. Although racism certainly ran rampant in the North, it was inextricably linked to the woman suffrage movement in the South. Yet, northern suffragists like Yates often embraced the idea of limiting the voting rights of certain groups as well, including the poor, illiterate, immigrants, and



By the mid-1890s, Yates had become a prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement. She was an excellent public speaker and toured the country to lecture on the topic of voting rights for women. From the *Atlanta Journal*, January 31, 1895, p. 1.

racial minorities. Most of the time, black women's suffragists were the losers in this game of strategy. Progressive African American women like Ida Barnett Wells and Mary Church Terrell emerged in this era to directly challenge the stunted and racist ideology of the late nineteenth-century white suffragists, to no avail, of course.<sup>39</sup>

After spending several months in the South, Yates headed west, focusing particularly on California. Early in 1895, the legislature in the Golden State had voted to amend the state constitution to allow voting rights for women, assuming that it passed a referendum vote at the next election in November 1896. Suffrage leaders from around the country flocked to California to help in the campaign.<sup>40</sup> Yates joined NAWSA leaders Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw there and toured every county in California. She delivered over a hundred speeches in support of the state suffrage amendment. According to one source, the "audiences were large and cordial, clubs were formed and the meetings more than paid expenses."<sup>41</sup> In 1895, Yates toured a total of sixteen states. She continued to make the case that voting should not be an ex-

clusively male prerogative. The right to vote would not turn women into men. "I can testify that where women vote," she argued in 1896, "husband's socks are darned and babies are well cared for, and equal suffrage is bringing forth a fruitage of good both for the home and the State."<sup>42</sup>

In 1896, Yates was once again selected by MWSA to serve as one of Maine's delegates to the NAWSA national convention, this time held in Washington, D.C. Although MWSA chose a total of five women to send as delegates, only Yates was able to attend the convention, and she played a major role there.<sup>43</sup> She led the 1896 convention attendees in prayer at the beginning of the convention alongside Susan B. Anthony and was among those who spoke to the U.S. House of Representatives on women's suffrage. She also debated with the others on whether or not to censor Elizabeth Cady Stanton's recent publication, *The Woman's Bible*, a work in which Stanton and a small team had rewritten the text to reflect women's rights. During this debate, Anthony made an impassioned plea for the delegates not to censor Stanton's work, reminding them that not all members of NAWSA were Christian, and invoked the sensible wisdom of the Jewish atheist, Ernestine Rose, who had served them well in the 1840s and 1850s. But Anthony was disappointed. Yates and a majority of others voted to censor Stanton's work. To them, Stanton had gone too far; most delegates believed it was blasphemous to alter the words of the Bible itself.<sup>44</sup> Yates was a fairly modern woman, but was an orthodox Christian when it came to the Bible.

By the mid-to-late 1890s, it was evident that Yates had become a major player within the women's suffrage movement. Never a suffragist of national renown like Anthony and Stanton, she was nonetheless a prominent state-level leader from Maine. She continued to play an important role in MWSA throughout the 1890s and into the early part of the next century. When MWSA hosted Susan B. Anthony at its 1898 convention in Hampden, Yates was among the leaders of the state organization who welcomed the national suffrage leader to Maine.<sup>45</sup> Her efforts were, in turn, recognized by the national organization. After the 1898 MWSA meeting, an article in NAWSA's publication, *The Woman's Journal*, briefly mentioned Yates, who was "well known to all readers of the JOURNAL," and noted, "Maine is proud of this gifted daughter."<sup>46</sup>

NAWSA assisted in her 1900 publication, "The Admission of Women to the Methodist General Conference." It was a mutually beneficial publication. Sent to press by NAWSA in its Political Equality Series, Yates was given a platform to herald the recent changes at the Methodist General Conference, which admitted women as delegates. It had not come

easily, she noted. Women like Yates had labored long in the service of the Methodist Church, the very same one that had refused to recognize Frances Willard as a delegate earlier and rejected the ordination of Anna Oliver and Anna Howard Shaw.<sup>47</sup>

Yates moved to Rhode Island some time during the first decade of the new century. Why she moved from Maine and relocated to Rhode Island is unknown. According to the 1900 census, she lived in Maine with her father, Alexander. He died in 1901, however. Her three brothers, too, had all died: Samuel in 1885, William in 1900, and Alexander, Jr., in 1905. She probably moved to Rhode Island sometime after 1905. One source stated that she was a recent arrival when she spoke to the Newport League in 1909 on behalf of the women's vote.<sup>48</sup> She moved up quickly in the ranks of the Rhode Island suffragists. By 1909, Yates was president of the Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association (RIWSA), a post she held until 1914.<sup>49</sup>

In was in her capacity as president of RIWSA that Yates spoke publicly against the presidential candidate of the Progressive Party and former president, Theodore Roosevelt, during the election campaign of 1912. He had arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, on a campaign stop, and spoke on a platform stage that also held fifty influential Rhode Islanders, including Elizabeth U. Yates, described as a "suffrage leader" by the *Washington Times*.<sup>50</sup> It is not certain Yates engaged in a direct conversation with Roosevelt, but she had been critical of him only nine days prior, and her criticism was published by the *New York Times*:

In considering the claim of Mr. Roosevelt to the support of American woman I am compelled to recall some conspicuous incidents of his previous career which, in my mind, outweigh the extraordinary promises of social regeneration he is now so loudly proclaiming. In my opinion, he has done more than any other person to develop the spirit of militarism in the rising generation, and was a great factor in precipitating the Spanish-American War, with its endless train of unfortunate complications, calling for the useless sacrifice of lives of the young men in our country and laying upon the people a financial tax of enormous proportions . . . In his desire to secure the States where women vote he has been converted to woman suffrage and bids all women to arise and unite in his service. While to the negroes he refuses due recognition, guided by the same principles of political expediency. . . My personal opinion of Theodore Roosevelt is like that which I entertain for Napoleon Bonaparte, great, but not admirable.<sup>51</sup>

In this telling statement, she aligned with the rights of women *and* African Americans. She scolded Roosevelt for not supporting women's suffrage in the past (especially when he was president), for stirring up a militaristic spirit, and, beyond that, for creating a larger military that Americans had to finance. After being on the suffrage circuit for over twenty years, perhaps Yates had changed. Where she once used flattery and humor, she now spoke freely and forcefully against those she deemed as an enemy of women's voting rights. As historian Michael McGerr has noted, the women's suffrage movement had changed by the first two decades of the twentieth century. Suffragists moved beyond forming voluntary associations and became more assertive, using pressure-group tactics.<sup>52</sup> Yates apparently changed along with the movement.

For the remainder of the 1910s, she stayed active with suffrage work. As president of RIWSA, Yates presided over annual suffrage meetings and traveled throughout the state to speak before various groups on the topic of the women's vote. She also campaigned with the College Equal Suffrage League and worked to open a headquarters in the Butler Exchange Building in Providence with the league along with her own organization. Her group also appeared at conventions like the Food Fair of the Retail Grocers' Association where they countered the anti-suffragists by presenting a map of states that had given women the vote. They distributed "tens of thousands" of leaflets at this convention and "thousands of new members were enrolled." During this time, Yates also researched presidential suffrage. She became an expert on this topic, and spoke about it frequently.<sup>53</sup>

At the 1913 NAWSA convention, Yates was once again a featured speaker. Her speech focused on the issue of presidential suffrage. She noted, for example, that "State Legislatures have the power to grant Presidential suffrage to women. No man derives his right to vote for presidential electors from the constitution of his State, but the U.S. Constitution delegates the power and duty to qualify citizens to vote for them to the Legislature." As the leader of the Rhode Island suffragists, she found herself embroiled in the organizational struggle between NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt, and a younger, rising star, Alice Paul. It seems her political allegiance was still with Catt and NAWSA's other leader, Anna Howard Shaw, with whom she had worked on numerous campaigns, including the one in California in 1895.<sup>54</sup>

Alice Paul was a highly educated, Pennsylvania Quaker who had trained with the militant British suffragettes. Paul wrote to Yates, asking if the increasingly independent Congressional Union (CU), a committee of

NAWSA geared towards influencing legislation, could attend the RIWSA convention in 1914. Paul hoped to encourage NAWSA members in Rhode Island to join the CU's efforts. Yates wrote to Shaw, telling her of Paul's appeal, and received Shaw's thanks. Paul's group eventually separated completely from NAWSA and formed a new organization, the National Woman's Party. Paul's group utilized more aggressive tactics than NAWSA, such as protesting in the streets, heckling Congressmen in public, and picketing at the front gates of Woodrow Wilson's White House. The older generation, of which Yates was now a part, feared these "militant" tactics would unravel all of their labors, dating back to that 1848 Woman's Rights Convention. Despite these fears, Paul's strategy had influenced less-militant suffragists like Yates, who herself marched in suffrage parades in Chicago and St. Louis in 1916.<sup>55</sup>

In 1917, the suffrage tide seemed to turn when several east coast states, including New York, finally approved the women's vote. In that same year, Yates returned to the state of Maine to work during the women's suffrage referendum there. The Maine House of Representatives passed a woman suffrage bill by a majority, and the Maine Senate approved it with no dissenting votes. The legislature then allowed the state's male voter population to vote on the suffrage bill in a referendum. Hopes were high that finally the suffragists' work in Maine, after sixty years of open agitation, would pay off in the 1917 referendum. The anti-suffragists, under the leadership of Margaret Rollins Hale, were hard at work to counter the pro-suffrage dialogue. Most of the female anti-suffragists came from well-heeled backgrounds, and were able to access male politicians to voice their concerns. To them, women did not need the vote. Women served society best as wives, mothers, and homemakers, the anti-suffragists argued; gaining the vote and entering the public arena would hamper women in performing these traditional roles.<sup>56</sup> Yates had consistently argued the opposite view: voting would *not* turn women into men.

Suffragists thought perhaps the old, traditional arguments about women's submissive role in society were melting away. Everyone held his or her breath. And then the polls closed and the state newspapers shouted the headline: male voters had voted down the suffrage referendum by a ratio of two to one. Portland, a suffrage battleground, was, according to male voters, decidedly against enfranchising women. Yates and her colleagues had come so far. It must have been disappointing to be stopped at this stage, especially since the all-male state legislature was finally on their side. But they had been thwarted before. They would

"Nature has marked the weaker sex for protection, rather than the direction of government."—Thomas Jefferson.

## The Case Against Woman Suffrage

The Most Important Question On the  
Ballot at the Special Election,  
September 10, 1917

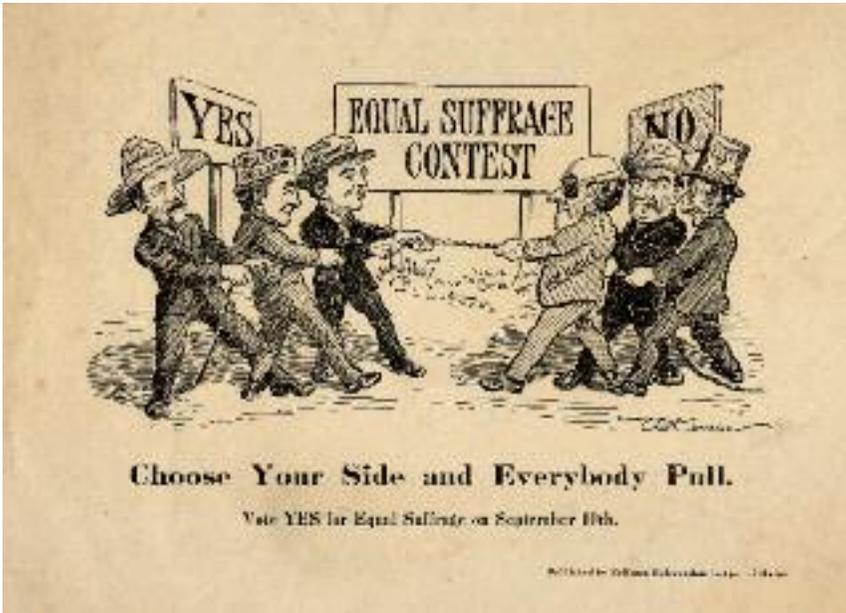


Shall the Constitution be amended  
as proposed by a resolution of the  
Legislature granting suffrage to  
women upon equal terms with men?

YES	
NO	X

"It is by the promulgation of sound morals in the community, and more especially by the training and instruction of the young that woman performs her part toward the preservation of a free government."—Daniel Webster.

Yates moved to Rhode Island in the first decade of the twentieth century, but returned to Maine in 1917 to help in the campaign for suffrage. This pamphlet was published by a group of anti-suffragists in Maine in 1917. Courtesy of Special Collections, Fogler Library, University of Maine.



Yates helped the suffragists of Maine in 1917 during the campaign preceding the September referendum. The anti-suffragists won this battle, but ultimately lost the war three years later. This cartoon by Frederic W. Freeman supported equal voting rights. Maine Historical Society Collections.

press on, with Carrie Chapman Catt's "Winning Plan," by applying pressure to state legislators and members of Congress alike. Some blamed the suffrage "militants," like Portland resident Florence Brooks Whitehouse, a friend of the equally militant Alice Paul of the National Woman's Party. But ultimately, the failure of the Maine suffrage referendum in 1917 was likely due to male voter's anxieties about women's new roles in society.<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Upham Yates was just the kind of woman traditionalists feared. She obtained a higher education, traveled to foreign lands as a missionary, and was a suffragist who often spoke in the public sphere. But she realized it was all for naught if women did not have the full political promise of American citizenship.

The sheer disappointment of the Maine referendum quickly faded. Support for women's suffrage dramatically increased over the next three years, turning former anti-suffrage politicians into believers. Was it women's participation in World War I that sealed the vote? Perhaps it was the combination of the militant and moderate suffragist tactics: picketing the White House, getting arrested, launching hunger strikes

from prison, or lobbying Congress relentlessly and sitting down to tea with President Woodrow Wilson. Most historians agree that it was all of these things combined. Oddly enough, at precisely the same time the nation shifted towards a more conservative atmosphere, hunting down suspected anarchists, socialists, and communists in a blatant violation of First Amendment rights, legislators also began to embrace women's suffrage. Even before 1920, Congress had begun adopting progressive measures, effectively taking the steam out of progressive movements. If Congress gave women the vote, would it matter? Would the women's vote really change the status quo? Many people worried about this. By June 1920, Congress had passed a women's suffrage bill and sent it out to the states for ratification as the Nineteenth Amendment. By August 26, 1920, they had done it. Women could vote.<sup>58</sup>

The next question centered on how exactly American women would use their right to vote. For some, there was a nagging sense of obligation to do something more. As a result, many women ran for political office in the 1920s. Yates was one of them. Now living as a companion to an older woman, Sarah Usher, in Providence, Yates considered her options. She was comfortable with the spotlight, having been in it her whole adult life. Could she do more? If male politicians continued, in her view, to fail the American population, especially women, perhaps it was her turn to throw herself directly into the political arena as a candidate. After all, she had been engaged in political work since the 1890s, as part of a new female force of pressure politics.<sup>59</sup>

By 1920, Yates, now sixty-two years old, was a seasoned veteran of political campaigning. For much of her adult life she campaigned for the right for women to vote. Now that women had gained that right, she could campaign as a candidate for office herself. She was nominated at the 1920 Rhode Island Democratic Convention as their candidate for lieutenant governor only ten months after the Rhode Island legislature had ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. In the general election in November, she came in second place with 57,750 votes, behind Republican Harold J. Gross, who garnered 106,377 votes. The other candidates, socialist Albert Parker, and James McGuigan, brought in 3,205 and 44 votes respectively. Yates was not the only woman in this election, as Democrat Helen I. Binning ran for secretary of state. She, too, came in second place, ahead of two others, and, like Yates, garnered roughly half the votes of the winner. Despite Yates' and Binning's loss, women were making headway in state and even national government, though the latter was still quite rare.<sup>60</sup> Yates had tried to do something more with her po-

litical ambitions, and did receive a respectable number of votes, but had not quite made it. She would not try again.

Records are scarce, but Yates seems to have drifted into a quiet retirement in the 1920s and 1930s. She was listed in the 1930 census as a single boarder in a house of mostly women in Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>61</sup> By 1940, she had moved to Watertown, Massachusetts, where she lived with her older sister, Sarah Yates Comery.<sup>62</sup> Sarah passed away in 1941, and Elizabeth died the following year. Although a lesser-known figure compared to the most famous suffragists like Stanton, Stone, Anthony, Catt, and Paul, Yates had played a leadership role and could be proud of her life's work. Hailing from a small, coastal village in Maine, she looked outward and embraced the world. She spent six years as a missionary in China and later campaigned for real change in American women's lives. The editors of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, in turn, recognized her as one their suffrage heroines: "A student of sociology, missionary leader, prophet and dreamer, whose dreams have come true."<sup>63</sup>

#### NOTES

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3. Elizabeth J. Bachelder, "A Flame for Their Souls: The Antislavery Work of Maine Women, 1838-1856" (M.A. thesis, University of Southern Maine, 2004); Alice Taylor, "From Petitions to Partyism: Antislavery and the Domestication of Maine Politics in the 1840s and 1850s," *New England Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (March 2004): 70-88.
4. Shannon M. Risk, "'In Order to Establish Justice': The Nineteenth-Century Women's Suffrage Movements of Maine and New Brunswick" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maine, 2009), pp. 24-61.
5. U.S. Census, 1860, Bristol, Maine; U.S. Census, 1880, Bristol, Maine; New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957, microfilm M237, roll 463, line 4, list #437, National Archives, Washington; Hope, *Special Places*, p. 75.
6. Elizabeth U. Yates, *Glimpses Into Chinese Homes* (Boston: J.W. Hamilton, Printer, 1887), dedication page.

7. Hope, *Special Places*, pp. 130-131.
8. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, *A Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred Seventy Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading Women in All Walks of Life* (Buffalo: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), p. 807; U.S. Census, 1880, Bristol, Maine; Hope, *Special Places*, p. 130. Bristol historian Peter Hope believes she may have had more higher education than her brief stint at the elocution school in Boston.
9. Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 49-54; Frances J. Baker, *The Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1895* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987; reprint, New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896), pp. 9, 11, 21.
10. Baker, *The Story*, p. 426.
11. Yates, *Glimpses*, pp. 23, 25, 30-35, 39, 42-43, 48-53, 58, 61-65, 70-76, 82-86, 88-92, 94, 96-100, 105-106, 111-112, 114, 123, and 128. For more on American female missionary doctors, nurses, and hospitals in China during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, see Norman E. Thomas, "Medical Missions," in Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan M. Lochman, and John S. Mbiti, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, J-O* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 3:486.
12. Baker, *The Story*, pp. 37, 147-151, and 174; Yates, *Glimpses*, pp. 30-36, 37-40.
13. Baker, *The Story*, pp. 282-283.
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15. Laura Askew Haygood, *A Message from China to the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Shanghai, October 19, 1885* (Shanghai: n.p., 1885), pp. ii-vii.
16. Yates, *Glimpses*, pp. 61-64.
17. Yates, *Glimpses*, p. 80.
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20. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage* (Indianapolis: Hollenbeck Press, 1902), 4: 707, 709.
21. Stanton, et. al., *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York: Fowler and Wells Publishers, 1881), 1: 472-753; Ida Husted Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* (Indianapolis: Hollenbeck Press, 1898), 1: 123-136, 502.
22. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1: 207-224; Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston, "Expectant at Seneca Falls," *New York History* 84, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 42.

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24. On Yates' travels on behalf of NAWSA see Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4: 487-490, 536, 558, 646, 696, 714, 783, 816, 822, 874, 899-900, 922, 964.
25. Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 43-74, 96-123.
26. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4: 228, 714; Harriet Taylor Upton, ed., *Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association Held in Washington, D.C., February 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20, 1894* (Washington, D.C.: National Headquarters, Chronicle Print, 1894), pp. 43-44, 157.
27. On the Maine Women's Suffrage Association in the 1890s, see Risk, "In Order to Establish Justice," pp. 147-177.
28. "Activity in Maine," *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), February 2, 1895, p. 1; "Maine Annual Meeting," *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), February 1, 1896, p. 5.
29. "Society," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1896, p. 7.
30. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1895, p. 5.
31. *Atlanta Journal*, February 1, 1895, p. 6.
32. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1895, p. 5.
33. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1895, p. 5.
34. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 9, 1895, p. 5.
35. *Atlanta Journal*, February 2, 1895, p. 5.
36. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 3, 1895, p. 15.
37. *Atlanta Constitution*, February 2, 1895, p. 15.
38. "The Atlanta Convention," *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), February 9, 1895, p. 5.
39. On the southern tour in 1895 and NAWSA's "southern strategy" in the 1890s and early 1900s see 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), pp. 113-118. See also Ida Husted Harper, *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* (Indianapolis: Hollenbreck Press, 1899) 2: 811.
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42. Rachel Foster Avery, ed., *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, held in Washington, D.C., January 23d to 28th, 1896* (Washington: NAWSA, 1896), pp. 55, 130.
43. "Maine Annual Meeting," *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), February 1, 1896, p. 5.
44. Foster, ed., *Twenty-Eighth Annual Convention*, pp. 71, 87, and 91; "Society," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1896, p. 7.

45. "Woman's Suffrage Convention," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, September 29, 1898, p. 3. Yates served as the secretary of the convention and also spoke at the evening session, immediately before the night's final lecture, by Susan B. Anthony.
46. "State Correspondence: Maine Notes," *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), October 22, 1898, p. 343.
47. Elizabeth U. Yates, "The Admission of Women to the Methodist General Conference," NAWSA's *Political Equality Series* 5, no. 5 (August 1900): 1-4.
48. U.S. Census, 1900, Bristol, Maine; Ida Husted Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage* (Washington: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), 5: 288.
49. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4: 345.
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51. "Woman Assails Mr. Roosevelt. Like Napoleon, He Is Great, But Not Admirable, Says Miss Yates," *New York Times*, August 8, 1908, p. 1.
52. Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (Dec. 1990): 864-885.
53. Ida Husted Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage* (Washington, D.C.: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), 6: 345-346.
54. Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5: 369, 565-568.
55. Alice Paul to Elizabeth Upham Yates, September 17, 1914, Reel 34, NAWSA Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Anna Howard Shaw to Elizabeth Upham Yates, September 22, 1914, Reel 34, NAWSA Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6: 570.
56. Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5: 288, 325, 338, 369-370.
57. Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6: 242, 565, 567-571, 574, 577; Wescott and Schriver, "Reform Movements and Party Reformation," 415-417; Anne Gass, "Florence Brooks Whitehouse and Maine's Vote to Ratify Women's Suffrage in 1919," *Maine History* 46, no. 1 (Oct. 2011): 39-66.
58. Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4: 694.
59. Ann Gordon, *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: An Awful Hush, 1895-1906* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), p. 21; U.S. Census, 1920, Providence, Rhode Island.
60. Doris Weatherford, *Women's Almanac 2002* (Westport, CT: Oryx Press, 2002), p. 288.
61. U.S. Census, 1930, Providence, Rhode Island.
62. U.S. Census, 1940, Watertown, Massachusetts.
63. Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 5: 577. The author thanks Bristol historian Peter Hope for his insights into the Yates family, as well as David Turpie, co-editor of *Maine History*.