

Museum Notes

for the week of July 12 – 18, 2020

by Kristen Parrott, curator

Votes for women! We are fast approaching the centennial of the day when most women in the U.S. officially gained the right to vote in all elections – August 26, 1920, was the day that the 19th Amendment became law. As we prepare to commemorate this event, we continue to uncover interesting stories about women’s suffrage here in Vernon County.

If your ancestors lived here in June of 1887, they probably heard of suffragist Olympia Brown, and maybe even met her. The Rev. Brown was one of the first women in the U.S. to earn a college degree, and also one of the first women to earn a divinity degree. She was an ordained pastor in the Universalist Church, and served at the Church of the Good Shepherd (now the Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church) in Racine, Wisconsin, from 1878 to 1887.

She also served as the president of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association from 1884 to 1912. In 1887, at the age of 53, she left full-time ministry to devote herself to women’s suffrage.

In early June of that year, the Rev. Olympia Brown came to Vernon County to give lectures in Viroqua, Newton, and Chaseburg. In Viroqua, she spoke at the Methodist Episcopal Church (now the United Methodist Church) on the first Friday and Saturday of June, and then at a former rolling skating rink on N. Main St. on Sunday. The local newspaper, the *Vernon County Censor*, listed her topics as “Woman and Education,” “The Womanhood of America,” and “The Symbol of Liberty.”

A week later, the newspaper reported on her appearances, saying that they had been well-attended, mainly by women, and that the “lectures furnish much food for thought, were interesting and instructive.” (The newspaper also no longer referred to her as Rev. Olympia Brown, which was her name, but instead as Mrs. Olympia Brown Willis – she was married to John Henry Willis, but had retained her own name.)

The *Censor* goes on to say that, “Mrs. Willis devoted much time advocating that the resolution adopted at the last election confers almost universal suffrage on women and advised them to assert their authority by offering their ballots at every election till the supreme court renders a decision on that point.”

This is what she was talking about: In 1885-1886, Wisconsin women had won the right to vote in “any election pertaining to school matters.” The measure had been introduced by Senator N.L. James of nearby Richland Center, passed by the state senate and assembly, and approved by Viroqua’s own Jeremiah Rusk, who was then the Governor of Wisconsin. Finally it had been passed by the state’s voters, who of course were all men.

In 1887, Olympia Brown did try to vote in a municipal election, asserting that all elections pertained to schools, but she was denied the right to cast her ballot. She brought a lawsuit against Racine, but the state supreme court ruled against her. I wonder if any local women followed her advice and also tried to vote in 1887?

The Rev. Brown continued her fight for women’s suffrage and, happily, lived to see the passage of the 19th Amendment. In 1920, at the age of 85, she voted for the first time in a presidential election. Votes for women!