

The League of Women Voters NH urges the Legislative Administration committee to vote Ought to Pass on HB475.
Submitted with oral testimony 2/21/17

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NH's first two female legislators

The ink was barely dry on the Nineteenth Amendment, making women's right to vote the law of the land, when two New Hampshire women decided to run for the NH House. On August 26, 1920, their right to vote (hence their right to run for elective office, they assumed) became official, but that was too late to file for state representative in the primaries. So they each ran a write-in campaign and won. They ran listed on the ballots in the November general election and again won. But it wasn't that simple. The National Women's History Museum website reports that "some of the state's leaders questioned whether the right to vote also meant that women had the right to hold office. Lawmakers quickly arranged a referendum on the subject in March of 1921, and voters confirmed the right of women to hold office by 30,285 to 24,142. This, however, was short of the two-thirds requirement that New Hampshire had for constitutional amendments – a technicality that lawmakers apparently decided to ignore. The two women were seated."

Here is a little bit more about each—and in truly non-partisan League of Women Voters tradition, they were members of different parties.

Jessie A. Doe (1887-1943) came to politics naturally: her father, Charles Doe, was the Chief Justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court, and her brother Haven served in the House, Senate, and as a mayor of Somersworth. Jessie served as a Republican from Rollinsfield for one term (1920-1922), took a break to devote to mountain climbing, European travel, running the family farm, and civic activities ranging from the League of Women Voters to the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen. In 1930 she ran for the House again, this time in an apparent tie with the Democratic incumbent. After a review of the election results, the Republican-dominated House seated her. She continued with her numerous civic and philanthropic endeavors for many years. A residence hall at UNH was named for her in 1964.

Dr. Mary Louise (Rolfe) Farnum (1870-1965) was a young widow when she entered the male-dominated field of medicine. She went to Boston University School of Medicine and received her MD in 1900. She practiced in Connecticut until the failing health of her parents called her back to NH. In 1920 Farnum ran as a Democrat from Penacook and Boscawen. The district was considered Republican, and she defeated a well-known Republican incumbent. "The vote was 264 to 27, to be exact," according to a Boston Herald article for which she was interviewed in December of 1920. This was to be her only term in the NH House, but in 1922 three other women were elected to the House, and two years later over a dozen women were serving. Like Jessie Doe, Mary Farnum was active her entire life in civic activities, including serving on the school board and the Red Cross.

An article in NH Magazine (Nov. 2012) by Rick Broussard quotes NH Governor Chester B. Jordan during the struggle for women's right to vote (in 1903) as saying, "We should remember that participation of woman in public affairs always tends to draw her interest away from her most sacred duty, that of homemaking.... When woman wants the ballot, no honest, intelligent man will withhold it from her. The lack of interest among women in securing the ballot is not so much from failure to recognize its value as from a true appreciation of their present exalted position in the homes of the Nation." Clearly Governor Jordan didn't count on Jessie Doe and Dr. Mary Farnum finding their way to the NH House just a few years later.

HB475 will honor these two women with a portrait in the State House. It will be a fitting tribute not only to them but also to all the women who have served and continue to serve in the state legislature, especially if this comes to pass for the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the League of Women Voters.

In addition to the sources listed, thanks to Cowhampshireblog.com by Janice Brown for additional details.

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