

Elizabeth Bates: Suffragist to Civic Leader



The following is the final in a series of articles researched and written by Julie Pencinger, our summer 2009 intern from St. Vincent's College in PA.

Elizabeth Mabel Miller Bates was born in Brooklyn, New York on July 4, 1879. Perhaps her patriotic birth date was a prelude to Bates' century long life which was mostly spent with Elizabeth involved in various elements of community service. An active citizen from childhood to her death, she is most notable for being a local suffragist. This experience was backed by her past influences and involvement in her community and also it prompted Bates to take on more civic roles and become active in more areas. These areas covered a broad range including politics, volunteering and recreation, all of which serve as part of the larger picture of Elizabeth Bates: a Citizen truly dedicated to her community.

Though Elizabeth was born in Brooklyn, her family soon moved to Englishtown, New Jersey, where she grew up. It was while living in Englishtown that she first took on a role in community service. As a young girl, she would trim the weeds at the Old Tennent Cemetery from around the graves of Revolutionary War soldiers who died in the Battle of Monmouth. Then, in 1890, Elizabeth and her family moved to Cranford where she immersed herself into the community. For example, she wielded a shovel at the 1893 groundbreaking of the First Presbyterian Church. Later, she married George Bates, a shipbuilder, in 1901 at the age of 22. The couple's marriage only furthered her civic career as both George and his mother, Fannie, another active Cranford woman, pushed the new bride into seeking activities to do outside the home.

By following the advice of her husband and mother-in-law, Elizabeth Bates soon found herself wrapped up in the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. While working the

polls on Election Day—an outside of the home activity—Bates witnessed a drunken man attempting to vote. She immediately thought that she, as a sober woman, could do better than the drunken man. Thus, her interest in women's suffrage was spurred. Bates later committed herself to the cause after visiting one of her sisters in Illinois and seeing that women there could vote. She soon joined the Equal Franchise League in Cranford and was their representative at a Trenton hearing for women's suffrage. She also attended two demonstrations for the cause, one in Newark and the other in New York. Finally, Elizabeth was able to savor the eventual success of women's suffrage. In 1922, now with the right to vote, Bates was one of the first women to be summoned to serve on the Union County Grand Jury.

Bates' role in fighting for women's suffrage, however, was not the limit of her experiences in politics. In fact, before she could vote herself, Bates was elected to the Cranford Board of Education, the second woman to do so. She served on the board for thirteen years, starting in 1914. Bates did not just win her own elections; she helped other local political candidates' campaign for office through her membership in the Cranford Republican Club as well. In terms of political affairs in town, she also joined the Village Improvement Association, a group founded by Bates' mother-in-law for women to join in order to be involved with the community. Eventually, Elizabeth became president of the organization, overseeing projects such as lobbying for traffic lights at dangerous intersections.

Bates was dedicated to her civic duty in more than just local politics though. She further served her country by volunteering to help the military. During World War I, Bates joined the Red Cross as a partial fulfillment of her childhood dream to be a nurse and was assigned to work in a navy hospital in Colonia. There, she delivered magazines and local newspapers to the wounded soldiers. After the war ended, she continued her service with the Red Cross for fifty years including volunteering to help at Camp Kilmer during World War II. However, despite her patriotic and altruistic intentions, Bates' experiences dealing with the dying and wounded soldiers of the two World Wars led her to become disillusioned with the whole concept of war. She stated when asked about the Vietnam War in the 1960s that she could "not believe in any war."

Fortunately, Bates' devotion to other types of civic duty was not diminished, and once again she was involved beyond the previously mentioned political and military activities. She participated in several recreational activities as well. Among these were several local clubs that Bates joined during her long life. These included: the Cranford Progress Club, The Westfield Bird Club and the Cranford Dramatic Club. In the Cranford Dramatic Club, she even held the role of Della in the club's 1930 adaptation of the then popular play, "The Royal Family." She also ran the Old Canteen Club and was a trustee of the Cranford Public Library. Bates' greatest passion, as evidenced by her aforementioned club membership in the Westfield Bird Club, was bird watching. This was her favorite pastime, especially in her old age, and she even volunteered to use her skill to assist local Boy Scouts in earning bird watching badges. Finally, she remained active at the First Presbyterian Church, the same one for which she attended the groundbreaking. Bates attended church there nearly every Sunday and was ordained the first woman elder of the church. She even had a hall in the church renamed for her.

From all of the above civic duties in which Bates partook, it is obvious that she was active in society all through her life, trying to not even slow down as she aged. Though she participated in fewer activities when she was older—something that bothered her—the fact that Bates continued to be active probably contributed to the fact that she lived more than one-hundred years. Other probable factors for Bates' longevity were her lifelong aversion to drinking and smoking as well as

her good health—she was never seriously ill. Bates thus outlived her husband and all seven of her siblings before her 1980 death of natural causes at the age of 101 at Westfield Convalescent Center where she had lived in her final years.

In all of her 101 years, Elizabeth Bates portrayed a true passion for civic duty. From trimming weeds at a cemetery as a child to her presence in local politics and service to the Red Cross as an adult to even her multiple leisure activities in her old age, Bates submerged herself in the society around her. Her most notable role—that of a suffragist—can act as a symbol of her dedication for civic duty. Before and during the suffrage movement, Bates, as a woman, had to push in order to take part in various social matters, but afterwards, she was able to have more freedom to involve herself in society. Nearly a century of such community service made Elizabeth Bates one of the busiest if not most remarkable local woman of her time.

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