

## "The Suffragists had the Town"

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During the last decade of the fight for voting rights, many suffragists embraced public protests, and suffrage parades and other types of demonstrations became more common. Kentucky's first suffrage parade (which the Kentucky Equal Rights Association claimed was the first in the South) was held in Louisville in 1913 and was followed in succeeding years by parades in other cities.

Lexington was the site of a memorable parade on May 6, 1916. The Lexington *Herald* reported that the event was a "mammoth demonstration" for suffrage. Estimating that the crowd numbered approximately 1,000 marchers, the *Herald* deemed it the largest suffrage parade ever held in Kentucky. Marchers wore white, which was typical of suffrage demonstrators. Sympathetic business owners decorated their store fronts on Main Street in yellow, another color that had been used in the suffrage movement since the 1860s. All told, the *Herald* reported, "the suffragists had the town for the morning."

I found the symbols and pageantry of the parade fascinating. The entire procession was led by a little girl named Dorothy Fitzgerald, whom the paper described as riding in a "gilded chariot." Groups of school children also marched, and the paper noted that demonstrators also carried flags. All of these symbols were used to signify that suffragists were neither anti-family nor anti-American. Then there was the pageantry, which included a young woman on a float wearing a blindfold. She symbolized Kentucky's refusal to grant women voting rights. The other young women riding on the float with her represented the states that had already given women voting rights.

I also noticed that local leaders such as University of Kentucky President Henry Barker marched. The paper also listed state militia men, bankers, and lawyers among the participants. I realized that although the *Herald* reported that only approximately 100 men participated, (about 10% of the estimated participants), they, along with the children, seem to have processed in front of the women's groups. Was the decision to let the men lead a strategic attempt to not make the women marchers seem aggressive? Did the local suffragists anticipate that critics might point to women leading as symbolic of their desire to turn the social order and families upside down? Or was the order of the parade designed to save the most important participants for the end?

The parade ended with a speech by Walter J. Millard. I haven't been able to find out much about Millard, but according to Melba Porter Hay, Madeline Breckinridge selected him to help promote the Fayette County Equal Rights Association. In his speech Millard declared that the walls of opposition to woman suffrage would crumble like the biblical walls of Jericho.

The *Herald* also printed an editorial that gave the march historic significance, declaring that it "sets at rest for all time any doubt that may have existed as to whether women want, and men intend to give them the right of suffrage." The paper even declared that the suffragists' opponents were won over by the procession, noting that "there were other hundreds who came to jeer but remained to cheer." Keep in mind, Madeline McDowell Breckinridge's husband, Desha Breckinridge, was editor of the paper at the time.

As much as the marchers clearly attempted to use powerful symbols that evoked loyalty to country and family, the parade did not escape criticism. An editorial printed in the *Central Methodist* noted that an automobile used in the procession carried a dog in the front seat and several children in the back. The editor remarked: "Woman suffrage, if carried out to its full meaning, means less children in the home and less time to care for them, so that the poodle dog in many cases would come first."

If you're ever in downtown Lexington, you can easily retrace the parade route. According to the *Herald*, the parade began at Gratz Park, turned left on Third St., turned left on Broadway, turned left on Main St. to Union Station, and ended at Cheapside where Millard gave his oration.

*Resources:*

"It's Coming." *Lexington Herald*, May 7, 1916.

"Suffrage Parade is Biggest Ever Held in Kentucky," *Lexington Herald*, May 7, 1916.

Hay, Melba Porter. *Madeline McDowell Breckinridge and the Battle for a New South*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009.

Knott, Claudia. "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Kentucky, 1879-1920." PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 1989.

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