

**Utica, New York: The Suffrage Movement
through the eyes of Lucy Carlisle Watson**

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There were five women having tea around a table on 13 July 1848 in Waterloo, New York; Lucretia Mott, her sister Martha Wright, Jane Hunt, Mary Ann McClintock and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.¹ Mott and Stanton talked about women's suffrage as they did when they first met in London at the Anti-Slavery Convention. They wanted to do something about women's rights and decided to form a women's suffrage movement in the United States. It was not until 1848 when they met again and took greater control of the matter. Later that night, the women got together and wrote an announcement that appeared in the 14 July 1848, *Seneca County Courier*, that invited women to attend a meeting to discuss social, civil and religious conditions and the rights of women.² The talk about women's influence for equality was spreading throughout New York State.

Before the changes that took place during the Victorian Era, it was a woman's job to take care of the home, the family, or the farm on which they lived. When a woman was married, everything she possessed belonged to her husband. A married woman had no control over her income, the custody of her children, how many children she would have, or property belonging to her from before she was married. In the eyes of the law, husband and wife were considered one person, and that person was the husband.³

There were many changes and revolutions taking place in the Mohawk Valley during the Victorian Era. Women's suffrage can be counted among the most important of these. Women's rights were significantly changing and expanding. Women were not

¹Miriam Gurko, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement*, (New York: Schocken Books 1974), p. 92.

² Miriam, p.3.

³ Miriam, p.8.

allowed to vote in any community elections. They had absolutely no say in any of the laws that governed society. The only way a woman could get involved in political issues was through her husband or father. Born into a prominent family of politics and past generations of politics, Lucy Carlisle Watson assumed an important leadership role in the suffrage movement and made significant contributions to the cause.

Lucy was born in Utica, New York, on 10 February 1855.⁴ She attended the Utica Academy and graduated from that institution on 28 June 1872. In her graduation program, Lucy presented an essay called “The Pressures of Society upon Beliefs.” From the title of the essay, one can see that Lucy was thinking about change. There were 27 students in her graduating class. Four of them were boys, 23 were girls. Lucy was intelligent and took classes like Latin, algebra, natural philosophy, etymology, composition and penmanship.

Originally from Providence, Rhode Island, her parents William Henry Watson and Sarah Thompson Carlisle were married on 1 May 1854 and moved to Utica, New York.⁵ Dr. Watson was very much involved in the medical community. He joined his practice and was one of the founders of the Homoeopathic Medical Society of Oneida County.⁶

Lucy had one brother named William Livingston Watson, and she used to call him Willis. He was born in March 1856 but died in 1909 from Cerebral Hemorrhage.⁷ Lucy

⁴ Oneida County Historical Society, Lucy Carlisle Watson Collection, Box 2007. 178.1.

⁵ Oneida County Historical Society, Lucy Carlisle Watson, Geology Book, publication 1928.

⁶ Oneida County Historical Society, Lucy Carlisle Watson, Geology Book, publication 1928.

⁷ Oneida County Historical Society, Lucy Carlisle Watson Collection, box 2007, 178.1.

and William were the Watson's only children. Willis went into a severe depression in 1880 at the age of 24 and this shows that he had a drug problem that led to problems within the family.

It was a dark day in our family history so far. Willis and father had a fight over Willis lying to father about buying two ounces of chloral hydrates off the druggist. Willis hid the drug and father and Willis are searching his room and they came up with nothing. I know where it is, but I want to protect Willis.⁸

Nobody knows why Willis went into depression in addition to not talk to anyone in the family. William Henry and Sarah tried to get him to talk but he would not open up. Willis would sometimes go to Lucy for help and they would go for random walks where they would talk. Lucy worked hard to help her brother. She was dedicated to her brother and to her fight to make things better within the family.

During one holiday, Lucy's family was invited to Thanksgiving dinner at a friend's house. Willis was not in the mood to attend, and Lucy fulfilled her role as a woman and sister had to stay with him at the house while her parents attended the dinner. Lucy was not pleased with her brother always acting out on his depression and more so with the way she as a woman, had no chance but to stay with him. These early experiences helped shaped Lucy's character and later public activities and fight for woman's justice.

Some authors state that Lucy was inspired by and inherited her politics from her father. I believe that she may have inherited them from her father, but also from her

⁸Oneida County Historical Society, Lucy Carlisle Watson, Diary book 2, 1880, box 2007, 178.1.

grandfather and past generations. Lucy's grandfather was William Robinson Watson. He was born 14 December 1799, and was a Rhode Island politician. He graduated from Brown University in 1823 and studied law, however, he changed careers and devoted most of his life to politics. In 1854, he was elected secretary of state of Rhode Island, but lost the election the following year. He also edited political journals and wrote for the press vindicating and explaining the doctrines of the Whig Party.⁹

Lucy's great grandfather, Walter Clarke was governor of Rhode Island from 1696-1698 and her great-great grandfather, Henry Bull was also governor of Rhode Island under royal cavalier from February 1690 to May 1689.¹⁰ One can see that Lucy was born into politics. Although a woman, she was involved in many organizations and causes. One of which was the women's suffrage movement.

Organized in 1893, the New Century Club was the first women's club in Utica, and the second oldest women's club in New York State.¹¹ In New York City a group of women founded a club just for women, it was called Sorosis. Women of Utica followed suit of the club in the city and formed one for themselves.¹² The purpose of the club was to provide for women's needs in education, culture, and the community. Women were starting to become more noticed as individuals rather than as appurtenance of the home. Women were beginning to develop a visible force in American society.

⁹Egbert Cleave, "Cleave's Biographical Cyclopedia of Homœopathic Physicians and Surgeon <http://www.homeoint.org/history/cleave/w/watsonwh.htm>, (accessed March 18, 2011).

¹⁰Lucy Carlisle Watson Collection, copy of Family Letters, 2007,184.285.

¹¹ Jones, Anna E, The New Century Club: Accounts of it's Organizations, Early years and Accomplishments, New Century Club Collection, box 2009.020.6-26.

¹² Jones, Anna E, The New Century Club: Accounts of it's Organizations, Early years and Accomplishments, New Century Club Collection, box 2009.020.6-26.

In 1896, Lucy became the recording secretary of the New Century Club and its vice president in June 1897.¹³ In 1899, Lucy became the president of the club, and while some of the topics open for discussion stayed the same, such as education, the women would also talk about history and government, economics, hospitality and the home. Lucy resigned from presidency in 1903 to focus more on the women's suffrage movement.

Women from all walks of life, but particularly from the upper and middle class, emerged from socially isolated and culturally prescribed places burst into public prominences in speaking, writing, marching, organizing and educating women.¹⁴ On 19 April 1894, Susan B. Anthony came to Utica to speak about women's suffrage. The meeting was held at the Utica Opera House. Focusing on political corruption and revisiting the Constitution, Anthony and her allies argued that women were the political reformers best allies. Suffragists began by trying to get women elected to the constitutional convention itself.¹⁵ Anthony also stated "Women of Oneida County, you are paid less than men doing the same job as you because you do not have the ballot. You are denied the right to a voice in government because you do not have the ballot. What you have is a whole white male aristocracy."¹⁶ New York State was in good form

¹³ *Utica Morning Herald*, "New Century Club: Officers Elected at the Annual Meeting Yesterday," June 13, 1896, p. 6.

¹⁴ Naomi Rosenthal, Meryl Fingrutd, Michael Ethier, Roberta Karant, David McDoland, "Social Movement and Network Analysis: A Case Study of Nineteenth-Century Women's Reform in New York State", *The American Journal of Sociology*, 90:5, (1985): 1025.

¹⁵ Ellen C. DuBois, "Working Women, Class Relations, and Suffrage Militance: Harriot Staton Blatch and the New York Suffrage Movement 1894-1909", *The Journal of American History*, 74:1, (1987):37.

¹⁶ Frank Tomaino, "This Week in History," *Utica Observer Dispatch*, April 12, 2009, <http://www.uticaod.com/history/x1579122316/This-week-in-history>.

of organization. Being able to vote in New York was extremely important to the suffragists; for it would increase support in Congress, further their goals of obtaining federal amendment, and, the belief of other heavily populated eastern states would quickly follow.¹⁷ Even without direct representation at the convention, suffragists were determined to educate the public, distribute petitions, and promote a strong “public sentiment” for woman suffrage in the state.¹⁸ Lucy believed all of this strongly.

Six years later, In 1900, Miss Anne Howard Shaw came to central New York and addressed the women of Utica. She urged them to stand up for themselves and make a difference. Shaw had a question and answer box that she used to respond to the community’s concerns. A couple of the questions asked were: Do women always vote as their husbands do?; and, When a woman votes differently from her husband, would it not create disturbance or disruption in the family?. Her response to the first question was “No, we inherit our politic from our fathers, just as we get our religion. We are more likely to be the same religion and politics that our parents are. Men do not represent us at the ballot box.”¹⁹ In response to the second question Shaw replied, “If it did it would not be an argument against women’s suffrage, but against marriage.”²⁰ Shaw gave the women of Utica confidence to make a difference in the community. After the two day

¹⁷ Susan Goodyear, “Susan B. Anthony, the 1894 Constitutional Convention, and Anti- Suffragism in New York State,” p. 1.

¹⁸ Susan Goodyear, “Susan B. Anthony, the 1894 Constitutional Convention, and Anti- Suffragism in New York State,” p. 2.

¹⁹ *Utica Herald Dispatch*, “Miss Shaw’s Question Box: Closing Session of the Women Suffrage Convention, Saturday Evening,” May 26, 1900,p 4.

²⁰ *Utica Herald Dispatch*, Miss Shaw’s Question Box: Closing Session of the Women Suffrage Convention, Saturday Evening,” May 26, 1900,p 4.

convention, 30 women signed up to transform Utica.²¹ The women's suffrage movement began in Utica at the Utica Political Equality Club. Lucy was one of the charter members and served as its president from 1900 to 1917.

Progress was slow at first for the suffrage movement, meetings were held at Genesee Hall. The topic that was discussed was often equal rights. The suffrage movement campaigns reflected and contributed to a significant change in women's lives: the growth of an independent feminist movement.²² Lucy and her friend, Florence Roberts, had been encouraging younger women to get involved in the suffrage movement, by handing out flyers and notices. During her presidency of the Utica Political Equality Club, Lucy explained her reasons for leading and encouraging more women to join the suffrage movement. She promoted the cause for 20 years because "women suffrage appealed to my sense of justice, and during the past five years the feeling of equal suffrage for men and women is an essential feature in a democracy, and the hope that it will aid in making better conditioning for women and children will have strengthen my belief in the necessity of "votes for women.""²³

In 1913, there was a suffrage parade in Utica, but not many people from the area attended or supported the movement. This was the first suffrage parade in the city. It formed at Oneida Square, where the suffrage headquarters was located and continued

²¹ *Utica Herald Dispatch*, Miss Shaw's Question Box: Closing Session of the Women Suffrage Convention, Saturday Evening," May 26, 1900,p 4.

²² Dublin, Thomas, "The Women's Suffrage Movement Revisited," *Reviews in American History*, 7:2, (1979): 216.

²³ *Utica Herald Dispatch*, "Woman Suffrage Notes," Saturday Evening, August 31, 1912, p. 6.

past Lucy's house to Bagg's Square and ended back at Oneida Square.²⁴ Women from not only Utica attended, but also from Syracuse, Rome, Oneida, Little Falls, Herkimer, Ilion and Clayville took part in the celebration. Disappointed with the local turnout, however, Lucy wanted this parade to get more people involved and more aware of women's rights.

At a suffrage meeting after the parade, Lucy introduced the guest speaker, Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt. She was the president of the International Suffrage Alliance and chairman of the State Campaign Committee.²⁵ The purpose of the meeting was to make women more aware of the suffrage movement and it did just that. During the meeting they raised \$400.00 in order to maintain the campaign for women's rights.

A year later, on 14 June 1914, there was another suffrage parade. This time there was more support than in the previous year, and Lucy, the grand marshal, judged it more successfully. As with the first parade in 1913, there was a meeting that followed. It was held in the Shubert Theater and the speaker of the day was Mrs. Beatrice Forbes Robertson Hale. Before she spoke, Lucy opened the meeting by saying, "It had always been thought that Utica was slow to be aroused to anything new. It was only two years ago that the women of Utica interested in the cause were asked if they would like to hold a parade, and the answer was no. The people of Utica were not ready for an event, but then after the second parade, I am sure it changed the opinions of many people regarding

²⁴*Utica Herald Dispatch*, "Getting Ready for Suffrage Parade," June 9, 1913, p.8.

²⁵*Utica Saturday Globe*, "Utica Meets Miss Catt," 1913-1914, www.Fultonhistory.com.

the movement and this year we are going by leaps and bounds.”²⁶ Even though the progress was slow, women were speaking out to make a difference. Even the men were making a difference for women. Lucy said “the strength of the manly force would have much to do with furthing the cause for women that is growing at a rapid pace.”²⁷

Lucy believed the suffrage parade in 1913 changed the opinion of many people regarding the movement when they went out and marched because during the parade of 1914 there were 300 banners proclaiming things such as “Vote for Women,” “Wake up New York its Daylight,” and “Liberty is Justice.”²⁸ Mrs. Hale pointed out the importance of the day and the hard work that the women had put into making the parade and, the fight to gain voting rights for women successfully. Hale said: “women who don’t want to vote are singularly like the women who do, except that we are more interested in being ancestors than being descendents.”²⁹ From pledges received and collections taken up at the meeting, the women’s suffrage movement of Utica raised \$700.00 to keep the campaign going.³⁰

To get women more aware and involved in the fight for women rights, there was a suffrage liberty torch being carried throughout New York State. The route started at Montauk Point on Long Island and it was planned to end in Buffalo on 31 July.³¹ As part of the event, on 15 July 1915, at the age of 60, Lucy carried the suffrage liberty torch

²⁶ *Utica Sunday Tribune*, “Great Demonstration for cause in Women’s Suffrage,” June 14, 1914. p. 3.

²⁷ *Utica Sunday Tribune*, “Great Demonstration for cause in Women’s Suffrage,” June 14, 1914. p. 3.

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³⁰ *Utica Saturday Tribune*, “Great Demonstration for cause in Women’s Suffrage,” June 14, 1914. p. 3.

³¹ *Amsterdam Evening Recorder*, “Bearing the Touch.” Friday July 9, 1915. p. 7.

from Utica to Verona.

Despite her activities the suffrage movement did not go unchallenged. On 31 October 1915, there was a competition between suffragists and anti-suffragists. There was a large “foreign” vote in Utica and both the suffragists and anti-suffragists were looking to persuade voters. In Utica at the time there were 22,000 Italians, 12,000 Poles, and a great number of Germans, many of whose votes were undecided.

The anti-suffragists sent out scores of paid Italian and Polish agents to do missionary work and give voting instructions to persuade voters of these respective nationalities. The suffragists made a special effort to corral the German vote, but according to statements from leaders in the German colony, the attempt was not attended with very telling results.³²

The defeat of the suffrage movement vote at the polls on 2 November 1915 inspired Utica’s women to redouble their efforts. A statewide organization was formed and Lucy took over leadership in this part of the state. She became head of the twelfth district in Utica and her job was to get women to become aware and get their support for the women’s movement by especially getting them to vote. In November of the following year, Lucy attended the suffrage convention in Albany. More than 300,000 women pledged themselves to work for gaining the vote in 1917. Each of the chairmen of the state’s twelve campaign districts promised to raise a certain sum for her district. Lucy spoke for her district and she was determined to raise \$5,000.00³³

³²*The New York Times*, “Foes of Suffrage Confident In Utica,” Sunday, October 31, 1915. p. 5.

³³*New York Times*, “Pledge \$300,000 For Suffrage,” November 23, 1916. P. 8.

The ratification of the 19th amendment of 1920 was the largest expansion of the electorate in American history, nearly doubling the number of citizens eligible to vote.³⁴

Lucy's contributions to the women's suffrage movement won her national recognition and the League of Women Voters listed her among 100 prominent women of New York State.

Her name is on a honor roll in Washington D.C. and Albany.³⁵

Lucy was politically and socially active beyond the suffrage movement. She was involved in many organizations and charities in the Mohawk Valley such as the Grace Episcopal Church and Girl's Friendly Society. She was founder and vice president of the Central Association for the Blind, on the Board of Managers for the House of the Good Shepherd, the Utica Playground Association, and was president of and endowed a room at, Utica Memorial Hospital.

When Lucy died in 1938, the mayor at the time was Vincent R. Corrrou. He said, "Her death removes from Utica one of its outstanding citizens, her activities in civic, religious, and charitable circles will always place her defiantly in the memories of all Uticans."³⁶

Throughout her life Lucy Carlisle Watson fought for women's rights in the Mohawk Valley. Birth into a prominent political family shaped Lucy's character and sense of justice. This can be seen through her leadership in the fight for women's rights

³⁴ Kevin Corder, Christina Wolbrecht, "Political Context and the Turnout of New Women Voters after Suffrage", *The Journal of Politics*, 68:1, (2006),34.

³⁵ *Utica Daily Press*, "She Pioneered for Women," Tuesday June 28, 1938, p. 22.

³⁶ *Utica Daily Press*, "Service for Lucy C. Watson," Tuesday December 18, 1938, p. 14.

and in the women's suffrage movement. After the passage of the 19th amendment, Lucy did not retire. She continued to work to improve life in Utica for other disadvantaged groups and demonstrate that a woman's worth was not measured in terms of her husband.

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