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Robert Treat Whitehouse

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THE HISTORY OF MAN SUFFRAGE

It Is An Error To Suppose That Men Have Always Had Universal Suffrage---They Had To Fight For It Just as Women Are Fighting For It Now.

(By Robert Treat Whitehouse.)

The average male voter of today is apt to regard the question of granting the franchise to women from the point of view of one who assumes often unconsciously, perhaps, that while in woman's case it cannot be regarded as in any sense a right, that in his own case his right to vote is a inhertent natural birthright if not the result of divine sanction and a right which all men by virtue of their mere masculinity have possessed and enjoyed from time immemorial. He seldom pauses to consider the origin of it. He is unaware of the fact that not many generations ago Kings, Priests and Nobles regarded the common man of his class and intelligence exactly as he regards woman today. He does not realize that his ancestors acquired political power by the agitation of an earnest and some times even militant minority and were put off and ridiculed with the identical arguments which he now applies to woman.

What are the facts? Prior to the granting of Magna Charta by King John to the barons at Runnimede in 1215 no form of political representation existed in England. The origin of representation and, therefore indirectly of Suffrage, is to be found in the English jury system which originated as a device of the King to discover taxable property. (Stubbs, "Const. Hist. of England I, XIVII) in the Anglo-Saxon moots or assemblies of freemen called together to discuss the borough, hundred, or shire and in the great National Assembly of wise men, the "Witen agemote" which was the early germ of Parliament. This early quasi Parliament was composed of members summoned by the King at will. The popular voice was associated with its deliberations only to the extent that crowds of people in the locality at which it happened to be held attended and shouted their approval or disapproval. There was no real fortification by the people in the National Government until a system of representation had become established.

The development of such a system began in 1254 when a writ of Henry III. directed the sheriff of each county to "cause to come" to the king's council two knights of the shire chosen by the men of the shire. In 1265 not only two knights from each shire but two burgesses from each borough were summoned and in the famous writ of Edward I., in 1295 the King summoned the knights and burgesses to be elected by the freeholders. The older National Council had consisted of a number of the privileged classes, including only nobles, great landlords and rich merchants. Down to 1430 all male freeholders were entitled to vote for knights of the shire but in that year an act was passed confining this right to freeholders resident in the county and in possession of land worth a rental value of at least forty shillings a year. The preamble of the statute explains the reason for its passage; "whereas the elections of Knights of the Shires to come to the Parliament of our Lord the King in many counties of the Realm of England have now of late been made by the very great outrageous and excessive number of people dwelling within the same counties of the Realm of England, of which the most part was of people of small substance and of no value whereof everyone of them pretended a voice equivalent as to such elections to be made, with the most worthy Knights and Esquires dwelling within the same counties, shall very likely rise and be, unless some convenient and due remedy be provided in this behalf . . ." From this time dates the famous forty-shilling freehold qualification for county voters, which was retained in force for almost exactly four hundred years, till the great reform bill in 1832. (Manhood suffrage G. A. B. Wolfe. Ph. D.) Up to a little more than one hundred years ago the common man was everywhere in Europe excluded from all share in the Government save in a few instances.

In the same way Suffrage was restricted in the American Colonies. The Puritans had scarcely landed on the rocky shore of Massachusetts Bay before they manifested a religious bigotry not less conspicuous than that from which they fled. The Colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth and practically all the New England Colonies at once proceded to impose strict religious qualifications and tests. Roman Catholics, Jews, Quakers, Baptists and all descendants were excluded from the franchise and only freemen could vote and only members in good standing in the Congregational church could be freemen. Consequently the majority of the male inhabitants were excluded, the entire list of freemen in Massachustts numbering only about two thousand. There were also moral qualifications in New England and a voter must be a person of "civil conversation and quiet and peaceable behavior." Apart from their other religious prejudices the colonies were not inspired by any noble belief from the average man. "Democracy," said Cotton, "I do not conceive that God ever did ordain as a fit Government either for church or commonwealth." Everywhere throughout the colonies the property qualification for the franchise was retained and not infrequently made more stringent than in England. As a qualification for franchise a man must be the owner of an estate valued at 40£ or freeholds renting for forty shillings or about seven dollars per annum or they must be taxpayers in some form.

Upon the adoption of the Constitution in 1787 no provision was made in regard to the qualifications for the franchise but these were left to the several States to regulate for themselves with the result that the franchise continued to be very limited. In spite of the Declaration of Independence the principle of manhood Suffrage was not agreeable to the leaders of politics and not accepted in practice. The religious disqualifications first disappeared, last being in South Carolina in 1797. The qualification was usually a freehold of forty shillings to 3£ or an estate worth 20 to 60£ or the ownership of a certain number of acres.

Nowhere outside of Vermont was there universal Man Suffrage. The property qualification was not abolished until 1809, nor in Massachusetts until 1821. In Rhode Island the property qualifications in the charter of Charles II. which limited Suffrage to free holders having an estate worth $134 or renting for $7.00 a year was not abolished as to foreign born male citizens until 1888 and the ownership of an estate worth $300 was still a prerequisite to Suffrage in Louisiana as late as 1901, while a tax-paying qualification was not done away with in New York until 1826, in Ohio in 1851 and Virginia in 1882 and South Carolina as late as 1901 still required the payment of a tax on property worth $300. It is conservatively estimated that in 1787 there were in America 150,000 electors from a population of 5,000,000 which 100 years later would have produced as many as one million voters, and that probably as high as one-half of the adult males were disenfranchised by the property qualifications established in the first constitutions set up after the Revolution.

During this long period when the common man was slowly requiring from his political superiors the right to vote, what was his attitude on the subject? We find him agitating and revolting at times but not in large numbers or in a general wide spread manner. From 1706 onward we find in Pennsylvania masses of non-voters, who, legally disqualified, used every possible means to influence the election. One sees them frequently in the background of the election picture with sticks or stone instead of the forbidden ballots, trying by physical means to express their opinions. From the point of view of the ruling class they were "servants or great numbers of disorderly persons" or "an outrageous multitude who by their rude and disorderly behavior disturbed the election or presumed to vote when they did not have the right to do so." These zealous minority groups sometimes employed arguments, appeals to justice, the cry of "natural rights," petitions, raids and sometimes not content with watchful waiting or silent picketing, resorted to mob violence.

In Rhode Island in 1842, the famous Dorr's rebellion took place which was a revolt against the property disqualifications which worked very unjustly in that State. The disenfranchised elements met in convention and adopted a constitution and organized a new government of State officers and legislature and elected Thomas J. Dorr as Governor. Governor King with royal forces dispursed the insurgents and Dorr was sentenced to imprisonment for life but was released after a few years and his sentence expunged from the records of the State. A new Constitution was adopted in 1843 correcting some of the abuses complained of and the former real estate qualification for foreign-born voters, was abolished in 1888.

On the other hand during these years of the slow evolution of Man Suffrage in England and this Country what was the attitude of the ruling classes on the subject? The motto of James I. was "Let the cobbler stick to his last" which meant to him "Let the merchant, the banker, the trader, the artisan and the laborer in the fields stick to their jobs and not interfere with the affairs of state, which are such high mysteries as to be beyond the reach of common intellect." A clergyman in England wrote a book on the subject in which he said to the common man in England, "What would you gain by Universal Suffrage? I am certain that you would gain nothing but universal confusion, universal setting of workmen against each other. **All workmen would then become politicians—they would neglect their vocations in life—spend their time, their strength, their talents in what would increase their poverty.** With respect to having members of Parliament paid and void of property qualifications—really this is too absurd for an idiot to be the author of it. The famous Chartist doctrine of Equality is diametrically opposed to Nature and the work of God." Truly these remarks have a familiar sound in our ears in this day and generation.

And now from the above brief sketch of the history of Man Suffrage in England and this Country what suggestions and lessons are to be derived applicable to the issue of Woman Suffrage at the present time? The first is that during all the two centuries in which the English Colonies were braving the storms of Atlantic and fighting Indians and other nations, in order to establish trading posts and colonies in America, the National representation to which they were accustomed was based upon a limited property Suffrage, and in all of these years of warfare and fighting down through the Revolution in America our forefathers never discovered the intimate and essential relations between brute and animal force on the one hand, and the exercise of the franchise on the other, which is asserted by some to be indispensable to the exercise of that privilege today and instead of a property tax having never been considered to have any relation to the right of representation which is a familiar assertion of the opponents of Woman Suffrage it is found that these two things were inseparably entwined during this entire period.

Finally the most significant and interesting thing to note is that in the evolution of Man Suffrage, nowhere were the disfranchised men required to submit to the tests now applied to women by those opposed to her enfranchisement today. They were not required to show that they were the intellectual equals of the enfranchised, nor that they were using the ballot wisely and for the benefit of the ruling class, nor to show that voting would not interfere with their natural functions as fathers and supporters of the home and above all it is to be noted that they were not required to prove that a majority of the disenfranchised men wanted the vote or would use it if they had it. Suffrage is demanded by women for themselves today in far greater proportion than it was ever demanded by men in their own behalf.

What then were the causes which led to this process of evolution and the resulting of enfranchisement of the common man? While a number of minor factors may have entered into the cause underlying this development, the primary reasons as uniformly stated by historians and writers on the subject was the impulse derived from the philosophy of the French Revolution and its principles of liberty, equality, and Democracy which became very powerful in this Country through the Jeffersonian Democrats. The demand for popular Government became irresistible in response to the two fundamental thoughts underlying the principles and purposes of Democracy which are first—that in a Democracy every class should be represented and have a voice in the Government, in order to express its own peculiar needs and special point of view and, secondly—that the highest standard of civilization is attained by the education of the largest number of people possible through responsibility and experience in self government.

In response to the appeals of these two purposes and ideals of Democracy practically universal Man Suffrage has been achieved and now the same principle and ideals demand that the last logical step be taken for the development of a complete and consistent Democracy in this Country by the enfranchisement of its women.