

SUFFRAGETTE SYLVIA PANKHURST IN WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

Before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, the Winchester Equal Suffrage League was actively striving to sway legislators and voters to change the law to get votes for women. Nationally, a flood of oratory poured forth in Europe and in America during the grand struggle. Perhaps the most famous suffragette to speak in Winchester was Sylvia Pankhurst.



Pankhurst (1882-1960) was the daughter of Emmeline Pankhurst, whom *Time* named as one of the 100 most Important People of the 20th Century. “She shaped an idea of women for our time; she shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back.”²

“We women suffragists have a great mission—the greatest mission the world has ever known. It is to free half the human race, and through that freedom to save the rest,” the elder Pankhurst stated.³

She was joined in her work by her daughters Christabel and Estelle Sylvia. In 1911, Sylvia Pankhurst undertook an American tour. She arrived in New York in January and gave her first talk in the Carnegie Lyceum.

Pankhurst found that “the Civic Forum Lecture Bureau had only booked two engagements for me on my arrival.” That quickly changed when the first newspaper reports and interviews were sent out over the wire service.

“Telegrams for dates began pouring in, and during my three months’ stay I could satisfy only a small proportion of those who were asking me to speak, though I traveled almost every night, and spoke once, twice, or thrice a day. I had arrived at the height of the interest and sympathy felt by America in the English Movement.”

She crossed the country to California, went into Canada, and went south to Tennessee. She went from the halls of power, as when invited to address the Iowa Senate and the House of Representatives in joint convention, to factories, laundries, and prisons, including the women's reformatory at Framingham.

She visited the Indian University in Arkansas and, according to her son's biography, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Artist and Crusader*, “incurred considerable wrath in the southern states by agreeing to speak at the Negro university in Tennessee.”

IN WINCHESTER

Pankhurst's visit to Winchester came near the end of her three months in America. Surprisingly, there is no mention of her lecture in the minutes of the Winchester Equal Suffrage League, although the meeting was under its auspices. This may indicate last-minute arrangements. Just one day ahead of her appearance, the newspaper printed her photograph on its front page, announcing that she would speak at Town Hall the next night, April 1, 1911.

Samuel J. Elder presided, supporting her appearance with his considerably impressive presence. A prestigious member of the Massachusetts Bar, just the year before Elder had been senior counsel for the United States in arbitration with England before The Hague Tribunal. (He would later be elected president of the Boston Bar.) In 1911, he was being considered for nomination as the Republican candidate for governor but declined.⁴ He did campaign for his friend of President William Howard Taft and spoke frequently and eloquently for various causes, particularly international arbitration as a basis for world peace. Father of two daughters who marched in support of woman suffrage, he himself supported and lent his oratorical skills to the Mass. Woman Suffrage Association.⁵

Sharing the Winchester platform with Pankhurst was Helen Frances Villard, the daughter of William Lloyd Garrison and sister of William Lloyd Garrison Jr. who had spoken in Winchester on the issue of suffrage in 1888. Villard spoke about the work in America, while Pankhurst related experiences and England.

According to a report in *The Winchester Star* printed a week later, the speakers "were greeted by a large audience of the most thoughtful men and women of Winchester who listened with marked earnestness to earnest pleas from both speakers for justice to women in the matter of suffrage."⁶

According to that report, Pankhurst spoke about the political conditions in England and the rise of the "so-called Militant Suffrage party" there and gave "a graphic description of the brutal and unmanly treatment of the women who had felt that more vigorous measures were necessary than those that had been used for so many years with so little results...and showed plainly how unauthorized had been the measures used against them, how terribly they had suffered, but without faltering because of belief in the justice of their cause."

The report did not describe Pankhurst or quote portions of her talk. In New York, she was described as "a little rosy-cheeked slip of an English girl," who looked as though she might belong to a group of school girls and "had no appearance of an English third-class prisoner, which she has been" (like many English suffragettes).⁷

When she spoke at Boston's Ford Hall in January, the *Boston Globe* reported, "Miss Pankhurst looks no older than she is said to be, 20 years, and has a sweet face and a sort, pathetic voice that would be quite in keeping with a girl of 12. Several times during the evening auditors could be seen dashing away a tear started by her graphic story, which at all times every person of the 1000 that filled the hall showed a rapt attention."⁸

According to the same *Globe* report, "He would have been a marble-hearted man who would not have become a woman suffragist, at least temporarily, while listening to the pathetic voice and story of the pretty, girlish English suffragette, Miss Sylvia Pankhurst, who in Ford Hall last evening described the privations of her sister suffragettes jailed for demonstrations against the British government in the last five years."

Pankhurst also spoke at Cambridge, sponsored by the Cambridge Political Equality league, and at Wellesley. She spoke about the about reasons why women feel they need the ballot, corrected misstatements in the press, described the maltreatment and sufferings of women imprisoned for the cause in England, and addressed the inequities in the law.

"If you take the reports that are given, you will think us frivolous. But we are fighting the battle of human freedom," she was quoted as saying in New York. "Americans should be sympathetic, for you did not hesitate to plunge your country and ours into war to gain the freedom for which we ask."

She talked about the violent way suffragettes had been treated and about their work for reform. "They say we do this for notoriety, but women put every thought of themselves aside for the good of others. Nine-tenths are never known at all, and we should none of us be remembered if we stepped aside. This has brought a great unity of purpose among the women."

It is probable that Pankhurst spoke of same conditions and conveyed similar sentiment in Winchester as in Boston and New York. The Winchester reporter wrote, "Listening to

A LARGE ATTENDANCE AT SUFFRAGE MEETING.

The meeting under the auspices of the Winchester Equal Suffrage League on Saturday evening last was a great success if the size and character of the audience offers proof. The speakers, Mrs. Henry Villard of N. Y., and Miss Sylvia Pankhurst of England were greeted by a large audience of the most thoughtful men and women of Winchester, who listened with marked earnestness to earnest pleas from both speakers for justice to women in the matter of suffrage. Mrs. Villard is a charming woman, the worthy daughter of her father William Lloyd Garrison who in her earliest years imbibed his views concerning all reforms. She attacked the subject from the American point of view, bringing out arguments and conditions existing here and stating her sympathy with Abraham Lincoln's statement that "No man is good enough to govern another—the word man here being used for mankind, including women. Miss Pankhurst explained the very different political conditions existing in England—explained the rise of the so-called Militant Suffrage party there and gave a graphic description of the brutal and unmanly treatment of the women who had felt that more vigorous measures were necessary than those that had been used for so many years with so little results. She spoke with remarkable clearness for one so young of understanding, of the situation in her own country, and showed plainly how unauthorized had been the measures used against them, how terribly they had suffered, but without faltering because of belief in the justice of their cause. Listening to her one could not fail to be impressed with the utter inability of one not conversant with English history—with the methods of which alone men have achieved their franchise, to judge fairly of the work of the suffragettes through the garbled reports of untrendily American newspapers. Slips inviting men and women who believed in suffrage for women, were distributed through the audience, asking them to join the Suffrage League, which has more than trebled its members during the last year. The slips also suggested that literature concerning suffrage for women would be sent to any who felt they would like to know more about it.

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THE CAUSE CONTINUES

After Pankhurst’s return to England, the Equal Suffrage League continued to meet, hold rallies, and educate for another nine years.

The debate reached a new height in 1915. That year every issue of *The Winchester Star* had articles, both pro and con, and the issue was debated in public meetings. It was a particularly hot issue since Massachusetts’ voters in 1915 were asked to decide on an amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution that would strike the word "male" from the article that gave men the right to vote.

The Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association organized a pro-suffrage parade in Boston on Oct. 6, involving some 15,000 marchers and 30 bands. The push was on to persuade men to vote yes. About 110 Winchester women marched in the parade (including Elder’s two daughters). A straw vote taken at the high school passed the measure, but the actual vote went decidedly against women’s suffrage. After that, Massachusetts’ suffrage activists concentrated their efforts behind the national campaign to amend the federal constitution. Four years later, the 19th Amendment of the United States Constitution passed and became law in 1920.

Once that battle was won, Equal Suffrage League disbanded to be succeeded by the League of Women Voters.⁹

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on March 10, 2010. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Marina Warner, *Time*, June 14, 1999.

³ Midge MacKenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).

⁴ Margaret M. Elder, *The Life of Samuel J. Elder*, Yale University Press, 1925, p. 261.

⁵ Several occasions are reported in the pages of the *Boston Globe*. One of these was also noted in *The Winchester Star*, June 25, 1915.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, April 7, 1911.

⁷ *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 1911.

⁸ *Boston Globe*, Jan. 11, 1911.

⁹ In 1936, when Henry Chapman published his *History of Winchester* (1936), he overlooked the Equal Suffrage League entirely, from its founding in 1888 through 1920, including Pankhurst’s visit to Winchester.