

The Way It Was

March is Women's History Month

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In 1918, 83 women registered to vote in East Haven Town elections. Sound strange? Perhaps that's because women did not gain national suffrage until 1920.

The East Haven Historical Society got a pleasant surprise last year when an East Haven resident donated some old documents they had found.

The list, "Women Voters of the town of East Haven for use at the Election, October 7, 1918," is well intact with a few smudges. It attests to a revolutionary time in United States and Connecticut history.

Many women on the list were known for their civic involvement. The presence of their names on that list further demonstrates that they felt compelled in the involvement of running their town.

The woman on the list with the most well documented civic past in East Haven is Miss Lottie Street, Hagan Memorial Library's first librarian. Donald Chidsey wrote in an eight-page biography of Miss Street:

"It is well to recall that the United States was preparing few for an active part in the World War in the spring of 1917 and a program was then underway to provide the soldiers with one million books. Of course East Haven took part in this work and assisted in the raising of funds. Miss Street was appointed the treasurer [of the effort] and had charge of 108 dollars raised in East Haven."

Other documents and old newspaper clippings speak highly of Miss Street, stating that she loved her town and that she would do anything to perpetuate any of its causes. When the library began in a small cloakroom of the original town hall, she came in with a broom and scrub brush, cleaned the room and was set to start operating the next morning. She was also the first president of the East Haven Civic Service Association.

gave prizes to schoolchildren for efficiency essays.

According to a book written on the history of Old Stone Church by East Haven resident Helen Hasse, there were two other women on the list who can be verified as being extremely active in their community. World War I had drained the economy and the "availability of men in the workplace." With more education at their fingertips, more women became involved in business endeavors.

"One of the older ladies, Miss Elizabeth Thompson, saw the need to keep these young, working women active in the church. In 1921, she and Mrs. Bertha Kirkham, a widow, invited a group of young women to meet in their home. The group became the Young Ladies Mission Social Group. One of their own, their first president, Florence Lewis, became a missionary, so there was a really personal commitment to missions."

While biographical information on most of the women on the voting list is hard to come by, Jean Rabinow, president of the Bridgeport district of the League of Women Voters, was able to offer some enlightenment. Rabinow is also a member of the Trumbull Historical Society. Recently, Trumbull's Society came across a similar document dated 1915.

"Apparently many towns were given the right to let women vote in town elections pre-national suffrage. Although I'm not sure of every town, however, women had to be inscribed on a separate list," said Rabinow.

After 1920, when women gained suffrage, these lists were no longer imperative for municipal records so most were discarded.

It was not until someone came into the Trumbull Historical Society with old family records belonging to a deceased ancestor who was a former registrar, that Rabinow discovered this.

The 1918 East Haven election resulted in Henry T. Thompson,

Thompson as selectmen and Wallace C. Coker as the Town Clerk and Tax Collector. A complete list of the officials elected that year is available at Hagan Memorial Library.

Although not much information is directly available about the women on the voter's list, some might be found at the East Haven Historical Society in the old high school. The old Stone Church library also has documentation of minutes from turn of the century Ladies' Auxiliary meeting that might be of help. The Historical Society is open from 11 to 2 on Wednesday afternoons.



Lottie Street, her mother Amelia, and sister Clara are three of the women who voted in the 1918 municipal election. Street was the first town librarian as well as the first president of the East Haven Civic Service Association. Photos courtesy of Historical Society and Hagan Memorial Library