

Wagon Women had Woodstock ties

100 years after New York voted for women's suffrage, the Spirit of 1776 is remembered

Jane Van De Bogart raced into Woodstock Town Board meetings with her nose pointing in the direction of her council seat. She hitched stacks of books, maps, and research papers under each arm. This town board meeting would have the usual budget line items to address, another zoning consultant's report to review, and one more town employee to advise about the state's Freedom of Information legislation.

Jane stopped, laid down her burden, and pulled a notepad from the stack to check off yet another task completed and then three more to add. Jane modeled multi-tasking before the rest of us even became acquainted with the term. Woodstock teemed with vocal and visible individuals like Jane, many determined to change the world up against those who were convinced the community should remain pretty much as it had always been — a quiet Hudson Valley retreat stirring only from Memorial to Labor Day.

By the mid-1970s, the townspeople had reluctantly come to terms with the shift from a part-time to a year-round town. Did Woodstock need a conventional or a custom solution to address disposal of its municipal sewage? The town board considered additions to the community master plan and aired progress reports on the town's sidewalk project and sign ordinance. Council members like Jane immersed themselves in the complexity of detail.

Back then I survived hours of public deliberations by taking copious notes and then I headed to the newspaper office to file my articles before the Tuesday deadline. Reporting for *Woodstock Times*, I believed, had to be one of the best jobs in town.

"What drives you to serve on the town board?" I asked Jane.

"Among other things — my great aunt Elisabeth and the stories I heard about her pounding pavements for women's rights," she replied. "I owe my right to represent the people of Woodstock to my great Aunt Elisabeth."

"My grandmother Edna was a Votes for Women activist too," I told her.

We weren't aware then that my grandmother Edna Kearns (1882-1934) and Jane's great aunt, Elisabeth Freeman (1876-1942), not only knew each other but they had worked together in the movement. Both were grassroots activists. Both were wagon women, organizers who drove horse-drawn wagons in order to mobilize support for women's voting rights in the nineteenth and teens. With the increased number of automobiles on the road, women and their wagons with freedom messages were noticed by New York's men who as voters were in the position of approving votes for women. But would they?

Novel organizing techniques such as wagons took the women places in rural areas where they could otherwise not travel. Activists flooded the state, from top to bottom during the 1915 voting rights referendum campaign that failed and then again in 1917 when women celebrated the statewide voting victory. Elisabeth Freeman and Edna Kearns were in the grassroots forefront of rattling the cages.

The suffrage campaign wagons used by Edna Kearns, Elisabeth Freeman, and Rosalie Jones of Long Island provided for visibility and mobility. Edna drove the "Spirit of 1776," and Elisabeth and Rosalie



Elisabeth Freeman on her way with her horse-drawn wagon to Washington, DC.



New York City, January 1914. Gathering to march to Albany. First row: Second from right: Serena Kearns. Third from right: Rosalie Jones. Fourth from right: Ida Craft. Second row from right: Wilmer Kearns standing with cane. Edna Kearns, second from right. Third from right: Elisabeth Freeman.

a yellow wagon that traveled within New York and then on to Ohio and Washington, DC. Wagons on the campaign trail were popular attention-getters. A woman driving a wagon with freedom messages might not sound like a cutting-edge tactic today. But during a period when wagons hit the streets for the women's cause, they were considered novel and successful. They attracted publicity, and best of all, crowds.

Wagons required skill in driving. The vehicles provided instant speakers' platforms. Citizens responded to the suffragists' impromptu demonstrations and rallies with curiosity, support, and heightened emotion. Rosalie Jones, Edna Kearns, and Elisabeth Freeman wrote articles, gave interviews, and served as press agents for the suffrage movement on the local, state and national levels. They understood and took advantage of the emerging power of newspapers in the New York City metropolitan area at the turn of the 20th century. They made reputations with their wagons and made sure reporters and photographers documented every detail of their work.

With jewels like these in Jane's and my background, a creative expression waited for a collaboration with the Floating Foundation of Photography in

High Falls, NY (Steven Schoen and Jone Miller) for a 1996 exhibit in Ulster County featuring Edna and Elisabeth. It justified the "Spirit of 1776" campaign wagon emerging from my grandfather's garage in the Philadelphia area and placed on exhibit for the first time in New York State along with large-format archival prints and collages. From this point on, the wagon took on a life of its own.

Over the decades, the "Spirit of 1776" wagon has become recognized as a prime artifact of women's struggle for the franchise, as well as symbolic of patriotic protest themes embedded in this major U.S. nonviolent social revolution. The "Spirit of 1776" is the only known existing example of a museum exhibit-quality wagon symbolizing grassroots organizing for women's voting rights prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. This was my grandmother's legacy. Jane's great aunt Elisabeth also organized for voting rights with working women and immigrants in inner cities. She didn't confine her activism to votes. She also went on a lecture tour to reveal the grim reality of lynching and didn't miss an opportunity to speak out about one social injustice or another.

Tracking down the wagon stories about Elisabeth and Edna uncovered several of their collaborations, including how Jane's great aunt, my grandparents, and my mother's older sister showed up in New York City in early January 1914 to join a march to Albany to speak to the governor. They planned to ask him to appoint poll watchers for the 1915 suffrage referendum to prevent election fraud. Another purpose of the march some referred to as a "hike" was to educate citizens along the way. Not every one completed the 175 miles from New York to Albany on foot. The Kearns family didn't, but Elisabeth Freeman persisted.

When the exhausted group reached Kingston,

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Suffrage Centennial exhibition

they stayed overnight at the Mansion House on the Rondout, then a popular hotel, before resuming the journey to Albany. Shortly thereafter, the *Kingston Freeman* published an editorial calling the women "bedraggled and charmless" and criticized them for having "diseased minds" and "trying to push their ways into spheres of action for which their own performance prove them to be pre-eminently unfitted."

The suffrage marchers may not have won over the men voters of Ulster County, but the purpose of the march was accomplished when New York Governor Martin Henry Glynn approved the poll watchers. Votes for women lost in Ulster County in 1915 and again in 1917 when New York women finally won the right to vote statewide. There were 5,800 affirmative votes for women's voting rights in Ulster County in 1917, but 9,300 men voters were opposed. In New York City, 104,000 "yes" votes carried the state.

Jane Van De Bogart and I continued sharing suffrage tales with others after the 1986 exhibit closed in Kingston. "Elisabeth Freeman was my mother's aunt, a daring and dramatic single woman who dazzled my mother when she was a young child with her flamboyant green velvet dress, titian red hair, and wild stories. I never met my great aunt. She died when I was only six months old, but I know my mother and her sisters liked and admired her," Jane told an audience at SUNY New Paltz in March of 1991, one of several presentations we gave about Elizabeth and Edna with the participation of our respective mothers to add color and human interest to the programs.

We dug even deeper to uncover what both women believed about militant versus more conventional movement tactics and strategies. Because Elisabeth Freeman had been trained by the Pankhursts in England and she served time in prison for voting rights activism there, she referred to herself as a "militant suffragist." In an article explaining her position, Freeman wrote: "Six years of battle on English soil and two terms in the hideous Holloway jail have convinced me that militancy is the only way to suffrage for women in England."

"But what about militancy in the United States? Is it justified?" Edna Kearns asked in an undated copy of a speech I found buried in my grandmother's suffrage archive where she wrote:

"I feel that Miss Freeman has taught me a great lesson in regard to passing judgment on others. For I had judged the militant women when I heard that they attacked the property of private merchants. I said, 'They can break all the government windows they want to, but when they attack the property of private merchants, I am afraid I cannot sympathize with them.' And then, being a believer in justice, and with the knowledge that had I lived in the time previous to the Revolutionary War, I too, regardless of the fact of whether it was lady-like or not, I too would have done anything in my power to help free my country from the tyranny of England. And because of this sense of justice, I am in sympathy with our brave English sisters..."

When Edna Kearns and her associates dressed in colonial costumes in July 1913 and hung banners on the "Spirit of 1776" wagon protesting "taxation without representation," they reinforced a tradition of going back to the nation's founding principles to define this form of protest as an integral part of American history. Scholar Hal Simon used the term "patriotic protest" in his survey of gay rights and other 20th century civil rights movements representing a long tradition.

Frederick Douglass relied on arguments of patriotic protest in his writings and speeches to justify the abolition of slavery and the extension of equal rights and freedom. Martin Luther King Jr. grounded many of his arguments for equality and social justice in patriotic protest. Examine the speeches and journals of many American women's suffrage leaders and organizers during the 19th and 20th centuries and you'll find patriotic protest references embedded somewhere, if not prominently displayed, in art, speeches, and writings.

During the January 2017 women's march I noted with interest the number of signs with the message "Protest is Patriotic." My impression was that of an idea coming into its own once more. This doesn't change the tension between the left and right wing definitions of patriotism and how this might or might not impact the struggle for equality still underway. We live in complicated times. How the spirit of 1776 is defined, manifested, and kept alive remains — as always — up to us. ++

Marguerite Kearns

Votes for Women: Celebrating New York's Suffrage Centennial — the first large-scale exhibition for the New York State Museum featuring the State's women's history — will run from November 4, 2017 to May 13, 2018 at the New York State Museum in Albany, NY.

The only known horse-drawn wagon used for grassroots suffrage organizing that remains in existence today, the *Spirit of 1776*, will be a featured artifact in the exhibition. The wagon was used for suffrage campaigning in New York City and on Long Island. More recently, it has become associated with Woodstock.

In 1913, suffragist Edna Buckman Kearns, grandmother of former *Woodstock Times* editor Marguerite Kearns, drove *Spirit of 1776* through Manhattan and Long Island, under often adverse conditions, organizing support for women's right to vote.

Starting March 3, 2017, in honor of Women's History Month, the *Spirit of 1776* wagon will be on display in the State Capitol near the Hall of Governors on the second floor. Then it will be moved to the lobby of the New York State Museum to advertise the "Votes for Women" exhibition opening later in the year. Accompanied by photographs of suffragists who used the wagon more than 100 years ago, the *Spirit of 1776* evokes the stamina, courage and determination involved in winning women's voting rights.

In celebration of the suffrage centennial observance this year, the New York State Women's Suffrage 100th Anniversary Commemoration Commission is funded and responsible for supporting many statewide programs of which the state museum exhibition is one. The 14-member commission also promotes the anniversary of women's suffrage between 2017 and 2020, a century after the 19th Amendment was ratified.

"The wagon shows women that came out for this movement," observed Jennifer Lemak, Chief Curator of History for the New York State Museum's Cultural Education Center. "It shows the direct action of the women to get their message out."

"The *Spirit of 1776* has been exhibited before, but this is the first major exhibition of women's history for the State Museum," Lemak said. "Over 35 institutions across the State are participating. It's been a lot of work but a lot of fun. We started research in 2014 and drove around the State in 2015. We're still going around the State. Ninety-eight percent of the artifacts have been selected."

Among the artifacts included are Elizabeth Cady Stanton's personal writing desk and early daguerreotypes, as well as Matilda Joselyn Gage's writing desk. The exhibition will include women from contemporary phases of the women's rights movement as well as those from the past. Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Mary Anne Krupak and Hillary Clinton are among those represented.

There is a possibility that the *Spirit of 1776* wagon will be put on permanent display at the New York State Museum in the future, as many women's rights advocates have requested. "We're in the process of redoing all permanent displays," Lemak said, adding, "It might be permanently displayed by 2020, or soon after." Asked if the Museum will mount another women's exhibition in 2020, the national centennial of American women voting, Lemak replied, "I hope so."

Lesson plans based on the *Votes for Women* exhibition at the NYS Museum will be available on-line at the Museum's website after the Novem-

ber opening. Teachers may bring their classes to the exhibition and go through the lesson plan, or use the catalog to follow the lesson plans in their classrooms.

Traveling exhibition

The 2017 exhibition celebration also includes two traveling exhibits consisting of ten panels each depicting the history of women's suffrage in New York State with images and prose. The panels will be displayed at various venues around the State. Most

of the time slots for the traveling exhibits have been taken. The one closest to our area, Lemak said, will be in Katonah. A schedule and more detailed announcements will be forthcoming.

The "Votes for Women" exhibition opens November 4, 2017, close to the date New York women won the vote in 1917, and it ends on Mother's Day, 2018. Historical sites lending artifacts to the State Museum will keep the items for their own exhibits until the "Votes for Women" museum exhibition is ready to begin. Suffrage centennial events have been scheduled all year throughout New York.

The 2017 bi-centennial of the opening of the Erie Canal will be celebrated at women's history sites along the Canal in what is billed as a "VoteTilla." A barge will make stops at all the women's history sites

where speakers will be part of special programs. The VoteTilla is sponsored by the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester. The VoteTilla is scheduled for the third weekend in July when the Women's Rights National Historical Park and other organizations celebrate "Convention Days," the anniversary of the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY.

Because the Finger Lakes region of New York State is referred to as the "Cradle" of the Women's Rights Movement in the U.S., and in 1917 New York was the first Eastern state to grant universal suffrage to women, the state suffrage centennial initiative is bringing considerable state history to public attention.

The upcoming November 2017 exhibition and companion catalog is presented by the New York State Education Department and the Office of Cultural Education. For more information, see <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/> or call the Museum at 518-449-7860. ++

Olivia Twine

More information about the "Spirit of 1776" wagon and Edna Kearns is available on *SuffrageWagon.org*, an information resource publishing since 2009.

Information about the life and times of Elisabeth Freeman is available on a web site published by Jane Van De Bogart's cousin—Peg Johnston of Binghamton, NY. ElisabethFreeman.org

Marguerite (Culp) Kearns is a writer of creative nonfiction. She started working for *Woodstock Times* for its first issue in 1972 and stayed through 1990. She loves the stories her grandfather Wilmer Kearns told her as a child about her suffrage movement activist grandmother Edna Kearns about a time in American history when women couldn't vote and equality must have seemed like an impossible dream. She has been blogging about her grandparents and the "Spirit of 1776" suffrage wagon since 2009: SuffrageWagon.org

