

Meet Mary Olney Brown - A Women's Suffrage Story

Welcome to my parlor. It is over cups of tea that my sister Charlotte Emily and some of my other friends have planned ways to gain the vote for women 150 years ago-as you just saw, we didn't have the vote then-but there is more to the story.

I'm glad to be settled here in Olympia. It seems like my whole life, my family and I have been on the move--that's one of the reasons I think women should be able to have a voice in what laws govern them.

To tell you a little about my family--they originally came from England and settled in Providence, Rhode Island in the 17th century. Among my ancestors were strong women including a namesake, Mary, who owned her own general store and another who like me was a writer. My parents William and Charlotte married in 1809 in New York state (my mother was just 14 years old) and I was born there. But they had itchy feet and lived in eight different towns from New York to Iowa. It was in Iowa where I married Ben Brown.

We decided in 1852 to come west where by brother Nathan was already living. It was a hard trip. The grass on the plains was so dry that we all had to get out of our wagons and walk to save our animals.

We came with my sister Charlotte and her husband from Iowa with our four children but we met the dread disease of cholera on the Platte River and one of our children died--that was one of the hardest times of my life to leave my child in a grave that I knew I would never see again. We weren't the only ones with hardship--I recall the day that we met another woman who had lost everything on the trail and was all by herself--she ended up joining us.

When we got to Oregon, we met my brother, Nathan who lived there and was an Indian Agent. We decided to move to Olympia where we settled on a Donation claim across the bay from here. When we lost our livestock, we decided to get some of the fruit trees from my brother Cyrus. Benjamin sold those trees all over Chehalis, Thurston and Lewis Counties for \$1:00 a start!

My husband and I, along with the French Family, decided to build our own wharf--in fact I signed on as one of the incorporators of the "West Wharf Company" in 1876. Many was the time that I exchanged courtesies with the naval officers who came to the wharf and I even met Ulysses S. Grant who for a time was stationed at Fort Vancouver.

During the Indian war of 1855-56, we came into Olympia and I had another child while we lived in a fortification called a "block" house. We always moved to town in winter so our children

could attend school in Olympia. Eventually, I had 11 children but only 5 of them lived to adulthood.

I was known as Mrs, "Cold Water" Brown for my water treatment cures and I even advertised as Dr. Mary O. Brown because I helped women when they give birth to children.

By 1866, we decided to go north to what you now might know as Auburn, Washington--then it was known as White River. We took all of our belongings in a boat and then by trail to a new home.

While I was at White River, I became very interested in the right to vote. Even though I had a large family, I had studied the newly enacted U.S. Constitutional amendments. I had a strong advocate right in my family. My brother Cyrus was a lawyer, judge and legislator in Oregon.

The right to vote had been presented in our Washington legislature as early as 1854. After the legislative session of 1867 empowered "white citizens above the age of 21 years" to vote, I sent out letters urging women to go to the polls. Just a year later, a legislator joined my efforts, urging women to vote ...But not a woman made a move, they wanted to vote but didn't have the courage to do so.

Knowing that if anything was going to be done, someone had to take the initiative so for several weeks before I made it known I was going to vote in 1869 in White River. I decided to go to the polling place at the school house with my husband, Benjamin, my daughter, Eliza and her husband Jefferson Axtell. Many gentlemen called on me and tried to convince me not to go to the voting place but I said I was going to the polling place with the same men that I met in church and I knew they would treat me with respect.

On the day of the election, oneman, Mr. Brannan, told my husband not to let me vote because he thought I would be insulted. My husband said, "My wife has a good a right to vote as I have, and I would not prevent her if I could!"

As we arrived at the school house, one man said, "Well! If women are coming to vote, I'm going home!"

Summoning all my strength I walked up to the desk behind which sat the officers of the election and one of them said, "You are not an American citizen; hence not entitled to vote." A big

dictionary was brought and they found that a citizen was a "person who allegiance to the government" so all citizens are not just men--women are citizens too!

I proceeded to provide more information to the men who were silenced by my discussion. Another man said "Women have not right to vote; and the laws of the U.S. don't extend over Washington Territory." I didn't need to contradict him--many others spoke up to tell him he was wrong. But although the election officers were convinced of our rights, they were afraid to accept our votes.

I didn't give up though!! The very next year I decided I would test my luck again-- this time in Olympia. I published an appeal in the newspapers and my sister, Charlotte Olney rench and I talked about how we would vote. She was living in southern Thurston County and began to talk up the idea.

She and her friends decided that the best way to a man's heart (including male voters) is through his stomach and so decided they would prepare a picnic lunch and then present their votes to well-fed judges. Charlotte was a well versed as I about the arguments for women's right to vote and did a good job of convincing those who were opposed. My sister was the first to hand in her ballot and others followed.

Now it has been talked about in the area and several women in Black River said that if the women in Grand Mound were successful they would vote too.

They stationed a man on a fast horse at the polls in Grand Mound with instructions that if women were voting there to come to Black River. The moment the man ride in sight of the schoolhouse he swung his hat, and screeched at the top of his voice, "They're voting! They're voting!" and the women there rushed to the schoolhouse and cast their ballots.

While these 15 women were successful, those of us in Olympia were not. Before the election women felt that this was their time and the buzz of conversation was "Are you going to the election tomorrow?" But the day of the election, the word was out that our votes wouldn't be accepted. My friends Jane Pattison, Jane Wylie and Susan Dofflemyer along with my husband and Nathan Pattison went to the polls. Susan's husband came and took her home though--afraid to have her go to the polls! The election judges refused to accept our ballots!!

The next year we received more help--the famous suffragist Susan B. Anthony came to Washington. I met with her in Seattle but she helped those of us who were activists form our

own suffrage association and we held our own conference right here in Olympia--I worked with many of my friends and family on the convention and when you look at the call to the convention in the newspapers--my name is at the top of the list.

When there was a proclamation to hold a constitutional convention to admit Washington to the union in 1878, I recommended to the Territorial Suffrage Association we secure delegates for the convention that would favor women's right to vote and that we circulate petitions asking the delegates to leave the word "male" from the constitution, guaranteeing that women would have equal rights.

Well the organization failed to take action and I went to work myself. I went our petitions into every town and country place where there was a post-office asking for residents to sign the petition to keep "male" out of the constitution. Here in Olympia, I took the petition in hand and if I went shopping or on an errand, I gathered signatures--I secured 300 signatures in Olympia alone!!

I didn't think that was enough--I decided I would write articles for Mrs. Duniway's paper and I wrote several for the New Northwest. Even though petitions were submitted and Mrs. Duniway went to the convention--women's right to vote wasn't in the constitution and two separate ballot issues about women's right to vote and hold office were defeated in 1878--but Washington didn't become a state anyway.

We still kept trying in 1881--it looked like our legislature, still the Territorial one, would consider Women's suffrage so one of my friends said, "Now, Mrs. Brown, write out you bill; the speaker of the House sent me word they were ready for it." I sat right down and wrote out the bill and it was presented and debated --it passed the House 13 to 11, but alas the Council turned it down 5 to 7. I heard later that the saloon keepers were alarmed that if women got the vote they would do away with liquor sales. The saloon keepers button-holed the members of the Council and as many of them could be bought by drinks pledged themselves against the bill!! That was why it lost.

Finally in 1883, the legislature passed women's right to vote--I was so happy!! All of our long work had paid off. We held a big celebration here in Olympia in November, 1883--the ladies of Olympia gave then governor Newell a gold pen to sign the legislation--After nearly 40 years of working on the right to vote, it was finally mine!!

Women began voting in 1884 and right away the right was challenged--likely by saloon owners but it was upheld. We voted again in 1885.

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I am going to have to end the story in 1886 because that's when I died. I wanted to be remembered for my work--in fact my tombstone reads: "Friend of Equal Rights." I rest uneasily though--I wonder if women did keep their right to vote? It is going to be up to you to find out the rest of the story--maybe as you look around this room you can discover it--for now I want you to know how hard it was to gain the right to vote--we women added to all of our other duties because we knew it was important--don't forget to register to vote and remember me!

1. James Birney b. 1840/ Iowa died 1846/ Iowa
2. Martha Jane Brown born 1842/Iowa died Olympia 1856
3. Charlotte Brown born 1844/Iowa/Died 18455 /Iowa
4. Ellza born 1846/Iowa
5. Mary Brown born 1848/Iowa
6. Ellen Brown born 1850/Iowa died 1852/Platte River
7. Charles Brown born 1852/Iowa died Olympia 1859
8. Harriet Brown born 1854/Olympia married 1873
9. Theodore born November 1856/Olympia (born during the Indian War)
10. Oscar Brown born 1858/Olympia
11. Jennie born 1865/Olympia died 1868 White River

Author Unknown

