"Think Ratification, Talk Ratification, Work Ratification": The Influence of Women in Public Health on Women’s Suffrage, Sexuality, and Professionalism.

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The suffrage movement varied by state, each state ratified suffrage at different times and the obstacles women faced varied between northern and southern states. The effect that women in public health had on the suffrage movement in North Carolina provided women with the opportunity to pursue careers of their choice and redefine the notions of womanhood and femininity. Many women that joined the suffrage clubs in North Carolina advocated for work as nurses, social workers, volunteers, and public education reformers. Society’s expectation of women as mothers, wives, and schoolteachers led numerous members of the Woman’s Clubs of North Carolina to push for legislation allowing women to serve on school boards, offices in the public health department, and leaders in associations beyond NAWSA.

The foundation of North Carolina’s women’s suffrage movement began as a small club established in 1894 in Asheville North Carolina. A group of 45 men and women assembled at the home of Asheville mayor Thomas W. Patton and voted Ms. Helen Morris Lewis as President of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association (NCESA), the first women’s suffrage association in North Carolina. Lewis addressed numerous crowds of both enthusiasts and detractors throughout North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and spoke at the Washington D.C. convention for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). During Lewis’ presidency, renowned suffragists such as: Frances Willard of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Laura Clay, and Elizabeth Upham Yates addressed the campaigns
for suffrage in North Carolina. Despite Lewis’ ambitions, the NCESA received scant economic support from sympathizers, forcing the association to disband in 1900.

Women involved in public health reforms during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century advocated for women’s right to college education, to obtain degrees beyond teaching and provide aid to the public in need. Women like Gertrude Weil and Dr. Annie Alexander believed in universal suffrage and the right to higher education and denounced marriage, claiming that husbands deter women from their realizing their full potential. Female advocates of women’s suffrage urged local politicians to allow women the right to hold offices in departments related to welfare, public health, education, and program funding. Women working in the public health system worked as nurses, social workers, and physicians devoted to public health, much like Dr. Annie Alexander. At the time, the majority of the influential office positions found within politics and the health department were only available to men elected into such positions by fellow (male) politicians. My thesis will explore the different positions women held in the public health system by researching the clubs available to them and the different reasons each had for joining the suffrage clubs in North Carolina.

Many suffragists worked in the public health system and advocated for their right to vote in order to affect or change public policy in the state. James L. Hyatt, a politician from western North Carolina, proposed a suffrage bill to the state senate in 1897 however, The Committee of Insane Asylums received the bill claiming its review of the bill on grounds that the bill supported women’s suffrage, and dismissed it. Hyatt’s denied bill sparked a new conversation amongst politicians; the problem of who was fit to vote obstructed much of the needed support for the suffrage movement in North Carolina. Men expected women to remain at home fulfilling daughterly and or wifely duties. Women’s sensitive and emotional natures negatively affected
the male dominated political sphere thereby, obstructing the proper way of the law. North Carolina would cease to have an official women’s’ suffrage association until 1913 when many of the state woman’s clubs became part of the new NCESA, whom merged with NAWSA later that year. Following the collapse of the NCESA, women’s clubs including the state’s WCTU began to recognize the importance of the woman’s vote following their inability to change health and social problems through political outreach. Women found themselves unable to acquire proper funding for schools, libraries, reformatories, and welfare projects without backing from the state legislature. Holding office in public education, public health, or public welfare was exclusive to those eligible to vote (men); men controlled the public life leaving women to tend to problems of healthcare, children, and public programs without proper funding or opportunities to influence legislation.

My thesis will explore the effects of the public health system on women’s suffrage in North Carolina in regards to how female public health workers shaped the social and political views of women’s professionalism, education, and ideas about marriage and sexuality. Available scholarship on women’s suffrage and public health focuses primarily on the effects of public health work on suffrage in terms of how social workers and public health nurses advocated changes in legislation to incorporate women into offices or boards of public schools, hospitals, reformatories, and welfare.¹ My thesis will focus on the years prior to the 19th amendment, particularly the period of 1870 to 1920. I will highlight educated white women from North Carolina joining the public health system at the state level in the late 19th and early 20th century;