

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Early Women Leaders Reflect Nationwide Struggle

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ELECTED WOMEN

The following is the first in a series of articles about women elected leaders from Erie County written by Jefferson Scholar in Residence Judith Lynch. Jefferson Vice President Ben Spегgen will host an online interview with Dr. Lynch at noon each Wednesday in October featuring the leaders.

A new focus on elected women is very timely. The 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote was adopted 100 years ago on August 18, 1920. This year featured several excellent programs marking the anniversary, particularly “The Vote,” a two-part documentary on PBS that shows the intensity of the fight for the vote.

When the right to vote was achieved, the work was not done. Women’s clubs throughout the nation organized to

register women to vote and to encourage women to run for elective office. It was a long and stressful fight to obtain the right to vote and then to move women into the political

YEAR	NAME	OFFICE
1923-1927	Maude Millnar	City Treasurer
1923-1927	Annette Young	Clerk of Courts
1927-1935	Odessa Plate	Recorder of Deeds
1935-1939	Ethel Davis	Clerk of Courts
1935-1939	Katherine Kalvelage	Recorder of Deeds
1931-1944	Helen Schluraff	Coounty Commissioner

process. Today, more women vote than men and the percentage of women elected officials is steadily growing.


The long, stressful fight was what won the battle. It is important to note that, before the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, each state was engulfed in efforts to give women the right to vote in state elections.

The Pennsylvania Legislature passed a bill giving women the right to vote in 1913; however, it had to be ratified by the voters. Women organized and crusaded for the ratification. Featured in the effort was a replica of the Liberty Bell, which toured Pennsylvania cities, small towns, and rural areas attracting attention, coalescing adherents, and enhancing the message: "Give Women the Right to Vote." Despite the vehemence and intensity of the effort, the referendum went down to defeat. But the defeat was only temporary.

The movement for the vote did not die in 1913; it pivoted to the national stage as women led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, and Lucy Stone pushed for an amendment to the national constitution enfranchising women. Many Pennsylvania women joined the effort. Protests outside the White House, parades throughout Washington, D.C., and lobbying of congressmen took place. These were lengthy battles: first, the effort for Pennsylvania enfranchisement of women failed to get ratification, then the effort to pass a constitutional amendment in Congress was successful, followed by the state-by-state effort to ratify the amendment. It all culminated in the adoption of the 19th Amendment and increasing awareness in women and preparing them for political participation in what had been a man's political world.

John Carney in his *Highlights of Erie Politics* notes that the women in Erie County who led the effort to ratify the 19th Amendment were Mabel Woodward Wright, Augusta Fleming, and Jane Weir Pressley. After ratification, these women helped form the League of Women Voters in Erie County in 1920. Along with the Zonta Club, which held its first meeting in Erie County on November 8, 1919, prior to the passage of the 19th Amendment, the League conducted drives to register women voters and then encouraged women to consider running for public office.

The women who ran for elective office generally followed a similar path. They usually had years of experience working in the office or similar office to which they aspired. They also were active in the women's organizations and the party organization to which they belonged. Many stepped in when husbands who held a public office died while in office and served out the term and then were elected in their own right. This is primarily the stories of the first women in Erie County who were elected to political office during the 1920s and 1930s.



VOTERS!

You should use the same sound judgment in employing a person to handle your public business as you would for your private business.

If you were employing a treasurer for a private business enterprise, where there were hundreds of thousands of dollars to be handled and accounted for, you would search for the most competent and reliable person available—one with experience and proven ability.

We offer subject to your vote at the election on November 6th

MAUDE S. MILLAR
Republican candidate for
CITY TREASURER

She is the most competent person in the city of Erie for this position.
She is an expert accountant.
She is absolutely honest.
She has had 12 years as assistant treasurer preparing for the position of treasurer.

MAUDE S. MILLAR
as
CITY TREASURER

Miller Campaign Committee

Although the 19th Amendment was adopted in 1920, it was not until 1923 that the first women were elected to major offices in Erie County. In that year, Maude Millar was elected Treasurer of the City of Erie and Annette Young was elected Clerk of Courts for Erie County.

The Treasurer's race, in which Maude Millar was the Republican candidate, was a hotly contested election. Her opponent was the Fire Chief, Michael J. Cronin.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING PAGES 10-11

THE ERIE DAILY TIMES 4 O'clock Edition

FOR ERIE AND VICINITY: Light, fair or snow and cooler this afternoon and tonight; Thursday fair, moderate to fresh northerly winds.

Vol. XXXVI, No. 178. PUBLISHED BY THE ERIE DAILY TIMES COMPANY, 100 N. WALTON ST., ERIE, PA. WEDNESDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 7, 1923. (28 PAGES) PRICE TWO CENTS.

OFFICIAL COUNT IS NECESSARY TO DECIDE CITY TREASURER CONTEST

On the day after the election, the Erie Daily Times headline read, "Official count is necessary to decide City Treasurer contest" (11/7/1923). The article went on to say:

Checking and rechecking of figures from districts throughout the city indicate that the margin of victory for either one will be inside of 50 votes. Figures obtained by the Times held Cronin in the lead up until early this afternoon, when his lead was cut to such a narrow margin as to be negligible. It is entirely possible that the mail vote may be the deciding factor in the race. There are about 40 ballots which the official board will have to count and these may turn the tide one way or another (Erie Daily Times, 11/7/1923).

The next day, the Erie Daily Times headline read, "Mrs. Millar wins Treasurer race by margin of 35" (11/8/1923). Two days after the election, the 42 mail-in ballots still had not been counted, but were not expected to change the result. The Erie Daily Times noted that there had been other close elections in Erie's recent past but what made this especially significant was that women voters were not an issue. "Women were not voting in the other contests, making the treasurer's race the closest ever run taking in consideration the great number of votes that were cast" (Erie Daily Times, 11/8/1923).



Also elected in 1923 was Annette Young, who became the first elected woman in Erie County government. She worked as Deputy Clerk of Courts under Ross Cutter. When he died in 1922, Governor William Cameron Sproul appointed Annette Young as Erie County's Clerk of Courts. She had years of experience working in the office and was seen as the most able person to fill the position.

Annette Young grew up in Erie and attended its public schools. Her mother graduated from Waterford Academy and had been a teacher in the Erie area schools. Annette Young, after graduating, moved to California, where she served as deputy city clerk in Redlands for four years. She returned to Erie, where she was appointed Deputy Clerk of Courts on December 1, 1912. She served in

that position until May 1, 1922, when Governor Sproul appointed her to fill the unexpired term of Clerk of Courts Ross Cutter, who had recently died in 1922.



Annette Young

Young, a Republican, was not only experienced in the Clerk of Courts affairs, but was also active in the Republican Party. In addition, she was very socially active in many of Erie's women's clubs. Young was a member of the Park Presbyterian Church Woman's Club, Zonta Club, and the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Club.

In 1923, as her appointment as Clerk of Courts was coming to an end and the election loomed, Annette Young threw her hat into the ring and was elected Clerk of Courts in November 1923. It was the same election in which Maude Millar was elected Treasurer of the City of Erie and three years after the adoption of the 19th Amendment. She was the first woman in Erie County to be elected to a countywide elected office. Annette Young served one term, until 1928 as the elected Clerk of Courts.



Odessa Plate

In 1927, the third woman to run for a major elective office in Erie County took the stage. Her name was Odessa Plate, often referred to as Odessie.

Odessie was married to Ferdinand Plate and lived in Corry. The Plate family moved to Erie and opened a news and delivery business in Erie where Ferdinand and his wife Odessie were very active in the Republican Party.

After the Millcreek Flood in 1915, the Plates sold the business and in 1923, Ferdinand ran and was elected Recorder of Deeds. A few months after being inducted into office, he was forced by illness to remain at home. In August 1925, he journeyed to Cleveland, Ohio, where he underwent surgery. Although he returned to the Deeds office a few weeks later, his recovery was only temporary. Within a month, he was so sick he was unable to work. Ferdinand Plate died in June of 1926 with one year to serve in his term.

Plate's wife, Odessa (Odessie) Hunter Plate, who had officiated in the Deed's office during her husband's sickness, was appointed by Pennsylvania Governor Arthur James to succeed her husband as Recorder of Deeds. She filled her husband's term while raising their two children.

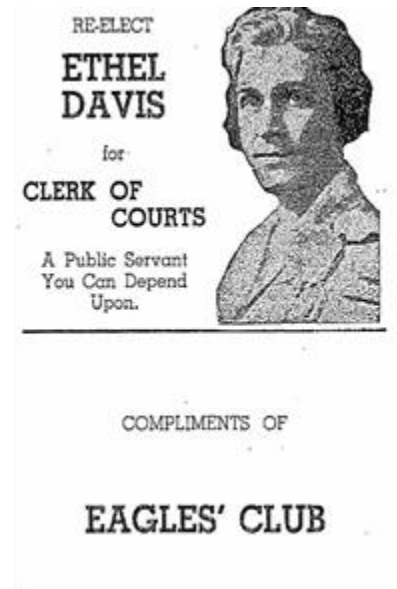
At the end of her appointment, she announced her candidacy for election to the position of Recorder of Deeds. Odessie was known for her door-to-door campaigning, in which she came into direct contact with her constituents. A memorable occasion was

the interchange with one woman who was too busy to talk because she was baking a pie. Odessie urged her to continue. "Make your pie, I'll watch you. I'm sure you make a much better pie than I do, but then, I can do a good job for you as Recorder of Deeds" (Freeman, 113).

Odessa Plate was elected Recorder of Deeds in 1927 and re-elected in 1931. In the following election in 1935, following her victory in 1931, Odessa was running against another woman, Katherine Kalvelage, a Democrat who won the election. Odessie Plate had served as Erie County's elected Recorder of Deeds from 1927 to 1935.

When Annette Young decided not to run for another term as Clerk of Courts, an associate in the office, Ethel Davis threw her hat into the political ring and, in 1935, was elected Clerk of Courts and served one term until 1939, becoming one of the few Democratic candidates to be elected to a countywide position.

During the 1920s, most voters, as well as most winning candidates, were Republican, and it is not surprising that the few women who won election during that time were also Republican and often very active in party affairs. However, by the middle of the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt and the Depression brought a Democratic wave. Katherine Kalvelage, the candidate who defeated Odessa Plate in 1935 for the position of Erie County Recorder of Deeds, was nominally a Democrat. The 1935 election also brought another Democratic woman into the Courthouse as an elected official. That person was Ethel Davis, who was active in Democratic Party affairs. Ethel Davis won the position of Clerk of Courts in 1935.



In 1939, both Ethel Davis and Katherine Kalvelage were on the ballot as Democrats, both seeking a second term. Katherine Kalvelage's advertisements emphasized that she was not a politician and not part of the Courthouse crowd, while Ethel Davis emphasized her role as a public servant. The election of 1939 was a difficult one. Both Ethel Davis, running for reelection as Clerk of Courts, and Katherine Kalvelage, running for reelection as Recorder of Deeds appeared to be targeted as women. When they lost their elections, The Erie Daily Times was jubilant and heralded their

defeat with the headline "WOMEN BEATEN."

The defeat of these two women left one woman in elective office. This was Helen Schluraff, who served as County Commissioner from 1931 to 1944. Our next monologue will explore Helen Schluraff's career as well as Evelyn Wilson's time in office as Clerk of Courts.

Sources: Erie Daily Times

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.

