

nation,—straitway, it shoots forth in the States—cut it off in the States—it comes forth in the counties—cut it off in the counties—and it steals forth in the form of town or city bonds.”

Another delegate, Schuyler Colfax, a Whig journalist from South Bend, who later served as Ulysses S. Grant’s vice-president, stated that the only way Indiana should go into debt again was by a vote of the citizens in the state. Colfax explained, “The past history of our State is the best argument in favor of this amendment . . . as we have suffered more than other States from the results of imprudent debt, which still hangs over us, impairing our prosperity, and impeding our progress and advancement as a State.”

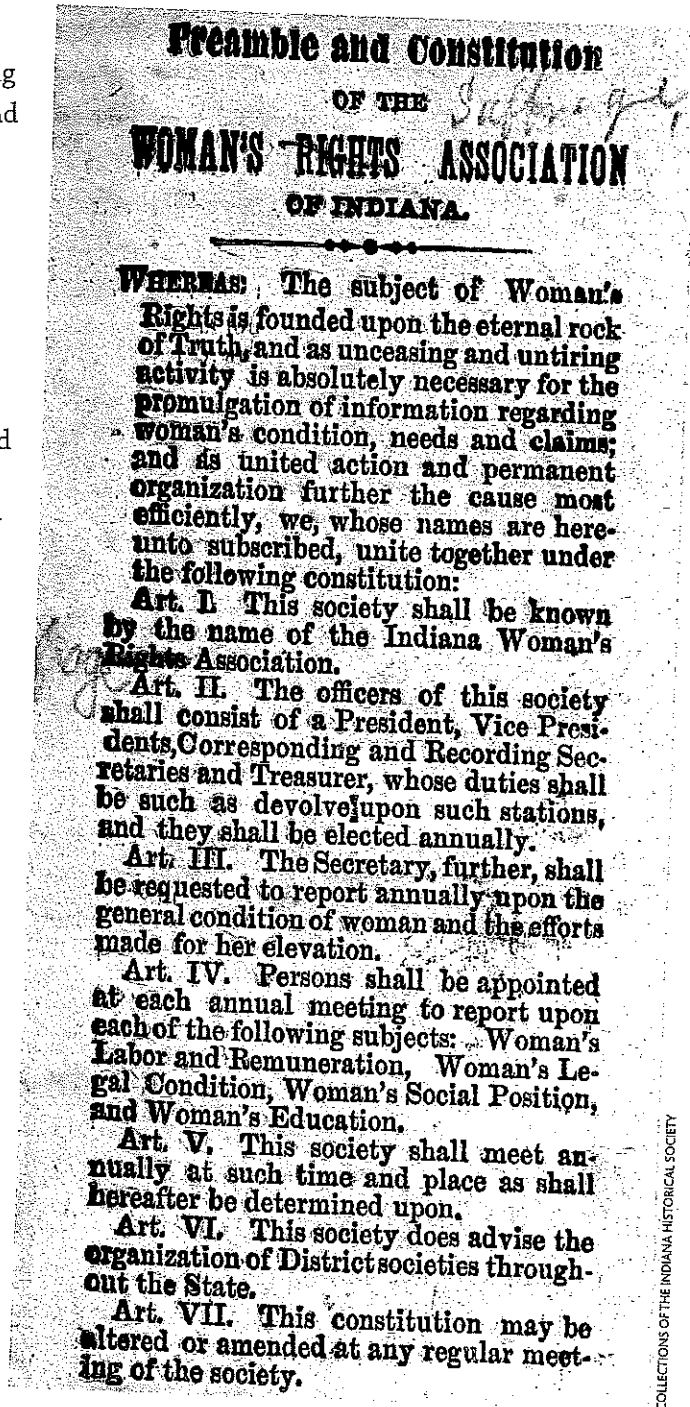
Thanks to the efforts of Caleb Mills and other education reformers such as convention delegate Robert Dale Owen from New Harmony, public endorsement of state-wide common schools was finally strong enough that the new constitution established a permanent fund to support schools and provided for a state superintendent to head the school system. The 1851 constitution paved the way for the 1852 Free School Law, and a new day dawned for Indiana public schools.

Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana

In 1851 the Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana was founded on the principle of women’s suffrage, the right to vote. In 1852 the association passed resolutions that affirmed women should have the same opportunities as men including education, equal pay for employment, and basic citizenship rights. In 1859 Dr. Mary F. Thomas and Mary Birdsall addressed the Indiana General Assembly to petition for these rights. Thomas stated that women should “assert their right to the elective franchise, and the privileges growing out of it, as the basis of all other rights.” However, the General Assembly did not seriously debate the possibility of suffrage until the 1880s.

Women’s Rights or Lack Thereof

The new constitution left large parts of the state’s population out of the equation. Only white men could vote, and married women were barred from owning property. At the convention, Robert Dale Owen proposed an amendment to grant married women the right to own property. Opponents warned that social chaos would result if women had equal property rights; they argued that women should remain in the home and raise children. Delegates cited biblical scripture to



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refuse women equal rights, “Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church, and that wives are to subject themselves unto their husbands.”

Women in the visitors’ galleries witnessed Owen’s proposal go down in flames, but they were grateful for his efforts. Fifteen women led by Sarah T. Bolton, a noted poet, honored Owen with a testimonial. They presented the New Harmony reformer with an engraved silver pitcher on the floor of the House, the first time women were allowed in the space.

Although newspapers mocked the gesture of the women who honored Owen, more women began to be involved in the fight for equal rights. At an anti-slavery meeting in Henry County, Amanda Way, a young Quaker woman, changed the subject from slavery to women and called for a meeting to discuss women’s rights. In October 1851 Hoosier women gathered in

Dublin, Wayne County, for the state’s first women’s rights convention. Way told the convention: “Unless women demand their rights politically, socially, and financially, they will continue in the future, as in the past, to be classed with negroes, criminals, insane persons, idiots, and infants.” The convention resulted in the formation of the Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana, which, over many years, took the first steps toward winning equality for women in Indiana. Almost seventy years would pass before American women gained the right to vote.

Zerelda G. Wallace (1817–1901)

In 1881 the Indiana General Assembly voted to approve a constitutional amendment granting voting rights, suffrage, to women. Although the resolution ultimately failed to become law after a second round of voting, it was thanks to suffragists such as Zerelda Wallace and May Wright Sewall that the resolution got so far in the assembly. Born in Kentucky, Wallace came to Indianapolis when she was a young woman. She married and raised a family, including her well-known stepson Lew Wallace (see Chapter 4). After her children were grown, Wallace became active in the Suffrage and Temperance, anti-alcohol, Movements. The sexism, or prejudice, she faced publicly as president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union led her to become an ardent suffragist. In 1878 Wallace and other prominent Indianapolis men and women formed the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society. Wallace also served as president of this organization, which lobbied Indiana legislators to support suffrage before the 1881 vote. Wallace remained active on a national scale following this defeat; but unfortunately, she did not live to see women gain the right to vote in 1920.

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