The history of women’s suffrage in Utah at the annual G. Homer Durham Lecture. Better Days 2020 seeks to publicize the heritage of early Utah suffragists in order to encourage and support Utah women in their corporate and political endeavors. Using excerpts from her book, Pioneering the Vote: The Untold Story of Suffragists in Utah and the West, McBaine explained that the first to grant white women voting rights in 1870, with Seraph Young being the first woman to cast a ballot under an equal suffrage law, McBaine went on to describe how in 1887, Utah women lost the right to vote under the Edward Tuckers Act, which disenfranchised all polygamous individuals. Although some Utah women regained their right to vote in 1896 and again in 1920 when the 19th Amendment was passed, Asian American, Native American, and African American women (and men) did not gain full voting rights in Utah state elections until 1952, 1953 and 1965, respectively.

In her lecture, McBaine shared three key observations about the importance of women’s suffrage in Utah. First, she explained that the story of suffrage isn’t just about voting; it marks one clear way in which white American women began to move from the limited domestic sphere into the broader political sphere. Second, suffrage history isn’t just women’s history; it’s a history of Utah women and men working together to achieve mutual goals. Third, Utah suffragists cannot be defined solely by their suffrage history; it’s a story of Utah women and men of both women and Native Americans.

A distinctive challenge that suffragists in Utah faced was religious prejudice. Martha Hughes Cannon, a plural wife and a doctor with four degrees, experienced this opposition first-hand. When the American government revoked the voting rights of polygamy in 1887, Cannon and other Utah suffragists worked with politicians inside and outside of Utah to regain the right to vote. In the debate, Brown, as Cannon, said “Women don’t need to be protected; they need to be included.”

The Dead Suffragists’ Debate

In November, the History Department held the Dead Suffragists’ Debate, the most recent installment of the annual Debate of the Dead series, in which faculty and students take on the roles of historical figures to discuss historical topics. During this year’s debate, four prominent suffragists were represented: BYU English professor Dr. Jamie Horrocks represented the views of Alice Paul, cofounder of the National Women’s Party and writer of the 1913 Equal Rights Amendment; University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English professor Dr. Jane Hallen represented the views of Zitkála-Šá, a Yankton Dakota Sioux writer and political activist for Native American rights; historian Barbara Jones Brown represented the views of Martha Hughes Cannon, prominent Utah suffragist and the first female US state senator; and BYU political science graduate Kayla Jackson represented the views of Ida B. Wells, journalist and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

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