



NURSING DEMOCRACY

The images of nurses protesting outside the White House demanding protective gear to fight COVID-19 in 2020 takes us back a century to a time when nurses joined protests at the White House as part of the Women's Suffrage Movement.



Nurses were in a powerful position to influence the suffrage movement because they were on the front lines both locally and at war, directly exposed to the social, economic, and political issues unlike many physicians and politicians. Their work was not limited to hospitals — there were many nurses working in the community, in the homes of patients who were unable or unwilling to seek hospital care. They saw firsthand the poor living conditions of the working class and knew that nursing alone was not enough to support public health.

Many nurses also became advocates for other health and social issues like public sanitation and workers' rights.



When it came to the suffrage movement, nurses like Lavinia Lloyd Dock, Sarah Tarleton Colvin, Mary Bartlett Dixon, Ellen La Motte and Hattie Frances Kruger were directly involved, organizing demonstrations, marching in parades, canvassing within their communities, signing petitions, and mobilizing support.

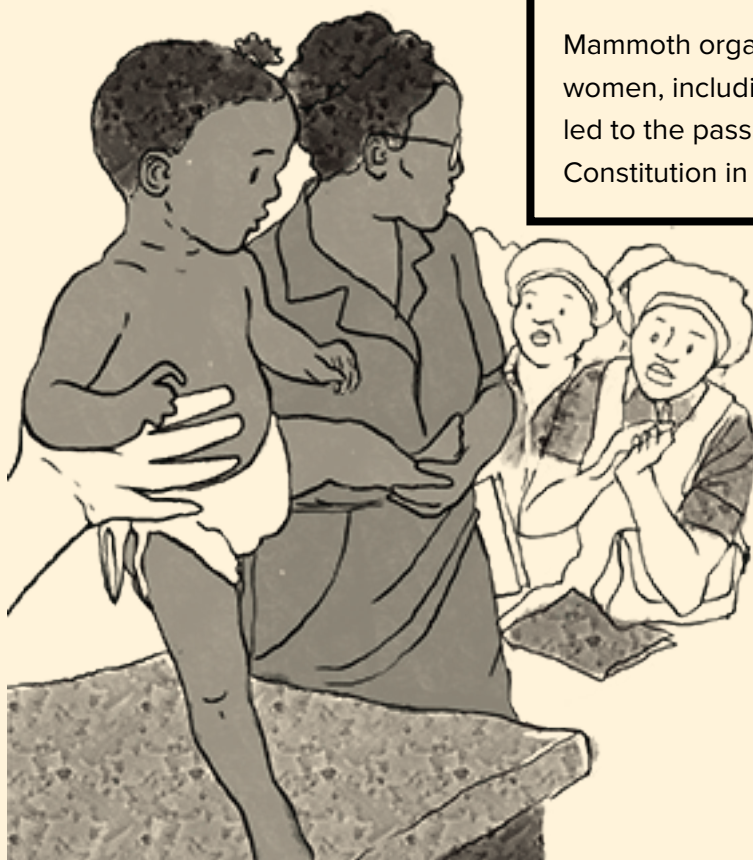
They believed that

“
if women won the right to vote,
they could reform public health,
set workplace standards, fund
hospitals and improve the lives
of the working class and poor
people who bore the greatest
burden of sickness.

”



Mammoth organizing and decades-long fighting by the women, including solidarity from other health professionals led to the passing of the historic 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920 guaranteeing women the right to vote.



The link between voting and improved health care quickly became evident. Barely a year after women won the right to vote, Congress passed the Sheppard Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act on 23 November 1921, funding a variety of programs to reduce maternal and infant deaths. Although similar bills had been introduced between 1918 and 1920, none received sufficient support to become law.

With the enfranchisement of millions of new women voters, however, most congressmen decided to support the bill in 1921. With funds from this legislation, states established nearly 3,000 prenatal care clinics, provided for 180,000 infant care seminars, and hired thousands of public health nurses, who made 3 million home visits to pregnant women and new mothers.