



“WHY DEPRIVE THE STATE OF

HER SERVICE?”

THE POLITICAL LIVES OF ROSE, MARIAN, AND

MARGARET NICHOLS

Suffrage parade, Boston, May 1914. Massachusetts Historical Society.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote. It is also the centennial of individual political and social reform contributions by sisters Rose, Marian, and Margaret Nichols.

As members of the Boston Equal Suffrage Association for Good Government (BESAGG), the Nichols sisters believed that women's enfranchisement would compliment and support other Progressive Era activities. Separate from the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), BESAGG was founded in 1901 with the express purpose of combining suffrage with other pressing concerns such as improving public schools, sanitation, and living conditions for the poor and disabled. Both NAWSA and BESAGG, as well as the more militant National Women's Party, largely excluded black women from the white suffrage movement. With the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, BESAGG became the League of Women Voters.

Rose, Marian, and Margaret Nichols each had their own unique way of furthering the movement and devoted their lives to three distinct causes: pacifism, ending corruption, and civil liberties.

Curated by Laura Cunningham and Rosanna Wright

ROSE NICHOLS: THE PACIFIST

For Rose Standish Nichols (1872-1960) and other committed pacifists, the necessity of women's suffrage was implicit in their peace activism. In 1912, reform leader Florence Kelley and BESAGG founder Maud Wood Park delivered a lecture on women's suffrage in the Nichols' family parlor on Rose's invitation. While Rose remained dedicated to securing the vote, she soon began to focus her efforts in the Women's Peace Party (WPP). Founded in 1915 by Jane Addams, a prominent social reformer from Chicago, the WPP worked to promote international peace independent of male control. Rose played a key role in growing the Massachusetts branch of the WPP and later served on the Executive Committee for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

After the United States joined WWI in 1917, peace activism became less popular in favor of patriotism. Rose rejected anti-communist rhetoric and spoke out on behalf of those who were maligned by the Red Scare, including an MIT professor. Her correspondence with Carmen Aguinaldo, the daughter of the Filipino revolutionary Emilio Aguinaldo, suggests that she supported Philippine Independence, and she was also sympathetic to Irish Independence. She maintained subscriptions to the ideologically leftist magazines *The Nation* and *The New Republic*.

In 1919, after attending all of the plenary sessions of the Paris Peace Conference, Rose joined over 200 women from 15 nations at the Zurich Peace Conference to promote women's suffrage, total and universal disarmament, as well permanent peace.



Rose Standish Nichols (standing, far left) at the Zurich Peace Conference, 1919. Also present in this photo is Jane Addams (sitting, third from right) and Mary Church Terrell (standing, center back), one of the first African American women to earn a college degree and a leader in the Black women's club movement, Black liberation, and women's suffrage.

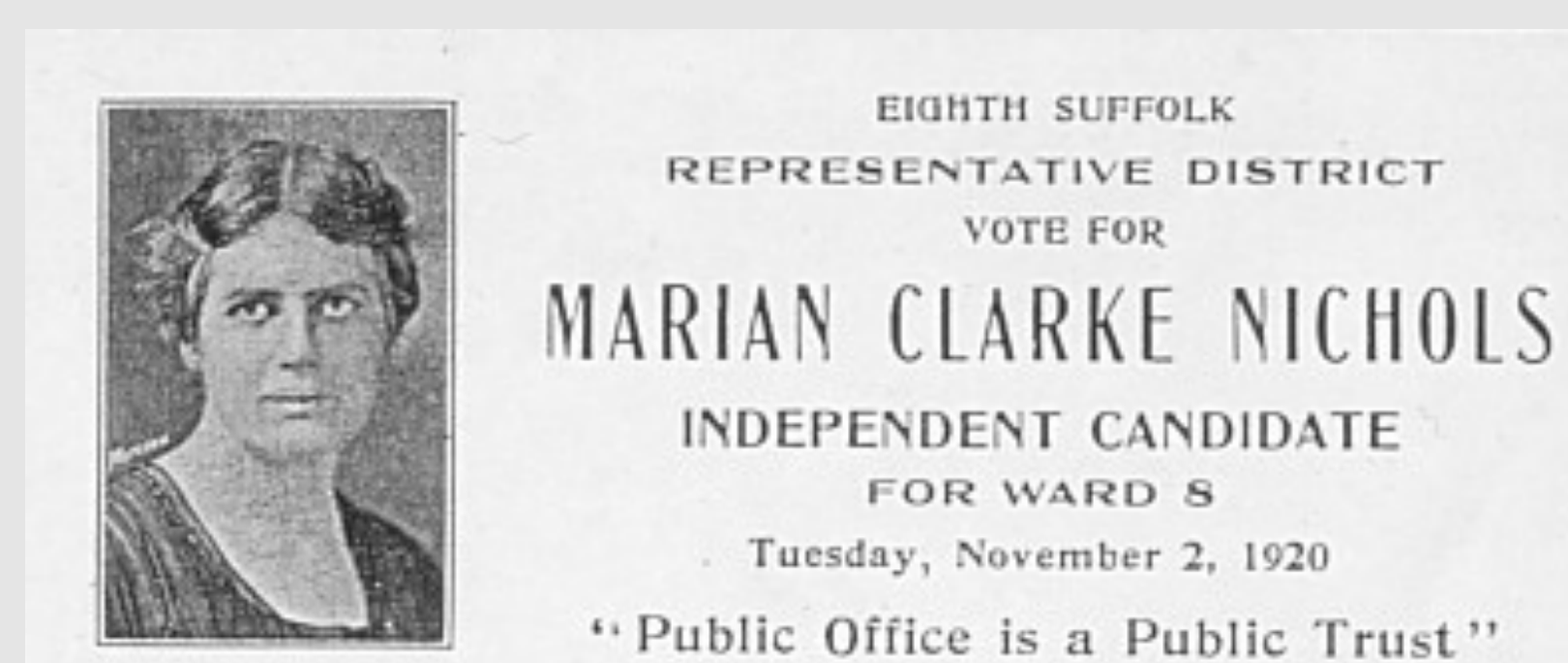
MARIAN NICHOLS: THE REFORMER

Growing up steps from the Massachusetts State House undoubtedly inspired Marian Nichols's (1874-1963) lifelong commitment to political action and reform. Marian Nichols attended Radcliffe College alongside Maud Wood Park and other leading suffragists. Soon after graduating in 1899, she became involved with the Massachusetts Civil Service Reform Association and she eventually served as secretary for its Women's Auxiliary. In doing so, she strived to eradicate corruption from the professional branches of local and state government.



Marian Clarke Nichols, ca. 1920.

Like many upper-class white women of her generation, Marian believed that women possessed an inherent morality that was greatly needed in politics. Marian, however, demonstrated unique tenacity when she became one of the first women to run for office in Massachusetts. Immediately following the ratification of the 19th amendment in August 1920, Marian launched her campaign as an Independent candidate for Ward 8. Her refusal to associate herself with either the Democratic Party or Republican Party, as well as the fact that working class immigrants comprised much of Ward 8, brought about speculation that Marian was a socialist and therefore, in the context of the concurrent Red Scare, a dissident. Although she lost the election to the incumbent, Henry Lee Shattuck, Marian was not deterred from politics.



Over the course of her career, Marian attended hearings on mandating maximum hour laws for women workers and she continued to pressure the State House for reforms, causing many of the “boys...to [reach] for an aspirin.”

MARGARET NICHOLS: THE JUSTICE SEEKER

In 1913, Margaret Nichols (1879-1959) entered an essay contest issued by *Pulitzer's Magazine* on the question of women's suffrage. In her submission, she writes: "Even if the political field for women is small, it is important and why deprive the state of her service?".

The youngest of the Nichols sisters, Margaret Nichols's "service" was perhaps the most radically-minded. In 1919, Margaret Nichols hosted a small group of people in her home to join ACLU founder Roger Baldwin in resisting a Red Scare government crackdown on anti-war dissenters, labor organizers, and immigrants known as the Palmer Raids. Referring to themselves as the League of Democratic Action, the group formed the nucleus of the Massachusetts American Civil Liberties Union. As a representative of the League, Margaret attended a 1919 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers' strike and she describes her experience picketing and being accosted by police in her memoir *Lively Days*.

The most famous victims of the first Red Scare were Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrant anarchists convicted and executed for the robbery and murder of a factory paymaster in Braintree, Massachusetts despite contradictory evidence surfacing during the trial. Margaret championed their cause and visited Sacco in Dedham prison on numerous occasions, bringing him craft materials to mitigate the inactivity forced upon him by incarceration.

Like her sister Rose, Margaret Nichols was a member of the Women's Peace Party and a committed pacifist during wartime.



Margaret Nichols-Shurcliff, ca. 1913.



Woven bag made by Nicola Sacco for Margaret Nichols while in Dedham prison, ca. 1921.