

Making Strides | Tennessee's Vote

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Photo courtesy of the [National Park Service](#).

BACKGROUND

"After decades of arguments for and against women's suffrage, Congress finally passed the 19th Amendment in June of 1919." [i] But, for the amendment to become law, at least 36 states needed to vote in its favor – a process called ratification.

"By the summer of 1920, 35 states had ratified the women's suffrage amendment. Eight had rejected it. One more was needed for it to become law, and Tennessee looked like suffragists' best (and possibly only) hope." [ii]

"Members of the Tennessee state legislature debated on whether or not to ratify the Amendment. [Ultimately,] the state senate voted to ratify, but in the state house of representatives, the vote resulted in a tie." [i] The tie-breaking vote was cast by Tennessee legislator Harry Burn, acting on advice from his mother. On August 18, 1920, with Tennessee being the 36th state to ratify, the 19th Amendment became law.

HARRY BURN

"Born and raised in the small town of Niota in Eastern Tennessee, Harry T. Burn became the youngest member of the Tennessee General Assembly when he was elected in 1918 at the age of 22." [ii] However, he truly distinguished himself when it came time to vote on the 19th Amendment.

"On August 18, 1920, Burn entered the General Assembly chamber wearing a red rose in his lapel – the symbol of the anti-suffragists. When a motion to table the Amendment came up, he voted for it. But the vote was a tie. Seeking to kill the Amendment once and for all, the anti-suffrage Speaker called for another vote on the Amendment itself. Burn's yes or no vote could pass it—or send it down to defeat." [ii]

Burn worried that a vote in favor of the Amendment would cause him to lose reelection that fall. But, his mother, Febb Burn, intervened. "A letter from her was delivered to him in the chamber. 'Hurry and vote for suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I've been watching to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet...Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt.'" [ii] Mrs. Catt was Carrie Chapman Catt, a suffragist, peace activist and co-founder of the League of Women Voters.

As Burn waited to vote, he had his mother's letter in his pocket. Despite his previous vote to table the amendment, he ultimately voted in favor of it. His explanation: "'I believe in full suffrage as a right. I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify. I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification.'" [ii]

[i] Tennessee and the 19th Amendment (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved August 17, 2020, from <https://www.nps.gov/articles/tennessee-women-s-history.htm>

[ii] Harry T. Burn (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved August 17, 2020, from <https://www.nps.gov/people/harry-t-burn.htm>

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