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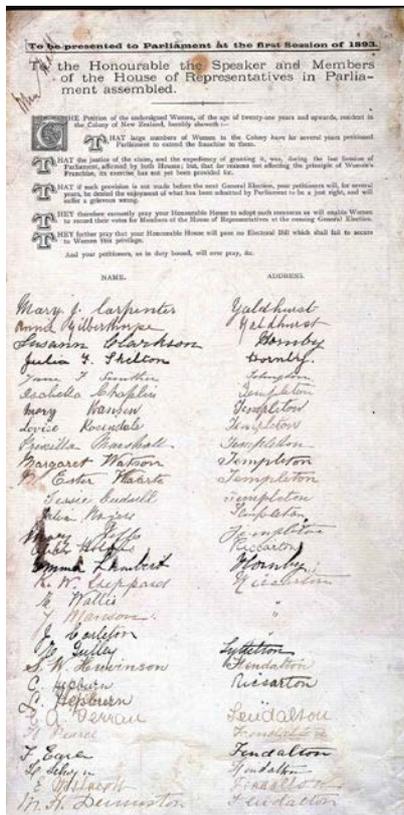
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# Women's Suffrage



The first page of the 1893 Women's Suffrage petition in the name of Mary J Carpenter and nearly 24,000 others. [Archives Reference: LE 1 1893/7a]

## Pathway to the Vote

In 1875 women ratepayers were granted the right to vote in municipal elections. Robert Stout introduced a bill in 1878 to give women ratepayers the right to vote in parliamentary elections, but this and other efforts in the 1880s failed.

Alcohol abuse became the unlikely ally of women's suffrage when the American-founded Women's Christian Temperance Union took root in New Zealand. Many women believed that banning alcohol would cause societal disorder to vanish. Much WCTU work focused on charitable activities but a franchise and legislative section was established for the suffrage campaign, with the inspirational Kate Sheppard of Christchurch as its leader.

Kate Sheppard was a skilled lobbyist, making an ally of politician John Hall who led the pro-suffrage group in Parliament. Inevitably, given that the women's suffrage campaign was strongly linked to the WCTU, it was strongly opposed by the powerful liquor industry.

Despite this, prospects seemed good during the Stout-Vogel ministry of 1884-87 with both leaders in support – to the point that a Women's Suffrage Bill introduced by Julius Vogel in 1887 got as far as a second reading, only to be defeated at the committee stage.

The 1890s saw effective work on both sides of the debate. Dunedin's Henry Smith Fish was a powerful enemy of women's suffrage, representing liquor interests in Parliament. He paid his anti-suffragist campaigners a bounty for signatures collected, but lost credibility when some signatures were found to be fraudulent. Offsetting his machinations were Harriet Morison, Marion Hatten and Helen Nichol who organised the first Women's Franchise League in 1892. Dunedin and Christchurch were hotbeds for the women's suffrage cause which rapidly spread to other centres. It also broadened its base to include women from all walks of life including many not allied to the temperance movement. And the key tool used by all lobbyists was collecting signatures by petition.

## Introduction

On 19 September 1893 New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant women the vote. It was a victory that was hard won. Suffragist activity ranged from local community agitation, to developing political acumen to take on male politicians opposed to the cause. Three petitions in the early 1890s, often taken on horseback into remote country settlements, were a key means of publicising the demand and putting pressure on politicians.

Archives New Zealand holds the two surviving Women's Suffrage petitions – 1892 [LE 1 1892/15] and 1893 [LE 1 1893/7a] (first page above).

If your ancestor signed, you can find and print a copy of your ancestor's signature in the Wellington Reading Room.

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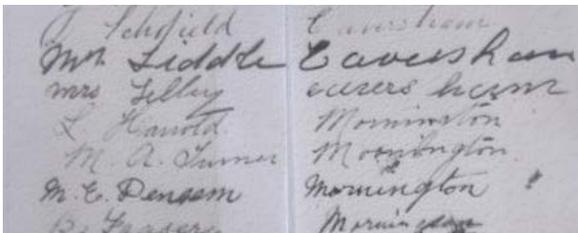
## Women’s Suffrage Petitions

In 1884 some 24 petitions for women’s franchise were collected and more followed. Most signatories were women but 1816 men signed petitions in 1884, and in 1893 Gerald Peacock of Devonport headed a petition of men supporting the right of women to vote.

In the 1890s the number of signatures escalated. Over 10,000 women signed in 1891, 18,724 in 1892 and 23,853 in 1893 (plus over 6000 in 12 smaller petitions including Nelson). The national petitions were organised by the WCTU Franchise Dept, led by Kate Sheppard. Other 1890s petitions held from 16 to 7687 signatures, but only the major ones of 1892 & 1893 remain.

Suffragists took the 1893 petition forms to some remote places but the distribution was geographically uneven. Canterbury and Otago, where the campaign was most active, were well represented, as was Wanganui. Other places were not, such as Hamilton, Gisborne, Tauranga, Marlborough, and the South Island’s West Coast. Signatures were collected in 179 towns and cities throughout New Zealand. Some Maori women can be identified. Once the forms were full they were sent to Kate Sheppard in Christchurch who glued them together then rolled them up for transport to Wellington.

The signatures reveal very little. Although they were supposed to include a full name and address, an entry could be something like ‘Mrs J Smith Mataura’. Few include an occupation, often recorded as ‘wife’ or ‘widow’. Women still defined themselves by the men they were connected to.



[Archives Reference: Micro 5357 Sheet 41 Dunedin]

The 1892 roll of signatures was submitted to the House of Representatives in the name of Margaret Lorimer, and the 1893 roll in the name of Mary J Carpenter. There was sense of theatre in the latter occasion. The story is that John Hall brought the 300 yards of petition into the House and, having introduced the Women’s Suffrage Bill, unrolled it down the central aisle where it gained pace until it hit the end wall with a thud. Only three members voted against its introduction.

There was still a hurdle to overcome. The new Premier, Richard John Seddon, opposed votes for women, and he intended the Upper House to vote it down. The Legislative Council was split and Seddon, trying to manipulate the vote, angered a few who would have voted against and they voted in favour. The New Zealand Herald commented: ‘it is hardly too much to say that the enfranchisement of the women has been accomplished by her enemies’. On 19 September 1893 Kate Sheppard received a telegram from Seddon to tell her the Governor, Lord Glasgow, had signed the bill giving New Zealand women the vote.

## The Petitions – then and now

Until 1975 the petitions were stored in cellars at Parliament. That year they were displayed for the first time at an exhibition celebrating women’s achievements. The 1892 petition [LE 1 1892/15 Micro 5081] was subsequently transferred to the then National Archives. The 1893 petition [LE 1 1893/7a Micro 5357] was displayed again in 1985 and afterwards the curator, concerned that it was in danger from rats and dust in the cellar, contacted National Archives.

Conservators’ work there revealed signatures that had been covered over when the petition sheets were pasted together and evidence that two copies were signed even though the second one did not survive. Once the pages were clear and in order it was decided the whole petition should be microfilmed. Then it was cleaned and treated by conservators at National Archives. The 1893 petition is now on public display in the Constitution Room at Archives New Zealand in Wellington. The 1892 petition was also microfilmed but is not on display.

## Finding an ancestor on the petition

The 1893 petition is displayed on a roll and so only a page or two can be seen. However the microfilms enable researchers to view and print out a facsimile copy of the signature of their ancestor(s) on any of the 546 pages of the petition.

This would not have been possible without the work of a dedicated team of indexers. Based in Masterton, the group produced a transcription and index of the 1893 petition. Signatures on the 1893 petition are accessed by surname in the card index in the Wellington Reading Room. Each card refers to the original microfiche numbers and as the petition was re-microfilmed later researchers need to use conversion books (located with the index) to find the correct frame number before viewing the microfilm. There is also a typed transcript of the 1893 petition.

In the Wellington Reading Room is a paper facsimile copy of the 1892 petition as well as a typed transcript of the same. The paper copy is somewhat faded and it is preferable to view the microfilm.

## Other Suffrage records

Archives New Zealand holds no known contemporary archives relating to the Women’s Suffrage Petitions, but there is a 1902 album of newspaper clippings from an overseas trip by Richard John Seddon in which, ironically, he was widely praised for being the leader of the first country to grant women the vote [Archives Reference: Seddon 3 32/34]. A wealth of material was collected during the 1993 Women’s Suffrage Centennial. One of the more unusual commemorations is a dress-the-Kate Sheppard-doll kit in which the suffragist is resplendent in her underwear complete with a set of clip on clothes. [Archives Reference: ABKH 7357 W4788/13 1365/4/93] Other records can be found searching for **women’s suffrage** on [www.archway.archives.govt.nz](http://www.archway.archives.govt.nz)