

The Life and Legacy of May Mann Jennings

The life of Mrs. May Mann Jennings is an important part of Clay County (FL) history and of the State of Florida's position in the history of our great nation. To this day, Jennings inspires and truly belongs in the Florida Women's Hall of Fame. Her two greatest contributions are the founding the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs and, as a vocal suffragist, publicly advocating for women's right to vote.

Old guard politicians simply refused to vote for the 19th Amendment. For example, Florida's Senator Park Trammel claimed, among other excuses, that it would interfere with states' rights and would prompt racial problems if African American females also dared to vote. Sadly, this was the position shared by many of his colleagues during that era. Fortunately, in nearby Jacksonville, May Mann Jennings was undeterred. The well-placed widow of former Florida Governor William Sherman Jennings and an active suffragist, she was emboldened to take action, founding the Florida League of Women Voters.

She also founded the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs of which our local Village Improvement Association (VIA) was the first and now oldest women's club in the state. Whether or not Jennings and the genteel women of the VIA in Green Cove Springs openly discussed or officially promoted women's suffrage is unknown. However, it is hard to imagine that private conversations among members took place without mention of this important topic. Certainly, these women bent the ears of their husbands and influential friends in positions of authority, acquiring assistance through their contacts and funding.

A new tide of support for the 19th Amendment soon moved across the state due to the efforts and tenacity of women like May Mann Jennings. The Florida Legislature passed legislation giving all Florida women the right to vote in 1921. Clay County women from all walks of life registered and showed up in large numbers in all eligible elections. Finally, Clay County and Florida women had a real voice in politics, thanks to May Mann Jennings and other heroes of the suffragist movement.

Jennings' portrait is one of determined beauty and is displayed with pride at the VIA Clubhouse and in our county's historic 1890 Courthouse. Jennings' presence there is a constant reminder of the powerful force for change she became - a woman who bravely blazed a trail for all women to follow.



MAY MANN  JENNINGS