Getting on the Map

American women and subversive cartographical practice

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Approaches to cartographic history have largely centered around a Cartesian perspective of space and a masculine tradition that celebrated the domination and exploration of new lands. This paper, instead, assesses the ways in which women have successful inserted themselves into this cartographic practice. By examining American women's use of maps, from tools for education and early nation building, to nineteenth-century biographical resources, and as promotional visuals of the suffrage movement, it becomes clear that women have utilized maps, geography, and cartographic vocabulary in unconventional ways throughout history. Maintaining critical perspective of feminist cartography also allows for identification of the oversight and exclusion of marginalized groups of women. This study of historic cartographic practices culminates in discussion of modern feminist geography and its efforts to represent women's diverse relations to space. In tracing the historical patterns of women's participation in cartography, as well as their contemporary implications, we find that women have subverted a traditional masculine narrative of space in a variety of ways.

In the world of maps and mapmaking, a masculine precedent is longstanding. Historically, cartography has been associated with ideals and imagery of exploration, conquering, male strength and bravery. Up until the very recent past the field of cartography was seemingly void of any contributions by women, a rare few being mentioned only fortuitously. As the classic text *The Story of Maps* begins, "[t]his is the story of maps, and the *men* who made them," emphasizing this overwhelming male dominance in cartographic practice.[1] Despite the limitations imposed by this masculine structure, many women successfully forged their way into the field. Even within a male-dominated tradition, American women historically participated in cartography, inserting themselves into the practice by using maps to advance their own unique aims, and ultimately, creating the basis of a modern feminist geography.

As early as the eighteenth century, young American women utilized maps as tools for education and nation building, albeit through non-conventional mediums that often make their usage overlooked. In various schools throughout the mid-Atlantic region, young women received instruction in needlework, making map samplers that enhanced needlepoint skills and also furthered their geographical education (Figure 1). The 1808 needlework map created by Mary Franklin, for example, clearly delineates the territories and regions of the world with different colors of silk thread, and demonstrates a deep awareness of geographical space. Geographer Judith Tyner's scholarship focuses on this unique use of maps by American women, establishing that through the needlework map, women were "educated in cartography and geography, and being provided with the knowledge and vocabulary to participate in discourse about their new nation."[2] Through needlework mapmaking activities, women were effective participants in both cartographic tradition and the development of national identity, during a period of newly realized independence. This desire to articulate a distinctly American ideology and character was achieved by female mapmakers, who contributed to early spatial and geographical representations by using readily available mediums.

As Tyner argues, because many girls were taught to read yet not to write, these map samplers also offered unusual value as physical products of female education.[3] Despite limited opportunity to make tangible contributions to an academic body, these needlepoint samplers signified women's active participation in emerging concepts of nationhood. Geography and maps became central aspects of women's education and, after the Revolutionary War, they served as important tools in the formation of a new society and nation. In the silk embroidery depiction of "Wisdom Instructing Youth in the Science of Geography", created in the United States around 1800, viewers find an image that celebrates the centrality of maps in female education (Figure 2). The scene depicts a group of young women encircled around a large atlas, with the figure of Wisdom as their educator, suggesting the possibility that women could maintain a role in the fields of cartography and geography - as students but also as valued contributors.

Despite this early precedent of cartographical practice, significant contributions by American women are often overlooked as they extend beyond contemporary norms of format and medium. As Tyner also suggests, many of the maps made by women did not adhere to traditional notions of cartography. They are ultimately

1 Judith Tyner, "Mapping Women: Scholarship on Women in the History of Cartography," *Terrae Incognitae,* 48, no. 1 (April 2016): 7-14.

2 Christina Dando, "Stitching the World: Embroidered Maps and Women's Geographical Education," *Geographical Review*, (December 2015): 14.

3 Judith Tyner, 18-19.

"dismissed because they are not legitimate-seeming maps or because they do not appear to contribute to the canon of cartography… [they are] at best, considered folk cartography."[4] These present-day cartographical frameworks deny significance to women's use of maps in early America, neglecting their critical educational function but also in support of national identity.

For one woman in particular, a strong advocate of women's education, map usage became foundational to understanding American history. As founder of one of the nation's first institutions for female education and author of numerous school texts as well as the first historical atlas, Emma Hart Willard (1787-1870) is considered a trailblazing figure in the field of education.[5] But apart from recognition of her pedagogical contributions, is the way she used geography and space to communicate a uniquely American narrative. As historian Susan Schulten writes, "Willard was the first to draw so extensively on the visual, graphic, and cartographic dimension of geography to advance history and nationhood."[6] Beyond using maps in a traditional geographic manner, Willard's cartographic work aimed at organizing information and history in alternative ways. As the age of American discovery and expansion declined through the end of the nineteenth century, cartography moved from a focus on conquest towards one of organizational and thematic mapping.[7] Schulten views Willard's series of 'chronographers', created as graphic measurements of time and history, as a product of this shift. Willard was among the very first to create a national narrative in the image of a map, utilizing spatial terms. Her 'Tree of History,' for example, plotted periods of United States history in an illustrative and visually understood manner, as branches emerging from the base of a thick trunk (Figure 3). A variation of the traditional map medium, this work visually suggested the unity of United States history. Emma Willard, then, was an example of a female cartographer who used maps in revolutionary ways, providing a spatial framework to encourage national memory, identity, and education.

This pattern of map usage continued to evolve into the nineteenth century, as educated American women repurposed maps as a biographical tool. Women in the American South became a part of an evocative cartographic culture, in which maps served as a narrative tool for their personal experience. As J.B. Harley writes, "The map is interpreted through the private code of memory… it recreates for the inner eye the fabric and seasons of a former life."[8] For women of the American South, the map served as a medium to convey emotion and memory. Geographical vocabulary and metaphors translated complicated feelings of isolation, and became a means of emotional expression.[9] Scholar Penny Richards explores the concept of emotional cartographic culture at this time, and examines the lives of various women who participated in biographical, domestic map use.

One individual who put this to practice was Ellen Mordecai, born in Virginia in 1790. Educated in geography as young girl, Ellen used maps later in life as a means of coping with separation from her beloved

4 Judith Tyner, 7-14.

5 Susan Schulten, "Emma Willard and the graphic foundations of American history," *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007): 542.

6 Susan Schulten, 550.

7 Susan Schulten, 555.

8 J. Brian Harley, "The Map as Biography: Thoughts on Ordnance Survey Map, Six-Inch Sheet, Devonshire CIX, SE., Newton Abbot," *Map Collector* 41 (1987): 20.

9 Penny L. Richards, "'Could I but Mark Out My Own Map of Life': Educated Women Embracing Cartography in the Nineteenth-Century American South," *Cartographica* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 1-17.

brother, Solomon.[10] When he moved to Philadelphia in 1819, it was through maps that "Ellen found a window to the places where Solomon now travelled and worked, a window through which she might somehow know his world real time."[11] Ellen was one of many women for whom maps became a means of connecting with loved ones, as a medium to share biographical narrative. This use of maps in a personal, emotional manner demonstrated a deviation form a Cartesian norm, in which accuracy and logic retain a primary emphasis of cartography. Instead, these American women inserted themselves in cartographic practice with entirely different aims, using maps as a tool to represent their own emotive experiences and to connect with others.

Beyond educational or biographical purposes, American women also turned to maps and cartography with political intentions, as a means of advancing the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century. During this period, women adopted cartographic rhetoric in their efforts to secure the vote, and also to persuade others of this right. Maps were already an aspect of everyday life for many women, especially with the advancement of higher education and increased reference to geographical articles or maps in magazines and other forms of media. Christina Dando suggests, then, that the upper and middle class American women who made up the suffrage movement were already well indoctrinated in cartographic culture, and that their use of maps in a political realm marked a natural progression.[12] Dando focuses in particular on the map created by Bertha Knobe, which first appeared as "Map of the United States Showing Status of Woman's Suffrage Legislation," in *Appleton's Magazine* in 1907.[13] The map is characterized by its presentation of the suffrage movement as an "uprising" which would "diffuse" across the United States. This medium of capturing the suffrage message proved to be both popular and accessible, prompting the continued distribution of suffrage-map variations in subsequent years. A map printed by the National Woman Suffrage Publishing Company, for example, highlighted the progress of women's suffrage across North America on a whole, also bringing Canada and Mexico into focus alongside the United States (Figure 4). The 'full suffrage' provinces in Canada received great attention here, coded in white, and viewers were probed with the question "How long will the Republic of the United States lag behind the Monarchy of Canada?" Dando also references a similar suffrage map published in *The Woman's Journal* in August of 1911, classifying it as a thematic map that depicts a political progress which otherwise remained invisible.[14] This distinction is an important one to note, as it exemplifies the way in which women utilized these maps in revolutionary ways. The suffrage map functioned as a visual medium to represent a spreading feminist ideology and political aim, in stark contrast to historical map practices that were rooted in masculine appropriations of space.

In depicting the progress of the suffrage movement through a map of the United States, an intangible goal becomes visualized. The suffrage map offers an especially compelling example how feminist causes were promoted through manipulation of the masculine cartographic medium. Map images like *The Awakening* proved the emotive and persuasive power that cartography wielded as a tool of the suffrage movement (Figure 5). Using the visual vocabulary of geography, this image represented the female vote as an emancipatory force set to seize the nation, from west to east. In spite of the overwhelming patriarchal precedent within the field

10 Penny L. Richards, 6.
11 Penny L. Richards.
12 Christina Dando, 224.
13 Christina Dando, 222.
14 Christina Dando, 225.

of cartography, the suffragettes' appropriation of the map medium for political aims invited female viewers to "place themselves on the map, to reflect on their state, literally and metaphorically."[15] The suffrage map, then, became a medium with which women visually identified and assessed their own political standing, prompting their participation in the movement.

Even from a contemporary standpoint, our understanding of American suffrage is often filtered through a geographical lens, making the map a logical tool for expression and promotion. As Karen Morin discusses, the progression of the American suffrage movement can be characterized by a strong geographic pattern in its diffusion of suffrage legislation from the west, or in an alternative view, in the way early Anglo-American political values and culture spread from the east.[16] Morin uses a geographical perspective to more effectively examine the forces of suffrage specific to Western America, including political, economic, and demographic influences. Yet also worthy of consideration, despite the successful circulation of suffrage ideology attributed to "Western women," was its failure to include "well over 200,000 Native Americans and Mexican Americans, the two largest non-Anglo groups west of the Mississippi River."[17] Although the suffrage movement was promoted, and later interpreted, through a geographical lens, this perspective may also be flawed in its oversight of minority groups of women.

While convenient to broadly classify the suffrage map as a symbol of female empowerment, attention must also be given to its contradictions. Dando's work, for example, also describes the suffrage map as providing a moral landscape of the early twentieth century that functioned in a marginalizing capacity. The map's monochrome shading can be tied to underlying issues of race in the United States during this period. Its legend made overt allusions to white as emancipatory, as the light of knowledge, and presents it in stark contrast to the darker regions of the map – overwhelmingly limited to the American South (Figure 6). This map, while serving as a tool of the suffrage, was also demonstrative of the movement's complex relationship to issues of race. Even beyond aims of suffrage, perhaps women's use of cartography, emancipatory in some capacities, has also failed to support the advancement of historically disadvantaged groups of women.

In addition to these connections to race and ethnicity, women's use of maps and participation in cartography also functioned in relation to class. A clear pattern exists, for example, of map usage by middle- and upper-class American women of, or those of higher education and greater financial means. From use in early America at select women's schools, to biographical resonance within affluent Southern culture, and even in suffrage promotion – a movement led largely by middle and upper-class women – the division along class lines is evident. Applying this nuanced approach is essential to avoid generalized celebration of an entire group when tracing the role of women in cartography. While American women were largely successful in inserting themselves into the masculine tradition of cartography and utilizing maps to fulfill distinctive needs, a critical lens allows for clearer understanding of the historical and contemporary implications of their actions.

Feminist geography continues to face challenges of race and class today, but cartography also provided an important visual method for continued research and democratizing efforts. Although the same masculine

15 Christina Dando, 224.

16 Karen M. Morin, "Political Culture and Suffrage in Anglo-American Women's West," *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 19, no.1 (Fall 1997): 18.

17 Karen M. Morin, 19.

biases that historically defined cartography have created a clear absence of thematic maps representative of women's unique spaces and experience, counter-efforts developed.[18] The need for contemporary cartography that portrays women's everyday life and perspective, to counter this historical precedent, has become more widely acknowledged. Feminist cartography has attempted to shift focus from acquisition of space to a mapping of personal experience. As Van Den Hoonard describes, the goal is to engage a map-reader with a visceral, colorful, and engaging representation that goes beyond passive retention of boundaries or locations.[19] A traditional Cartesian view of space, that has long determined a logical, calculated, and masculine cartographic practice, "fails to represent space in terms of relations, networks, connections, emotions, and other nonstandard patterns or movements that characterize women's life-worlds."[20] Women historically subverted Cartesian cartographic practice to create and use maps in ways that fulfill needs of identity, memory, and empowerment. Yet, so often these forms of participation are overlooked as unconventional. The issue is not of content, but rather of context. In the field of cartography, so embedded within a historical precedent, that context often "presume[d] a male outlook as normative."[21]

Of critical significance for contemporary feminist geography is the inclusion of marginalized groups of women. In an effort to make cartography a more democratic practice, greater representation of women's diverse occupied spaces, experiences, and their interpretations is essential. The strength in feminist geography lies in its ability to bring to the foreground otherwise silenced perspectives of the self, the body, nature, work, social changes and networks, and represent them in a visual manner. While traditional cartographic practices are often directly linked to a dominating political state identity, feminist geography, instead, creates democratizing space for other marginalized groups to be represented. Through insertion into a historically masculine sphere, feminist geographers must consider numerous groups and adopt a variety of methods to truly "get at the less formal space where hidden and marginalized, but no less important, political identities and processes are formed and reformed."[22] Despite the success that woman have had utilizing cartography within a masculine tradition, the field of modern feminist geography continues to face challenges in achieving widespread representation, as well as acceptance of non-traditional understandings of space.

A historical participation by American women in the field of cartography is evident, despite challenges in the face of a masculine precedent and traditional understandings of space as logical, calculated, and to be dominated. Even in 'unconventional' ways, women did participate in cartography, and utilized maps in a subversion of traditional types to fulfill their own needs. From needlework maps that functioned as a means of education and nation building, to the concept of a narrative or biographical map, and the American suffragettes' appropriation of the map as a visual representation of their political strife, women undoubtedly put cartography to use in unique forms. Although American women's participation in cartography offers an empowering history,

18 Nikolas H. Huffman, "Charting the Other Maps: Cartography and Visual Methods in Feminist Research," in *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation,* eds. Paul John Jones, Heidi J. Nast, and Susan M. Roberts (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 255-83.

19 Will C. Van Den Hoonaard, *Map Worlds: A History of Women in Cartography* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 277.

20 Will C. Van Den Hoonaard.

21 Will C. Van Den Hoonaard, 282.

22 Joanne Sharpe, "Doing Feminist Political Geographies," in *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography,* eds. Lynn A. Staeheli, Eleonore Kofman, and Linda J. Peake (New York: Routledge, 2004), 98.

one worthy of recognition, it simultaneously overlooked certain minority groups —an issue that continues to be addressed currently. Contemporary feminist geography builds off this historical model in challenging Cartesian cartographic practice, and continues to champion for representation of women's diverse range of experiences and understandings of space. The struggle to remain on the map still persists.

Figure 1 - Needlework picture, worked by Mary Franklin. Pleasant Valley, NY; 1808. Silk embroidery with watercolor and ink on silk. Source: *Common Destinations: Maps in the American Experience*, online exhibition hosted by the Winterthur Museum. http://commondestinations.winterthur.org/the-national-map.

Figure 2 - Wisdom Instructing Youth in the Science of Geography, United States; about 1800. Silk embroidery and paint on silk ground. Source: *Common Destinations: Maps in the American Experience*, online exhibition hosted by the Winterthur Museum. http://commondestinations.winterthur.org/the-national-map.

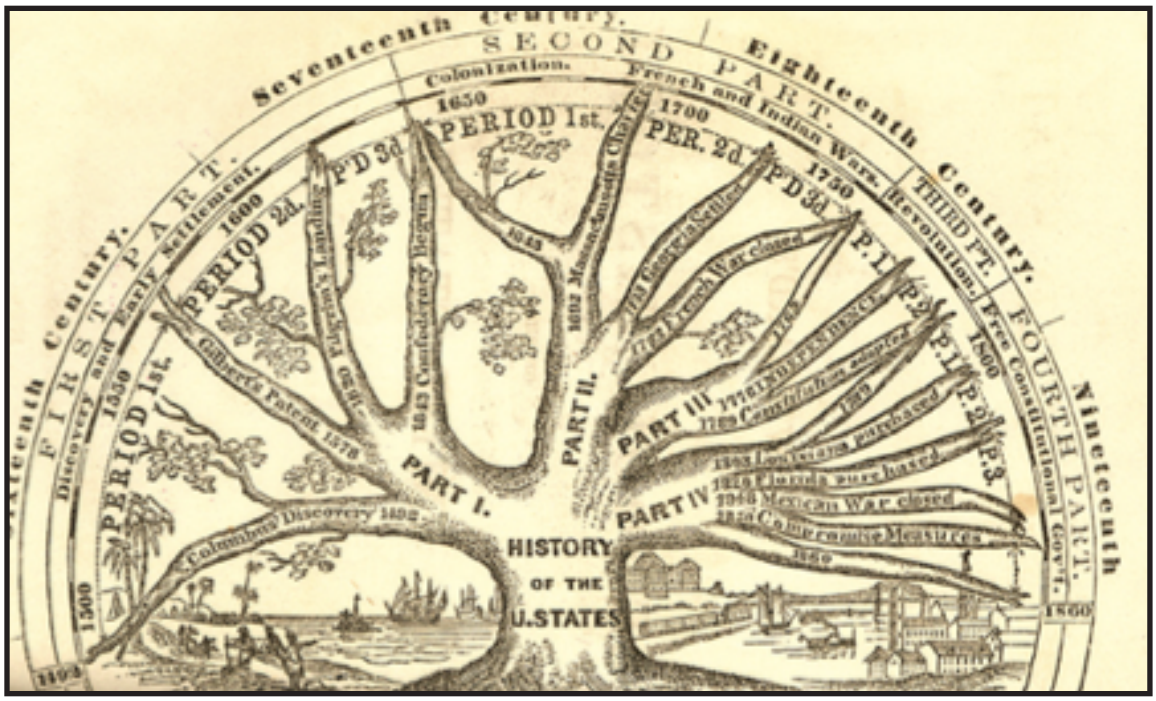

Figure 3 - E. Willard, *Abridged History of the United States, or Republic of America* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1860). Source: Susan Schulten, "Emma Willard and the graphic foundations of American history," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 33 (2007): 56.

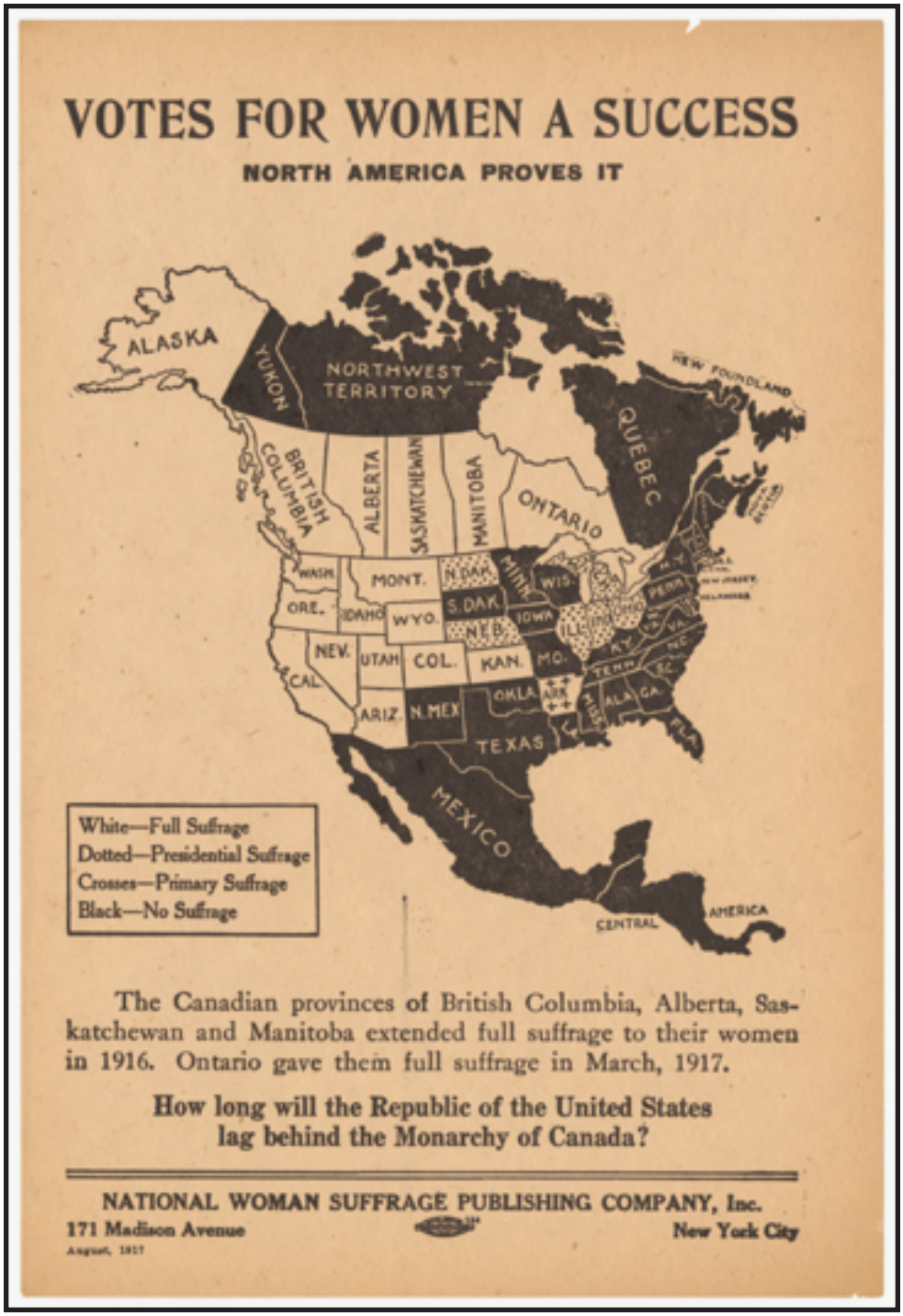

Figure 4 - Votes for Women a Success: North America Proves It, National Woman Suffrage Publishing Co., 1917. Source: Cornell University Library Digital Collections. https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3293932.

Figure 5 - Mayer, Henry, *The Awakening*, 1915. Source: *Puck Magazine*, February 20, 1915, pp. 14-15. Cornell University Library Digital Collections. https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:8245859.

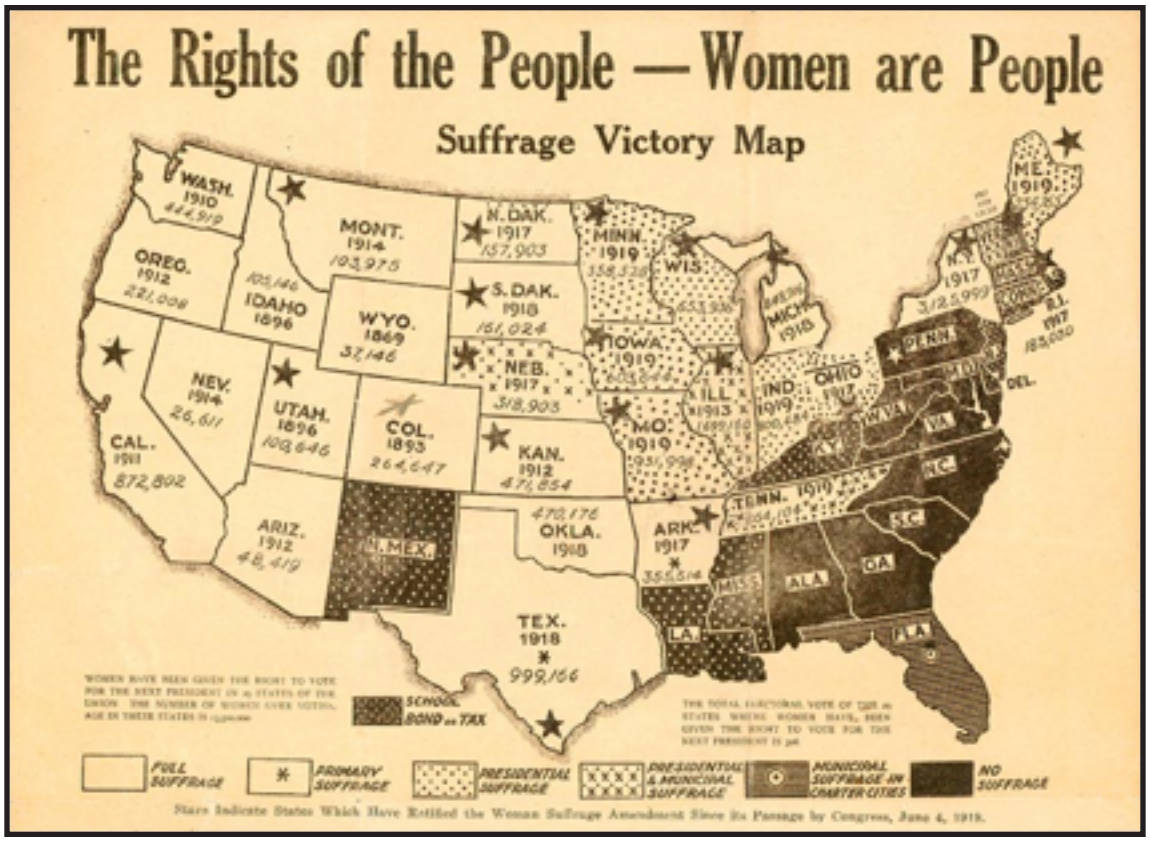

Figure 6 - "*The Rights of the People - Women are People*. *Suffrage Victory Map*," 1920. Source: Equal Suffrage League of Virginia Papers. Library of Virginia. https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/destiny/votes/victorymap.htm.

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