


# Gainesville played a key role in ***securing votes for women***

BY PEGGY MACDONALD

**A** century ago, Gainesville played a significant role in securing women's right to vote. The city was home to one of Florida's most powerful advocates for equal suffrage, and also one of its most influential opponents.

From 1913 to '14, Gainesville resident Caroline LaFontisee McCollum-Palmer served as president of the Gainesville Woman's Club, then known as the Twentieth Century Club. She might be best known locally for establishing the Junior League of Gainesville. However, from 1919 to '21, McCollum-Palmer was president of the

Florida Federation of Women's Clubs. At the time, the federation was the largest women's organization in the state, with more than 10,000 members. McCollum-Palmer later served on the board of directors of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, an international service organization. Although published histories of the Gainesville Woman's Club and Florida Federation of Women's Clubs downplay the organizations' involvement in the suffrage movement, the minutes of the meetings of the federation's board of directors and annual state conventions tell a different story.



Sarah Matheson traveled extensively during the Cold War. She is pictured in China in 1971.  
[MATHESON HISTORY MUSEUM]





Chris Matheson with an unidentified woman at his downtown Gainesville law office ca. 1910

In 1915, suffragists lobbied the Florida Legislature to enact legislation to enfranchise women. Two equal suffrage proposals failed in committees, according to Elizabeth Taylor's history of the women's suffrage movement in Florida. However, the legislature granted equal suffrage in the municipality of Fellsmere in St. Lucie County, signaling the start of women's suffrage in the state, Taylor observed.

In 1917, the legislature debated a proposed amendment to the state constitution that would extend the suffrage to Florida women. W.H. Marshall of Broward County argued in favor of the proposed amendment, noting that equal suffrage had worked well in western states such as Wyoming, where women had been eligible to vote and run for public office since 1869, when Wyoming's first territorial legislature passed an equal suffrage bill. Christopher

Matheson of Alachua County — who was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1917 after serving as Gainesville's mayor for a record eight years — argued against equal suffrage, maintaining that the western states' laws were no better than laws in other states, according to Taylor. The measure failed to pass the House.

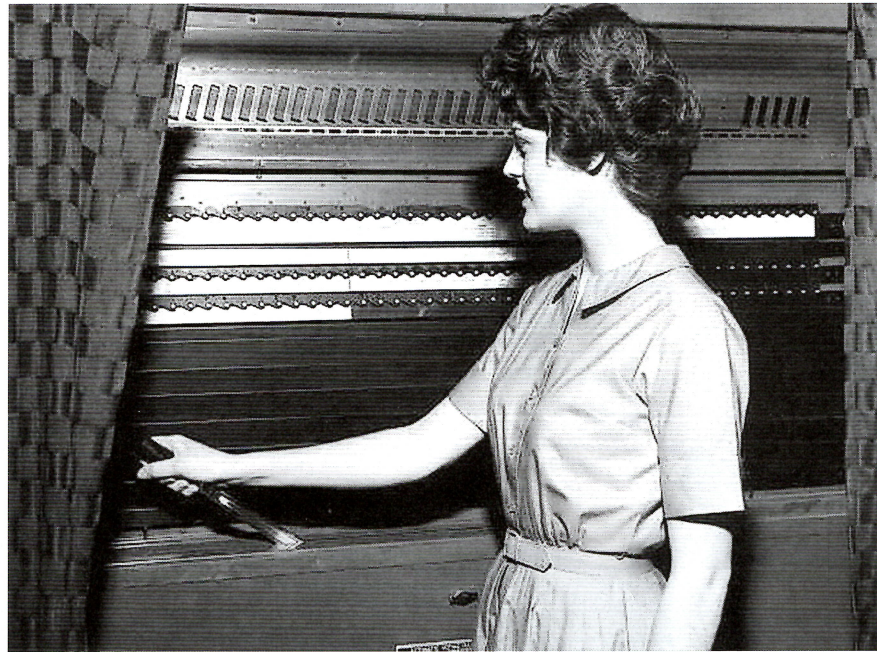
At the time, Matheson was a bachelor. In 1933, he married Sarah Hamilton, who likely enlightened him. Sarah had a master's degree, served as president of the Alachua County Historical Society, co-founded the Matheson History Museum, and became the first female elder at First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville. She preserved her husband's family home, the 1867 Matheson House, the crown jewel of the Matheson History Museum complex.

Equal suffrage proposals continued to fail at the state level, but the legislature

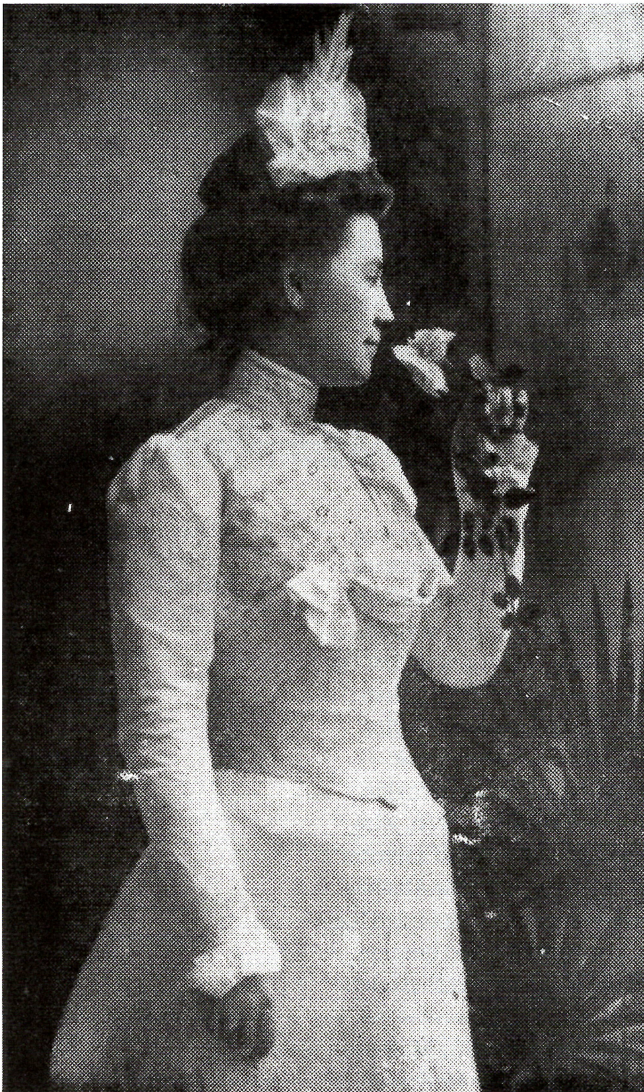




**ABOVE:** This 1948 photo is from Caroline LaFontisee McCollum's wedding announcement. She married Jay Holland Palmer after the death of her first husband.



**RIGHT:** An unidentified woman at a voting machine. [STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA]



Florida first lady May Mann Jennings in 1901, at the start of William Sherman Jennings' first term as governor. [STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA]

approved several measures to establish it at the municipal level. In Alachua County, Archer elected a woman to the city council. On July 10, 1919, the Gainesville Daily Sun reported that Pearl Groves Maddox's election demonstrated that Archer had taken an advanced position on the question of women's suffrage by electing one of its best businesswomen to the city council. Maddox was married to Hitup Maddox, owner of the Maddox Foundry, Archer's oldest surviving industry.

"In the election, Mrs. H. Maddox, authoress and business woman, active in social and civic life, led the ticket for a place on the council," The Sun noted.

Maddox was the author of the novel "The Precipice," according to the April 24, 1917, issue of The Florida Alligator.

By 1919, federal support for women's suffrage reached the highest levels, with President Woodrow Wilson reversing his previous position on the issue and offering his support for the proposed 19th Amendment, which would prevent denying or abridging the right of citizens of the United States to vote "on account of sex." Not all Florida politicians agreed, however. U.S. Senators Duncan Fletcher and Park Trammell fought to preserve white supremacy, warning that equal suffrage would extend the right to vote to black as well as white women.

The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs responded to Fletcher and Trammell by telegraph, urging them to reconsider their vote against the federal suffrage amendment, according to the minutes of the Feb. 4, 1919, board of directors meeting. The federation's board of directors — under McCollum-Palmer's leadership — followed this appeal with a June 19 communication requesting that Fletcher



and Trammell vote to pass the draft 19th Amendment, named the Susan B. Anthony Amendment for one of its greatest champions, who died in 1906.

"The women of these United States have been called upon from the beginning of our country's history to give to the utmost to defend the cause of Liberty and true Democracy, and have never failed to respond loyally to every call of patriotism," the federation's message read. "The women of these United States have demonstrated their fitness to exercise the privileges, as well as bear the burdens of the human race. Now we, the Board of Directors of the F.F.W.C. do hereby call upon our senators in Congress assembled to have done with subterfuge and unreasoning opposition and to pass the Susan B. Anthony amendment to the Federal Constitution."

The federation secretary sent this message to Fletcher and Trammell and also directed the press secretaries of women's clubs across the state to publish it in the Federation Page, a regular feature in local newspapers across the state. This was not the first time the

federation had appealed to the senators' conscience. On Nov. 22, 1918, the federation passed a vote to censure Fletcher and Trammell for failing to support the 19th Amendment.

"We feel that these senators do not properly represent all of the people of our state and are ashamed that they should be so lacking in the progressive spirit of the times," the minutes from the Nov. 22, 1918, annual federation convention stated.

Despite Florida politicians' reluctance to support equal suffrage, Congress passed the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919. Two days later, a front-page article in the Gainesville Daily Sun optimistically reported that Florida might become the first state to ratify the amendment. During the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs' 25th annual convention, held Nov. 18-21, 1919, the federation issued a special appeal to Gov. Sidney Catts to call a special session of the legislature to ratify the amendment. However, the Florida Legislature failed to take action on the issue for another 50 years. In 1969, Florida symbolically ratified the 19th Amendment.

On Aug. 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment went into effect across the nation. Former Florida first lady May Mann Jennings, who served as president of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs from 1914 to '17 and was elected as the first vice president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1919, co-founded the original Florida chapter of the League of Women Voters to educate and empower the state's newly enfranchised women.

Nonetheless, African American voters' struggle to exercise their right to vote continued, despite the existence of the 15th and 19th Amendments. Gainesville Daily Sun articles on the fight for women's suffrage in 1919 and 1920 were surrounded by articles on lynching and race riots. In 1951, NAACP organizer Harry T. Moore and his wife, Harriette, were killed after a bomb exploded under their bed on Christmas Day. Moore was credited with facilitating the registration of more than 116,000 black voters. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally secured African American men and women's right to vote, 45 years after the 19th Amendment was ratified. 