

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

ADA JAMES:  
CONSERVATIVE TO RADICAL WOMAN IN LIFE AND POLITICS  
1877-1919

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HISTORY 489: RESEARCH SEMINAR  
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

DECEMBER 2006

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will discuss the changes in women's lives in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the main focus on the political and social life of Ada James. While the political life of Ada James is covered in depth, the social life of Ada James has not been explored until now. The evidence shown in this paper will prove how through the influences of both her family and friends, Ada James progressed from a conservative woman to become one of the most radical women of her time, politically and personally. The sources used will be personal memoirs written by and to Ada James and the James family, and show how lives of women were improved through the women's suffrage movement by giving women a voice in politics.

## INTRODUCTION

Achieving suffrage for women was a long and hard process in the United States. Each state had its own obstacles to overcome to achieve suffrage, and progressive groups to help accomplish their goals. Women had been fighting for the right to vote starting with the First National Woman's Suffrage Convention that took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was added to the United States Constitution in 1920. One of the progressive women who fought for suffrage was Ada James. The women of the suffrage movement were the women who were going to fight for what they believed in, and were not going to settle until they got what they wanted for women in the United States.

Seneca Falls was the first step of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States that got women to stand up and start to take notice of the problems in their lives. The book entitled *One half the People: the Fight for Woman Suffrage*, edited by Harold M. Hyman, starts with the Seneca Falls convention in 1848. A small newspaper attracted three hundred women to "discuss the social, civil and religious rights of women."<sup>1</sup> The women who showed up for this convention were upset with the suffrage movement, or lack thereof, because they did not have the vote when even the worst men at the time had more rights than the women. The Declaration of Sentiment, which resembles and was modeled after the Declaration of Independence, was the declaration which stated the argument that women were not allowed to vote, but were still being governed

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<sup>1</sup> Anne F. Scott, and Andrew M. Scott, *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott Company, 1975), 9.

without their consent. The woman argued that they were one half of the population so they should have the same say as the other half.<sup>2</sup>

In the book of *Liberal Feminism in the United States* by Suzanne Marilley, she explains that there were women, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who wanted radical changes in their own lives and those of other women. At the convention they wanted changes in marriage, the political system, and society.<sup>3</sup>

The change that is seen over time with the writings on the Seneca Falls convention is that it goes from a basic overview of the actual convention, to what the women actually wanted out of the convention, besides the right to vote. The women wanted a change in their lives from being just housewives; they wanted to be women who had their own voice.

During the 1870's in America the common stereotype was that women were supposed to clean the house, have babies, and do so with a smile on their face. One man named Dr. Edward Clarke felt so strongly about women not getting a university education, he wrote a book entitled, *Sex in Education*. In Dr. Clarke's book, he explains that a higher education would be too draining for women because it would pull blood away from their reproductive organs. The final outcome for these educated women would be infertility, invalidism, and mental collapse.<sup>4</sup> This opinion was strongly debated with the help of a well respected physician named Mary Putnam Jacobi. Jacobi did research on educated woman and found that the woman's health was not impaired by

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<sup>2</sup> IBID., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne M. Marilley, *Women Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Woloch, *Early American Women A documentary History, 1600-1900*, (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing, 2002), 313.

higher education. The findings by Jacobi were needed by women as a way to stand up to the ideals of men.

In the United States the concept of women taking control of their lives was on the rise with women joining religious and government groups at a remarkable rate. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was a group that many women joined. Since the Temperance Union's founding in 1873 the active group had worked hard to establish a platform of bringing about prohibition, peace, social purity, and class issues in cities. By the 1890's the Women's Christian Temperance Union's membership had exceeded 150,000 women.<sup>5</sup> The women's clubs were also starting to shift towards a more civic and social issues while still focusing on the self-improvement and education aspect that drew many women into the groups in the first place. One club leader stated that the women's clubs were "a mutual improvement society, which should educate (women) and lead them out into better hope, nobler aspirations, and larger life."<sup>6</sup>

Just as the suffragists had started to organize, so did their opposition. In *One Half the People*, the anti-suffragists were called the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, and in 1911 the women were organized in twenty states.<sup>7</sup> Liquor dealers stood behind the anti-suffragist movement because they felt that by giving the vote to women it would bring about prohibition. Textile workers were also stood behind the anti-suffragists, because women who had the vote would put an end to child labor. Many men were also worried because women were going to try to clean up the government, and that meant that they would look too exhaustively at the shady issues of the government at the

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<sup>5</sup> IBID., 335.

<sup>6</sup> Woloch, 335.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, and Scott, 25.

time, such as how they used or achieved the campaign funds.<sup>8</sup> Some men felt that the downfall of family would also be a problem with woman gaining the vote, and having the vote for women was not worth the risk. “Why should anyone capable of motherhood want so trivial a right?”<sup>9</sup>

In *One Woman, One Vote* the anti-suffragist point of view was exposed in the article entitled “Better Citizens without the Ballot” by Manuela Thurner. In this article there was a story about how in Massachusetts the anti-suffragist held a mock trial to prove woman did not want the vote, and hoped that no women would show up. The anti-suffragist got their wish with a horrible turn out for women. This surprised the suffragists at the time by how small the number of woman who showed up to support and participate in the vote.<sup>10</sup>

Today the women of the suffrage movement in the first part of the twentieth century are known to have been radical and full of life. The famous women who appear in the readings of woman’s suffrage include; Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, Alice Paul, and Lucy Burns. These women were out in the world fighting for woman’s suffrage on a national level, but what about the local level? The grassroots and other local scenes such as local school boards were also instrumental in getting the vote out for women. The women who ran these organizations were as important as the ones on the national level, if not more important because they fed the fire for the national campaigns.

When thinking about the suffrage movement it seems logical to think of the women who ran these organizations to be radical, assertive women who were ahead of

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<sup>8</sup> Scott and Scott, 26.

<sup>9</sup> IBID, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Wheeler, *One Woman, One Vote*, (Newsage Press, 1995), 160.



their time in dealing with the ideas of men, and holding their ground. But what influenced these women to become assertive and find their own ways in life in a time when women were supposed to be submissive and in the home? The life of women at this time was in the home, so how could they have been so far ahead of their time when there was usually not enough money, or time spent away from the family farm to educate women in politics?

One woman who had many influences in her life to become educated and find her own voice in life was Ada James. This paper will explore her personal and political lives through influences of her family and friends in a time when women were not looked at as political or radical. This paper will also explore the influences in Ada James' life which changed her from being a leader in a conservative suffrage group, to a leader in the most controversial political suffrage group in the nation.

## **ADA JAMES AND THE INFLUENCE OF HER PARENTS**

Ada James was born in Richland Center, Wisconsin in 1876 to David G. James and his second wife Laura Briggs. David G. James' first wife, Ada Briggs, Laura's sister, died in 1869. Although the death of his first wife, Ada, had left David James heartbroken, he found love again with Laura Briggs. David James had proposed marriage several times to Laura over two years, but to no avail.

Laura was more interested in the new movement for women that was taking place around her, and wanted to become part of the movement. Laura Briggs was a strong, independent woman who fought for important and controversial issues of the time such as birth control, sexual freedom, socialism, and woman's suffrage.<sup>11</sup>

While the suffragists were being opposed by the anti suffragist there were still women who were not going to let the opposition bring them down, such as Ada's mother, Laura Briggs, who fought for suffrage.

Laura Briggs married David G. James in 1873. Together they had a son who died a year after his birth in 1875. After his death they had the first of three daughters in 1876 and named her Ada. Beulah James was born in 1878, and last was Vida who was born in 1887. Their mother and father were both very political, with Laura getting the family involved early in politics.

Ada's father, David G. James, aware of the political spark inside of Laura Briggs, also became involved in politics. After serving in the Union Army during the American Civil War he was appointed to be one of the scouts for the United States to find the exact locations of the battles. David James found and marked the location of the Battle of

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<sup>11</sup> Brief history of the James Family, Box 1, Folder1, in the Ada James Papers.

Shiloh. After David was finish with his scouting job he focused on local government which eventually led to his run for senate.<sup>12</sup>

Laura Briggs was one of the founders of the Richland Center Woman's Club in 1882. The main goal of this club was to work for the goals of women's suffrage. With the Woman's Club being the first in the state it attracted Susan B. Anthony to speak at Bailey's Opera House in 1886.

Ada James would have been ten years old and was growing up in a time that had two very different views of women and the roles they should be playing. To see her mother out taking an active role in politics in her small town showed Ada that women were supposed to be, and it was okay, to be out fighting for what they believed in. It showed that women should not be sitting around waiting for men to take control of every aspect of the lives of women.

With Ada's father also taking an active role in politics it showed her that not all men who were in the business of politics were trying to keep women down. Without her father being involved in politics Ada could have never acknowledged the fact that some men are true family men and trying to give their family what was best for their futures.

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<sup>12</sup> Brief history of the James family, Box 1, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

## **ADA JAMES AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE OTHER ADA**

Ada James was raised in a very political family and had many very active political friends. In her memoirs there are many letters from a woman who calls herself “the other Ada.” The other Ada lived in Milwaukee and had an ongoing correspondence with Ada James. The other Ada had invited Ada James to a dance that was going to be a big event in the town. Ada James wrote a letter saying that she would not be joining her. The other Ada wrote back and explained that she did not understand why she would not be joining in on the fun, she explained that she knew Ada would be having a struggle between “the two selves” of Ada.<sup>13</sup> The other Ada knew that Ada James was going to be going against her feelings toward dancing and her Christian beliefs. The other Ada told Ada James that “I do not mean that I think it would be better for you to attend dances than not to do, so if you think dancing wrong you should not be so fearful for yourself. You are strong.”<sup>14</sup>

The other Ada’s letters to Ada James would also beg her to come to Milwaukee and join her “where the action was.”<sup>15</sup> The other Ada would write letters telling Ada James about all the strikes that she took place in. In March of 1896 the other Ada took place in a bus strike in Milwaukee that had a slogan “I can walk, can you.”<sup>16</sup>

Another letter Ada James received from the other Ada was one that talked about how if Ada James was in town that the two of them would be doing so many fun things

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from the other Ada to Ada James, December 1894, Box 3, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from the other Ada to Ada James, December 1894, Box 3, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from the other Ada to Ada James, December 1894.Box 3 Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from the other Ada to Ada James, March 1896, Box 3 Folder 2 in the Ada James Papers.

together. Ada James could not have helped but to think of how much she would want to join her cousin out where the things were happening. Ada James was sitting in a town that was away from all the action that she wanted to be part of, but she did not know how to let herself be part of all the big city action to help fix the social problems.

Women at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were focusing on social problems in cities as well as the Suffrage Movement. In the year 1896 Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city of 236,101, compared to the population of Richland Center, Wisconsin, that was 1,819 the amount of political, social, and environmental campaigns were of greater number and importance in Milwaukee. For Ada James it would have been impossible for her to read about the activities in the larger cities without feeling some longing to join in. She was raised by her political parents as a woman who should be part of the woman's movement, and she would not be part of the movement unless she was in a larger city.

If Ada James read about how much she could be involved in the women's movement and change the world, then why did she not go to Milwaukee and join her friend the other Ada? One of the possible answers to this questions could be the current love in her life; Charles Bingham Cornwall. In a letter to Ada James from the other Ada in the end of 1894, she asked James if she ever talked much to C.B.C. "I do not think you need be afraid to ask him anything you think right, for he is genuinely good."<sup>17</sup> The other Ada got Ada James' mind focused on issues of political activities and on issues of love. The other Ada tried to get Ada James to open up more and be the active woman that Ada James was destined to become. She felt that Ada James was always going to be reluctant to act the way she wanted because of her Christian faith.

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from the other Ada to Ada James, December 1894, Box 1 Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

## **ADA JAMES AND THE INFLUENCE OS CHARLES BINGHAM CORNWALL**

Charles Bingham Cornwall started to invite Ada James to the opera or to other social events around the beginning of 1895. Cornwall wrote letters to Ada James explaining to her how he would love to take her to shows and keep her company.<sup>18</sup>

Ada would join Charles around to social events which seemed to cause a stir in the community. Letters were written to Ada's parents telling them that they should watch their daughter in the company of a certain gentleman from the Bingham family.<sup>19</sup>

Around this time Ada graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She wanted to become a teacher and stay in Richland Center. She was a woman who had a college education, and in the United States women with college degrees were starting to not follow the standard of getting married. There were surveys that were taken from college educated women that found the less women were getting married and those that were getting married were having less and less children.<sup>20</sup> For Ada, who was part of the "new woman" generation of college graduates, she was trying to find her own voice in her decisions regarding the proposal of Charles Cornwall.

In the beginning of the correspondence Ada is more than willing to write back right away and join Charles at all social events, but still has hesitation of her feelings towards Charles. Cornwall is trying to get answers out of Ada and started to worry about their engagement. In one letter Cornwall asked Ada "do you remember you have always been uncertain of yourself and what you would do and took considered time for

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Charles Cornwall to Ada James, February 1895, Box 3, folder 2, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous letter to David James, 1895, Box 3 Folder 1 in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Woloch, 335.

reflection? To be married at once would spoil this (the engagement) all right away.” “I would still like to see you but understand you need time to come into the confidence over the issue.”<sup>21</sup>

Charles wrote that Ada is not sure of her self and is not saying what she means. Charles made Ada realize that she was a strong woman who should not have to beat around the bush. Charles was the best and worst thing that happened to Ada. He treated her as an equal by letting her decide on the wedding arrangements, and she became an equal to him.

In June 1896 Ada talks about the idea of teaching again, and Charles decides that this was an attempt to put off the engagement even longer. He explains that in the beginning he was okay with the fact that Ada was stalling in the engagement but now he is starting to get anxious as to what Ada’s thoughts were about the outcome of their engagement.<sup>22</sup> He wants her to come and live with him and be his housewife. Ada is starting to rebel away from the general stereotype of woman at this time. She is not jumping into marriage or quitting her job to be a wife to Cornwall. She is becoming a woman who, like her mother, is becoming more radical in her views.

In July of 1896 Ada and Charles were starting to fight in their letters which is only a month after her friend, the other Ada, started to write Ada letters telling about the strikes she was involved in and the opportunities that were present for Ada James in Milwaukee.

By September 1897 Ada is teaching again. In a letter from Cornwall he explains that he knew she did not want to be his wife, and he did not want her to be mad at her.

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Charles Cornwall to Ada James, June 1896, box 3, folder 2, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Charles Cornwall to Ada James, June 1896, box 3 Folder 2. in the Ada James Papers.

He explained to her on September 12, 1896 that he would respect her decision and would wait in case she changed her mind.<sup>23</sup> After this letter there is not another correspondence from Cornwall. Ada James chose not to follow the marriage ideal and instead chose to follow the “new woman” way of life with other women college graduates. Ada James chose to follow her gut in life and decided that marriage would not be for her. Although there were many other marriage proposals in her life, she never accepted and chose to dedicate her life to community causes.

The relationship between Ada James and Charles Bingham Cornwall was a decisive moment in the life of Ada James. The beginning of the relationship Ada James was still trying to find out what path she was going to take in her life. She figured out that her path in life was going to be one that was active and that she was not going to be a housewife. She followed the more radical view of women, although it took her a few years to figure out that it was the way she was going to take.

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Charles Cornwall to Ada James, September 1896, Box 3, folder 2, in the Ada James Papers.



## ADA JAMES AND THE INFLUENCE OF HER SISTERS

For Ada James being the oldest sister to both Beulah and Vida helped her find her place in life. While she was the oldest her sisters always had a way of shining the light of themselves, and the community as well. Letters found in Ada James personal memoirs have helped to see how her sisters' lives changed Ada James and made her more liberal in her letters and actions.

Beulah James was born two years after Ada James in 1878. Although Ada and Beulah both attended the same grammar school, the grade reports show the grades that Beulah got were always a grade or two above Ada James.<sup>24</sup> Beulah James was also very involved in the school choir. There are many invitations to see Beulah James sing around 1896 at Baileys Opera Hall. Beulah James got married in 1901, but shortly after she died. The letters do not explain the death but have many cards of sympathy for her quick death.

The year 1905 was also a tough time for the Briggs family. Laura Briggs passed away within years of her middle daughter. The outpouring of support for the family and letters to Ada seemed to have helped the family survive. Ada stayed with her father and helped him around the house, and also helped out with the youngest James daughter, Vida.

Vida James was born in 1887 and was said by to have been a beautiful girl. In a letter to Ada James from Charles Bingham Cornwall, he explains how Vida is very beautiful and not at all plain. Vida James left home in 1905 to attend Milwaukee Downer College. Vida was constantly sending letters to Ada James and her father about how much things cost and for them to send money. Many letters included the poem;

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<sup>24</sup>Report Card for Ada James, 1895. Box 3, folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

“roses are red, violets are blue, please send money PDQ!”<sup>25</sup> Ada was working on a teacher’s salary at this time and helping to support her father as well as herself. The money was by no means in abundance and it had to be difficult to send money.

During the time that Vida was in Milwaukee she would be invited to visit with the other Ada and would tell her sister Ada James about the visits and tea that they would share. For Ada James to be sitting in Richland Center at this time must have been difficult. She had received letters from the other Ada asking her to come out to join her and have fun, and now Ada James was sending money for her little sister Vida to take place in the events she had passed up the years before. Ada James was starting to get restless and needed a change, so she decided to join her father on a trip to Europe.

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Vida James to Ada James, 1906, Box 4, folder 2, in the Ada James Papers.

### **ADA JAMES AND HER POLITICAL LIFE**

Ada James went with her father to Europe around 1908. She had no husband to tie her down because she figured out before that she was not going to be anyone's housewife. There is not much written or known about the time Ada James spent in Europe with her father, but when she returned she took an active role in politics by joining the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association. She took a stand on suffrage and decided that she needed to do something in her life and join her sisters and friends in the limelight.

The influences of her parents, sisters, the other Ada, and Cornwalls influenced James to join the Suffrage Movement of Wisconsin. The suffrage organizations that Ada James became a member of changed over time when her ideas of how to tackle the subject of suffrage changed. The groups she joined started with the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association. Ada's mother Laura James had been a member until her death in 1905, and had paved the way for Ada to join. Ada James joined the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association while Reverend Olympia Brown was the president.

The contributions of Olympia Brown to the women's suffrage movement date back to the early days of the suffrage movement. She was an advocate for American Educational Research Association with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in 1868. Brown was also gave speeches that were critical of the Republican Party. She wanted to show how the Republicans were not doing anything for the suffrage movement. Reverend Brown was an activist who also paved the way for Ada James to get involved in politics.

**ADA JAMES AND THE WISCONSIN WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE  
ASSOCIATION (WWSA)**

While a member of WWSA a lot was accomplished by Ada James who now had teamed up Rev. Brown for the suffrage movement. The two women together got out the voice of women's suffrage in the state of Wisconsin, but just how to get the voice out in Wisconsin meant two different things for Brown and James.

Ada James felt that using public methods to get the word out about suffrage would be the best way to accomplish her goal. Ada James would feel that the automobile tours would be the best way to get publicity while Brown felt that the old method of having well known public speakers was best for the organization. She felt that automobile tours would not get the cause anymore leverage in Wisconsin than the speakers.<sup>26</sup>

Brown also felt that woman would lose their femininity by attracting too much attention to them selves. The woman would be admitting they were not in the home and that they were running around during the day talking to men and trying to get their voice heard. Ada James felt that this was the way to get the vote for women because it would show they were serious and not going to take a back seat.

Reverend Brown also could not understand the idea of woman getting paid to work on the suffrage campaign. She felt that each woman should want to work for the cause at her own expense. The gain for each woman would come at the end of the movement when each woman had the vote in the United States.

With this reasoning of paying woman to work for the cause Ada James also felt differently from Reverend Brown. Ada James herself did not get paid for her work, but

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<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Brown to Ada James, July 23, 1911, Box 6, Folder 1, the Ada James papers.

she felt that men would get paid for their help, so if women chose to get paid than that was alright by her.<sup>27</sup>

Ada James and Reverend Brown disagreed about many things regarding the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association but the final disagreement between the two had to deal with the upcoming annual National American Woman Suffrage Association of 1912. Ada James felt that the national group should think about holding it's convention in Milwaukee. James saw the potential impact of holding the convention in Wisconsin that would bring support from the state to the national level. The leaders of the national suffrage movement could bring ideas and new tactics to the state of Wisconsin; along with money.

To Ada James' dismay the president Reverend Olympia Brown felt just the opposite. Brown felt that the women from the national campaign would come and spend their money on entertainment and would not get anything accomplished for the movement.<sup>28</sup> Brown could not see the benefit of having more women around getting nothing done. She did not want the national movement to come to Wisconsin. The convention did not end up coming to Milwaukee in 1912, and proved to be the final straw in the disagreements between Brown and James.

With all the disagreements between Brown and James while both were members of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association it was only a matter of time before the different views of the two women caused a problem. Many of the younger generation of woman suffragists that was coming up after Ada James felt that her tactics would be better to get a stronger voice out about the suffrage movement in Wisconsin. Ada James

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<sup>27</sup> Ada James to Jane Addams, May 28, 1912. Box 6, Folder 2, the Ada James papers.

<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Brown to Ada James, July 23, 1911, Box 6, Folder 1, in Ada James Papers.

also knew that something had to be done to change the conservative ways of Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association.

By 1910 the membership of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association had dropped to an all time low of under 70. Ada James saw her chance to branch out with the younger, less conservative suffragists of Wisconsin. On April 4, 1911 Ada James along with other members of Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association formed the Political Equality League with Ada James as their president.

## **ADA JAMES AND THE POLITICAL EQUALITY LEAGUE**

Although Ada James respected Reverend Olympia Brown, she felt that the organization of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association was not going to progress the way it needed to with the current direction of the movement. Ada James felt that having two parties working together for the cause would be better than one. She wanted to work towards the same goal and try less conservative and more radical, or public, means of getting there.<sup>29</sup>

Ada James with the support of her father and other women who supported the Political Equality League took the role as the new president for Wisconsin. Under James' leadership there were many public appearances made by women who were working towards the goal of suffrage. Speakers from the Political Equality League would go to any county they were asked to and give speeches about the positives of women's suffrage.

The Political Equality League under Ada James highly favored the automobile tours, something that would have been looked down upon by Reverend Olympia Brown in the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association. The automobile tours were started when someone from the community donated a car for the organization to use. The women of the Political Equality League would then drive around to county fairs and busy places in towns to stop and give speeches. They would do this to spread word about how suffrage would impact the lives of woman and men. The women of the Political Equality League had to be careful when speaking about suffrage to some parts of Wisconsin for the fear that there would be people still set in the ways of not allowing women's suffrage.

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<sup>29</sup> Ada James to Mrs. Brown, March 29, 1911, Box 5, Folder 2, in the Ada James papers.

The Political Equality League in Wisconsin worked their hardest around summer of 1911 speaking out at county fairs and other local get functions across Wisconsin. During the summer the suffragists were speaking at around three towns or functions a day.<sup>30</sup>

These speeches alone helped communicate more than the flyers of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association under Brown because if a person saw a flyer on the ground and see that it is about women's suffrage and they did not agree with it they are not going to read any of more of the pamphlet. The speeches were also more useful because if people in the community could not read than they would also not get the message on women's suffrage. The speeches that were being given were there so everyone could hear them; you could not help but hear them.

When the temperature started to get colder and the county fairs were done, Ada James had to think of something that would get the attention again to keep working towards the goal of women's suffrage. Ada James called on the help of her father to request the time of Senator LaFollete and his wife to speak at functions. Senator LaFollete would bring a speech about the Republican Party for the suffragists to listen to first, but most would stay for after his speech when Mrs. LaFollete would give a speech on the importance of women's suffrage.<sup>31</sup> For Ada James to be going national in her attempts to bring about suffrage is starting to show her leaning towards even more radical ways of going straight to the top of the government.

The national committee for suffrage the National American Woman's Suffrage Association was starting to feel the tension building in Wisconsin and felt that something

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<sup>30</sup> Work report in Wisconsin by Harriet Grim, 1911, Box 7, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Mrs. LaFollete to Ada James, September 8, 1912, Box 14, Folder 4, in the Ada James Papers.



needed to be done to bring the groups of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association and the Political Equality League back together under one heading. This did not sit well with either Reverend Olympia Brown or Ada James, but the two women worked together, despite their very different views, and together they worked towards getting the vote for suffrage passed in the vote of 1912.

Although the two suffrage groups worked together to bring about the change for women's suffrage in Wisconsin the vote on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1912, was defeated by a landslide. The total votes were 135, 545 in favor of women's suffrage while 243, 419 were against.

Although this was an upset for both parties it still showed the effects of having speeches at public functions and other ways of getting the word out on the women's suffrage. Without any form of advertising there would have not been as many people out in the voting booths with men or women.

After the vote in 1912 the amount of activity that took place for women's suffrage in Wisconsin started to trickle away. The memberships declined again and most activities were put on hold. Sensing the trouble the two organizations under Brown and James came back together under the heading of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association. Because of the lack of support, the two groups came back together under a new president named Mrs. Theodora Youmans.

Ada James was still involved with the organization on the Legislation Committee, and still helping the movement. Around 1914 James seems to be favoring the national interest for the right of suffrage more than that of Wisconsin's local organizations and

showing interest in the Congressional Union, or the Woman's Party as it later became known.

## ADA JAMES AND THE CONGRESSIONAL UNION

The Congressional Union was an organization of woman that were radical with their tactics for getting out a voice across to the national members of congress, as well as President Woodrow Wilson, about the issue of Women's Suffrage. The only goal of the organization was to pass the Federal Suffrage Amendment. The women of the Congressional Union would not stop at anything to achieve their goal.

Many women in the United States were starting to take a stand on suffrage for themselves, but some felt that the movement was taking too long and tougher actions needed to be taken. In *One Half of the People*, a focus was on the militant tactics in the Woman's Party against the government. The side of the North American Women's Suffrage Association was presented to the state, where they thought that this type of behavior, and radical ways, were slowing down the process for woman's suffrage.<sup>32</sup> The argument made was that the militant tactics made the congress get down to business by discussing the vote for women. They men feared if they did not get to discussing suffrage the women would continue to picket in front of the White House, and going on hunger strikes in prisons to oppose the government.<sup>33</sup> This would be an embarrassment for the government that the men in power felt they could avoid by at least discussing the issue at hand.

In *One Woman, One Vote*, the article in the book entitled "Alice Paul and the Triumph of militancy," is about the militant movement of woman's suffrage. Paul wanted the movement that was in the hands of men to change. The militant movement was developed from the fact that men were not reacting to woman, and needed women to

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<sup>32</sup> Scott and Scott, 41.

<sup>33</sup> IBID., 41.

stand up to them and take a stand against their ways.<sup>34</sup> The article spoke of how Alice Paul came back from England with a new way of thinking of suffrage in the United States for women, and was going to do it.

In the same book the other side of the fight for suffragist was explained through the story of Carrie Chapman Catt in the article by Robert Booth Fowler. He explains how “Catt was particularly eager to distance the movement from unpopular causes or radical tactics that could undermine the steady growth in support for woman suffrage between 1910 and 1920.”<sup>35</sup>

With all the controversy surrounding the Congressional Union and the militant tactics they were using to achieve the vote, the small town girl in Ada James wanted to branch out and try her hand in the National Level, but felt resistance from her previous party, and its president, Theodora Youmans.

In 1917 Ada James wrote a letter to Mrs. Youmans explaining her position in the suffrage movement;

“It has been understood for some time that I was working with the Woman's Party, the W.S.A., or any organization which seemed to be doing effective work. I have believed for years that it is as deadly to suffrage to have one organization as it would be to politics to have but one political party. I have gone all over this before so I think my position is clearly understood and that everyone of the W.S.A. board knows that I was converted to the methods employed by the Woman's Party. I believe so earnestly that they are doing good that I am humiliated and ashamed to be out of Ocoquan [the workhouse near Washington, D.C., where Suffragette pickets were imprisoned]. You do not see it in this light but I am sure you know me well enough to believe that I am true in my conviction always--except perhaps in this Ocoquan matter, I cannot bring

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<sup>34</sup> Wheeler, 279.

<sup>35</sup> IBID., 285.

my weak self to leave my father, but I am making no excuses for myself, believing as I do I should be there.”<sup>36</sup>

Although Theodora Youmans strongly disagreed with Ada James’ decision she replied to Ada James with a letter stating;

“We are sorry to have you leave our organization but I know that your heart hasn't been with us for a long time. Such being the case a separation is probably best. There is no question in the mind of anyone who knows you that you are doing what you think to be right. I must confess that it seems to me you would not be benefiting yourself or anyone else by going to jail so I am glad that your father is acting as a deterrent in that direction. Be assured always of my warm personal feeling for you. We may work along different channels for a little while but I fancy that we shall all be working together for certain civic ends when the Federal Amendment is finally passed and endorsed.”<sup>37</sup>

These exchanges of letters between the two women bring out in the open different tactics that the organizations of the Wisconsin Woman’s Suffrage Party and the now Woman’s Party. Theodora Youmans was not going to have anything to do with militant tactics or picketing outside the White House, she felt that the way to get the vote was to work with the government.<sup>38</sup> Youmans felt that the Woman’s Party was going to hurt the cause for women’s suffrage in the end.

These letters also tell a tale of how Ada James could not leave her fathers side to join the fight that she wanted so badly to win. Ada James was trying her hardest to be part of the suffrage action, but her family was holding her back. She came as far as joining a radical group of women trying to accomplish the end goal of suffrage, but she still had a piece of her tied down with family obligations.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Ada James to Theodora Youmans, November 20, 1917. Box 1, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Theodora Youmans to Ada James, November 22, 1917. Box 1, Folder 1, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Diary entry, Friday, October 26, 1917, Box 28, Folder 2, in the Ada James Papers.

Although Ada James was a fan of the militant tactics and procedures of the Woman's Party, she also had a limit to what she could witness in the party. Some women burned the President's speeches and an effigy of President Wilson after it was defeated in 1919. Ada James describes these actions in her diary as, "too much like mob violence."<sup>39</sup> She was not going to go far enough to terrorize the government.

One way that Ada James was very helpful in The Woman's Party was when she would speak at meetings and urge the issue of suffrage as something important for everyone. At one meeting of The Woman's Party James is quoted as saying;

"Today we find that we desperately need the ballot and we expect to be given it without further delay. For that reason we insist that President Wilson call at once a special session of congress to permit the Republicans to have a chance to pass the suffrage bill which was defeated by the last Democratic congress."<sup>40</sup>

Social reform was also a way that Ada James was helpful in The Woman's Party. The positive affects on the lives of women and children was a big concern of James'. In a diary entry Ada James was quoted as saying that "it is unjust to hold mothers responsible for the morals of their children while denying them a voice on municipal conditions making up their environment."<sup>41</sup> The idea of helping mothers and their children out stems back to Ada James' upbringing. Her family was very supportive of her attempts to become equal in the eyes of the government.

For Ada James the Woman's Party was the outlet she needed to use her skills for the good of all women. She went into the Woman's Party as a woman in conflict with

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<sup>39</sup> Diary entry, Tuesday, February 11, 1919, Box 28, Folder 4, in the Ada James Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Diary entry, newspaper article, May 2, 1919, Box 28, Folder 4, in the James Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Diary entry, newspaper article, May 2, 1919, Box 28, Folder 4, in the James Papers.

the conservative leadership of the Political Equality League and came out a member of the most radical suffrage group of the time.

Ada James was the woman to get most of the local support for the national cause of suffrage. The Woman's Party lobbied the Wisconsin Congress in 1919. The vote was ratified in Wisconsin so they were then able to ratify the Federal Amendment. Wisconsin was the first state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment on June 10, 1919. Ada James' father, David James, was made a messenger to be responsible to carry and deliver the papers of ratification to Washington.

There is a lot of debate over this fact partly to do with the fact that Illinois was also sending a messenger to Washington to ratify at the same time. There was a problem with the wording of the Illinois bill, and they were turned away before Wisconsin. Nevertheless, Wisconsin was the first state to officially be recognized as to have ratified the vote.<sup>42</sup> After Wisconsin many states followed the example, with the thirty sixth state of Tennessee. On August 26, 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment for women's suffrage is ratified, the woman of the suffrage movement had achieved their goal.

After the vote was achieved for women the suffrage groups in Wisconsin did not stop with their active lifestyle. The organizations were lumped together and then broken into the League of Women Voters. The group was under a new president named Mrs. Ben Hooper. The goals of the new league were that of American citizenship, protection of women in industry, child welfare, social hygiene and the food supply demand.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), 328.

<sup>43</sup> Newspaper article, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Box 28, Folder 4, in the Ada James Papers.

## CONCLUSION

Ada James would not have been able to understand the importance of the suffrage without the help from her parents or sisters. The “other Ada” was a woman who was doing what she believed in and made Ada James realize that the fight could be won with help from woman of Wisconsin. The influence of Charles Bingham Cornwall was to let Ada James find her own self and realize that she was a strong independent woman who was not going to fall into the role of housewife; she was going to break the stereotypes from women in the United States.

Ada James’ contributions to Women’s Suffrage were normally under the radar, but her contributions influenced the women’s groups in Wisconsin. Without these contribution from Ada James women would not have been able to find their two separate voices to better bring about suffrage for women in the United States.

The Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association was a starting point for Ada James to get her feet wet in the Suffrage Movement, but when she was in the organization she felt that the tactics were not pushing the idea of women’s suffrage hard enough. She was going to be a leader for the cause that she cared so deeply for.

When Ada James changed her focus to the National Level and the passing of the Federal Amendment, she joined the national fight under the Woman’s Party. She was a strong influence in the local aspects of running a national campaign for suffrage. Even after the Amendment, Ada James would still stay active in the political works of the state of Wisconsin.

Ada James stayed in Richland Center, WI after the amendment passed and joined local school boards and helped low income children. While working with the children



Ada James helped to establish the first Children's Bureau in the state of Wisconsin.<sup>44</sup>

Ada James was a woman who found great strength in helping others. She called on the inspiration from her family and friends to keep pushing on with her life in her personal and political adventures. Ada James died in 1952 after illness struck her quickly. Her influence on the Women's Suffrage Movement is still today widespread and the greatest gift she gave of herself to others.

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<sup>44</sup> Newspaper article, November 11, 1918, Box 28, Folder 4, in the Ada James Papers.

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