

Ellen Clark Sargent

By Bernard Zimmerman

2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment to the US constitution, granting women the right to vote. Nevada County was the birthplace of the Amendment, as its parents were Aaron and Ellen Sargent. Much is known about Aaron, one of the most prominent sons of Nevada County: publisher, politician, Congressman, Senator and Ambassador. Much less is known about Ellen, one of the most prominent daughters of Nevada County. This is her story.

Ellen Clark was born in Massachusetts in 1826. As a teenager in Newburyport Massachusetts, she fell in love with Aaron Augustus Sargent, one year her junior, an aspiring journalist and politician. Both taught Sunday school in the local Methodist Church.¹

In 1847 Aaron left Ellen to begin the journey which in 1849 brought him to Nevada City to search for gold. He built a four room house on Broad Street and in early 1852 returned to Newburyport where he and Ellen were married on March 15. They arrived in Nevada City that October. Ellen wrote of her arrival:

"My good husband had before my arrival provided for me a one story house of four rooms including a good sized pantry where he had already stored a bag of flour, a couple of pumpkins and various other edibles ready for use."²

While Aaron prospered in business, politics and the law, Ellen raised three children, daughters Ellen (b. 1854) and Elizabeth (b. 1857) and son George (b. 1860). She was always an advocate of women's rights and in 1869 founded the Nevada County Woman's Suffrage Association.³ Soon afterward, she became president of the California Woman Suffrage

¹ Enss, Chris, COWGIRL LIFE (23 Oct. 2018), Wild Women Of The West: Ellen Clark Sargent, viewed on 21 January 2019 at Cowgirlmagazine.com.

² Id.

³ Harris, Gloria G.; Cohen, Hannah S. (2012) Women Trailblazers of California: Pioneers to the Present, pp. 64-8.

Association.⁴ In 1869, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association, to advocate for a constitutional amendment granted women the right to vote.⁵ Ellen soon became its treasurer.⁶

Susan B. Anthony was a close friend of Ellen's, and a frequent guest in the Sargent homes in California and Washington D.C. A sense of the depth of their relationship can be gleaned from the over 30 years of correspondence between them.

For example, In 1872, Aaron was elected to the United States Senate and the Sargent family moved to Washington. Susan accompanied the Sargent family on their trip across the country. In Wyoming, the train stalled in a snowstorm. Wrote Susan:

"...young Georgie Sargent got out to explore, slipped on the snow and broke his arm. Watching the painful bone-setting of her little son's arm, Ellen fainted."⁷

Ellen lived in Washington on and off, for 12 years. When Aaron was appointed Minister to Germany, she accompanied him to Berlin.⁸ She enjoyed her time in Europe, and the ministerial life, though she candidly wrote George:

"...I expect to go to the Court Entertainment of January 19. Your mother will appear in a dress decollete, without sleeves, such is the tyranny of court fashion, but still, it seems best that I should go. Of course, I can stay away, but if I go I must conform to the custom".⁹

⁴ Silver, Mae, Ellen Clark Sargent, viewed on Aug. 17, 2019 at foundsf.org.

⁵ The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: National protection for national citizens, 1873 to 1880. Rutgers University Press. 2003. p. 30. ISBN 9780813523194; Mead, Rebecca J. (2004), How the Vote was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868-1914. NYU Press. p. 38. ISBN 978-0-8147-5676-8.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

⁸ See March 17, 1883 letter from Ellen to Susan in Sleeve 59-60 of Box 4 of the Sargent Papers (hereafter Sargent Papers) at the Searls Historical Library in NevadaCity.

⁹ Ellen to George, Jan. 6, 1883, Sargent Papers, Box 2, Sleeve 15-6.

Upon her return to the US, she wrote Susan:

"I assure you it seems great to be once more on American soil, and I believe myself to have a more just appreciation of my country since my sojourn in foreign lands. We are far from being a perfect people or a perfect government, but it seems to me there is more hope of our growing to the full stature of men and women here, than of those who are under the conditions of the old world".¹⁰

Aaron died in 1887. Ellen returned to San Francisco, where the Sargents had bought a home before he was elected to the Senate. She continued her activities with the California Woman Suffrage Association and the National American Women Suffrage Association.¹¹ She also helped found the Century Club, San Francisco's first woman's club, still in existence.¹²

Ellen and Susan continued to correspond. Over the years, Ellen shared some of her doubts and concerns:

"How is it with our countrywomen? Have we any influence at all in shaping the legislature of this country? Have we any power hidden or acknowledged? In short have women anything to do with the present campaign? Will anybody do anything for us? Will we do anything for ourselves?"¹³

Susan often gave advice:

"You need a score of good organizers... in as many different counties every single day - but while you may not find organizers - you must be able to find good canvassers with the petitions - it needs intelligent women - who can give the reasons for our position - paid agents as a rule

¹⁰ Sargent Papers, July 29, 1884, Box 4, Sleeve 67-68.

¹¹ This organization resulted from a merger of the American Woman Suffrage Association with the National Woman Suffrage Association.

¹² Silver, Mae; Cazaly Sue (2000) *The Sixth Star*, p. 29.

¹³ Sargent Papers, July 29, 1884, Box 4, Sleeve 67-8.

- aren't good for much – because they do not understand the great principles upon which our claim rests."¹⁴

in

At the age of 74, Ellen became a tax protester. Her position was simple: why should she have to pay taxes to a government that wouldn't let her vote.¹⁵ She lost her court case, but continued to file tax protests.¹⁶ Her actions caused other wealthy women taxpayers to also protest. Finally in 1911, she led the campaign for a successful California referendum which amended the California constitution to give women the right to vote.¹⁷

Ellen died during the referendum campaign. The City of San Francisco held its first public memorial for a woman, during which it was said: "It was her strong conviction that the ballot, in the hands of women, would help to redeem the world."¹⁸ State flags were flown at half-mast.¹⁹

In 1878, Aaron while a U.S. Senator had proposed a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote, It got nowhere for 40 years. It was reintroduced in 1919 and enacted in 1920 as the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution. It is Ellen's eternal memorial.

¹⁴ Sargent Papers, undated, Box 4, Sleeve 3-4.

¹⁵ San Francisco Chronicle, Nov. 28, 1900, p. 7.

¹⁶ San Francisco Call, Nov. 28, 1900, p. 7; May 23, 1901, p. 7.

¹⁷ Silver, Mae; Cazaly Sue (2000) *The Sixth Star*, p. 29; *Suffragette Tax Resister Ellen C. Sargent* (28 Nov. 2008), viewed on Jan.21, 2019 at sniggle.net.

¹⁸ Chartier, JoAnn; Enss, Chris (2000) *With Great Hope: Women of the California Gold Rush*, p. 77.

¹⁹ Id.