

Engaged Citizen Corner

A brief but spectacular history of the Brookline League of Women Voters

League of Women Voters of Brookline

LWV Brookline Annual Meeting: June 19 from 6-9 p.m. at Function Hall, Latvian Church, 58 Irving St. @ High St., Brookline.

At the annual meeting on June 19, the Brookline League of Women Voters will be celebrating its 99th birthday. Part of the festivities will include a brief history of the League by Greer Hardwicke, preservation planner for the town for more than 30 years.

Hardwicke's diligent research has corrected the accepted version that the Brookline League was formed 75 years ago in 1944. She is working on filling the gap in the history between 1920 and 1944 and will tell us more on June 19.

The League had its origins in the Brookline Equal Suffrage Association, which had been established in 1895 to advocate for women's right to vote. And even before that, the members of the ESA had acquired their experience, passion and administrative skills from their years of advocating for the end of slavery. Members of the ESA were both women and men, and ranged from former abolitionists to newly minted suffragists. In support of their cause, they held lectures, fundraising bazaars, house parties, parades and open-air rallies.

The Brookline League of Women Voters came into existence on Sept. 20, 1920, at a meeting in the Brookline Public Library about one month after the passage of the 19th Amendment. As its incorporators explained, "The League has been formed to help us to take part intellectually in both the local and National Government. It is nonpartisan and aims to unite women in a group of citizens whose purpose will be to promote education in citizenship and to support improved legislation."

Education and civic participation had long been a clarion call of the suffragists and was taken up by the newly formed organization. Barely two months after the League's inception, a membership campaign was started to pursue the goal of non-partisan civic education, which continues today.

In November 1921, the Brookline League published a pamphlet on town government, “The Brookline Primer,” probably the first local League in Massachusetts to do so.

Over the years, the League has held talks and public forums on topics from town affairs to international affairs. Along with meetings about town Meeting warrant articles and state ballot referenda: in 1921 it sponsored the observance of Armistice Day; in 1945, a talk on “The Atomic Bomb and World Peace” and a debate on “Jury Service for Women.”

Two of its presidents, Helen P. Whittington and Sybil H. Holmes, became two of the first four female town meeting members elected in 1921. Whittington also ran for selectman in 1922 and lost. Nearly 40 years later, another League president, Louise Castle, became the first woman elected to the board of selectmen in 1960.

In 1977, former league president Sara K. Wallace, a tireless advocate for the town, established a trust fund to support voter education and an annual award to a Brookline High School student that continues to this day.

Today the League annually publishes “Brookline Close-Up,” a citizens’ guide to town government, “How to Run for Local Office” and the voters guide to the annual election. It hosts a monthly informal 2nd Friday discussion on topics such as rank choice voting and gun violence prevention. And it continues to host candidate and town meeting forums.

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline. The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy. All articles can be found at <https://brookline.wickedlocal.com/search?text=Citizen%20Engagement%20Corner&start=1>.