



Episode Two | TRANSCRIPT

Augusta Hunt | 1842 - 1932



HOSTED BY:

League of Women Voters of Maine
Featuring Anne Gass



MARKER LOCATION:

165 State Street
Portland, Maine

lwvme.org/SuffrageTrail

- 0:15 You're listening to the "Road to the 19th Amendment" podcast, and we're telling the story of Maine's suffragists, and bringing this history the recognition it deserves. This project is made possible by the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative, chaired by Ellen Alderman, led by Anne Gass, and with support from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation and other donors like you.
- 0:42 This episode covers Augusta Hunt, the story told by Anne Gass.
- 0:53 So, my name is Anne Gass, and I'm a member of the Steering Committee of the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative, and I...but the maker initiative for Maine. I also serve as the Maine Coordinator for the National Votes for Women Trail, which sponsored the marker initiative nationally.
- 1:20 So Augusta was born in Portland, in 1842. She was an affluent woman, married to a man named George S. Hunt, and I'll talk about him a bit more. She was a leader in movements to uplift Maine women. Her good works included getting an Equal Guardian Ship Law passed through the Maine Legislature that gave parents equal legal control over their children. Pushing to hire female police officers, which wasn't a thing in the mid-nineteenth century. Creating day nurseries and free kindergartens for children. And getting women elected to school boards. She was also co-founder of the Maine branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and served as its president for 15 years.
- 2:09 I believe it was through her WCTU, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, work. It's somewhat ironic given that her husband made his money importing sugar from the West Indies, where it was converted in Portland into rum. But use of alcohol was rampant in the nineteenth century, and...resulting in a lot of domestic violence. So the WCTU had



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an active woman's suffrage department, because its members believed that women needed the vote in order to protect the home, and family, and women. So, I believe that that's how she came to suffrage.

2:43

So among her many other good works: she served as president of the Maine Women's Suffrage Association for many years, and she helped organize a number of efforts to persuade the Maine Legislature to amend the state constitution to support women's voting rights. None of those was successful, but you know she still was a leader in the movement for many years. And in 1916, when she was 74, she stepped back in as the Maine Woman's Suffrage Association's acting president during the leadership crisis, and that was kind of a critical time in the movement.

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So the controversy is that Augusta's husband George S. Hunt owned the Eagle Sugar Refinery in Portland, as well as a fleet of ships; and he imported sugar from Cuba, and then his ships would return to Cuba loaded with dried fish, lumber, and other Maine products that help support the sugar cane plantations there. This is a well-documented trade exchange at this time of history, but what's important to understand is that the sugar cane in Cuba was raised and processed by slaves, which means that the Hunts' affluence resulted in part from slave labor. So, you know, why recognize her at all? We struggled a lot about — with — this question. You know, ultimately, we decided that at the time that Augusta was born and growing up, women were denied access to jobs that would allow them to support themselves, so marrying a prosperous businessman, even when, as in this case he was 13 years older than her, was one way that women could find financial security.

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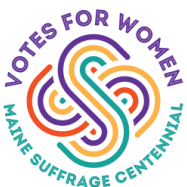
And she could have spent her life more frivolously, but instead she used her privilege to improve conditions for women and families, and she wasn't just showing up at an occasional tea or fundraiser. She helped form and lead these movements. One of her contemporaries, Florence Brooks Whitehouse, once observed that Augusta was quote: "A fine specimen of womanhood, a woman who has been at the back of every movement for the uplift of women and children in the state for 50 years." Endquote. So ultimately we decided that her good works deserved recognition. Both that...we at the same time had to be transparent about the whole history, the good, the bad, and the ugly, as it were.



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- 5:03 In 1916, at the age of 74, she came out of retirement to serve as the Maine Women's Suffrage Association's [MESA] interim chair during that short-term leadership crisis. And so in October of 1916, she hosted MESA's annual meeting at her gracious home on 165 State Street, which was attended by about a 100 members. That's where the marker is located, 165 State, Street in Portland.
- 5:29 This was a particularly critical meeting because they had to decide whether or not to pursue yet another statewide suffrage referendum in 1917. Now, the Maine Legislature had never taken this step, but for the first time, MESA had the votes. Yet the the national American Women's Suffrage Association president Carrie Chapman Cat, who attended the meeting, advised against it. She argued Maine wasn't ready, they lacked the funds, and they didn't have seasoned organizers who were needed to undertake that campaign.
- 5:59 You know Maine wasn't really part of Cat's "New Winning" plan. But ultimately, the MESA membership voted to ignore Cat and move ahead with what became Maie's first statewide suffrage referendum in 1917, which was was soundly defeated two-to-one. So Cat had been right, but that that meeting...that annual meeting at her house at on State Street was kind of a pivotal time in Maine's Suffrage Movement.



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Bio.

Augusta Hunt | 1842 - 1932

Throughout her life Augusta Merrill Barstow Hunt worked for women's rights, suffrage and the temperance movement. She was president of the Portland chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) for 15 years, and helped to establish a day nursery, free kindergartens, and the practice of hiring police matrons for female offenders.

She also helped enact laws giving mothers equal rights with fathers in the care and guardianship of minor children, and permitting the election of women to school boards. She championed many causes, using her wealth and privilege to improve the lives of those less fortunate.

Augusta was an early advocate for suffrage, both with Maine Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) and the WCTU. In 1916, at the age of 74, she came out of retirement to serve as MWSA's interim chair during a short-term leadership crisis. In October 1916 she hosted MWSA's annual meeting at her gracious home on 165 State Street, which was attended by about 100 members. At this meeting, the members decided to pursue legislative approval of what would become Maine's first ever statewide suffrage referendum, in 1917. While the referendum failed, the 19th Amendment through which most women the right to vote was ratified in August of 1920. In recognition of her many contributions Hunt was given the distinction of being the first woman in Portland to cast a ballot.

"A great humanitarian;" that's how a Portland newspaper article described Augusta Hunt on the occasion of her

90th birthday. And yet, her story has a darker side. She was married to George S. Hunt, a wealthy sugar refiner and shipping magnate, who was 13 years her senior. George owned the Eagle Sugar Refinery in Portland, as well as a fleet of ships. George's ships brought Maine lumber products to Cuba, where they were exchanged for cargoes of sugar and molasses to bring back to his refinery.

Cuban plantation owners used slave labor until it was abolished in 1886. Maine timber, as well as dried fish and other products, helped build and sustain the slave labor plantations. Thus, the Hunts' affluence, which allowed Augusta to turn her hands to good works instead of to paid labor, resulted in part from the labor of enslaved peoples.

Augusta deserves to be acknowledged for her work over decades to promote women's equality. Yet we must not forget that her privilege was derived from her husband's business interests, which profited from slave labor.

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