

Throughout the country, the period from 1880–1920 saw women, particularly upper and middle class women, make tremendous strides into the public sphere as progressive reformers.

Women's clubs provided an acceptable means for addressing social concerns, particularly around child welfare, education, sanitation and public health, and community morality. They also represented extensions of the domestic role, while applying the knowledge and confidence that elite women had gained through expanded access to higher education. White clubs such as the Anti-Tuberculosis League and black clubs such as the Phyllis Wheatley Club made significant progress in improving quality of life in New Orleans, opening hospitals and clinics, and creating new regulations and civic bodies, all without their members having the right to vote.



"The Awakening" by Henry Mayer. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Sisters Kate and Jean Gordon were amongst the most visible members of New Orleans' progressive-era reformers. As leaders in the ERA Club, an elite women's suffrage club founded in 1895, they headed campaigns for the prevention of cruelty to animals, tuberculosis treatment, and the admission of women to Tulane Medical School. Jean, through her role on the ERA legislative committee, waged a successful statewide campaign for child labor laws, which resulted in the 1906 Child Labor Act and an amendment to the state constitution allowing women to be factory inspectors. She was appointed the first such factory inspector, a role she felt should be reserved for elite women who could serve without pay.



Factory inspectors from across the US. Jean Gordon is fourth from the left, and was the factories inspector for Orleans Parish in 1908. Source: Know Louisiana, a project of the Louisiana Endowment for Humanities.

Through Kate's role as President of the Women's League for Sewerage and Drainage, and with women having newly gained the limited right to taxation suffrage, she organized a petition in 1899 to call an election on a two-mill property tax to fund the creation of the Sewerage and Water Board. Many women, especially those in the elite classes who were more likely to own the property that would allow them to exercise this new right, were reluctant to visit the unruly and sometimes violent polling stations. Visiting the homes of other elite women who were leery of coming to the polls themselves, the Gordons collected over 300 proxy votes. Women, however, had no legal standing to witness a document, a point driven home to New Orleans women's club members when a will donating a thousand dollars to the St. Anna's Asylum was overturned on that basis. Understanding this impediment, Kate Gordon chose to use Sam, the family's black coachman, as witness for the proxies, so that white women had "the opportunity to compare their legal standing to Sam's."



Kate and Jean Gordon. Source: Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University Library.

For over twenty years, Kate and Jean Gordon would organize and speak at a vast number of local and national mass meetings in support of women's suffrage, while relentlessly pushing back against ballot access for the lower classes and leveraging racist ideology to build support. Exploiting racial anxiety was at the center of Kate Gordon's suffrage efforts; for her and many of her supporters, "the question of white supremacy [was] one that will only be decided by giving the right of the ballot to the educated, intelligent, white women of the South." While Kate's leadership in the state suffrage association earned her a role as corresponding secretary for the National American Woman's Suffrage Association in 1901, she resigned in 1913 in opposition to NAWSA's growing support for a federal amendment. For Kate Gordon, the prospect of a constitutional amendment was anathema; it represented federal intervention in 'state's rights' and raised the specter of federal action to undo Louisiana's 1898 disenfranchisement of black voters.

Sources

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