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Digital History, Digital Sources, Digital Display: The Her Hat Was in the Ring Project on U.S. Women Who Ran for Political Office Before 1920

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Byrn Mawr Women's History in the Digital Age Conference, March 22 and March 23, 2013

Jill Norgren

HerHat Project: Women Who Ran for Political Office before 1920

www.herhatwasinthering.org

Welcome. Wendy, Kristen, and I –co-creators of the HerHat web site-will divide this hour-plus session, each of us making a short presentation—mine an introduction-- on a particular aspect of the project before a Q & A.

I am Jill Norgren. I am a political scientist, historian, and biographer.

Once upon a time in the last quarter of the 19th century two women, Victoria Woodhull and Belva Lockwood, ran as U.S. presidential candidates. Their political campaigns –symbolic although **either** woman would have been happy to win-made Wendy, Kristen, and me curious about women who ran for office in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

We wanted to know who ran for what offices.

We wanted to know if they ran as the candidates of particular political parties.

We wondered why they ran.

We puzzled over **who** elected them given general lack of suffrage rights for women.

We speculated how many there had been –200, 300, **500?**

And we pondered where to find their names.

Our curiosity led to the HerHat project.

I would like to take my time this morning to talk about the reigning assumptions in U.S. political history, and women's history, before the canvas for women candidates that has been the work of our project.

For almost a century scholarship in the United States focusing on elections, political parties, and civic participation has virtually ignored the political candidacies of women running for public office before women received full suffrage in 1920 via the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Instead, scholars focused on the woman suffrage movement (1848-1920) as the crucial movement for women's full citizenship.

Most scholars and popular writers were content to depict public-minded women as disinterested in running for elective office. These writers said that it was the M.O. of women to work for civic betterment using non-partisan methods.

For sure, the right to vote has been, and is, a critical component defining citizenship in the United States. We should not, however, ignore other aspects of citizen rights gained by women in the period before 1920 including, we argue, the right to be elected to public office.

For the most part, historiography has placed the beginning of women's access to electoral office after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

This is incorrect. Thousands of women were elected to local and state offices prior to 1920, beginning –as you will hear in greater detail from Wendy-- in the mid-1850s. The story of these women's public lives has been omitted in the telling of United States political and social history because until our team's research brought this information to light, most historians did not believe that a class of women political candidates had existed this early in the nation's history.

While scholars have studied some state suffrage campaigns, there has been next to no research completed on the full history of women's electoral rights within each state, or nationally, before 1920 with the exception of a small body of scholarship—for example the publications of Cox, Edwards, Freeman, Gilmore, Gustafson-Miller & Perry, McCurry, and Materson. We have built on the ideas and preliminary data of this scholarship to create the first web site to describe and analyze women's candidacies before 1920. By doing this we create a new understanding of U.S. political history, one that more fully embraces the contributions of women

We are doing this by collecting data on women candidates before 1920 that is then entered on the web site. We currently have more than 2,300 biographies of pre-1920 women candidates displayed on the HerHat site.

Beginning with at least two women in 1855, small numbers of women in the United States began campaigning for, and were voted into public office. In the 20th century, textbook accounts and histories of the woman suffrage movement said little or nothing about these candidates and office holders. While local and state historical societies have honored a few of these women candidates, scholars of voting rights, democracy, and women's history have largely overlooked them.

Ironically, this occurred despite election data available since the late 19th century in various contemporary sources, including the well-known *History of Woman Suffrage* and the readily available annual state reports listing local and state candidates for office.

Ignoring women candidates and office holders is consistent with the misconception that women of this period were neither eligible for political office nor interested in partisan politics and running for elective office. In a well-known American history textbook, for example, Mary Beth Norton and colleagues have written, “excluded from office holding...[club women and] reformers were drawn less to efforts to revise government than to drives for social betterment.” (Norton et al., 1990, 622)

But Lydia Hall and Marietta Patrick did win election to a Massachusetts school board in 1855. And after the Civil War, in 1871, newspaper publisher Victoria Woodhull did announce as a presidential candidate. And Washington, D.C. lawyer Belva Lockwood did run a full campaign for the presidency – complete with cross-country campaigning and media coverage—in 1884 and again in 1888.

Woodhull and Lockwood’s national candidacies were highly publicized.

Neither candidate could vote. During her campaign speeches Lockwood was fond of saying, “I cannot vote, but I can be voted for.” Neither Woodhull nor Lockwood won, but both women opened a national dialogue on the place of women in U.S. political culture.

Although many writers were content to depict public-minded women as disinterested in, or even repelled by what scholars mistakenly viewed as the male “boots and spittoon” world of elective politics, our research shows that many – thousands—of women were not unhappy to be associated with elective politics.

Wendy will pick up the story here. She will demonstrate how the site (www.herhatwasinthering.org) may be used, giving you both individual and aggregate findings to date.