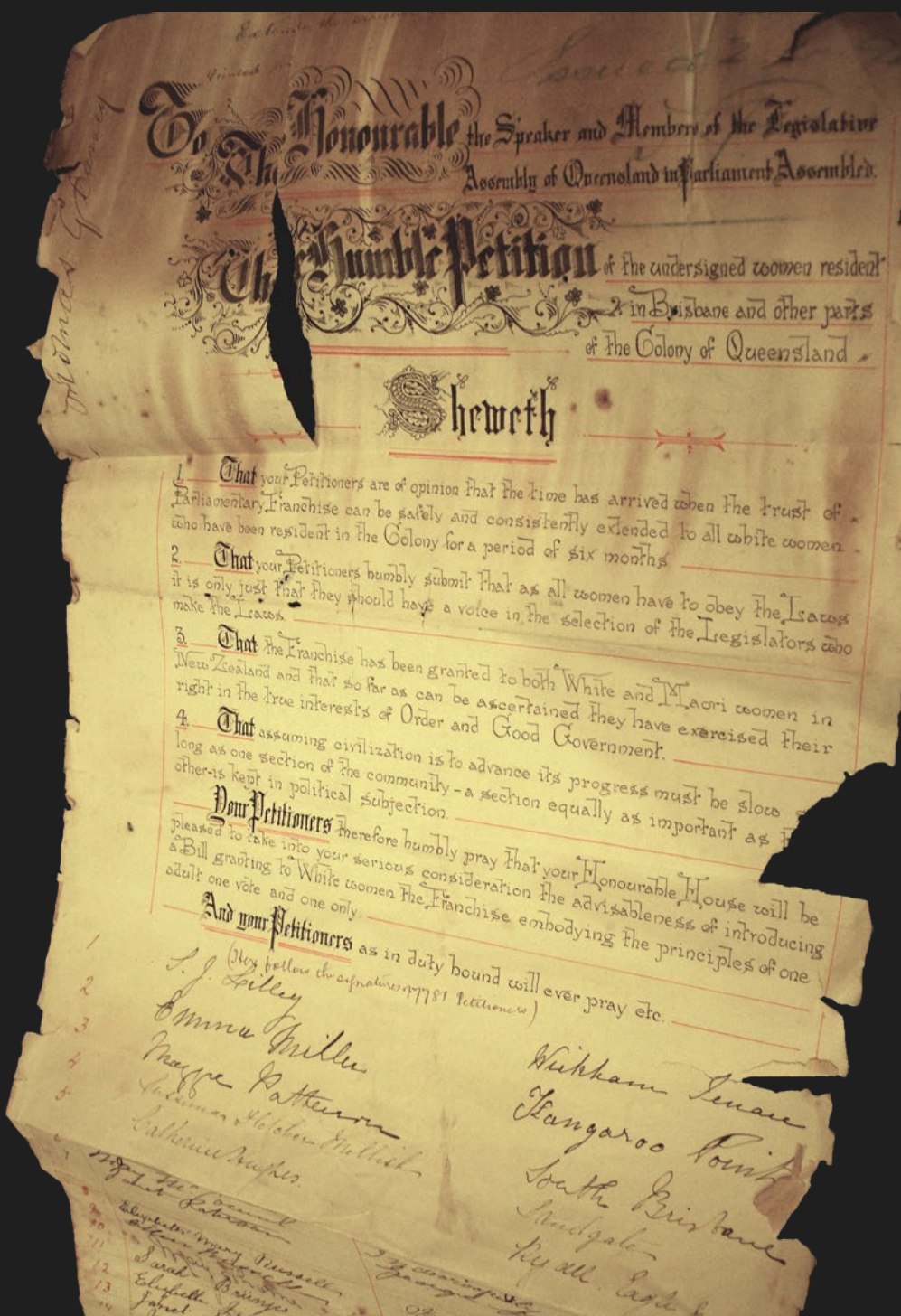


QUEENSLAND WOMEN'S FRANCHISE PETITIONS OF 1894 AND 1897

DEBORAH JORDAN DELVES INTO THE RECORDS OF THE WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN TEMPERANCE UNION AND DISCOVERS HOW THE UNION CONTRIBUTED TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN QUEENSLAND.



In the lead-up to the centenary of women's suffrage in Queensland in 2005, historians and archivists searched hard to find the Queensland women's franchise petitions. But to no avail. It was several years later, when undertaking research for his biography of Elizabeth Brentnall, the president of the many-faceted Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), that John McCulloch located a double petition from 1894 and a second petition from 1897 in the Queensland Parliament. With the assistance of the State Archives, the originals were carefully photographed. The Queensland Family History Society has undertaken the transcription and meticulous checking of the documents in preparation for the Parliament to make them available online for searching. A website containing these petitions will be launched shortly. The petitions are a crucial part of Australia's suffrage history.

The right of every person to have a vote was one of the great struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth century in the western world. In most countries, women, people of different races, and people without property were explicitly excluded from voting.¹ By the 1890s women in different parts of the globe were beginning to focus on the vote, as both an instrument of reform and a powerful symbol of equality. Women's right to vote in New Zealand celebrated as the first in a self-governing nation in the world, appeared to have resulted from a monster petition.² Across Australia, women were inspired by the New Zealand success. In 1894, a series of huge public franchise meetings were held in Brisbane to form associations to work for suffrage, and then, across

the colony, regional centres followed suit. Reform was much needed. Until 1890 married women could not own property.³

The very first item on the agenda of these 1890s meetings was the drawing up of a petition for female suffrage. The Women's Equal Franchise Association (WEFA) which came to spearhead the women's movement in Queensland called for one vote and one vote only for all white women in its petitions. Overwhelmingly, the women of Queensland wanted equality with and for men, an equality based on one vote for one person. They rejected the existing property qualifications, which entitled wealthy men to as many votes as they had property titles in different electorates (the plural vote). On the other hand, for the Women's Franchise League (WFL), electoral reform for men was seen as a separate issue and they wanted the vote for women on any basis. The WFL started collecting signatures for their petition but WEFA was much better organised.

150 copies of the WEFA petition were sent out from Brisbane.⁴ Gympie, Bundaberg, Warwick, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Albion, Charters Towers, Charleville, Croydon, Nerang, Southport, Coomera, Hughenden, Longreach and various other places joined with the Brisbane association. Some of these new societies were promoted by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Some emerged from the vigorous labour movement, but most were new amalgamations of men and women from different sections of the local communities. In the final weeks leading up to the tabling of the petition, WEFA arranged for two coupons to be published in the four-page weekly, *The Worker*, so readers could cut out the coupon, sign it and then send it in to the newspaper's office.

None of the records of WEFA has survived, but glimpses of how dedicated bands of women canvassed can be seen through reports in the records of the WCTU and in the newspapers of the time, the *Courier* and the *Worker*.⁵

Far left: 1894 Queensland Women's Franchise Petition.
Photo by John McCulloch

Below: Report on Womanhood Suffrage, Minute book,
12th Annual Convention, Bundaberg, 1897. UQFL438,
Box 16, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library

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Womanhood Suffrage.

This important branch of W.C.T.U. work has made rapid strides during the year. Since my last annual report there has been a general election of members to the Legislative Assembly, and, with few exceptions, the candidates for Parliamentary honours spoke favourably on the subject. Many of our W.C.T.U. women attended the political meetings, and by their presence testified to the interest taken in political matters, and to their desire for womanhood suffrage. A petition has been drawn up for presentation to the Assembly, asking that the restrictions of sex may be withdrawn, and that women may in consequence have the rights and privileges of citizenship as we have at present the burden of being taxpayers, and responsible to the laws without the right of protecting ourselves from unjust legislation. I earnestly ask all our members to sign this petition as promptly as possible, and that each member make it known to the large body of women outside the temperance cause, who are in favour of womanhood suffrage, many of whom would sign such petition if it were brought before them. I have sent copies of the petition to Thursday Island and other places. Our Unions are doing good work, notably South Brisbane District, whose energetic superintendent caused circulars to be sent out to the different candidates at the elections in that district. Favourable replies were obtained from all but one, and his hesitancy was not on account of the justice of our claims, but how it would work out in practice, thus ignoring the foundation of all sound government—justice to all classes. The Downs District report that Miss Murcutt's visit was productive of much good; her lecture on Franchise was greatly appreciated, and created much enthusiasm, in consequence of which Womanhood Suffrage has made distinct progress there. From the Wide Bay Superintendent a most enthusiastic report was received of the good work done; the women there during the elections interviewed the candidates and attended their meetings. Ipswich also reports good progress, having papers and discussions, and active work in circulating our Franchise Petition. Roma, though not yet possessing a superintendent, is well to the front on the question of suffrage. In all the North Brisbane Unions active work is going on in obtaining signatures to the petition. At present the question of Electoral Reform is engaging the public mind, and it is considered certain that some changes will be made very shortly. We must be active, both by voice and pen, to bring our claims to suffrage forward. Our sisters in South Australia now possess the political franchise; in Victoria the Premier has promised to introduce a Bill this session emancipating the women; New South Wales is also advancing, a motion being before the Assembly there; in New Zealand there is a proposal to admit women to a seat in the Legislative Council. Queensland alone is backward, and refuses to recognise that women are equally concerned with men in the rights and duties of citizenship. We hope the time has come when all true men will unite in removing all disabilities of sex from women.—C. E. TRUNDLE, Superintendent.

The sheer size of Queensland underlined the logistic nightmare of collecting signatures.⁶ About a quarter of Queensland's population was concentrated in Brisbane. Overall, most of the addresses given were urban: Brisbane, Ipswich, Gympie and Bundaberg. The WEFA petitions (one for men and one for women to sign) were collected in only six weeks and signed by 7896 women and 3575 men.⁷ The fate of the second petition of 1000 signatures collected by the WFL is not known; the petition was never presented.

The bill was expertly pursued on the crest of the confluence of Liberal and Labor forces, and was ultimately successful.

Queensland's petition was not successful in bringing women the vote. In the early 1890s Queensland was wracked by the great depression, huge floods and a good deal of political turmoil. 1894 saw the second shearers' strike. To pursue electoral reform initiated by a social movement through Parliament, several factors were pivotal. These factors were political opportunity, powerful and skilled advocates within the Parliament, and an unstable government. Although the WEFA petitions were tabled in Parliament by Labor leader, Thomas Glassey, the associated bill asked for more than the petitions did, notably the enfranchisement of shearers and miners. This bill and a second by Charles Powers, an independent liberal, did not get the majority needed in the Legislative Assembly. The Parliament was polarised and Glassey's bill was filibustered.

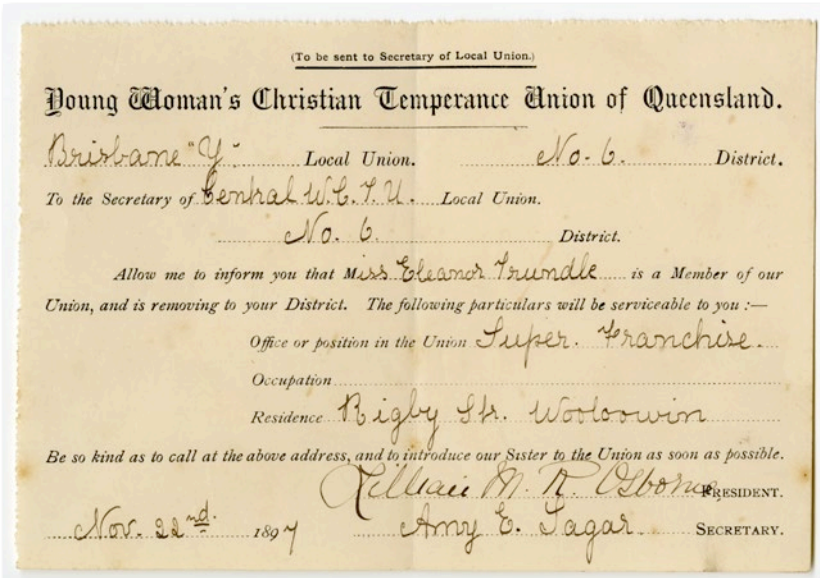
Below: Women's Christian Temperance Union membership cards belonging to Annie Carvosso (top) and Eleanor Trundle. UQFL438, Box 25 and Box 31, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library

At much the same time, in 1894, the South Australian petition of 11 600 names was collected. The petition 'prayed' for the right of women to vote under the same conditions as men and was the joint work of the WCTU and the non-partisan Women's Suffrage League.⁸ The monster petition, the largest ever in South Australia, was tabled in Parliament in 1894 on the third reading of an electoral bill to give women the vote on the same basis as men.

Three years later, in 1897, the second women's franchise petition was tabled by the WCTU. It called for the extension of the franchise to women and the removal of the 'disability of sex'.⁹ The women's section of the Temperance Union was established in 1886. They were 'an amazingly ambitious, politically aggressive women's organisation' Ellen Carol DuBois finds, and through the circulation of advanced ideas within the movement combatted 'the sense of isolation on the periphery'.¹⁰ By 1894 there were 1426 women and 1000 'honorary men' on its membership rolls, and 43 branches across Queensland.¹¹

The WCTU 'must be counted among the most significant women's political organisations' finds Helen Irving.¹² The Union was dedicated to promoting abstinence from alcohol and other harmful drugs. Arguing that drug abuse leads to all kinds of other issues, the group pursued a very wide-ranging reform agenda mostly advocating for the welfare of women and children.

Queensland suffrage history is in its early stages. There are extraordinary gaps in the archival record and empirical narrative.¹³ No records survive from the two key suffrage associations and no personal papers from key suffragists prior to the federal vote in 1902. There are as yet no editions located of *The Star*, Queensland's only suffrage weekly newspaper, and only a few editions of *Flashes*, an important women's social paper established in 1893. Details can only be traced through the lens of male journalists working on daily and labour newspapers. That is, until we begin to look at the holdings of the WCTU in the Fryer Library. In the early records and minute books held there is something miraculous for Queensland women's history.





From the early 1890s, the WCTU became actively involved in the suffrage movement. There were dedicated suffrage 'superintendents' of suffrage departments within many of the branches even as far afield as Mackay; and district superintendents of franchise as well as the colonial superintendent who networked internationally. Charlotte E Trundle, pragmatic and zealous, was appointed the Colonial Superintendent in 1893. While signatures were being collected for the 1894 WEFA and WFL petitions, Trundle spoke at local WCTU groups. Unions particularly active on the suffrage issue were those located in the Brisbane suburbs of Albion, Ithaca and the Valley as well as the 'Y' unions in Corinda and the Frances Willard 'Y's'.¹⁴

The organisation and tiered structure of the WCTU, built as it was on small local urban groups, inspired and encouraged women to address their personal and local issues in a broader context. In the Fryer Library we can read this in the early surviving minute books of some of the unions – those of Gympie, Ipswich, Albion, and Brisbane Central. The Ipswich women were highly politicised; the Albion group was more concerned with music and devotions, flowers and suppers. Through them all is the intervention of Trundle, guiding, visiting, giving papers on the franchise question and encouraging their own suffrage superintendents who were promoted to positions of responsibility and empowered,

and educated and educating in the processes of lobbying and political change.

Each Union had a certain autonomy, with various degrees of involvement from local public figures and liberal churches. Executive minutes of meetings presided over by the charismatic Elizabeth Brentnall only survive from 1897, but the records of frequent conferences at regional, colonial (and federal) levels are present in the collection with details about the franchise departments. Despite the representations by the press of a divided movement, the WCTU sought unity. There were two petitions (the WEFA and the WFL petitions) being circulated for the 'general public' to sign. Sarah Payne, the president of the Ipswich Union, urged WCTU members 'to sign whichever they chose'.¹⁵ We gain an extraordinary insight into the trans-local and the trans-regional political and religious spaces opened up for the meeting of these women (and men) in the pursuit of a more humane society. The WCTU Colonial Executive decided *not* to organise a separate WCTU petition in 1894. A further petition would 'weaken the cause'.

We can understand the internal reasons for the initiation of a second petition, not just the more readily observable historical pressures. In 1895 the WCTU decided to go ahead with its own petition. Districts were mapped out for canvassing and passed over to the individual

Above: Delegates at the Women's Christian Temperance Union Convention, Toowoomba, 1900. UQFL438, Box 26, Folder 13, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library

branches.¹⁶ Trundle sent out bundles of petitions.¹⁷ With much experience in the house-to-house distribution of tracts, WCTU members collected signatures throughout Brisbane and regional Queensland. Not only Union members went canvassing. Women stood with their 'lists' for successive Friday nights on the street corners.¹⁸ In early 1897 the Third Triennial Australasian Convention of the WCTU was held in Brisbane and leading suffragists from all over Australia were in town for that week; women and men would have signed at large public meetings. Womanhood Suffrage Superintendent CE Trundle wrote in 1897:

"Womanhood Suffrage

In conclusion, I desire to thank most heartily the members who gave so much of their time and labour to the work of gaining signatures; in a Queensland summer it is no light work to walk out long distances, but it was a proof of how earnestly women desire legal disabilities to be removed from them, and that they may be equal and honoured citizens with men.

CE Trundle, Superintendent¹⁹

3869 signatures were collected. The petition makes no mention of the property vote or the residential requirements. The WCTU petition was presented to the Legislative Assembly in July 1897, by James Drake, leader of a small independent opposition group. The *Courier* noted the petition, but apart from a very brief paragraph echoed by a couple of other papers, there was a startling lack of publicity. There were no associated electoral reform bills.

Only a few women appeared to have signed both the WCTU and the WEFA petitions.²⁰ While the WFL's feminist ideals were more closely aligned to those of the British Women's Franchise League, both the WCTU and the WEFA had stronger connections with other local movements and institutions (primarily the temperance movement and churches, and the labour movement). With strong feelings of local autonomy, they were better capable of organising signatures on the community level. From the census figures of 1891 and 1901, there were 80,410 to 107, 119 women of twenty and above. One of every seven to eight women in Queensland was politicised enough to sign a petition; this is suggestive of the pervasive community support.

From further examination of the WCTU records, we will be able to extrapolate and understand how signatures were clustered and collected on the petitions; when the descendants of these early women and men find their forebears' signatures on the digitised petitions, we can begin to see something more than just the

streets where the signatories lived but which communities they were part of. In the days before news polls, the petitions formed an essential building block in the feminists' campaign for the vote achieved at the federal level in 1902 and at the state level in 1905.

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2. This petition is now on the UNESCO Memory of the World register.
3. *Married Women's Property Act 1890* (Qld). See John McCulloch, 'The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in Queensland,' *Hecate*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 11-35.
4. 'Equal franchise for the women', *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 28 July, 1894, p. 2, viewed 24 June 2014 <<http://nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/82226522?>>.
5. The scale of the activity is recorded in this account by CE Trundle of the 1887 petitions, Records of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Minute book, 1887, UQFL438, Box 16, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
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7. R Kopitke, QFHS Publications Sub-Committee, June 2013.
8. A Oldfield, *Woman suffrage in Australia: a gift or a struggle?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 36 ff.
9. Queensland Parliament, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 2nd session of 12th Parliament, 13 July 1897, pp. 519, 57.
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11. 'Woman's Christian Temperance Union district convention' *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 30 June, 1894, p. 3, viewed 24 June 2014 <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/82226167?>>
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13. See J McCulloch, *From suffragists to legislators*, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 2005 and articles by Kay Saunders, John Kellett, Jean Stewart and Jessica Paten. There is only one biography of a suffragist, *Proud to be a Rebel Emma Miller* by P Young, and the unpublished biography of Elizabeth Brentnall by Dr J McCulloch.
14. The 'Ys' were the Young Woman's Christian Temperance Union groups
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20. This is from an initial survey of the two digitally amalgamated petitions.

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