

Lavinia Margaret Engle

1892-1979, MONTGOMERY COUNTY

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never stopping a moment to consider not fighting for her cause.*

In 1848, American women were unable to vote, own property, inherit their husbands' estates, be legal guardians of their children, attend college, or enter any profession other than teaching. The year marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement when the first women's convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Many brave, patriotic women began a campaign for women's rights that changed the face of America and its Constitution. More than seventy years later, on August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was finally ratified. It stated, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." Following its passage, women around the country let out a joyous cheer; among those cheering the loudest was Marylander Lavinia Engle.

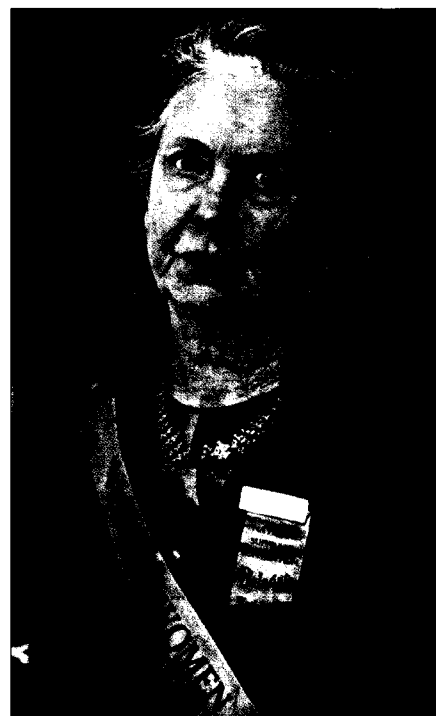
Engle, born in Montgomery County in 1892, became keenly interested early on in the women's suffrage movement, largely due to the example of her Quaker mother, a suffragist herself. In early adulthood, Engle joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association and set to work to make her goals a reality (Johnson 122). Initially, her position was that of field organizer, though her organizational skills soon resulted in her promotion to field secretary. She campaigned in sixteen states for the suffrage cause, talking with locals, handing out pamphlets, and appearing before a number of state legislatures in support of the cause.

In those days, women's suffrage was not always an easy or popular cause. Engle's campaigning activities were often rewarded with ridicule as well as outright hostility. Nonetheless, she persevered valiantly, never stopping a moment to consider not fighting for her cause. She rode a mule all the way up a dry creek bed to reach a West Virginia legislator to whom she successfully pled her cause. She marched up and down streets in Washington and New York, confronted by hostile crowds. In Texas, when several legislators left the statehouse to attend a horse show, she stopped their train to persuade them to return and vote for the suffrage amendment (Johnson 123).

With the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, Engle and her comrades prevailed, but she did not take the amendment's success as a sign to stop working. Instead, she became increasingly concerned that the new amendment be enforced and that women indeed utilize their newfound right. With the help of others, Engle founded the Maryland League of Women Voters and became the executive secretary. This new organization was instrumental in encouraging many women to vote, and it also acted as a watchdog organization, keeping check on public officials to guarantee they were not in any way hindering women who chose to claim their voting privilege. By 1928, Engle determined that women were at last voting in large enough numbers to make a significant impact in a campaign.

During her tenure in Maryland's league, Engle saw to it that the organization addressed itself to topics broader than women's rights. The league lobbied for legislation that included the Juvenile Court Act, the establishment of a State Department of Infant and Maternal Hygiene, establishment of the Commission on Almshouses, the reorganization of the Board of State Aid to Charities, and a law providing minors compensation for injuries when illegally employed. As part of the Maryland League of Women Voters, she also became active in international affairs, organizing a Pan-American Conference of Women in Baltimore.

In 1930, Lavinia Engle decided she was no longer content simply to lobby for laws; she wanted to make them. Drawing from her experience in the suffrage movement, she successfully campaigned for a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates, the first Montgomery County woman to do so, soon becoming a successful lobbyist and advocate for social insurance legislation and women's and children's legislation. In 1933, her fiery speeches resulted in the narrow passage of the state's first compulsory unemployment insurance-compensation bill (Johnson 125). In December of the same year, Engle became the first woman to serve on the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners.



COURTESY OF LAVINIA ENGLE SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Following her terms in the legislature and as county commissioner, Engle finally resigned her directorship of the Maryland League of Women Voters in 1936. Having gained national prominence because of her work on behalf of social insurance legislation, she was offered a presidential appointment as the education representative of the Social Security Board, which she readily accepted. Engle traveled the country and spoke at colleges, trying to persuade students to become involved in the Social Security program via study and internships. In addition, she addressed numerous women's organizations, explaining the Social Security Act and how it affected them. Soon promoted to chief of field operations in the Washington, D.C. headquarters, she was responsible for developing the department plan for the regional organization consisting of regional and district offices. Engle remained there until her retirement in 1966 (Maryland Women's Hall of Fame).

Throughout her career and life, Engle continued to actively promote welfare causes and women's and children's rights. She played a pivotal role in gaining suffrage for women and dedicated much of her life to ensuring that they could exercise their new privilege freely. Lavinia Engle made a profound impact on women; she was indeed a significant factor in helping them win the freedoms they enjoy today. ✨

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H I S T O R Y

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