

# Suffrage Day at Rickwood Field, 1915

## How Alabama's suffragists went to bat for the right to vote

By Alex Colvin

The Alabama Equal Suffrage Association (AESA) achieved an important victory on January 22, 1915. On that day, Rep. Joseph W. Green of Dallas County introduced a suffrage bill in the Alabama House of Representatives. The bill read: "The right of the citizens of this State to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex." After three years of lobbying legislators and educating the public, the AESA's goal of obtaining state legislation for women's suffrage was within sight.

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But the introduction of this bill, while a significant step, was only the beginning. In addition to proving their political acuity, Alabama suffragists also needed to assure wary politicians that they weren't fighting on behalf of their equally disenfranchised African American neighbors. Indeed, the all-white AESA had no intention of undermining the recent voting restrictions baked into the state's 1901 constitution; the organization distanced itself from parallel Black movements fighting for the vote, such as the Tuskegee Woman's Club.

To convince state legislators to pass the bill, AESA suffragists embarked on a seven-month campaign of luncheons and lectures, pamphlets and columns. Bossie O'Brien Hundley and Lillian Bowron, two Birmingham suffrage leaders, traversed the state in a Hudson Six to promote the amendment and gather signatures for a pro-suffrage petition. But suffragists knew they could not rely on lectures and fliers alone to sway Alabamians indifferent to their cause. They also connected their movement to the popular culture of the day.

### They decided to play a game, a baseball game.

The AESA's Birmingham chapter planned a "Suffrage Day" at Rickwood Field, home of the Birmingham Barons. Founded in 1885, the Barons joined the newly formed Southern Association in 1901. In 1909, Rick Woodward, an iron industrialist, bought the team; Rickwood Field debuted the following year. After consulting with the team's managers, the AESA announced that they would co-sponsor a "Suffrage Day" event on August 18, 1915. The Barons were to play the rival Chattanooga Lookouts. Local newspapers promoted the game, promising "delightful and novel



Aerial view of Rickwood Field, circa 1920. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives & History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Unknown photographer, *Birmingham News*.

schemes" to make "the day a memorable one in the baseball annals of Birmingham." This unique game would be full of prizes, suffrage interviews with the players, and lively music. The publicity proved successful. The *Birmingham News* later reported "one of the best baseball crowds of the season" in attendance.

# VOTES FOR WOMEN



A collage of photos from The Birmingham News' August 19, 1915, coverage of the Suffrage Day game. Top left: Bessemer and Birmingham suffrage teams. Top right: Barons owner Rick Woodward and pitcher Dick Robertson wearing suffrage sashes. Bottom row, left to right: Bessemer winning pitcher Lula Riggs; longtime Barons manager Carlton Molesworth; women joining the men in the press box atop Rickwood Field's roof. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives & History.



Pattie Ruffner Jacobs, circa 1915. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

As fans entered the ballpark on that Wednesday, they encountered bright yellow "Votes for Women" banners fluttering in the breeze. Accompanying posters bearing the words "Justice" and "Equal Rights" hung from the railings. Yellow, the primary color of the suffrage movement, was everywhere. Women dressed head-to-toe in yellow frocks, sashes, and hair ribbons distributed hundreds of yellow pro-suffrage pamphlets. Barons players, coaches, and managers donned belts and

"Votes for Women" sashes to show solidarity. The press box, a space usually reserved for male sports reporters, invited suffragists inside to watch the game. It was there that Pattie Ruffner Jacobs, Birmingham suffragist and AESA president, proudly sat to watch the Barons play.

In an exhibition inning, all-female teams from Birmingham and Bessemer took to the field to show they could play the game "just as the men do." While the runs scored did not count in the official tally, spectators got to witness the abilities of these young women. Following this inning, which the Bessemer team won, the Barons and the Lookouts took the field.

During the game, the suffragists provided prizes — from a hat to a yellow tie and more — to the Barons player

"Votes for Women" gold ribbon, circa 1911. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



with the first hit and to the most enthusiastic female and male fans in the stands. Between innings, they played suffrage anthems, including “It’s a Long Way to Suffrage,” as the women proudly sang along: “It’s a long way to woman suffrage; But watch how they grow/So it’s good-bye, voteless woman; Farewell, ‘antis,’ dear/ It’s been a long way to woman suffrage; but it’s almost here.” The suffragists nominated Alfred Turner, a four-year-old Barons fan, to be their mascot. Not only did the youngster cheer for a baseball victory, he also expected “to cast his first vote for a woman” when he came of age, and he expressed confidence that women would also be running for public office by then.

As reported by the press, the game itself was “unusual” in that neither team scored a run during the nine innings. Despite the scoreless outcome, the game proved a memorable experience for patrons and good exposure for the suffrage movement. After all their hard work, the AESA felt confident that the legislature would pass the suffrage bill. The *Montgomery Advertiser*, a newspaper generally unsupportive of the suffrage cause, boasted a headline on August 24, 1915, that read: “Woman Suffrage Amendment Will Pass Legislature.” But the very next day, August 25, the House voted down the bill. Even Representative Green, who had introduced the measure, voted against it.

Green defended his decision this way: “I am now firmly convinced the adoption of this measure would be most unwise and fraught with great political danger...To confer suffrage on women in the South would double the negro problem by adding to it the more vicious and aggressive element of the race.”

This outcome delayed the suffrage cause in Alabama, but it did not destroy it. Earlier that year, the AESA had published a suffrage bulletin proudly stating, “We suffragists are in to win.” Pattie Ruffner Jacobs and others encouraged the AESA to focus their attention on a federal amendment. As a sports reporter might say,



Rickwood Field, block print on paper, Charles Buchanan.

Alabama suffragists in 1915 may have lost an inning, but by 1920 they would win the game.

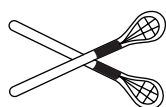
On August 18, 1920 — five years to the day of the Rickwood game — the 19th Amendment secured the vote for women nationwide; except, of course, for where federal law ran up against the Jim Crow South. “Suffrage Day” at Rickwood Field reminds us how widely debated the vote for women was in 1915, and how far out of reach suffrage remained for Black Alabamians.

This article is adapted from an Alabama Department of Archives & History catalog published for its 2021-2022 exhibition, *Justice Not Favor: Alabama Women & the Vote*.

# Games of Consequence

The Suffrage Day game of 1915 is one of many Alabama sporting contests that had an effect far beyond the playing field.

## September 1808 Stickball diplomacy



Stickball, called the “little brother of war” among southeastern

Native Americans, often served as a diplomatic tool, with games used to keep the peace between nations. In 1808, just west of present-day Thomasville, Creek and Choctaw Indians agreed to settle a border dispute on the stickball field — one game between the men, one between the women. The Choctaws won both and to the winner went the spoils; fertile watershed land between the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers. A historical marker, erected in 1978 by the Clarke County Historical Society, notes the boundary.

## February 22, 1893 The Iron Bowl: Chapter One



The Iron Bowl’s origin story begins on a long-gone field at the corner of what’s now 32nd Street South and

Clairemont Avenue in Birmingham. Young men in red-lettered “U of A” sweaters and blue sweaters trimmed in orange “A’s” — and no protective gear — traded 4-point touchdowns and 5-point field goals in a contest that more closely resembled rugby. In game one of college football’s legendary rivalry, 5,000 fans watched Auburn best “Tuskaloosa,” 32-22. The *Birmingham News* noted a Miss Delma Wilson presented a cup to the winners: “Drink from it and remember the victory you have won this day.”

## October 5, 1948 The last hurrah



Rickwood Field hosts the final game of the last Negro League World Series.

With Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, the Negro Leagues would gradually fade away. But not yet. In 1948, the Birmingham Black Barons — featuring legendary player-manager Lorenzo “Piper” Davis and a 17-year-old rookie named Willie Mays — won the Negro American League title over the Kansas City Monarchs to advance to the World Series. Alas, Birmingham lost the final-ever Series in five games to Pittsburgh’s Homestead Grays.

## April 1-3, 1954 Looking the other way



Section 597 of Birmingham’s segregation laws was explicit: “Negroes and White Persons

Not To Play Together.” But who could say ‘no’ to Stan Musial, Minnie Miñoso, Jackie Robinson, and Hank Aaron? It turns out, nobody. So in 1954, three illegal baseball games took place at Rickwood, featuring integrated, Hall of Fame-laden rosters from the Braves, Dodgers, Cardinals, and White Sox. One possible reason the games were allowed: “Blacks and whites were ready to break down the fences” to see them, writes Allen Barra in *Rickwood Field*. “Whatever the reason...the segregationists agreed to look the other way.”

## May 31, 1959 The night The Alabama Gang came to town



Bobby Allison runs his first short-track race in Alabama, finishing fifth in a night race at Dixie Speedway

in Midfield. The next evening, he would claim his first win at Montgomery Motor Speedway. Bobby, brother Donnie, son Davey, Red Farmer and Neil Bonnett would soon all settle in Hueytown. Collectively, they became known as The Alabama Gang; dominant figures in NASCAR for decades, each man was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame. Today, the back straightaway at Talladega is called The Alabama Gang Superstretch.

## November 30, 1968 From Boligee to basketball history



In the tumultuous year of 1968, Auburn basketball’s Henry Harris became the first Black athlete to play for any SEC school — in any sport

— across the Deep South. A sparse crowd watched Harris make history on the hardwood when he debuted with Auburn’s freshman team in a game at Georgia Tech. As Sam Heys notes in *Remember Henry Harris: Lost Icon of a Revolution*, “the emptiness of the arena only made the epithets echo.” Six years after making history, Harris died from an apparent suicide at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he was student-coaching.