



League of Women Voters of Amherst, Massachusetts Records

1939-2002

60 boxes (33 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 296

Collection overview

Non-partisan political organization based in Amherst, Massachusetts that influences public policy through education and advocacy by registering voters, organizing candidate forums, publishing voting guides, and disseminating general information on the legislative process and the functioning of government on the local, state, and federal levels. Includes minutes, annual reports, financial records, publications, extensive files on specific programs, photographs, video- and audio-tapes, scrapbooks, and newspaper clippings. Also contains information on two league members who rose to national prominence: Lucy Wislon Benson (Under Secretary of State in the federal government in 1977) and Jane F. Garvey (Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration in 1997).

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Background on League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan political organization that influences public policy through education and advocacy. It supports positions, but not individual candidates or political parties. The national league was established in 1920, primarily to help the 20 million newly enfranchised women exercise their constitutional rights.

League members study issues of local, state and national significance. Once members agree on a position, the League may act by providing information to the public, obtaining public support for the position, lobbying, initiating legislation or participating in court action.

The League promotes political responsibility through its voters' service and citizen information activities. Members register voters, organize candidate forums, publish voting guides and disseminate general information on the legislative process and the functioning of government on the local, state and federal levels.

On March 21, 1939, Joy Kennedy organized a meeting to establish the League of Women Voters of Amherst. The group included five Amherst residents who belonged to the Northampton League, and 20 members of an Amherst reading club. Since 1939, the Amherst League has studied and taken action on a wide range of

national, state, and local issues. It also provided voter information, registered voters, and undertook special projects. All of these activities are reflected in the records.

Growth and change in Amherst since 1939 is reflected in some of the activities of the League. In 1939, the town's off-campus population was 6,400. The 2000 census lists the town of Amherst as having 34,874 residents. The need for new housing, schools, water and sewer, recreation facilities, and professional town management formed the basis of the League's program over the years.

In 1940, when the superintendent of Amherst Schools fired five married women teachers, the League formally protested, opposing a blanket indictment of married teachers, saying a teacher's effectiveness should be decided on individual records. The policy changed.

In 1944, the League adopted a position in favor of a new elementary school, the beginning of a series of campaigns for new and renovated school buildings that was to last to the turn of the new century. Other school issues studied included curriculum, overcrowding, kindergarten (a goal not achieved until 1968), and regionalizing the secondary schools.

In 1950 Town Meeting voted to submit a proposal for a Town Manager form of government to the state legislature. It was approved by the Legislature but rejected when submitted to the town voters. In 1953 the League collected enough signatures on a petition to place the plan on the ballot again and in 1954 it was adopted by a 13-vote margin. The League has reviewed its position in favor of this form of government several times with almost continuous studies of town meeting, and has maintained its position.

Lucy Wilson Benson, Amherst League President 1957-1961, was President of the Massachusetts League 1961-1965 and of the League of Women Voters of the United States 1968-1974. In 1977, she became Under Secretary of State in the federal government. Two of the many achievements of her tenure in Amherst were the adoption by the legislature of fiscal autonomy for the University of Massachusetts and measures to strengthen the Massachusetts executive branch of the government.

After a 1966 study of the town's libraries, the consensus was to affirm the public nature of the Jones Library. The town subsequently increased and continued its tax support of the libraries.

During the 1970s, the League, which had observed the Select Board and School Committees for many years, began to observe other major boards regularly. The February 1975 newsletter reported that the Observers Corps was expanding its role with 18 members observing 10 town committees. The "Observers Corps Notes" became a regular, popular feature in the League newsletter.

Voters Service by the League has included registering voters, publishing election guides and conducting candidates' forums, holding public meetings on community, state and local issues, and publishing handbooks.

Booklets published by the Amherst League of Women Voters for the information of the citizens of the town include Town Meeting Handbook, You and Your Amherst Government, and They Represent You (a list of Amherst Town Meeting members and town officials with their addresses and telephone numbers). They are revised and up-dated periodically.

League members have served on town boards and committees and as town meeting members, contributing considerable information about issues. In *Essays on Amherst History*, (1978, p.351) Winthrop Dakin, former longtime town moderator, says "Participation of women in official town positions has increased steadily...By far the most consistently useful and politically effective citizen group in the recent decade has been the local branch of the League of Women Voters."

During the 1980s and 1990s the Amherst League continued studies and action concerning town government, local schools and affordable housing as well as participating in state action on education reform, child care, universal health care, casino gambling, county government, reproductive choice, and domestic violence. League members twice worked with other organizations to pass state-wide ballot questions to implement a graduated state income tax in place of the flat income tax. (Neither ballot question passed.) A major, successful effort was made in 1995 to retain the Amherst Town Meeting/Selectboard/Town Manager form of government.

Many members of the Amherst League of Women Voters have not only contributed much to the League, but have served the Town of Amherst as well. Among these was Diana Romer, President of the Amherst League 1983-1985 and 1987-1989. She served two terms on the Selectboard, and was on many town committees including the Finance Committee and Solid Waste Committee, Animal Facilities Committee and many others. She was elected to the board of the Massachusetts League of Women Voters in 1984.

Scope of collection

The records of the Amherst League of Women Voters, 1939-2001 (30.5 linear feet) document the activities of the organization as it attempted to educate the citizens of Amherst about candidates and issues and to influence local community policies. After studying issues and reaching consensus, members urged the town to adopt the policies they proposed. Among the topics studied in depth were town government, education, land use, waste management, and affordable housing. In addition the reports of League observers at town board and committee meetings give an objective picture of the discussions and actions of those boards and committees. Almost all of the material in the collection is related to local and regional issues although local research on statewide and national programs are included.

In addition to minutes, annual reports, financial records, publications and extensive files on specific programs (studies, consensus, and action), the collection includes photographs, video- and audio-tapes, scrapbooks and newspaper clippings. A 1989 series of tapes and transcripts, part of a Harvard study entitled *The Female Experience in American History*, records interviews with nineteen Amherst League members focusing particularly on issues relating to the Women's Movement.

Most of the records concern the programs. These include a broad range of issues, including, in part: the form of town government, school issues, zoning, local and regional planning, health care, reproductive choice, and domestic violence. Voter Service records reflect a strong commitment to voter education through candidate forums, voter registration, and publication of voters' guides. For several years League members met annually with State Representatives and the Congressman from the district.

The files contain information on two league members who rose to national prominence: Lucy Wilson Benson served as President of the League of Women Voters of the United States 1968-1974, and became Under Secretary of State in the federal government in 1977; Jane F. Garvey, became Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration in 1997, previously serving as Director of Logan (Boston) International Airport and Commissioner of Massachusetts Public Works before moving to federal level as Deputy Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration 1993-1997.

The collection is arranged in ten series: Administrative; Financial; Membership; Voters Service; Observer Corps; Programs; Publications; Photographs; AV Material, Tapes, Transcripts and Videos; and Scrapbooks and News clippings.

Arrangement

This collection is organized into ten series:

- **Series 1. Administrative, 1939-2001**
- **Series 2. Financial, 1945-2000**
- **Series 3. Membership, 1944-2000**
- **Series 4. Voter's Service, 1951-2000**
- **Series 5. Observer Corps, 1965-2001**
- **Series 6. Program, 1945-2000**
- **Series 7. Publications, 1946-2001**
- **Series 8. Photographs, 1958-2001**
- **Series 9. Audiovisual Materials, n.d.**
- **Series 10. Scrapbooks and News clippings, 1959-2000**

Series descriptions

Series 1. Administrative

1939-2001

The series includes by-laws; annual reports of board members and of the study and action committees; minutes, 1939-2001; correspondence, primarily business, but including some letters to editors and to state and local politicians, and early correspondence reflecting substantive discussions with town officials; public relations materials generated by the publicity committee; and selected reports of state and national conventions.

Series 2. Financial**1945-2000**

The Treasurers' reports and budget reports cover the years 1945 to 2000 with some years missing. Ledgers, which include day-by-day expenditures, cover the years 1960-1985. Finance drive records include the annual fund drives as well as the annual book sale, the major source of yearly income.

Series 3. Membership**1944-2000**

The files contain the yearly lists of members and some activity forms as well as member recruitment information and new member orientation information. Arranged by type of material, then chronologically.

Series 4. Voters Service**1951-2000**

The files contain records of candidates' presentations/debates, 1952-1992, letters and questionnaires to candidates in preparation of publication of annual Voters' Guides, orientation of Town Meeting Members, voter registration drives, election monitoring and other voter service activities. Arranged by type of material, then chronologically, with some years missing.

Series 5. Observer Corps**1965-2001**

Records of League observers of town boards and committees (in alphabetical order), including Select Board, Finance Committee, Board of Health, School Committees, Planning Board and many others.

Series 6. Program**1945-2000**

Extensive files in alphabetical order covering a wide range of studies of local, state and national issues. The almost continuous extensive studies of town government (Representative Town Meeting, Selectboard/Town Manager) seek to maintain citizen participation and make local government more responsive to needs of the town through revision of town boards, clarification of responsibilities of the Town Manager, and boards and committees. Local Action succeeded in the retention of the Selectman/Manager form of government in the 1957 and 1960 referendum questions. The questionnaires used for specific studies to improve Town Meeting (1969-1972, 1975-1979, 1988) are included. Extensive files deal with the League's response to the Amherst Charter Commission which considered abolishing the Representative Town Meeting, working to defeat that ballot question (1996) through informational meetings, broadsides, and direct mailings.

Studies of education issues in Amherst (1951-2000) include the building of new schools, establishment of public kindergarten in 1969, sex discrimination in schools, teacher salaries, and the responsibility of the town in regard to children's services.

Adequate and available low and moderate housing continue to be issues of study and action (1965-present). A library study and subsequent action (1966-67) resulted in a substantial increase in Town tax support of the town's libraries, previously largely endowment supported. Other files contain studies concerning solid waste, child abuse, the Amherst Police Department, taxes, cable television issues, and many others. Zoning is cross referenced with Planning. The Amherst League recommended a revised Zoning By-Law in 1963 after a Master Planning Study. Arranged alphabetically, then chronologically.

Series 7. Publications

1946-2001

Newsletters (complete 1946-2002), Your Amherst Government (complete in 6 issues: 1959, 1964, 1971, 1975, 1985, 1992), Town Meeting Handbook (6 issues: 1950, 1963, 1969, 1971, 1976, 1986), They Represent You (yearly listing of Town Meeting members and boards - incomplete, 1963-2000), Yearbook (incomplete 1946-1995), Directory of Town Services complete in 5 issues: 1986, 1987, 1989-1990, 1991-1992, 1993-1994).

Series 8. Photographs

1958-2001

Photographs of league activities and members, including the book sale, Lucy Wilson Benson, Amherst League members at conferences and conventions, annual meetings, members with elected officials. Arranged chronologically, except Book Sale which is arranged chronologically within the topic.

Series 9. Oral History Project

1989

The series includes tapes and transcripts of interviews with nineteen members of the Amherst League. The project was part of a Harvard University study called The Female Experience in American History, funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The interviews, done in 1989, focused on the interviewees' lives during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly on issues relevant to the Women's Movement. Additionally, since 1998 the League has been producing Through the League Lens with the Community Television Station. Some of the videotapes of this series are in the collection. There are also miscellaneous tapes, dated and undated, including some pertaining to League anniversaries.

Series 10. Scrapbooks and News Clippings 1959-2000

Press releases and newspaper clippings (many in folders), covering League meetings, programs and events, including the 50th Anniversary of the Amherst League and the 50th and 75th Anniversaries of the National League. Other items include: congratulatory resolutions from Massachusetts Governor and Legislators, art work, individual files on Diana Romer Memorial Fund (1998) and Lucy Wilson Benson.

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Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Deposited 1990 by Lois Dethier, President, League of Women Voters of Amherst, Massachusetts. Accretions received from various officers. Deposit converted to donation, April 2002 by Lois Dethier.

Accruals

More accretions expected.

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- Benson, Lucy Wilson
- Education--Massachusetts--Amherst--History--Sources.
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