

This Day in History... September 28, 1839

Birth of Frances Willard

Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard was born on September 28, 1839, in Churchville, New York. She was a leading figure in the temperance and women's suffrage movements in the late 1800s, though she wouldn't live to see the passage of the 18th and 19th Amendments that achieved her goals.

Willard's family moved to Oberlin, Ohio in 1841 and Janesville, Wisconsin in 1846, where she attended the Milwaukee Normal Institute. After the family moved to Evanston, Illinois, she attended the North Western Female College. After graduating, Willard took teaching positions at the Pittsburgh Female College and Genesee Wesleyan Seminary in New York, which later became Syracuse University.

In 1871, Willard was made president of the newly formed Evanston College for Ladies, which had absorbed the operations of the North Western Female College. The Evanston College for Ladies was associated with Northwestern University, but both schools had separate boards of trustees. Willard found this made the administration unnecessarily complicated, and after two years, proposed the college be incorporated as a unit of the university. The plan was finalized in 1873, and the college became the Woman's College of Northwestern University. As part of the arrangement, Northwestern agreed the board of trustees would always include at least five women, and that there would always be at least one female professor. Willard was appointed the first dean of women at the university. However, she left that position the following year over disagreements with the university president, her former fiancé.



Willard was a leading figure in the temperance movement to ban the sale of alcohol for over 20 years.

Willard attempted to gain support from Lucy Hayes, wife of president of Rutherford B. Hayes, but was unsuccessful. She also met with Varina Davis, wife of former Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Davis had been publicly opposed to temperance, but Willard and Varina would continue to correspond for years to come.

During her national travels, Willard also spoke in favor of women's suffrage. She argued for the idea of "Home Protection," which she described as "the movement... the object of which is to secure for all women above the age of twenty-one years the ballot as one means for the protection of their homes from the devastation caused by the legalized traffic in strong drink." The "devastation" she spoke of was a reference to the violence against women by intoxicated men. She argued that men could too easily get away with their crimes without women's suffrage.



The 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, also went into effect in 1920.

included in Statuary Hall in the US Capitol. Several schools, buildings, and other sites across the country have been named in Willard's honor and she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2000.



Willard stamp from the 1940 Famous Americans Series

After leaving the university, Willard turned her attention to the temperance movement. In 1874, she attended the founding convention of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and was made its first corresponding secretary. Two years later, she was appointed head of the publications department, responsible for increasing readership of the organization's weekly newspaper, *The Union Signal*. Willard temporarily left national WCTU over a disagreement with the then president, Annie Wittenmyer. Willard wished to link the issues of temperance and women's suffrage, while Wittenmyer did not. In 1879, Willard was elected president of the national WCTU, beating out Wittenmyer, and held the position until her death. Over the course of about 10 years, Willard traveled nearly 30,000 miles per year delivering upwards of 400 lectures each year. She adopted the slogan "Do Everything" and encouraged WCTU members to lobby for social reforms through petitions, speeches, writing, and education.



The 18th Amendment, banning the sale of alcohol, went into effect in 1919.

In 1883, Willard composed the Polyglot Petition for Home Protection, the first international proclamation against the production and trade of liquor and drugs. She and several other WCTU members traveled the world collecting nearly eight million signatures in over 50 countries. The petition helped to bring international media attention to the cause.

In 1885, Willard helped found the Illinois Woman's Press Association. Willard was also a founding member of the National Council of Women of the United States and served as its first president from 1888 to 1890. Also in 1888, she founded the World WCTU and was made its president in 1893.

Willard died in her sleep after catching the flu on February 17, 1898. She left her home to the WCTU, and it was later made into a museum and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1965. In 1905, Willard was the first woman to have a statue in Statuary Hall in the US Capitol. Several schools, buildings, and other sites across the country have been named in Willard's honor and she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2000.

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