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The Republican Party of Texas

- Women's History Month -

Martha Goodwin Tunstall (1838 - 1911)



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Long before women would become prevalent in Texas Republican politics, heroic women would have to rise and fight for women to be included and viewed equally, politically.

In the great state of Texas, at the foundation of women's suffrage, one name can almost certainly be found: Martha Goodwin Tunstall (1838 -1911). She was married to William Vaughan Tunstall, a schoolteacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, and Methodist lay minister. Together they had nine children. Yet, nothing and no one would stop Martha Tunstall from being a formidable voice for women and slaves.¹

The Republican Party of Texas was born July 4, 1867, in Houston, Texas. However, this birth did not include women. During this time, the only way for women to be involved and have a political impact was through civic groups and organizations. They were barred from voting until the twentieth century, they were not included in the inner chambers of any political party, and, due to the lack of campaign funds, were hindered and impeded in running for office.² Tunstall, nevertheless, did not simply wait idly. Instead, she wasted no time getting involved.

Tunstall was no less of a vanguard than male counterparts who were advancing Republican agendas. She was known as an anti-slavery Unionist, Radical Republican¹ supporter, stalwart for woman suffrage and more.³ Texas was an independent Republic and, eventually, a state in the United States. At neither juncture did the leaders move to provide women the right to vote. Many in Texas believed that government affairs were best left to men and desired to leave it as such. They believed women's suffrage was more than a political issue and went so far as to view it as a dangerous threat to social order.⁴

Proponents of women's suffrage, like Tunstall, were fully aware that women were taxpaying citizens too, and believed they had a right to have their voices heard in government affairs, as well. Tunstall took full advantage of the momentum of change at hand with the birthing of the Republican Party in Texas, and the required Texas Constitutional Convention of 1868-89. During this convention, Titus H. Mundine prosed support of woman suffrage. Before the final vote was cast at the convention, Tunstall spoke to a group of supporters in Austin, 1869 in favor of the proposal. The conclusion of her speech was as follows:

...may not your mothers, your wives, your sisters, your daughters, the women of America, have a voice in making the laws and selecting the rulers to who she owes, and to whom she renders the most implicit reverend and faithful obedience.⁵

A powerful orator, and skillful with words, Tunstall made her best argument, but unfortunately, it would yield no great success. Instead, the proposal was rejected by a vote of 52 to 13.⁶

All would not be lost, nonetheless, as the battle Tunstall engaged in, to push woman suffrage forward, would gain traction and national attention. News spread, and eventually Tunstall's efforts were noticed and acknowledge by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, both national suffrage leaders. Tunstall's efforts would be rewarded as she would soon be named Vice-President of the National Woman Suffrage Association, representing Texas.⁷ Although she would gain notoriety and traction with this position, the battle for women's suffrage rights would continue for decades.

¹ Radical Republicans – existed from around 1854 until the end of Reconstruction in 1877. Had a goal to totally eradicate slavery. Later sought equal treatment and enfranchisement of the freed blacks. Often stood in opposition to Conservative Republicans in Texas.

Tunstall would, however, continued to speak out against what she perceived to be injustices. At one point, living and working on a plantation as a teacher, she witnessed a white man beating a slave and noted in her journal:

O my God, when will all this end? He is beating him as one who had no feelings. What a horrible curse on mankind is slavery—would that it were done away with, then could we truly say America is free—how it does degrade this African & White man. It is the worst of evils.⁸

Such a statement provides a lens into the heart of Tunstall, who was a baptized Christian, not only concerned about woman suffrage but also about the plight of the slave. At one point, it is believed she and her husband were going to gain control over her mother's slaves by becoming executors of her deceased father's estate to free them, but those efforts failed in court.⁹

Ultimately, she would be viewed as a legend to many. She led the early efforts for women's suffrage, which women in Texas -- and the nation -- would eventually benefit. She was a strong voice, speaking at local, state, and national meetings of women's groups and opened a school for African Americans in Crockett, Texas. The antislavery attitudes held by the Tunstall's would lead to them being harassed in Texas for the remainder of their lives.¹⁰ This harassment would come from both former Confederates and even some of Martha's extended family members.¹¹ Her life and great sacrifices, nonetheless, were not in vain as her impact and contributions provided much needed momentum which would eventually lead to women's suffrage being resolved.

Women in Texas and this nation owe a debt of gratitude to such people as Martha Goodwin Tunstall as she was indeed an invaluable ambassador for women's suffrage decades before it would be realized. Although she was yoked to Radical Republican politics in Texas, women from all political spectrums benefit greatly from her hard work, dedication, and sacrifice. A true Texas legend, Martha Goodwin Tunstall.

As always, there is so much more that can be learned from the rich history of Texas Republican politics. It is, therefore, paramount, that the lessons of the past be sought, thus ensuring a more prosperous and sound future for generations to come. Thank you for taking the time to take embark upon this journey through history. Remember, *History Matters!*

Endnotes

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- ¹ Mulvihill, Barbara. Tunstall, Martha Goodwin. Biography Entry. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ² McArthur, Judith N. Women and Politics. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ³ Mulvihill, Barbara. Tunstall, Martha Goodwin. Biography Entry. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ⁴ Taylor, A. Elizabeth. Woman Suffrage. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ⁵ Mulvihill, Barbara. Tunstall, Martha Goodwin. Biography Entry. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Mulvihill, Barbara. Tunstall, Martha Goodwin. Biography Entry. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Collier, Ken, et. Al. Lone Star Politics: Tradition and Transformation in Texas.
- ¹¹ Mulvihill, Barbara. Tunstall, Martha Goodwin. Biography Entry. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.