

Women’s Suffrage and Copyright; Any Connection?

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Part of women’s history in the United States may be told through the suffrage movement that culminated in the 19th amendment to the Constitution, giving the vote to women. Did copyright play a part in the enfranchisement of women?

In 1856, when photographs were added to the types of works protected by copyright, the copyright law enabled the expansion of a paying profession. Copyright protection meant that photographers owned their works and could sell the right to use a photo. The holdings of the Library of Congress include the George Grantham Bain Collection of thousands of photographs created mainly from 1900 to the mid-1920s for the Bain News Service founded by Bain in 1898. This business was the first to deal in worldwide news photos. Without copyright protection, Bain might never have established a business based on selling rights to photos, and the photos might not have been taken or preserved.

Included in the Bain Collection are photos of the Women’s Suffrage Procession, a parade that took place down Pennsylvania Avenue in the District on March 3, 1913, the day before President Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated. Leading the parade astride a large white horse and draped in a flowing white cape was Inez Millholland (1886–1916), a Vassar graduate, labor lawyer, and fiery orator. Bain’s photos record the inspirational image of Millholland, who was considered by some to be a martyr to the cause



Inez Millholland led the Women’s Suffrage Procession on March 3, 1913.

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of suffrage after her 1916 death at age 30 from pernicious anemia.

Looking deeper into the events of the day, we find that a Copyright Office staffer was one of the parade’s organizers. At least 5,000 marchers lined up behind Millholland by category. First came representatives of countries that had already enfranchised women, then “pioneers” who had long fought for the vote, then groups of women workers divided by professions. Leading the librarians’ contingent was Harriet Hifton, a Copyright Office staffer who then lived at 623 E. Capitol Street in the District. She must have been a sturdy and determined woman to march, especially when we find out that Secretary of War Henry Stimson had to call out the Army to maintain order among bystanders, and scores of marchers ended up in the hospital.

During Women’s History Month in March, we in the Copyright Office can be proud of the part the Copyright Office played and continues to play in preserving important images of historic events and in providing a dedicated campaigner for social justice. ©