

Michigan Lawyers in History

Phoebe C. Munnecke

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

You may have heard of Phoebe C. Munnecke. She's generally remembered as the "militant suffragist" who strongly encouraged Martha W. Griffiths to run for political office.¹

Phoebe C. Wirth Munnecke was born in Iowa to a Swiss immigrant and his wife. Dr. John George Wirth had studied medicine at Heidelberg University in Germany and practiced in Europe for several years before moving to the United States. Wirth settled in Iowa and married the much-younger Regina Beizinger; the couple had four children. The Wirths valued education. Cyrillus, the oldest child, graduated from Keokuk Physicians & Surgeons Medical College at the top of his class and became a pharmacist. Another child, Elizabeth, became a teacher, while a third, Guido, worked in real estate. Phoebe, the youngest of the four, would eventually become a lawyer.²

First, however, she got married. In the late 1880s, Phoebe married Walter Munnecke, a builder and contractor.³ The couple made their way to Detroit in a roundabout fashion, first living in New York.⁴ In Detroit, Walter formed a contracting business with George Pine; Pine & Munnecke specialized in "general cold storage construction work" and the company frequently advertised in the local newspapers.⁵

While assisting her husband in building his business—she served as vice presi-

dent⁶—Phoebe became involved in Michigan's role in the women's suffrage movement. She joined the National Women's Party (NWP), a breakaway sect from the National American Woman Suffrage Association.⁷ The NWP focused on a nationwide constitutional amendment rather than the association's state-by-state approach to suffrage and used attention-grabbing tactics to promote the cause of women's suffrage. The Silent Sentinels was one of these tactics.⁸

Six days a week from January 10, 1917, to June 4, 1919, members of the NWP stood silent before the White House, holding banners in protest of Congress's failure to pass a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. The Silent Sentinels gained notoriety. Women were attacked, banners were ripped, and the Sentinels were arrested and sentenced to the workhouse. The arrestees generated more news in custody, staging a hunger strike when imprisoned; guards had to force feed them.⁹

Despite President Woodrow Wilson's public support for suffrage, the bill had failed the previous September. Both sides were losing patience with one another, and the NWP stepped up its efforts. In winter 1919, the Silent Sentinels added another feature to their protests: they began burning various speeches President Wilson had given in Europe regarding democracy, liberty, and freedom. After all, half of all Americans did not have the rights of which he spoke.

The NWP intended to keep those fires burning "until the Senate passed the suffrage resolution."¹⁰

Phoebe had been involved in the Silent Sentinels and was chairperson of the NWP Michigan branch. After participating in the speech burning, she was arrested on January 5, 1919, along with several of her compatriots. Her sentence was a \$10 fine or a stay at the workhouse for 10 days. She chose the workhouse and promptly went on a hunger strike. About halfway through her stay, officials became concerned for her health; force feeding seemed imminent.¹¹ Phoebe was reported as "suffering from nausea and pains in the head"¹² and eventually the rest of her sentence was commuted.¹³ She later said that the tales of what women endured in prison were not exaggerated.¹⁴

That summer, the suffrage amendment finally passed; it was ratified by the majority of states a year later.¹⁵ It was probably thrilling for Phoebe and the other Silent Sentinels to vote in the next election.

Phoebe moved on from the fight for women's voting rights to law school. She graduated from the Detroit College of Law in 1922¹⁶ and joined the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan, the International Bar Association, and the American Bar Association.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, she worked with the Michigan League of Women Voters¹⁸ and the Detroit Business Women's Club.¹⁹ When the *Detroit Free Press* had a "Women's

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Women suffragists picketing in front of the White House, 1917

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Hall of Fame Contest" in 1928, Phoebe was nominated for achievement in politics.²⁰

Phoebe also began lobbying for another constitutional amendment, drafted by the NWP Lawyers' Council, to ensure that "no distinction between the rights of the sexes shall exist in the United States or any place subject to its jurisdiction."²¹ It was a piece of extremely progressive legislation when put forth in 1922.²² That amendment is better known today as the Equal Rights Amendment.²³

In the 1940s, Phoebe was quoted as saying that "women in public office have improved the quality of government, 'but we need more women in Congress.'"²⁴ Around this same time, she met a recent University of Michigan Law School graduate who was just becoming involved in politics with her husband. When Phoebe told Martha Griffiths she should run for office, Martha didn't take her seriously. But Griffiths' husband, Hicks, did. Shortly before Phoebe would have celebrated the 36th anniversary of her arrest, Congresswoman Martha Griffiths was sworn into office in Washington, D.C., just a few blocks from where Phoebe had been arrested. She did not live to see it, but she would have been proud.²⁵ ■

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ENDNOTES

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- Comstock Hits Party Labels*, Detroit Free Press (October 29, 1926), p 1.
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- The first note was in the February 13, 1928 issue of the *Detroit Free Press*. Phoebe didn't win, though. The winners were Dr. Caroline Barlett Crane (religious achievement), Lenna Frances Cooper (scientific achievement), Anne Campbell (literature achievement), Dr. Maria B. Coolidge (medicine achievement), Laura Osborn (education achievement), Minnie C. Booth (philanthropy achievement), Jessie Bonstelle (arts achievement), Mrs. Harry V. Woodhouse (political achievement), Mrs. E. J. Jefferies (social service achievement), and Bina M. West (business achievement).
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- See generally Nat'l Org of Women, *Chronology of the Equal Rights Amendment, 1923–1996* <<https://now.org/resource/chronology-of-the-equal-rights-amendment-1923-1996/>>.
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