

“Many Females Will Vote:”¹ Campaigning, Politics and Newspaper Marketing

Mary Ellen Zuckerman
*School of Business,
SUNY Geneseo*

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to detail the role played by partisan newspapers in promoting and swaying elections in the nineteenth century. Specifically, this paper looks at the case of the County School Commissioner races in the 1890s in Cattaraugus County NY.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses historical analysis based on archival material from the papers of Martha Van Rensselaer in the New York State School of Home Economics Papers at Cornell University.

Research limitations/implications – This paper provides one example of how elections played out in partisan newspapers. Additional examples, particularly of how women were portrayed in print during the heyday of these newspapers would be illuminating.

Originality/Value – This paper adds to the history of how partisan newspapers were used in the late nineteenth century for political persuasion. It also raises issues of the portray of females in the public sphere.

Keywords – Political persuasion; newspaper communications; images of women; women in politics.

Paper Type – Research Paper

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century United States, the fight for female suffrage was being waged across the nation using both the strategy of full national voting rights and one of incremental voting rights, local and targeted. One area where the targeted strategy held sway was for local School Boards and School Commissioners. When women sought suffrage in these focused elections, the marketing battle for votes frequently took place in the pages of local newspapers, the popular medium of the day. Newspapers told the story of the elections, reported on supporters and detractors and served much as talk shows do in today’s world to try to present information in the most persuasive manner to support a political case.

In New York State, where women gained enfranchisement for School Commissioner elections in the early 1890s, much of the fight for the position of School Commissioner in the southwestern corner of NY State, Cattaraugus County, occurred in the highly partisan newspapers of the day. The fact that the candidate for office was female did not cause the newspaper articles and editorials to hold back in their efforts to persuade votes to back one candidate or the other. A prime example of these battles occurred with the candidate of Martha Van Rensselaer (1864-1932) who ran in the first year that women across New York State could vote in these elections. She triumphed in a hard fought first battle in 1893, and easily won re-election in 1896, both covered in the regional and even a national newspapers. However by 1899 Van Rensselaer had crossed the will of some local politicians and they attacked her in the papers. She lost the election amid a sea of newsprint.

School Commissioner Race

In 1893, Martha Van Rensselaer, at that time a teacher, who had been born in Randolph NY in 1864, had tired of the classroom and was looking for a new career. While discussing her future plans with her family and close friends, well know and well-connected in Cattaraugus County, an opportunity presented itself that seemed to well suited to Martha’s educational and administrative skills; the position of County School Commissioner.

A legislative act in February 1880 had given women of New York State who paid taxes or had children the right to vote in school board meetings and be eligible for a position on the board. This law energized women in local elections, and drew suffrage leaders across the state to ensure that women used this newly available right. Then, in 1892, the Republican majority legislature in Albany, NY went

further, passing a law providing women the right to vote in County School Commissioner elections, simultaneously making women more electable for that position.

By empowering a female electorate, this legislation opened the door to female County School Commissioner candidates in rural areas across the state.² In Tompkins County teacher Ella Gale had been elected school commissioner in 1892, the first woman in New York to hold that position. She was a Democrat in a predominantly Republican county and a supporter of Prohibition. But women turned out to vote for her, giving Gale a victory.³ A handful of other women ran for this position in 1893 and 1894. Two women had already held the position in Oneida county and, a newspaper argued, in a common justification offered in editorials for allowing women this job, the females had raised standards and introduced excellence while taking politics out of the schools.

School suffrage, whether it be for School Boards, school committees, or in this instance School Commissioner, had gained in popularity. By the 1870s and early 1880s, state legislatures across the nation had begun enfranchising qualified women (usually property owning and/or having children living with them). Education was seen as a natural feminine arena and allowing women a say in choosing who ran the schools and to serve in these positions proved a step even many conservatives could support. Some female activists supported this type of partial suffrage, akin to the fights for municipal female suffrage. Even those who believed that full woman suffrage at the national level was where money and energy should be devoted conceded that partial efforts such as school suffrage should be supported, with particular emphasis on ensuring that the newly enfranchised populace voted.⁴ Organized efforts for these local school elections, including providing information and arguments to newspapers, the popular media of the day, gave women practice in organizing and working for a candidate and allowed them the power of the ballot, steps toward demanding full suffrage.

The framing of the argument granting women the right to run for and vote in the County School Commissioner elections highlighted a split the suffragists wrestled with. Some contended that women had a special ability to oversee education, that it formed part of the separate sphere many in these decades believed females existed in.⁵ The also argued that women were above politics and therefore would bring higher standards to educational oversight. As sister candidate Martha Almy, a suffragist running for Count Commissioner in neighboring Chautauqua County the same year as Martha, argued, “The women believe that there are yet some departments of education and some phases of school life that need patient consideration and painstaking effort that woman is pre-eminently qualified to give.”⁶ Others argued that women were inherently equal to men and hence should have the vote, not just for School Commissioner, but for all elective offices.

No such split received much coverage in Martha Van Rensselaer’s section of New York. Being granted the right to vote in the County School Commissioner election galvanized the organized women’s groups who set about identifying a winning candidate. The Southwestern New York region had seen strong activity for female suffrage in the late nineteenth century, with neighboring Chautauqua county earning the title of “banner county” at the 1891 national Political Equality Clubs meeting, a designation the county proudly kept for several years.⁷ The temperance and women’s suffrage movements of the late nineteenth century had shown what women could do in the public sphere.

Newspapers in this region reflected the active suffrage movement. Most Chautauqua county newspapers were prosuffrage and the activities of the Political Equality Clubs or Leagues consistently received coverage; regular columns or “departments” devoted to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) appeared as well.⁸ These predominantly rural areas may have been predisposed to seeing women as equal to men, albeit different, as women formed an important economic mainstay on the farms.

Van Rensselaer capitalized on the momentum generated by the new enfranchisement for the School Commissioner election. The strong networks that Martha’s family had developed through their active participation in Randolph’s town life, as well as her mother’s connections with various reform-minded groups, served Martha well as she built support to gain the Republican nomination for this position (the county was strongly Republican, and selection as candidate by this party gave a strong presumption of winning). However, the result of this pioneering and ultimately political step was by no means a sure thing and a hard fought political battle, much playing out in the pages of the newspapers, ensued.

By the spring of 1893 Martha was deeply involved in political preparations, sending out feelers to businessmen, politicians and delegates. Women’s groups jumped into the fray, with a coalition supporting Martha’s candidacy. The local Women’s Christian Temperance Union put Martha’s name into

nomination, and the local Political Equality Club (PEC) seconded the nomination. Both groups provided information, sponsored speakers and held regular meetings about the school suffrage initiative throughout Martha's campaign, all reported on in the papers. These groups had worked together across the country in a variety of locations, with the WCTU making a strategic decision to support the fight for the ballot, especially in these partial suffrage battles; they hoped if women gained power in municipalities they would ban liquor and they hoped if women were in charge of education they would enforce teaching about the evils of liquor.⁹ In addition to the WCTU and PEC, Van Rensselaer received an endorsement in March 1893 from the Women's Republican Club of Randolph, of which she was treasurer, again noted in the local paper.¹⁰

WCTU officials made it clear to their followers that Van Rensselaer supported their cause. In nominating Martha, WCTU Superintendent for Cattaraugus County Franchise work Mrs. Eva. A. H. Barnes urged members in her regular newspaper column to vote for Van Rensselaer, providing clear rationale for the organization's endorsement: "This lady, besides being eminently qualified as to education and practical ability to perform the ordinary duties of the office, is an avowed, earnest temperance worker and would no doubt be of great help to the WCTU in enforcing the law in regard to scientific temperance instruction in our schools."¹¹ Since alliance with the anti-liquor interests might arouse strong resistance by the opposing forces, a newspaper editorial felt compelled to point out that Van Rensselaer's endorsement by the WCTU was not a reason to vote against her: "It might as well be said that we should oppose a candidate because she was a Methodist or a Baptist, as to refuse to place her in nomination because her canvass was being urged by the WCTU."¹²

WCTU's Barnes also suggested in a newspaper piece that women band together in groups both to register and to vote, thus making the process more comfortable. She closed with the strong admonition: "Let every woman consider it her duty to put her opinion on record in the only intelligent way, upon public matters of vital interest at the ballot box. Let men sentimentalize as they will about the powerful influence of 'the hand that rocks the cradle,' you will find they will pay far greater heed to its protests when it wields the ballot, and it will 'move the world' much more effectively and with far less friction."¹³ She clearly saw female suffrage and WCTU interests as aligned.

The local Political Equality Club (PEC) endorsed Van Rensselaer on April 25th, 1893, at their county semi-annual convention, held in a Congregational church in Little Valley, NY where a woman, Emily C. Woodruff, served as pastor, a fact noted in the local paper. At this meeting, in addition to listing Van Rensselaer's stellar qualifications and the fact that the WCTU had already put her name into nomination, speakers referenced the special skills argument, pointing out that women could do this work (overseeing the schools) better than men. They also argued that since women had been granted the right to vote for this position, they should use their power to elect a woman (and contended that men should be gallant enough to nominate a woman). Both the WCTU and the PEL realized that the woman vote had to be nurtured (hence the WCTU suggestion that women go in groups to the polls). Not all women were comfortable with the voting process or saw it as important, and these organizations sought to inform and encourage female voters.¹⁴ The WCTU and PEL gave a joint reception for Van Rensselaer in the summer of 1893, so people could meet the candidate.

This was the local Political Equality League's (PEL) first venture into politics and an intensification of efforts by the WCTU. The Cattaraugus WCTU chapter had the position of County Superintendent of Franchise Work, as did other WCTU branches, but the Cattaraugus branch felt they had fallen behind in franchise work, particularly in comparison with neighboring Chautauqua County. Both The WCTU and the PEL mobilized, disseminating information and educating potential female voters as well as hosting events for Van Rensselaer, and sending back intelligence about the political dynamics in various towns.

A great deal of newsprint covered this first election with a female candidate for County School Commissioner. Martha received strong endorsements from several newspapers. In an indication of the environment in this part of Southwestern NY, some pieces talked about the future expansion of suffrage to women as though it was just a question of time. The political wisdom of jumping on board with the inevitability of an expanded pool of voters received attention from columnists. The *Jamestown News* argued that since female suffrage was inevitable and Van Rensselaer highly qualified, the Republican party should take the long view, nominate a female and be seen as the party of women. They also noted that "There is strong political equality sentiment in the country; that sentiment belongs by right to the Republican party," and "...it is important that the future custodians of enlarged suffrage should cast their maiden ballots for a capable republican woman."¹⁵

One editorial echoed the PEC and maintained that the men in nomination should withdraw.¹⁶ The next edition followed up, claiming that if the Republicans didn't nominate a woman, the Democrats were apparently ready and waiting to do so: "It should be remembered that under the law as it stands today hundreds of women are to become voters on the school commissioner questions. They are not tied up to any party yet, and the direction in which their votes are cast is going to decide the contest. Then if the Republican party, having the power to nominate a woman who is peculiarly gifted and who would bring unquestioned integrity of purpose to the duties of the office, refuses to take such action, it will have affronted not only the political equality sentiment of the county, but the womanhood of the district, which is as yet dormant as a political force."¹⁷ The savvy political party should consider carefully this future electorate. Intra-party politics marked this race. It was only natural, but ironic as one of the arguments for allowing women to be elected as School Commissioners was to take politics *out* of the educational arena.

As part of her election quest, Van Rensselaer highlighted her experience as a teacher, soliciting letters of endorsement from previous employers in Tidioute and Harrisburg, PA, and Ellicottville, NY, to attest to her strong classroom performance and outstanding administrative abilities. The Harrisburg principal called her "a woman of rare merit." These encomiums were printed in the newspaper and summed up by a paragraph stating "Miss VR is splendidly equipped, by natural endowments and educational qualifications for the position of school commissioner and should receive the vote of every republican and woman voter in the district."¹⁸

Despite strong support from various constituencies, Van Rensselaer's fight for the Republican nomination was fierce, with several other candidates running. The process to gain the nomination required strategically reaching out to influential individuals in each of the towns in the county, giving speeches and meeting voters, monitoring and responding to articles and editorials in the press.

Aside from the general agitation stirred by the novelty or threat of women being able to run and vote for school commissioner, several other controversies marked the 1893 campaign. The first, fought in the pages of the fiercely partisan newspapers (one historian notes that around this time it was said that "there were as many newspapers as there were towns in the county"), centered around a rumor that Van Rensselaer would run as an independent if the Republicans failed to nominate her.¹⁹ Calls came for Van Rensselaer to identify as a Republican and agree to abide by the selection of the party's nominee. Papers such as *The County Times* argued that if Van Rensselaer wasn't going to declare herself a Republican and abide by the Republican caucus decision (and refuse to run as an independent), following and paying obeisance to the party, then she shouldn't be considered as the Republican candidate. Refuting this were papers such as *The Randolph Register*, contending that since women weren't legally permitted to attend the party caucuses and conventions, take part in shaping party platforms and run for general offices (beyond the School Commissionership), they shouldn't be held to a political party allegiance: "As Miss VR has never yet been accorded the privilege to record her choice at the polls it had not occurred to anyone that it would be necessary for her to prove her political past..."²⁰

The established party was clearly fighting for control and fearful of the unknown power of female candidates and voters. As *The County Times* wrote "We are in no wise prejudiced against Miss VR, but as she is asking for the republican nomination; as she is asking to be permitted to stand as the exponent of a party representing certain principles, this newspaper, in justice to itself, to the paper and to Miss VR, deemed it advisable to ask her if she was willing to conform with the established customs and precedents of the party and the obligations due it from its candidates for nomination." Eventually Van Rensselaer did agree to abide by the party choice, but not right away. *The County Times* also published an editorial on "Women in Politics," haranguing the newly enfranchised voters, warning them that they would be on trial in this election to demonstrate their ability to be good citizens, intelligent and well-informed, and as such, would surely want to vote along party lines, not for a woman just because she was a woman.²¹

The fact that family friend James T. Edwards had introduced the state Senate bill authorizing female suffrage and candidacy was held against Van Rensselaer by the opposition, which noted that "When we recall the fact that the Van Rensselaer mansion was the headquarters of the Edwards independent senatorial movement in 1892 and that Edwards was the introducer of the bill making women eligible to hold and vote for this office, it would almost appear, from the fact that Miss Van Rensselaer is the first lady to be recognized as a bonafied candidate for this \$800 position, as if, well, as if it was a strange coincidence."²² Also, here and later, editorial comments hinted that a woman earning that much money was somehow unseemly, taking the salary from a man.

The political nature of the campaign was highlighted by the PEL of Salamanca which noted in a newspaper that based on the qualifications and benefits to the actual schools, Van Rensselaer's candidacy was clearly the strongest. The other candidates "base their claims for the office on their political service; that the office should go to a 'stalwart republican,' a 'hustler,' or one who 'has been trying to get the office for a good many years,' making competency and fitness of secondary importance."²³ The issues of loyalty to party versus taking the County School Commissioner position out of politics continued throughout the campaign.

Eventually Van Rensselaer ignored the advice of those who had counseled her to run as an independent if she failed to secure the nomination, and publicly stated that she would only run as a Republican.²⁴

Turmoil also occurred near the actual voting date. An item appeared in a local paper about an attempted challenge to the "woman vote" by a Democrat in Randolph, but this contest was fought and the votes counted. Some confusion existed about eligibility to vote; the earlier 1880 law that allowed women to vote for school board members had posited requirements of either having children living with them or paying taxes. The 1893 legislation had not been clear as to whether these same requirements pertained. Martha and her supporters had to rush the question to Albany in order to reassure women about who could legally cast a ballot.²⁵ A letter to Martha from the Political Equality League in Gowanda raised the same point, with women wanting to vote but uncertain as to whether they could if they had neither children nor property.²⁶ After the caucuses some clarifications had to be sent out through public newspaper statements and through the mail.

Strategy came from newspaper staff as well. Mr. W.E. Collins, the editor of the Republican *Gowanda Herald*, had written favorably about Martha's candidacy. She wrote him, thanking him for his support and he responded with advice. He suggested having some friends, possibly females, go to the town caucuses to influence the vote; having people there in person often helped shape the vote.²⁷ He was incensed by a political attack in *The County Union*, which he strongly advised Martha to counter, point by point, in a circular that could go out to delegates and voters, as well as getting information into the newspapers. He noted that this was a political and bitter fight, but saw her as strong, honest and frank. He was willing to help, but from behind the scenes. He also counseled that she needed a man in whom she had confidence to give another opinion on *The County Union* attack; even this supporter did not trust a female (perhaps politically untried) viewpoint in this political fight.²⁸

Martha's meticulous approach to the election included preparing form letters with information about when the town caucuses would occur. These mimeographed sheet asked recipients to fill in and send to her the name of the delegates for the convention immediately after their local caucus, as "It is needless for me to add that I am anxious an effort should be made to select delegates favorable to me, and you will understand the situation better than I, and how it may be accomplished."²⁹ She used women from the WCTU in towns as well as newspapers to help her pass along information about the logistics of the caucuses.³⁰

The Republicans held their nominating on Thursday, Sept. 21, 1893, in the opera house of the town of Little Valley and was reported on carefully by the papers. Representation of the district towns was "3 for each town, and one for each 100 republican votes cast at the last election, and one additional for fractions over 50."³¹

Van Rensselaer's competition for the slot included A.B. Archer of Conewango, a teacher and a candidate for the position in 1890; C.A. Fish of Salamanca, who had some training at Cornell; H.E. Vincent of Dayton, who principal of a school at Dayton; Mr. Waller, principal of the school at Little Valley; and Mr. Harrison.

The nominating meeting provided high drama with 42 rounds of voting needed to declare the ultimate winner. After the first 19 votes, delegates took a supper break. Harrison withdrew after the 20th roll call, Vincent after the 35th and Archer after the 37th. With three candidates left (Van Rensselaer, Waller and Fish), the voting went to a 41st round, when Fish withdrew. Martha triumphed on the next vote, with 51 pledged to her versus Waller's 43. Van Rensselaer had led or was tied for the lead on all the roll calls. One account noted that "It was probably the fairest and squarest convention ever held in this section, and we think it safe to say not a dollar was used in securing votes."³² Women participated in the proceedings, one as teller and one presiding over several of the votes. Van Rensselaer was introduced to the convention by Chairman F.C. Vinton to make some remarks. The party leaders then asked her to agree not to marry during her term, to which she replied only that she would not leave the county. Finished

and triumphant, Martha returned to her home for a celebration with family and friends, noted the local paper.

In the November, 1893 general election, Republican Van Rensselaer won out over Democratic candidate Abbott. Martha Van Rensselaer, became the first female elected County School Commissioner in this district, in the first Cattaraugus County School Commissioner election where women cast their ballots. She was relatively young, 29 when elected.

The Otto newspaper noted that “Election day passed off very quietly notwithstanding the presence of a good many women. The average woman seems to be able to fold her ballots as well as the average man. Between forty and fifty of them voted. They didn’t stampede the booths, but came in by ones and twos, said little and went away quietly.” The article went on to note that Republican candidate (Van Rensselaer) received 146 votes in the town to Mr. Abbott’s (Democratic candidate) 85. Women, with a few exceptions, voted for Van Rensselaer.³³ Here, as in other school elections across the country, women showed that they wanted the vote.

With this win, Van Rensselaer joined a small number of female county school commissioners in New York State, (five during her nine years in office). It was not a foregone conclusion that female candidates would triumph simply because women were now voting; in neighboring Chautauqua County suffragist Martha R. Almy had run for the Third District of Chautauqua County in 1892, supported by the Chautauqua County PEL, but lost. In Cattaraugus county Christina McLennan, sister of Syracuse NY judge Peter B. McLennan, ran for the position in the 1st district.

The issues of women voting for School Commissioners in New York State in 1893, female candidates and how political parties would respond captured the attention not just of local newspapers. The illustrious *New York Times* pointed out that an unusually high number of women were registered to vote in the School Commissioner races and that female candidates were in fact running. The paper specifically mentioned the race in Cattaraugus County, noting that “The Political Equality Club of Salamanca and the Cattaraugus County Woman’s Christian Temperance Union are working night and day for Miss MVR of Randolph, and with fair prospects for success. It is only in Cattaraugus County that the status of the women can be determined. In the other western counties the politicians are all at sea concerning their intentions. No man can say until the votes are counted how the women are going to vote...”³⁴ This piece showed an understanding of the efforts of the Cattaraugus County women’s groups and of Van Rensselaer’s skillful politicking and organizing.

The 1896 Election

Re-election to the Commissioner position in 1896 proved surprisingly easy. Van Rensselaer planned as carefully as she had for the first election, but her stellar record and the willingness of the county Republican party to allow her a second term conspired to make the election uneventful, with even the Democratic party endorsing her. She had been working hard and newspaper clippings, letters and encomiums attested to the public record of her excellent performance. The election went smoothly, unmarred by the politicking of the first contest and the one to come in three years. There was some sentiment that individuals in this position should be allowed two terms. Citing this a newspaper pointed out that Van Rensselaer deserved a second term, first because “it has long been the custom to give a deserving official at least two terms in the position,” but additionally, because she has succeeded in doing more than previous officials and had won endorsement from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as the Teachers Association.³⁵ Both performance and custom dictated that she be given the second term.

Newspaper accounts of the renomination in 1896 speak to the high quality of Van Rensselaer’s work, one account noting that she was “the best that had been in the office for many years.” In this year, her excellent performance counted as a positive. In fact, in August 1896, *The Randolph Register and Weekly Courant* called for the Democratic party to endorse Republican nominee Van Rensselaer for Commissioner: “Her work in the past has been superior to any official in that office for many years and it is the avowed intention of the many Democrats to help increase the majority by which she will be returned.” The piece points out that the election will be less political because women still don’t have the general vote, so this position may be decided on actual performance rather than party.³⁶ At the fall Democratic convention in Salamanca in 1896 Van Rensselaer received two-thirds of the votes endorsing her. The paper reported this as placing the interests of the schools above partisan politics.³⁷ The Populist party nominated an F.H. Seymour for School Commissioner against Martha and he publicly declined, saying he wouldn’t run against someone better qualified than he.³⁸

Van Rensselaer's performance reflected well on females in public office, as was acknowledged in a newspaper piece published in nearby Jamestown, NY in summer 1895: "Miss MVR, a school commissioner of the second district of Cattaraugus county, has demonstrated the fact that woman's 'sphere' may be widened into this department of public work very successfully, not only to women but to the work. Few officers attend more strictly to business than she has done, for she has been untiring in her labor to know and to improve the condition of the public schools in her district. There was doubt in many minds if a woman would have the requisite business ability to become a success as a commissioner. It has vanished, for she is a success. If the 'coming woman' is any like Miss VR we hope she will keep on coming."³⁹ This positive acknowledgement of her performance and publically proclaimed sense that she had proven women's worth must have been gratifying.

Martha's performance received attention not just locally and on the state level. An article appearing in nationally distributed *Godey's Magazine* in January 1896 on "The New Woman in Office," noted "New York State has five women county school superintendents, and two village school superintendents. Perhaps the best known of these is Miss Martha Van Rensselaer of Cattaraugus County. Immediately upon her election she began a personal inspection of schools, and her influence was most immediately felt. She is full of energy and ambition, and devotes herself untiringly to the duties of her position. It is the testimony of the State Superintendent that 'Miss Van Rensselaer is one of the best school commissioners in the state.' The Second District of Cattaraugus, over which she presides, is one of the largest in the state."⁴⁰

Election of 1899

Van Rensselaer's straightforward victory in the 1896 election may have lulled her into believing her meritorious performance would ensure continued re-election. The administrative work itself, focused both county and state-wide, the school house visits, as well as the teacher trainings she regularly undertook, may have consumed her energy. Whatever the reason, in the months leading up to the 1899 School Commissioner election, Van Rensselaer made an uncharacteristic political error. Martha formally announced as a candidate in an April 24th, 1899 letter. She referenced her experience, judgment and knowledge, and the fact that the position should go to someone who is not holding any other job.⁴¹ At the same time, she asserted that she would not campaign, as she was too busy doing her job and would not have time to go out and canvass delegates as she had in the past. This statement showed a rare deaf ear to the need to connect directly with people, and may have been seen as getting above herself. While undoubtedly true that the job kept her fully occupied, Martha's opponents seized upon this declaration, conceding that she had done an excellent job, but arguing that in all fairness it was someone else's turn to hold the Commissioner position. Martha's unwillingness to campaign was all that other candidates needed to successfully tarnish Van Rensselaer's name in the press and cause voters to question whether she should really continue in this position.

Martha was manifestly hard-working in the position, conscientious and supported by the teachers. All agreed that she had raised the quality of the schools. But she ran afoul of the Republican party machine, and perhaps the sense that she had had her turn and now someone else should have a chance. Martha knew getting re-elected so she could do the job was the most important task, and as a good politician that's what she should do. However she believed the schools should be left out of politics. Her point of view, published in the newspapers, was derided by her opponents. As the *Olean Times* noted "There is a strain of mild demagogy through the effusion, and it's doubtful if Martha has gained anything by its appearance."⁴²

The *Salamanca Daily News* argued that while Van Rensselaer had unquestionably performed well in her position, "Miss VR's claim of past efficiency should not, as we view the matter, be considered a reason for indefinite perpetuation in office. While Miss VR satisfactorily filled the position, there is little doubt in our mind that her place can in turn be filled with equal satisfaction to all interested... we do not feel that Miss VR is the only person who could be found to perform the duties of the office to which she desires re-election. With all due respect to her past good work, let the position be given to some other competent person---two terms should be quite sufficient to satisfy the political ambition of the young lady in this particular direction."⁴³

This idea of individuals in public offices not deserving to continue enjoying the advantages of these positions irrespective of their performance was not uncommon; in Miller's national article on women in office he quoted "A Male Republican Voter" lauding the defeat of a female incumbent, arguing "I do

think that you have received the benefits accruing from that office long enough and furthermore do not believe in making a lifetime job out of any public office, as that savors too much of monarchy.”⁴⁴

Competitors lost no time coming forward, including a previous County School Commissioner, J.J. Crandall as the *Cattaraugus Union* reported: “Frank E. Brown of Napoli and J.J. Crandall of Randolph are after the Republican nomination for school commissioners to succeed Miss Martha Van Rensselaer.... We are pleased to know that our genial friend J.J. Crandall has decided to become a candidate for school commissioner of this district. Mr. Crandall needs no introduction to the people in this section as he is well known to have been one of the most thorough commissioners that ever held office in Cattaraugus county. He has kept in close touch with educational matters and the condition and progress of the schools and is even better fitted for the various duties of the position than when he served the....”⁴⁵ Another candidate, S.A. Peavy, emerged. A graduate of Alfred University, Peavy had also earned a certificate from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Martha’s boss), a ‘college graduate (life)’ certificate. He had been a teacher and a principal.

In addition to not campaigning, Martha’s efforts to divide the district into two, which she successfully accomplished, had created some bad feeling, as did other changes. A school consolidation and other actions received coverage in the *Gowanda Herald*, which noted many modifications made to the Cattaraugus district: “The Jolls district is to be no more and is to be added to Dayton, Gowanda and Perrysburg, also the districts at Seventh Day and Allen’s Switch are to be made one, and the district between Gowanda and Perrysburg is soon to be given up. These changes are made necessary, as the old school buildings are unfit for use and too small a number of children to support a teacher. Miss MVR, the commissioner, favors the consolidation, as the children will receive better instruction.”⁴⁶ Coldspring wanted some variations in their district, which Commissioner Van Rensselaer was considering.

In Spring 1899, Governor Theodore Roosevelt signed a bill dividing Cattaraugus County into three rather than two school districts. A similar bill had been tried in 1889 but failed. Newspaper accounts gave credit to Van Rensselaer for her persistence in getting this bill through. The rationale was the large size of the district, making visiting each of the widely dispersed schools difficult, as Martha had seen in her tenure. The large number of schools created an equally large workload, daunting for any School Commissioner. *The Cattaraugus Republican*, endorsing Martha, noted both her excellent performance and the improved performance of anyone with a smaller district: “This work of our present commissioner has won the hearty appreciation of all who have become familiar with it and the praise of the state superintendent and the authorities at Albany. She has devoted her entire time to it, and it is acknowledged by teachers and people that the schools of our county were before in so prosperous a condition. The compensation for all this labor is small while the expenses exceed by considerable the amount furnished by the state. This new division however will improve this to a degree. Before long the time will come for the selection of a successor to our present commissioner. It is a very important matter in which fitness, not politics, should decide. Experience, maturity of judgment, education and tact in such an office are essential to success and the principles of civil service should apply here.” The paper went on to point out that State Superintendent Skinner had praised Van Rensselaer’s performance, and that the teachers of the district wanted her.⁴⁷ Martha was also supported by the *Randolph Enterprise*.

However, her political foes argued that Van Rensselaer had pushed for this re-districting for political reasons. The *Salamanca Daily News* called it a “smooth, political scheme by which the county had another district added, in order that there might a possibility of her retaining a good fat political position for a third term. The same young lady, who is making up these districts juggled with the towns placing one here and another there, in order that she could take care of past promises and retain her position.”⁴⁸

Another newspaper notice, while calling on Van Rensselaer to state categorically whether she was angling for the Democratic or Independent nomination (and an offer to use the pages of the paper to let people know) if she failed to receive the Republican nod, wrote an editorial whose tone was indicative of the nastiness of the campaign: “We would like to bring to the attention of our readers another thing that proves that Miss VR is a lightning change artist, and can turn emphatically declared plans upside down without three or four years to consider the matters.... Only a few short weeks ago this lady politician, who, by the way, is about as smooth a worker as could be pointed out, posed before the papas and mamas and old bachelor voters in a public letter as a self sacrificing, devoted servant who could not conscientiously spare time from the beloved schools to make a canvas. It was a nice bait, but we are informed that the lady has changed her views, and can now find time to use about three livery stables in getting over the district. As we have before stated, a better commissioner than Miss VR could not in our judgment be found; but she has held the office as long, and longer than she is entitled to it, and we should

like to see a change, and there will be change, regardless of Democratic affiliation, independent ticket or any other effort which may be made by the lady to retain her place.”⁴⁹ Martha hadn’t played this game of party politics. Meritorious performance alone was not enough in this ultimately political position.

Martha shot back, within an hour of the paper going to press: “Editor Register—Replying to your editorial of May 31st in which you state that a report seems to be generally circulated throughout this district to the effect that I am making a canvass for Democratic endorsement of an independent nomination for the office of School Commissioner, I have to say that the report is untrue and has no foundation of fact whatever. I am not now making, nor have I at any other time made efforts of the nature referred to in your editorial.”⁵⁰

Martha realized that she did indeed need to get out and talk with voters and potential delegates as well as stay on top of newspaper attacks; performance and the support of her superior and the teachers she supervised, as well as the demonstrably improved conditions and standards in the schools, was not enough. She changed her decision and began campaigning. A poem called “William Smith’s confession” appeared in a newspaper, telling of the various candidates coming around and bribing William Smith to vote for them and to influence others to do so. When finally Van Rensselaer met with him, she spoke straight to him and didn’t bribe him except to give him a four-leaf clover she just picked. But he voted for her because she was honest and hard working. Or the intensity of this campaign he wrote, “But the very worst of everything, To turn me upside down, Has been the school commissioner, That’s liked to swamp the town.”⁵¹

A newspaper photograph from these years shows MVR with her hair pulled up in a small top knot with some fringe left on her forehead, softening the image. She appears very professional and respectable, in a formal dark dress with the mutton leg sleeves so popular at the time and some white patterning outlining the neck, with a high lace collar.⁵²

On Saturday, June 24, 1899 the Republican caucus of Martha’s hometown of Randolph went for J.J. Crandall, by a margin of 48 votes out of the 250 cast; Martha received only 102, an alarming prognosticator. The newspaper article reporting this noted that Mr. Crandall “...has been favored with the delegations from several other towns and will probably enter the convention with enough votes to assure his nomination.”⁵³

J.J. Crandall according to one newspaper account was the “choice of the organization,” but he came in third on the ballots, to Brown (who started out strong) and Peavy. “It is commonly reported that the nomination was the result of a deal, in which the consideration was a good and substantial one, not by any means based solely upon love and affection.”⁵⁴

Martha lost the reelection: “On the 33rd ballot (taken after an afternoon recess following 31 ballots, to do what one account called “missionary work” (*Cattaraugus Union*)) the final total was Peavy 32, Brown 24, Crandall (dropped out) and MVR 1. Upon motion by Brown it was made unanimous. They did pass a resolution endorsing the work done by MVR’s administration. A resounding defeat.”⁵⁵

In a newspaper piece a Cattaraugus county farmer remembered Van Rensselaer as an energetic and dedicated School Commissioner; when she was in charge, “...there wasn’t a clapboard loose on a school house in this end of the county that she didn’t know it and let the trustee know about it too. I tell you she gave the truant officers some ideas about why they were elected, and she looked after the school teachers like a sister. And yet, she was so red cheeked, handsome and smiling that no one ever thought of kicking. After the politicians squeezed her out they divided the district and put three men onto her job, and, by Jinks, the whole three of them don’t do half the work she did.”⁵⁶

Martha always maintained it was because she didn’t have enough “pull.” Country poet William Smith’s description of the bribes changing hands in the election was discouraging to Martha who had counted on outstanding accomplishments to carry the day. This loss did provide an important, albeit bitter lesson about politics, political persuasion and the media, and the need to understand the political landscape, lessons she used effectively later in career as a home economist at Cornell University when lobbying the state legislature for funds for new buildings and for designation as a College.

Martha sent her last official missive to the schools on December 22, 1899, distributing the State Superintendent’s annual report for that year.⁵⁷

Cornell University Offer

With the loss of the election Martha was forced to look for a new look opportunity. As County School Commissioner she had become familiar with the Cornell University Extension efforts to educate farmers and schoolchildren. Both John Spencer and Ada Botsford Comstock from the extension division at

Cornell had come to lecture at the Institutes Martha organized, so she had ongoing connections with these two extension workers. When Cornell University Agriculture School Dean Liberty Hyde Bailey identified a need for an education extension person to focus on farm families and create a Farmers' Wives Reading course (parallel to the one run for farmers), Comstock proposed Van Rensselaer. The personal recommendations of Comstock and Spencer would have been persuasive. Additionally, Martha had worked with then State Senator Francis Higgins (later Governor) to achieve passage of the redistricting legislation in the 1890s referenced in her last unsuccessful Commission campaign. Martha alluded to this and her three political campaigns for School Commissioner in offering to assist Dean Bailey with the state legislature if needed.⁵⁸ While ultimately the move to Cornell proved a stepping stone for a highly successful career in home economics and higher education administration, it was not an opportunity Martha would have sought if she had won the third election.

Martha took with her to Cornell the strong, independent character she had developed as a teacher and School Commissioner. She had learned powerful lessons about politics and the need to navigate the political system and the media. At Cornell she took a 10 month, somewhat amorphously defined and under-resourced position being offered in the Extension division, and built a new department, school and ultimately College. And she often used newspaper coverage to mobilize support for her endeavors.

In the County School Commissioner elections, newspapers had shaped the views of voters, even as it informed them about the candidates, issues and opinions of political parties. Newspapers printed editorials as well as articles written by partisan supporters. The papers also reported on the activities of various agricultural, business, educational and women's groups offering a recounting of the activities of the time, both for those living then and for historians to come.

NYSICHE=New York State College of Home Economics records, #23-2-749. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

RA= Randolph Village New York Archives

¹ "Many Females Will Vote," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1893, p.2

² Clipping, n.d., np, no title, NYSICHE.

³ "Her Hat was in the Ring!" website herhatwasinthe ring.org., accessed 5/26/2018.

⁴ Thomas, "School Suffrage and the Campaign for Women Suffrage in Massachusetts, 1879-1920," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts; Welch, Local and National Forces Sharing the American Woman Suffrage Movement, 1878-1890*. Welch argues that the efforts for and results of school suffrage have not been sufficiently studied by historians of the women's suffrage movement, an indictment in which Tetrault concurs: "School suffrage is underresearched and in desperate need of a historian," p. 221; see also Welch, *Local and National Forces*, p.16 .

⁵ For discussion of separate spheres in these years, see the classic Barbara Welter, "The Cult of 'True Womanhood.'" "

⁶ "Women As School Commissioners," *The [Los Angeles] Herald*, October 1, 1893, 11, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042461/1893-10-01/ed-1/seq-11/>.

⁷ <https://www.sunyjcc.edu/womenshistory/suffragemovement/timeline/>, accessed 6/11/2018.

⁸ Suffrage speakers also appeared on the program at nearby Lily Dale; Susan B. Anthony describes the glorious scene there in her autobiography, *ibid*.

and Doty, *Southwestern New York*, Vol. II, p.534, 535.

⁹ For example, at the PEC 1893 Cattaraugus county convention, where Van Rensselaer was nominated, they also organized to ensure having a day at the county fair, where they would have a suffrage speaker. They note that "The Rev. Anna Shaw's address last year at the Conewango Valley Fair decidedly enlarged suffrage sentiment in the audience. A speech at a fair does incalculably more good than at a regular woman suffrage meeting. In no other way can so many doubters be reached," "Cattaraugus convention" no title, np, nd, NYSICHE. On the coalition between suffrage groups and WCTU, see Welch, *Local and National Forces*, p.21; and Tetrault, p. 86,87. But in New York state, earlier, in 1878, the state WCTU had not supported school suffrage. By the time Martha ran, the position, at least of the local Cattaraugus county chapter, fully supported this campaign; Welch, *Local and National Forces*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Mrs. P to MVR, 3/23/1893, Box 33-14; and

-
- ¹¹ W.C.T.U. Department, *Republican*, 7/28/1893, p.15; and see Mrs. Wm. B. Rhoads to MVR, 4/6/1893, Box 33-15.
- ¹² Newspaper clipping, no title, nd, np, NYSICHE.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Nearby candidate Martha Almy, also supported by the Political Equality Club and the WCTU lost, she said, because women didn't come out to vote in large enough numbers, "Equality notes," The Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, *Randolph Register*, p. 9, nd; newspaper clipping, no title, nd, Box 33-11. Almy was the VP at large for the NY State Woman Suffrage Association. Women not turning out to vote for these school related elections was a fear that the larger women suffrage organization had; see Tetrault, *Myth of Seneca Falls*, p.86.
- ¹⁵ "Growing in Strength," *Jamestown News*, nd, np; "The Cause Growing", nd, np, The Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture in the *Randolph Register*.
- ¹⁶ "Growing in Strength," *Jamestown News*, nd, np.
- ¹⁷ "It is Good Politics," July 31, 1893, *Jamestown News*.
- ¹⁸ "Her Record as a Teacher," Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, nd, np.
- ¹⁹ Doty, *Southwestern New York*, Vol.II, p.722.
- ²⁰ *Randolph Register*, May 30, 1893, Box 33-11.
- ²¹ Clipping, *The County Times*, No title, np, nd; and *The County Times*, "Women in Politics," 1893, Both in Boxes 33-11.
- ²² *County Times*, 10/25/1893, p.2, Box 33-11, NYSICHE.
- ²³ "Political Equality Notes," *The Cattaraugus Republican*, 9/8/1893, NYSICHE.
- ²⁴ See e.g. *County Times*, Box 33-11.
- ²⁵ Mabel Van Schoonhorm to MVR, 10/18/1893, Box 33-15, NYSICHE.
- ²⁶ They also wanted to schedule MVR to speak to them, but were willing to wait until after the election, M.E. Lake to MVR, 10/11/1893.
- ²⁷ Collins to MVR, 8/26/1893.
- ²⁸ W.E. Collins, to MVR, 9/8/1893 and 9/2/1893; his call for a rejoinder may have been in response to those asking MVR to state that she would not run as an independent if she failed to receive the Republican nomination.
- ²⁹ MVR, undated letter, Box.
- ³⁰ MVR to "Lelie", 8/28/1893, Box 33-14.
- ³¹ "Lady Candidate Wins," newspaper clipping, not title, nd, np, NYSICHE.
- ³² "Woman Wins the Day," *Gowanda Herald*, Sept. 22, 1893, np; "Randolph People Celebrate," No newspaper title, nd, np, NYSICHE; and B. Dolores Thompson, "AAUW honors Randolph native for education roles," March 20, 1999, newspaper clipping (no title for newspaper, no pp.), RA.
- ³³ "Queer Democratic Methods," np, nd clipping; Otto newspaper, Nov. 10, 1893.
- ³⁴ "Many Females will Vote," *NY Times*, 10/25/1893, p.2, NYSICHE.
- ³⁵ School Commissioner, May 13, no title, np, NYSICHE.
- ³⁶ "Republican Nominations," *The Randolph Register and Courier*, 8/5/1896, np, NYSICHE.
- ³⁷ September 2, 1896, no title, np, NYSICHE.
- ³⁸ Newspaper clipping, no title, nd, np, NYSICHE.
- ³⁹ *Evening Journal*, Saturday, July 6, 1895, np, in NYSICHE.
- ⁴⁰ Joseph Dana Miller, "The New Woman in Office," *Godey's Magazine*, January 1896, pp.59-64,66,67; clipping NYSICHE.
- ⁴¹ Letter of announcement as candidate for School Commissioner, April 24, 1899.
- ⁴² "Doubtful if She gained," Published in *The Randolph Register*, April 26, 1899.
- ⁴³ "Our School Commissioner" *Salamanca Daily News*, April 22, 1899, np
- ⁴⁴ Joseph Dana Miller, *Godey's Magazine*, "The New Woman in Office," p.62.
- ⁴⁵ *Cattaraugus Union*, April 21, 1899 clipping
- ⁴⁶ Newspaper clipping, nd, np, no title.
- ⁴⁷ *Cattaraugus Republican*, April 14, 1899, "Three Districts Now;" "New School Commissioner Districts," *Randolph Enterprise* April 1899.
- ⁴⁸ "Our School Commissioner," *Salamanca Daily News*, April 22, 1899, np.
- ⁴⁹ "Changes All Around," *The Randolph Register and Weekly Courant*, Wednesday, May 31, 1899, np.

⁵⁰ “Miss VR’s Position,” *The Randolph Register and Weekly Courant*, nd, np; This same paper listed the delegates supporting MVR: James White, Jerome A. Crowley, Gilbert F. Gould, Eric Frederickson, Jerry W. Chapman and Crowley Wentworth (these may be from RA).

⁵¹ “William Smith’s Confession, Concerning the Republican Contest for School Commissioner Nomination”, R.V.W., no title, nd, np.

⁵² This picture is from the *Buffalo Enquirer*, 8/5/1896, Miss MVR, Renominated by the Republicans for School Commissioner, First District, Cattaraugus County (actually erroneous as it was the second district.)

⁵³ *Official County Paper*, June 28, 1899, np.

⁵⁴ “For School Commissioner,” *Cattaraugus Union*,” 7/14/1899.

⁵⁵ “Peavy was nominated,” no title, nd, np.

⁵⁶ “Doubtful if She gained,” Published in *The Randolph Register*, April 26, 1899.

⁵⁷ See letter, 12/22/99 MVR to “Dear Sir.”

⁵⁸ MVR to LHB, 2/14/1908, NYSCHS.