



SMITH
CHURCH
BUILT
1842
REPAIRED BY
1870

(SUFFRAGE CENTENNIAL)

Cradle of Equal Suffrage

SOUTH NEWBURY UNION CHAPEL BY ERIN ESMONT

Little about South Newbury Union Chapel's outward appearance hints at its rich history.

The 162-year-old small white structure stands back from the road on a large patch of grass. It's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it attraction on Ravenna Road in Geauga County.

Venture closer and a plaque near the front door gives a clue—it's a coveted designation from the National Register of Historic Places.

Inside, with sun spilling through curtained windows, the cozy space looks much as it did in its heyday in the second half of the 19th century. Wooden benches line the walls, two long pine tables give a place to gather and a black kerosene fixture hangs overhead, a relic from the days before electricity.

THE QUEST FOR REFORM

Here, community reformers—mostly women, but men, too—pushed for progress considered radical for its time. Newbury, like other nearby towns, had been settled by travelers from the East, many from Massachusetts, then considered the center of culture and "advanced thinking."

The first reform movement, in 1870, called for women to dress without "unnatural and unhealthy" corsets, bustles and sweeping skirts. "Dress reform" advocate Ellen Munn caused quite a stir when she showed up at a community picnic in trousers.

The following year witnessed the most significant crusade in the chapel's history—to secure the right of women to vote. The chapel served as an incubator for the budding suffrage movement, and became home to the second-oldest women's suffrage group in Ohio. It also was the place where nine women cast ballots—illegally—in 1871.

More women would show up at subsequent elections to cast ballots. An account in the *Geauga Republican* newspaper from 1873 stated the election judges were "courteous and gentlemanly, as usual" but declined the votes.

The women—and the men who supported them—inscribed 50 ballots: "People's Ticket. Equal Suffrage for all Citizens of the United States, an Inalienable and Constitutional Right. Knowledge and Truth in Opposition to Ignorance and Prejudice."



A plaque outside South Newbury Union Chapel says the building was "dedicated to free speech by James Abram Garfield." [State Historic Preservation Office](#)



This Ohio Historical Marker was dedicated at a ceremony in South Newbury on Aug. 26, 2010. [Wikimedia Commons](#)



On Aug. 23, 1919, suffragists marched from South Newbury Union Chapel to a wreath-laying at the nearby Centennial Oak to commemorate the 19th Amendment. [Ohio History Connection Archival Collections](#)

A "MASS CONVENTION"

The newspaper noted that the number of people who sent in ballots in support of suffrage was almost double that of those who had voted in the last presidential election. While those efforts were largely ceremonial, larger and more impactful events unfolded at the chapel. In 1873, women and men gathered for a two-day "mass convention" on human equality that resulted in 82 signatures on a petition sent to the constitutional convention in Columbus.

The chapel's beginnings stemmed from an act of censorship involving a future president. Thus began a long history of ensuring the right for all to speak freely on any topic.

In 1857, future president James Garfield, then a teacher at what is now Hiram College, came to town to give a speech. Worried his talk would be controversial, the local Congregational church, where he was to speak, disinvented him.

That didn't sit right with some of the townspeople, so they decided to build a place that would welcome all ideas. A neighbor donated the land, and the residents set out to build one. They hauled wood from their lots, rolled up their sleeves and donated their time as carpenters and masons.

THE FREE SPEECH CHAPEL

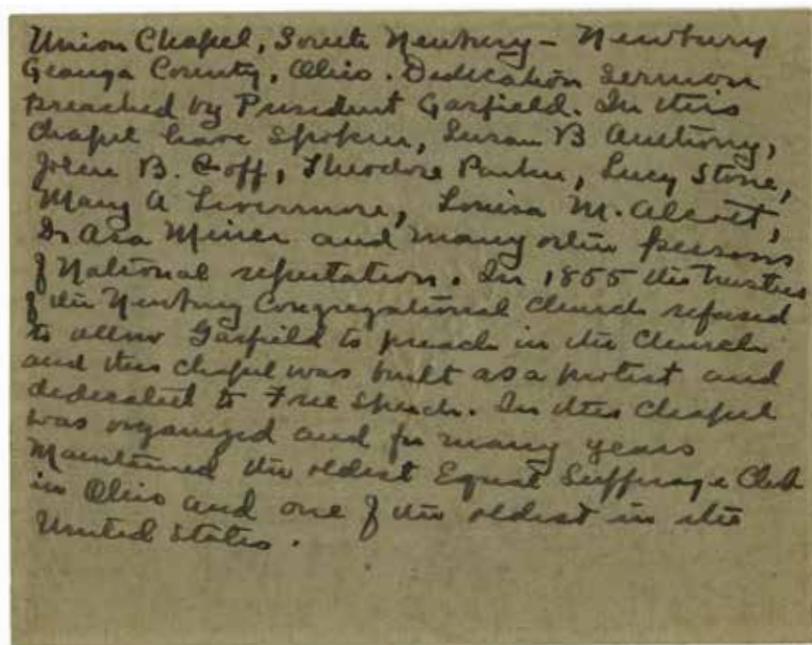
The property's deed reads: "To be used for literary, scientific, moral and religious purposes, and free for lectures upon all useful subjects, open and free for all denominations, but to be monopolized by no one or to the exclusion of anyone."

On the walls hang photos of famous visitors—social reformer and women's activist Susan B. Anthony, who spoke at the chapel in 1879, and author Louisa May Alcott, who legend has it visited, too.

The three trustees who care for the chapel—Sandy Woolf, Carole Drabek and Bill Ward—gathered there recently to share stories of a time when spirited debates reverberated within its walls.

"It's mind-boggling that people were so progressive so long ago," Woolf says. A seventh-generation resident, she counts among her relatives Ruth Fisher Munn, who wrote the constitution establishing the Newbury Women's Suffrage Political Club and was its president.

Drabek came to the chapel as a young girl with her mother and grandmother, Lucy Walker Simpson. As Drabek speaks, behind her on the wall is a





Suffragist Harriet Taylor Upton speaks at the Centennial Oak planted in 1876 by members of the Newbury Woman's Suffrage Political Club, organized at South Newbury Union Chapel in 1874. [Ohio History Connection Archival Collections](#)

photograph of a group of women at an Aug. 23, 1919, march that includes her grandmother.

"She was a rabble rouser," Drabek says. She wasn't alone.

After the chapel tour, Woolf drives up the road and into the South Newbury cemetery. She walks among the graves and points out markers of nine women who formed the suffrage club. She's a direct descendant of several of them.

Nearby stands a towering oak tree that several of them planted in 1876 to commemorate the centennial of the

Below: The note accompanying this photo taken on Aug. 23, 1919, reads that South Newbury Union Chapel "maintained the oldest Equal Suffrage Club in Ohio and one of the oldest in the United States."



Ohio History Connection Archival Collections

United States and symbolize their suffrage movement taking root.

Only one of the original members of the suffrage club—Dr. Julia Green, a medical doctor from Newbury—would live to see the 19th Amendment pass in 1920.

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LEARN MORE

South Newbury Union Chapel at 15829 Ravenna Rd. in Geauga County is open 1–4 p.m. on the first Sunday of the month from May through September 2020. A consortium of Northeast Ohio history organizations is producing a series of trading cards titled *Valiant Visionaries of the Vote*. For more information, go to Facebook and search for "Northeast Ohio Suffrage Centennial."

Read more about suffragist Harriet Taylor Upton in the May & June 2019 issue of *Echoes Magazine*.

Learn more about the 19th Amendment and explore more places related to it on the National Park Service web page *The Nineteenth Amendment* at nps.gov/articles/the-nineteenth-amendment.htm

The National Votes for Women Trail highlights more than 1,000 sites across the country—including South Newbury Union Chapel and other places in Ohio—significant to the struggle for women's suffrage. Find an interactive map with details at ncwhs.org/votes-for-women-trail/about-the-trail/.