

## **Memory of the World Register - Nomination Form New Zealand - The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition**

### **Abstract**

The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition led to New Zealand becoming the first self-governing nation in the world where women won the right to vote. It was signed by close to one quarter of the female adult population and was, at that time, the largest petition of its kind signed in New Zealand and other Western countries.

### **Identity and Location**

**Name of the Documentary Heritage:** 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition

**Country:** New Zealand

**Address:** 10 mulgrave Street, PO Box 12 050 Wellington New Zealand

**Name of Institution:** Archives New Zealand - Te Whare Tohu Tuhituhinga o Aotearoa

### **Legal Information**

**Owner:** New Zealand

**Custodian:** Archives New Zealand - Te Whare Tohu Tuhituhinga o Aotearoa

### **Legal Status:**

**Category of ownership:** Public, the government and people of New Zealand

**Details of legal and administrative provisions for the preservation of the documentary heritage:** Under the Archives Act 1957 the Archives New Zealand has the statutory obligation to preserve records of permanent value produced by central government.

**Accessibility:** Because of its fragility the document nominated cannot be issued in the reading room. It is on display under controlled environmental conditions in The Constitution Room. Transcripts and printed copies may be consulted in the reading rooms.

**Copyright status:** Crown Copyright under current Copyright Act 1994

**Responsible administration:** Archives New Zealand - Te Whare Tohu Tuhituhinga o Aotearoa

### **Identification**

**Description:** The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition which led to New Zealand becoming the first self-governing nation where women won the right to vote, comprises 546 sheets of paper, all glued together to form one continuous roll, 274 metres long. A contemporary annotation on the back of the first sheet claims that the petition carried 25,519 signatures when it was presented to the House of Representatives in 1893; the actual number of signatures on the surviving petition is 23,853.

**Visual documentation:** slide/transparencies

**History:** The document was transferred to Archives New Zealand as government record.

**Bibliography:** The most informative publication on the Women's Suffrage movement in New Zealand and its international context is: Patricia Grimshaw, *Womens Suffrage in New Zealand*. Auckland, Auckland University Press-Oxford University Press 1972; reprinted 1987.

## **Management Plan**

### **Assessment against the Selection Criteria**

**Influence:** The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition led to New Zealand becoming the first self-governing nation in the world where women won the right to vote. It was signed by close to one quarter of the female adult population and was, at that time, the largest petition of its kind signed in New Zealand and other Western countries. Prior to the First World War, only four nations in the world granted Women's Suffrage - New Zealand in 1893, followed by Australia in 1902, Finland in 1906 and Norway in 1913. The importance of the 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition as documenting the struggles for women's emancipation transcends national boundaries. In 19th century Western society, movements for the emancipation of women from their legal and social subjection to males, arose in a number of Western countries. With the spread of the principles of democracy that increasingly gave men a voice in political affairs, women began to seek equal opportunities. The emerging local and international movements for social, economic and political equality with man became later known as "feminism". New Zealand women in the nineteenth century were very much in touch with the new ideas on women's rights that were becoming current in the northern hemisphere. Although twelve thousand miles separated the suffragists of New Zealand from the mainspring of their cause in the USA and Britain, they were nevertheless aware of being part of a world-wide movement. And leaders of the 19th century feminist movements were aware of the struggles taking place in New Zealand. When Bill was passed in New Zealand in 1893, the event was widely hailed by suffragists in England, Australia and the USA, and New Zealand was held up as a shining example in the struggles to recognize women's rights in those and other countries.

**Time:** The New Zealand 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition reflects the growing movement in any Western countries for female emancipation in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

The first published treatise in the struggle for women's equality was the 1792 English publication by Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Many voices in subsequent years began to speak up for the political rights of women. These included Jeremy Bentham, Hume, William Thompson, Disraeli, Cobden and the philosopher-politician John Stuart Mill. Women in nineteenth century New Zealand won their right to vote in national elections as a

result of several petitions presented to Parliament; the 1893 petition led to the Electoral Bill being passed that year.

**Place:** The 1893 Suffrage Petition reflects New Zealand society in the late 1800s. The two basic impulses of 19th century feminism were the growth of female education at all levels and paid employment by increasing numbers of women who thus shared with men the status of breadwinner. Both these elements were clearly evident in the New Zealand of the early 1890s. By 1893, all New Zealand girls received primary education, a growing number entered secondary education and small but influential group obtained university degrees. The number of women in public employment was also growing. By the early 1890s women were not only receiving equal educational opportunities with men, but had entered many hitherto masculine occupations; they had even invaded the world of trade unionism. An additional explanation for the early victory of suffragists in New Zealand is that there, as in most pioneering countries, an absence of entrenched and strong conservative forces made for a greater public readiness to accept new ideas. In addition to this lack of a traditional conservatism, the political climate in the latter part of the 1800s, after a long economic depression, was especially favorable to radical reform of many types, including women's emancipation.

**Subject/Theme:** The 1893 Suffrage Petition is a document of international significance in the context of the long history of women's emancipation. The initial stimulus to the 19th century feminist movements were the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, with their emphasis on egalitarian and democratic ethic. The subsequent Industrial Revolution provided a profound practical stimulus as, for the first time; large numbers of women were forced out of the home and into paid employment in factories. This tended to undermine Victorian conceptions that there existed so-called "women's spheres", and that a woman's place was in the home. In the 1870s and 1880s the teachings of liberalism and the principles of democracy, were spreading widely in a New Zealand society becoming increasingly egalitarian.

As the right to vote was extended widely to men, the question was being asked as to why half of the adult population should be excluded from it. The advance of New Zealand women into many new domains made their political exclusion seem illogical and unjust. A number of Women Suffrage Petitions were presented to both Houses of Parliament from the early 1880s till 1893. The 1893 Suffrage Petition finally resulted in New Zealand becoming the first self-governing nation to grant women political voting rights.

### **Consultation**

**Regional or National Memory of the World Committee:** Relevant National Memory of the World Committee Secretary, New Zealand Commission for UNESCO, c/- Ministry of Education, PO Box 1666, Wellington

**Independent institutions and experts:**

Dr Charlotte MacDonald, Senior Lecturer, History Department, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 472 1000, Wellington, New Zealand

**Nominator**

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**Relation to documentary heritage:** Custodian

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