

Early History: League of Women Voters of Saratoga County
by Linda McKenney

The highly respected League of Women Voters of Saratoga County is robust with 300+ members. This might not have been the case if the dedicated women of two other leagues had accepted the inevitability of dwindling membership. The founders of the original League of Women Voters of Shenendehowa, which had morphed into the LWV of Southern Saratoga County, joined forces with the League of Women Voters of the Saratoga Springs Area to create the current League. This merger, which happened in 2000, afforded other towns in Saratoga County membership in the League. It also opened membership to folks in adjoining New York counties, Washington and Warren, who are not represented by a League.

In concert with the National League, the Saratoga League is an activist, grassroots organization encouraging members to be political by educating citizens about, and lobbying for, government and social reform legislation. The desire to be proactive on issues such as voter services and education, Social Security, housing, water, transportation, green space and apportionment entice women and men to come together and use their collective resources. Important and time-consuming studies were conducted by each League before the merger and continue today.

The concept of a League in the City of Saratoga Springs was sparked in 1965 at an organizational meeting. Fifty-seven women attended the meeting that was cut short because of a fire in Saratoga Springs that destroyed the local hospital and several hotels. But the determination of those women was not extinguished. While waiting for formal recognition, they addressed urban concerns such as planning, zoning and the city form of government. In November of 1965, 6,000 copies of "Facts for Voters" were distributed. This publication reached almost all of the registered voters in Saratoga County. The Saratoga Springs Area League was formally recognized in 1967. That same year, they produced another publication as a public service: the 54 page, A Citizen's Guide to Saratoga Springs.

The Southern Saratoga County League was originally recognized in 1973 as the League of Women Voters of Shenendehowa. Theirs was a more rural League with a different set of concerns, such as public housing and transportation. Southern Saratoga County was developing, and this league was particularly focused on zoning and growth issues, such as ensuring green space. They conducted Graphic Information System studies, and served as a watchdog, keeping developers' feet to the fire.

Prior to the merger, the two leagues collaborated on a study, Focus on the Poor. They delved into welfare and other services administered by the Saratoga County Department of Social Services. This study resulted in a comprehensive booklet: Focus on the Poor, Survey of Needs and Services, formally presented to the Saratoga County Board of Supervisors. A former president of the League offered this advice: Study without action is futile and action without a study is fatal.

Over the past fifty plus years each league conducted various fund-raising efforts to subsidize operating costs. The first annual LWV bake-off was won by Louise Welch who created a goluptious and gorgeous-looking cake. And members collected S&H green stamps to buy much needed shelving.

Both Leagues were dedicated to providing candidate forums, but each were faced with a history of one political party consistently in power. Respectful and principled relationships combined to get the results needed to offer those forums. On the first two-party candidate night, the League was warned to call it off as it would be too dangerous. Proper precautions were put in place, and the League set a tone of order and respect. The candidates and audience followed suit.

The League also played a role in changing New York State law, to allow persons awaiting trial or disposition of their case to vote. By establishing a respectful relationship with the New York State Assembly, league members opened the doors for communication and the opportunity to be heard on this and other important legislation.