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MARY NORTON: "A GRAND GIRL"

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“**D**EAR MARY, You are a grand girl,” Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote on White House stationery on June 1, 1942.¹ The letter was addressed to Honorable Mary T. Norton,² the first Democratic woman elected, after suffrage, to the House of Representatives. Norton, whose papers are housed in Rutgers University’s Alexander Library, represented Jersey City and Bayonne in the House from 1924 to 1950. She was the first woman to serve on the New Jersey State Democratic Committee, of which she was chairwoman from 1932 to 1948. She became the first woman to co-chair the National Democratic Platform Committee in 1944 and, in 1948, the first woman to chair the Credentials Committee; in 1932, Norton became the first Democratic woman elected to a position on the Board of Chosen Freeholders in Hudson County, New Jersey; and in 1924 she was elected to the House of Representatives and was the first woman to chair a congressional committee—the House Committee on the District of Columbia, on which she served as “Mayor” of the District from 1931 to 1937. Norton was also the first woman to chair the House Labor Commit-

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the Hon. Mary T. Norton, June 1, 1942, Mary T. Norton Papers, Box 3, Series 2, New Jersey Collection, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

² The papers of Mary Norton are deposited in the New Jersey Collection, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. They include correspondence, speeches, writings, photographs, press clippings about her political career, and the unpublished manuscripts of her autobiography.



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THE HONORABLE MARY T. NORTON TOWARDS
THE BEGINNING OF HER POLITICAL CAREER.

tee from 1937 to 1946. But despite her pioneering political career, Norton did not consider herself a "feminist," and she opposed the mailing of birth control information and championed protective legislation for women. She was a woman who worked within the existing social system and is historically significant to women of today since she helped to lead women out of their separate sphere into the mainstream of society.

Norton was born Mary Teresa Hopkins on March 7, 1875, in Jersey City, New Jersey. She was the daughter of Irish immigrants, Marie Shea and Thomas Hopkins. She was the fifth of seven children, of which four survived. Marie Shea left Ireland for America in 1860 at age 19. In America she worked as a nursery governess for ten years. Thomas Hopkins was the eldest son of a prosperous farmer, and left Ireland in 1854 at age 16. When Hopkins arrived in America, he worked on the railroads in the south and west and eventually came to work for his uncle who was a well-to-do contractor in New Jersey. Thomas Hopkins became a prosperous road builder. Mary Teresa's childhood was spent in a middle class environment. Norton writes in her manuscript: "father boasted that he always lived in his own house." Of her childhood in Jersey City, she continued, "it was a small town where most owned their own homes and everyone knew their neighbors." Of herself as a child Norton relates little. She does say she was a difficult child but "I did have one quality to which she [mother] could always appeal. That was a sense of justice, even as a small child." Norton's mother died when Mary was seventeen years old and Mary took over the running of the house "with a girl to help with the hard work."

Her first job was as a secretary in a bustle factory. When her father remarried, Norton and her two younger sisters moved into an apartment of their own. Norton lived with her sisters and worked as a stenographer and secretary until her marriage to Robert Norton. Robert Norton was a cooperage merchant in Jersey City, a widower with two daughters when he married Mary in April, 1909. His daughters, Mary and Katherine, did not come to live with Mary and Robert Norton after their marriage because they had been raised by their grandmother and wished to remain with her. In her biographical manuscript, that remains unpublished, Norton gives little information on her personal life. There appears to be a reticence on her part to reveal much about Mary Norton, private citizen. There is no

further reference to Robert Norton's daughters and little reference to Robert Norton himself. She mentions that he supported or "raised no objection to his wife's entering politics."³ He did not move to Washington with his wife, but remained in Jersey City. The Norton's only child, Robert, died in infancy in September, 1910. To help assuage her grief, Norton became involved with the Queens Daughters Day Nursery in Jersey City.⁴ Of her only child's death and her subsequent political career, Norton said,

When my only child, a son, died in infancy the bottom dropped out of my world for a time. Something had to take the place of the children I could not have. I cannot say that politics and Congress ever filled the place. But at least I've had an active life and an interesting one, with the opportunity sometimes perhaps to do a little to help other mothers more fortunate than I was, and their children.⁵

Norton was thirty-five years old when her son died and she started her work for the nursery.

The Queens Daughters Day Nursery was a local parish endeavor to answer the need of working mothers during World War I. When the nursery became filled to overflowing, Norton solicited donations from local businessmen, secured a house to use for the expanding nursery as well as donations of free milk from a local dairy. Her work for the nursery brought her to the attention of the mayor of Jersey City, Frank Hague. She went to Hague to seek municipal funds for the expansion of the nursery. Hague had been impressed by Norton's work for the nursery. He was also aware of her work for the Red Cross during the war. Hague sent Norton to plead her case for the nursery before the city council. She did this well and instead of the \$1,500 she sought, the council gave the day nursery \$25,000. Norton worked as a volunteer with the nursery for fifteen years. Hague, being an astute politician who saw the power in the anticipated woman's vote, asked Norton to serve on the New Jersey State Democratic Committee and thus Norton began her career in politics. Historian Hope Chamberlin has noted that "Hague never denied the accusations that he had pushed Mrs. Norton's political career to give respectability to his machine politics."⁶

³ Hope Chamberlin. "Mary T. Norton, Democrat of New Jersey." *A Minority of Members: Women in the U.S. Congress*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 55.

⁴ Mary T. Norton, Autobiographical Manuscript, Chapter 1, New Jersey Collection, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

⁵ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 22.

⁶ Chamberlin. *A Minority of Members*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 53.

Hague intended to use Norton to organize the woman's vote. When she claimed she "knew nothing of politics,"⁷ Hague's response was, "No woman knew anything about politics and in any event the position of state committeewoman was an empty honor which required no work."⁸ Norton's response to Hague was that "I am not interested in politics."⁹ But upon reflection and encouragement from her brother, she realized "any woman interested in her own family and her community is interested in politics."¹⁰ In 1920 Mary T. Norton accepted Hague's offer and served on the New Jersey State Democratic Committee, of which she was chairwoman from 1932-1934. In 1922, with the Hague political machine behind her, Norton became the first woman to serve on the Hudson County Board of Chosen Freeholders. Her tenure on the Board of Freeholders was an educational experience for Norton: "What I learned in the year and a half I served on that board was of great value to me as a member of Congress. . . . In the days I spent at those county institutions . . . I witnessed some tragic scenes."¹¹

Her experiences as a member of the Board of Chosen Freeholders helped her to deal with problems on a national level that she had dealt with on a county level. Norton resigned from the Board of Chosen Freeholders to run for the House of Representatives, and in 1924, she was elected to the House of Representatives at the age of forty-nine to become the first Democratic woman elected after suffrage. A contemporary remarked that "Mrs. Norton came to Washington with a conventional party background. . . . Mrs. Norton appears to be the most 'regular' in her partisan progress in Congress."¹²

Three women were sworn in when the 69th Congress met in December, 1925: Mrs. Florence Prag Kahn of California, Mrs. Edith Rogers of Massachusetts, and Mrs. Norton of New Jersey. Rogers and Kahn had been widowed by the deaths of members of the House and were elected to fill resulting vacancies. Norton was the only woman elected in her own right.

⁷ Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, "First Democratic Woman in Congress seeks 12th Term," Norton Papers, Scrapbook #9, p. 1B.

⁸ William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 38.

⁹ Norton Papers Scrapbook #9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 50.

¹² Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933, First Edition), p. 297.

The Hague political machine in New Jersey certainly helped to elect Norton to the House, but if Hague exacted any political payment from Norton she denied it. Of her first year in the House, Norton said,

In my first year in Congress I didn't know how to vote very well. One time I asked him [Hague]. He said, "You're on the spot. If I didn't think you had the brains, I wouldn't have sent you. Use your own brains."¹³

Hague's statement seemed to give Norton the freedom to use her own brain, but it also let her know who had sent her to the House. Norton also claimed in her manuscript that Hague did not try to influence her vote. He may not have needed to. Hague and Norton were both the children of Irish immigrants from Jersey City and thought alike on most issues. Hague's unsavory reputation as a political boss was in the future; in the early 1900's, Hague was seen differently. A modern historian has written that

Of all the leading politicians of the city, Frank Hague could win the support and admiration of opposing groups in the city. The churches were on a crusade to drive vice and corruption from the city, and in Frank Hague they found a highly religious man whose church-group activities could always be depended upon. The woman's clubs regarded him as a very moral individual, happily married, with a fine family and a reputation for decency; he did not drink, smoke, or loiter around saloons. Even the so-called evil groups—the saloon-keepers, gangsters and brothel proprietors—saw in Frank Hague the strong man . . .¹⁴

The Hague machine may have gotten Norton to the House of Representatives, but while there Norton became a respected legislator in her own right. Mrs. Norton's record in the House of Representatives is noteworthy because she was a woman working in a traditionally male sphere. Norton was sworn into the Sixty-ninth Congress on December 7, 1925. In Norton's maiden speech as a congresswoman, delivered on December 15, 1925, she introduced an amendment to the income tax bill. She also introduced one of the first resolutions calling for an investigation into the Eighteenth (Prohibition) Amendment (H Con. Res. 18).¹⁵ In a speech to the

¹³ Eleanor Anderson, "She Gets Her Way," *Today*, Sept. 1, 1934, p. 5.

¹⁴ George C. Rapport, *The Statesman and the Boss* (New York: Vantage Press, 1961), p. 189.

¹⁵ Summary of the Legislative Career of Representative Mary T. Norton. Norton Papers, Box 1, Ac 1914, Env #3, 1950.

National Association for Prohibition Reform she called Prohibition a “Frankenstein” that brought nothing to the nation but grief and woe.¹⁶ Norton was appointed to three committees during her first term in Congress: District of Columbia, Labor, and World Veterans Legislation.¹⁷ Norton was elected to the House again in 1926. Of her reelection Norton writes,

I came back to the 70th Congress in 1926 re-elected, by a larger majority than I had received the first time I ran. These majorities continued to climb as the years went by and had a great deal to do with whatever I accomplished during my service in the House. It is a comfortable and encouraging thing to know that the people you represent believe in you. It gives you confidence in yourself and leaves you free to use your own judgement in asking decisions.¹⁸

Others beside her constituents believed in Norton, especially the citizens of Washington, D.C., whom she served as “Mayor” of the District of Columbia: She was the first woman to serve as a chairwoman of a conference committee in Congress, the House Committee on the District of Columbia, a position which gave her the honorary title of “Mayor.” When she began her tenure, the Committee consisted of twenty men, eleven of whom were lawyers. Norton writes of her initial experience on the Committee:

When Representative Frank L. Bowman, Republican from West Virginia, remarked at the initial meeting of the House District Committee over which she [Norton] presided, “This is the first time in my life I have been controlled by a woman.” Norton’s response was “It’s the first time I’ve had the privilege of presiding over a body of men and I rather like the prospect.”¹⁹

Being “Mayor” of the District of Columbia would not get Norton votes from her constituents in Jersey City but Norton, the welfare worker, worked hard as chairwoman of the committee that decided the fate of the voteless residents of the District of Columbia. Norton was instrumental in the building of a new tuberculosis hospital in Washington, D.C. After she became chairwoman of the District Committee, complaints began coming to her office about the district tuberculosis hospital. Norton said, “I decided to investigate and

¹⁶ “Mrs. Norton Sees Dry Law as National Frankenstein,” Norton Papers Scrapbook #2.

¹⁷ Congressional Record, Vol. 67, 69th Congress.

¹⁸ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 75.

¹⁹ Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members*, p. 54.

called at the hospital early on a Saturday morning, unannounced.”²⁰

This action typifies Norton’s habit of investigating quietly and without fanfare the complaints of her people in the District. She found abuses at the hospital and was instrumental in the building of a new facility. The work she did for the residents of the District of Columbia did not gain Norton national acclaim, but she aided the residents in many ways that improved their day-to-day lives. She enacted legislation to wipe out alley slums, and helped in passing a bill to permit the merger of Washington’s two street railway companies—a plan which had been under consideration for 30 years.²¹ Norton also saw to the pensioning of the needy blind and secured funds for a sewage disposal plant and new municipal buildings in the District of Columbia. Norton gained the respect of the citizens of the District of Columbia and claimed that what was closest to her heart “was the enactment of a law setting up a Board of Public Welfare for the District of Columbia.”²² Norton served on the House Committee on the District of Columbia from 1931-1937, resigning to serve as the chairwoman of the House Committee on Labor.

No woman had ever before been chair of this committee. Norton, because of her seniority on the Labor Committee, automatically became chairwoman on the death of William P. Connery of Massachusetts. Historian Hope Chamberlin has written that “With the Committee chair, Mary Norton inherited the most difficult professional assignment of her 62 years: pushing Roosevelt’s stiff wage and hour bill past on unsympathetic Rules Committee and through a recalcitrant House.”²³

Norton fought a long hard battle to insure passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, sometimes called the Wage and Hours Act of 1938, considered one of the major accomplishments of Roosevelt’s New Deal and a great victory for labor in America.²⁴ The Wages and Hours Bill of 1938 called for a minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour and a forty-hour work week, time-and-a-half for overtime and strong provisions to prevent child labor. This

²⁰ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 108-109.

²¹ Denis Tilden Lynch, “Her Honor the Mayor,” *Literary Digest*, 1935-1936, Norton Papers Scrapbook #6.

²² Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 56.

²³ Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members*, p. 56.

²⁴ Norton Papers, Box 3, Series 2, 1958, *Congressional Record House*.

second Wages and Hours bill passed the House 314 to 97 on May 24, 1938.²⁵

On the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the bill, Speaker of the House John McCormack said of Mary Norton,

I remember well my dear friend Mrs. Norton of New Jersey, who was chairman of the Committee on Labor. She was one of the outstanding members of the House. No greater member ever served in the Congress of the United States than Mrs. Norton. . . . The people of America and particularly those who have benefited, are forever indebted to Mary Norton, for her sterling character and courageous spirit.²⁶

Norton herself said of the bill, "I am prouder of getting that bill through the House than anything else I've ever done in my life."²⁷

Norton's stand on the Wage and Hours Act was popular, but Norton was not afraid to take an unpopular stand. She went against Frank Hague and her constituents in Jersey City when she opposed the early payment of the Veterans Bonus during the Depression. "She voted against the veteran's bill when lobbyists were growling at her office door and the newspapers back home were ready to pounce on her,"²⁸ a contemporary reported. After World I, the army had promised large pensions to the veterans based on the days spent overseas. The bonus was to be paid in 1945 but by 1930 the veterans were suffering the effects of the Great Depression and were demanding their bonus immediately.²⁹ The veterans did not get their bonus and in protest set up camps in Washington. They were finally driven out when Hoover called in the army. Norton explained later:

I opposed the measure when it came up in the House because I believe that to single out the veterans would be unfair and would do a great deal of harm to the veterans themselves in the public mind, particularly since there were no funds available in the United States Treasury to pay the huge sum called for.³⁰

This was a practical decision on Norton's part because she believed that the huge payment could have bankrupted the Treasury.

²⁵ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 159.

²⁶ Norton Papers, Box 3, Series 2, 1958.

²⁷ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 159.

²⁸ Anderson, "She Gets Her Way," p. 5.

²⁹ Class notes, "Development of the U.S.," Prof. Oshinsky.

³⁰ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 116.

In 1932 there was a move to submit the name of Mary T. Norton in nomination for the Vice Presidential slot to run with Al Smith. Her proposed nomination did not garner much publicity whether because she was a woman and was not taken seriously, or because it was a foregone conclusion that Al Smith would lose in his bid for election to the Presidency. For whatever reason the announcement that her name be put in nomination was found at the bottom of page 5 in three small paragraphs in *The New York Times* on Saturday, July 2, 1932. The small article was titled, "Mrs. Norton to be Named: New Jersey Woman is first of Sex for National Ticket." Norton turned down the offer. Norton said, "My nomination would have been just a grand gesture."³¹ Norton knew that the majority had agreed on John Nance Garner for Vice President. A few years later Norton commented on the nomination: "I don't think it is quite time yet for a woman to cast her hat into the Vice Presidential ring. That time will come, though perhaps a decade."³² Norton said this in 1941. She seems to have believed that women's rise in national politics would continue its upward surge, but it took four more decades for the Democrats to nominate a woman for Vice President. Norton's view of women's rise in politics was overly optimistic but farsighted.

In 1948 Norton's farsightedness was also evident when she was able to turn back the Mundt-Nixon bill ". . . which would have required registration of all Communist front organizations and all Communist Party members. The legislation was endorsed by many patriotic societies such as the American Legion; but it failed to get through the second session of the Eightieth Congress in 1948."³³ Earlier, in 1939, Norton had favored the Sisson bill to repeal the "Red Rider," a bill that required all civil servants to take an oath of allegiance to the flag and the country. Norton believed the "Red Rider could lead to dictatorship and loss of freedom."³⁴ Norton evidently had the foresight to recognize that the fear of communism in America and the denial of civil rights could lead to the extremes of McCarthyism.

³¹ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 159.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Rudolph Englebarts, *Women in the U.S. Congress 1917, 1972*, Libraries Unlimited, 1974, Littleton, CO, p. 30-33.

³⁴ U.S. Congress, House, HR11375, 74th Congress, 2nd session, June 11, 1936-June 20, 1936, *Congressional Record*, 80:10055-10897.



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THE HONORABLE MARY T. NORTON ON 21 MARCH, 1951.

During Norton's tenure in the House of Representatives, America went through some very trying times and the role of government changed. Norton reflected on these changes in her manuscript. She had begun her tenure during the Coolidge years, and of these years she said:

We dealt with routine matters, bills concerned with appropriations and the administration of the government, but we did not have all the mass of urgent and controversial legislation growing out of depression and war piled on top of them. And, Congressional investigating committees were few and far between.³⁵

Norton's most difficult time seems to have been during World War II. She said of those years:

For a member of Congress, with thousands of young men from your district fighting in faraway lands wounded, killed, or missing in action and thousands of worried wives and parents desperately appealing to you for news of them, or help in most difficult and heartbreaking situations, it is unadulterated misery.³⁶

Mary Norton was a recognized humanitarian, but may not be considered a feminist in the modern sense of the word even though she was a pioneer for women in politics and a politician who was respected as conscientious and responsible. There are two reasons why modern feminists might not consider Mary Norton a feminist: One was her stand on the birth control (Gillette)³⁷ bill, and the other her insistence on protective legislation for women. Norton vehemently opposed the Gillette bill, which would have allowed birth control information to be sent through the mails. Feminists of the 1980's would tend to condemn Norton for her strong opposition to the Gillette bill. We must see Norton's stand on the issue through the eyes of the social system of her time. Norton was born in 1875 and raised in a society that separated the sexes into separate spheres: women were assigned the sphere of the home, the private sphere of family and motherhood; they were seen as the moral custodians of the society. Men were assigned to the public sphere of the outside work world. Norton herself echoed this feeling, "If I were asked to name the most important career to which any woman might aspire I would without hesitation or qualification name that of motherhood."³⁸ The

³⁵ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, S. 4582, 71st Congress.

³⁸ Norton Papers, Box 4, Series 4, 1926-1944.

existing social system, as well as Norton's Catholicism, caused her opposition to the Gillette bill. The Catholic Church opposes any artificial means of birth control.³⁹ Norton also rejected the argument she assumed was put forth by Margaret Sanger that children were a liability. Norton wrote:

Another argument presented [for birth control] was that children were more or less an affliction, a liability, and that childbirth was enervating. Mrs. Sanger used her own mother as an illustration of how a woman could suffer from having children. I countered with the stories of many women I knew who had large families. My own mother was one of them.⁴⁰

We must also remember that Norton had been denied motherhood by the death of her infant son. Many babies did not survive in the 1930's but died from diphtheria, croup, pneumonia, measles, and the flu. Also the new hordes of immigrants were reproducing and thus threatening the power of the ruling class. Norton herself alludes to this: "We must secure the survival of the stock of the forefathers."⁴¹ Norton was a woman who worked within the system. She was not a radical, while Sanger and her followers *were*; and birth control was widely perceived as "a political demand raised by feminists and left-wing radicals."⁴² Norton's stand on birth control was also a product of her own personal history: Her mother had lost three of seven children and she herself had lost her only child. Norton was not alone in supporting the status quo:

Significantly, the middle class reform movement which won the suffrage battle did not seek to overthrow traditional values toward women. Although the movement reflected collective dissatisfaction with the status quo, it used the framework of conventional ideas as a basis for seeking change.⁴³

Evidently conventional ideas prevailed, as the Gillette bill never got out of committee.⁴⁴

Norton also reflected conventional ideas in her push for protective

³⁹ *Humanae Vitae*: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, July 25, 1968.

⁴⁰ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 97.

⁴¹ Norton Papers, Box 4, Series 4, 1926-1944, "In Congress."

⁴² Cited in *A Heritage of Her Own*, by Nancy Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*, Linda Gordon (Touchstone Books), p. 445.

⁴³ William H. Chafe, *Woman and Equality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 38.

⁴⁴ Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 97.

legislation for women, which she supported, along with Eleanor Roosevelt and other influential women:

Eleanor Roosevelt clearly supported women's rights. A thornier issue, however, was the Equal Rights Amendment, first introduced in 1923. Like many of the social reform activists who were her friends, Eleanor Roosevelt supported protective legislation for women and believed, until the 1940's, that ERA would threaten industrial benefits that had been achieved for women.⁴⁵

The protective legislation debate and ERA seemed to have meshed together into one debate at the time and split women into two separate camps. Susan Ware writes: ". . . the Woman's Party's single-minded devotion to the ERA split the woman's movement since most women in public life believed that protective legislation for working women was more important than a general statement of equality under the law."⁴⁶ In 1940 Norton said of ERA, "For I was not then, nor am I now, convinced that it is possible to devise an amendment which would guarantee such rights to women [which would not] at the same time destroy many hard won privileges."⁴⁷ Later on Norton and Eleanor Roosevelt changed their ideas on the ERA as social conditions improved for lower-class working women. In 1947 Norton co-authored a bill "which would declare it a national legislative policy to make no distinctions on the basis of sex."⁴⁸ And Eleanor Roosevelt in 1951 "acknowledged that it would serve women to be declared equal before law and equal politically and in whatever work a woman chooses to undertake."⁴⁹ In 1985 the battle for an Equal Rights Amendment continues.

Norton and Eleanor Roosevelt become close friends and both supported the candidacy of Al Smith for President in 1928. Chamberlin said of the Norton-Smith friendship that ". . . it was rooted in their shared obsession with social reform."⁵⁰ They were also both Catholic. It is said that Smith lost the election to Hoover because Smith was a Catholic. Norton fought hard for Smith's election, and of the loss she later wrote:

⁴⁵ *MS Magazine*, "The Real Eleanor," Sept. 1984, by Blanche Wiesen Cook, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Norton Papers Scrapbook #3, *Washington Daily News—American Forum*, Nov. 30, 1940.

⁴⁸ Norton Papers Scrapbook #9.

⁴⁹ Norton Papers, Box 4, Series 4.

⁵⁰ Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members*.

No one who had any part in that campaign in 1928 will ever forget the bitterness of it and the disillusionment. To many it was a shock from which it took a long time to recover. It was one of the few times in my life when I almost lost faith in people. A Roman Catholic myself, I had never had much experience with bigotry. I got it that summer. It was hard to believe that this thing could happen in America, in a nation founded by people who came over here and endured all the hardships of the wilderness to get away from the very thing that was tearing us to pieces now.⁵¹

The anti-Catholicism Norton experienced while working for Al Smith influenced her decision in running for the Senate. Norton said:

I thought about it [the Senate] for a week and decided I could not afford to take the chance of defeat, particularly as I really liked being in the House. And I knew I would have two strikes against me being a woman and a well-known Catholic.⁵²

America did not elect a Catholic to the Presidency until 1960.

Evidently her Catholic background also kept her from being included in Washington society. "To snooty Washington society she is a business school graduate, Tammany and a catholic and hence unacceptable,"⁵³ said Denis Tilden Lynch. But Norton was not without friends in Washington. She was involved with women in government such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member in the nation's history. Perkins was appointed by Franklin D. Roosevelt to the position of Secretary of Labor in 1933 and served in that position until 1945.⁵⁴

Norton expresses some strong ideas on the role of women in politics and the power women can wield with their vote. She calls the right of suffrage "a duty that must be filled by every individual . . . there is no greater service to mankind than service to your country."⁵⁵ Norton's thinking evolved through her years in the House as society in America evolved. In 1926, Norton spoke of women as the moral guardians of society: "Good government and right living are coming to be more and more the product of moral forces as well as

⁵¹ Norton Papers Scrapbook #2.

⁵² Autobiographical Manuscript, p. 133.

⁵³ Denis Tilden Lynch, "Her Honor." Norton Scrapbook #6.

⁵⁴ *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, edited by Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green with Ilene Kanbron and Harriette Walker (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 535.

⁵⁵ Norton Papers, Box 4, Series 4.

of political forces and women have always been recognized as having a finer moral sense than men, this should be in the electorate.”⁵⁶ Women at this time had started to move out of their separate sphere of the home by way of welfare work, and Norton is talking of expanding this movement into politics and government. She tried to legitimize the role of women in politics by saying that it was women’s moral duty to be involved in politics. In 1932 Norton still held to the view that woman’s primary role was that of mother:

The greatest honor and privilege that can come to any woman is to be the mother of a family. But the time comes when a woman has completed the work of raising a family. This brings her to middle age and the best years of her nature, thought and tolerance when she is in a position to make a really worthwhile contribution to public life.⁵⁷

In the same article she said, “Women, if they knew their power, could actually change any political organization. It should be recognized that women working effectively and honestly could hold the balance of power.”⁵⁸ These were strong words, almost revolutionary, in 1932.

As a means toward the development of women as a political force, Norton felt education was of utmost importance. In 1935 she said:

Girls in classrooms today should have the best preparation for the work the older generation of women have had to undertake without much preparation. If they can give it the same amount of understanding and hard work they would give to any other profession, they will undoubtedly succeed in making themselves felt in politics.⁵⁹

Later, in 1941, she spoke of what was to come:

The question of the future of women depends largely upon women themselves. We have had the vote twenty years; we have achieved recognition in practically every profession and business in this country. We have produced women the equal of men to fill positions formerly regarded as within the domain of men only. It is for us to see to it that we continue the programs we have made and improve the progress as years go by.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Norton Papers, Box 4, Series 4.

⁵⁸ Norton Papers Scrapbook #2, 1930-1937.

⁵⁹ Norton Papers Scrapbook #2.

⁶⁰ Susan B. Anthony, “Woman’s Next Step: As Women See It,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 13, 1941, pp. 11, 20.

Norton retired from the House of Representatives in 1950 at age 75 and received many accolades from her colleagues in the House. Representative Bolton of Ohio said of Norton,

. . . there is not a woman now in this House . . . who has not learned to love her, to respect her, to want the friendship with which she is so generous. . . . We are deeply grateful for the example she has set to all women in America.

And from Mrs. Rogers of Massachusetts, “. . . all of us admire her for her strength of character, and because she has always stood for the right.”⁶¹ Norton died in Greenwich, Connecticut in 1959. During her lifetime she had gained the respect of Roosevelt, Truman, Speaker McCormack, and many other government leaders. By so doing, she legitimized the role of women in public life and firmly established her position as a pioneer for women in politics.

⁶¹ From Congressional Record, House, 1950, found in Norton Papers, Box 1, Ac 1914, Env #3, 1950.