

Florence Mae Risser Funk (1871-1923)

Florence Mae Risser was born in Bloomington, Illinois on October 28, 1871. She was one of three children born to Abraham Frank and Mary Francis (Holmes) Risser. According to family history, Florence was a **descendent**, on her mother's side, of William Bradford, who immigrated to North America on the **Mayflower** and served as governor of the Plymouth Colony for several years.

In 1890, after attending both public and private schools in Chicago, Florence enrolled in Vassar College in New York state, where she studied painting (drawing). She received a diploma in 1893. Florence and her classmates were termed "special, **preparatory**, and art students." After graduation, Florence returned to Chicago.

On December 11, 1895, Florence married Frank Hamilton Funk, whom she had known from her childhood in Bloomington. The couple took up residence at 907 N. McLean St., Bloomington, on the Franklin Park square, where they would remain for the rest of Florence's life. Florence and Frank were the parents to three children: Mary Cassandra (1899-1943), Benjamin Franklin II (1902-1969), and Florence Risser (1903-1981).

Florence spent her early married life in Bloomington being a wife and mother, and joining in some social circles. Florence's passion, though, was community betterment; thus, she became actively involved in such local civic groups as the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A) and the Women's Club. In particular, her joining the local Women's Club was a turning point in her life.

Sometime in 1914, Florence Funk began to develop an interest in the women's **suffrage** movement, which was growing in importance all over the country. Her commitment to the cause was probably an outgrowth of her involvement in the Women's Club at the local, state, and national levels.

Funk was a member of the **Illinois Equal Suffrage Association (IESA)**. Her group successfully got the Illinois General Assembly to pass the Presidential and Municipal Voting Act, first in the Senate and then in the more reluctant House of Representatives. The "phone brigade" was the preferred strategy, followed by letters and telegrams, in **lobbying** lawmakers. When Governor Edward Dunne signed the bill into law on June 26, 1913, women could vote for president, select presidential electors, and fill **municipal** and township offices. This was a big step, but women had to use separate ballots and ballot boxes, and could not vote for governor, or members of Congress.

Women then began to push for complete voting rights. The National Federation of Women's Clubs held its **biennial** convention in Chicago in June 1914. Florence Funk attended that convention and, with her fellow delegates, **endorsed** full women's suffrage. Funk was also a delegate to the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association convention held at the Congress Hotel in Chicago, in October of 1914.

Things changed greatly in the spring of 1917, when the newly re-elected President Woodrow Wilson signed a declaration to commit the United States to enter into World War I. Some women's organizations took time off from their own fight for equal suffrage to join the war effort.

It became a challenge for the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association, because they wanted to support the "fight" in Europe, but also not lose momentum in its own fight for full women's suffrage in Illinois. The Women's Emergency League or WEL was formed, which focused on both the war efforts and women's suffrage. Florence Funk accepted a position with WEL and

also represented the 17th congressional district on the state committee of the **Women's Council of National Defense**.

Starting in September 1917, this woman's committee of the CND in Illinois began the difficult work of registering women aged 16 and older for types of work that were divided into categories including agricultural, clerical, domestic, industrial, professional, public service, social service, Red Cross, allied relief work, and miscellaneous. These women also substituted for jobs that servicemen held before the war; and they would help the families of the servicemen in a variety of ways. They needed to know what each woman was capable of doing to place them in the appropriate job. "The woman," declared the women's committee of the Council of National Defense, "holds the jobs, fills the breadbaskets, and dresses the wounds of the boy at the front, at the same time nourishing his family at home . . ."

Even during wartime in Europe, the United States continued the battle over suffrage on the home front. Between January 1918 and June 1919, the proposed 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—which stated that citizens could not be denied the right to vote on the basis of sex—was considered by Congress five times. Each time it was defeated by the narrowest of **margins**, with southern **Democrats** stubbornly holding out. How could a nation whose women had sacrificed so much and whose efforts during the war had been praised by people around the world, continue to be denied the vote?

White women eventually won the right to vote in all elections through passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. African Americans would not enjoy the same rights to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It would take several **subsequent** amendments to the Voting Rights Act in the 1970s and 1980s to ensure that all U.S. citizens could exercise their Constitutionally guaranteed right to vote. The 19th Amendment was officially adopted on August 26, 1920 after the necessary 36 states **ratified** the measure, with Illinois being one of the first states to ratify it, thanks in part to Florence Funk's efforts.

In July 1920, Florence turned some of her attention to the political ambitions of her husband, Frank, who announced his intention to seek a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives from the 17th congressional district, an office held by his father 25 years earlier. On election day, he easily defeated his opponent and Frank Funk was sworn in on March 4, 1921 for the first of his three terms in the House.

While in Washington D.C., Florence enjoyed the social opportunities that came with being a congressman's wife. She became involved in the University Women's Club of Washington, the Political Studies Club, and the Congressional Club.

A few months before her death, Florence, Frank, and their children returned from Washington to Bloomington for the summer. They stayed with Frank's mother, Sarah Funk (widow of Ben Funk) who lived at 1008 N. Main Street in Bloomington. It appears that Florence's health began to decline while staying with her mother-in-law. Her condition was not considered serious until she developed **paralysis** and passed away on September 6, 1923 at the age of 51. Her death was attributed to two ailments: Bright's Disease (an **inflammation** of the kidneys) and cerebral edema (a build-up of fluid on the brain).

In an article published the day after her death, the author stated that Florence Funk "was a woman of liberal culture, energetic nature, of comprehensive views on all questions of public interest, and possessed of a large and sympathetic heart." Her funeral was held at her mother-in-law's home on North Main Street. It was largely attended with many friends, relatives, and representatives of the various organizations to which Florence belonged. She is buried in the Funk family plot at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.