Kentucky-born Josephine Kirby Williamson Henry (1846–1928) seized the new women's rights discourse to demonstrate that southern women wanted the vote. By 1890 Kentucky had still not granted married women the right to own or inherit property, make a will, or receive wages, making them, according to Henry, virtual nonentities.1 Working in conjunction with the Kentucky Equal Rights Association, Henry spoke eloquently in support of the “Husband and Wife Bill,” which gave married woman “equality with the married man in the possession and control of property.” Governor John Young Brown signed the bill into law on March 15, 1894.2 In 1890, Henry became the first woman in Kentucky to run for state office when she served as the Prohibition Party candidate for clerk of the Kentucky Court of Appeals. In 1895, Henry worked alongside Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as a member of the revising committee, on what would become the Woman's Bible.3

Henry's “New Woman of the New South” was published by the Arena, a monthly magazine founded by Benjamin Orange Flower in Boston in 1889. The Arena advocated a wide range of economic, political, and social reforms, many of them related to women, including equal suffrage, dress reform (criticim of tight corsets and long skirts), and a higher “age of consent.” Women played prominent roles in editing, writing, and determining the content of Arena. To raise circulation, which was about 24,000 in 1895, the magazine lowered its annual subscription rate from five dollars to three that year.4

---

Josephine Henry’s essay on “The New Woman of the New South” begins here:

It is not the purpose of the writer to discuss in this paper woman’s right to the ballot or the good or evil results to accrue from her enfranchisement. To argue the question of right is not admissible at this stage of the issue. To forecast results would afford no logical ground to stand on. The article will, therefore, be confined to the limitations of facts and their tendencies as they appear to a Southern woman.

The idea seems to be abroad that Southern women do not desire the ballot. Considering the powerful influences which operate to suppress an open manifestation of opinion among Southern women on this question, as in fact on many others, it is easy to see how those who have given the subject no thought are led to accept such an impression as correct. The true index of existing facts is not always found upon the surface of things. We must probe a little if we would know the truth and its relation to cause and effect. Woman in the South is to such an extent the slave of her environment that it is questionable whether she has any clearly outlined opinion, exclusively her own, on any subject. Chivalry has allotted her sphere, and her soul has been so pressed by social and ecclesiastical rigidity that the average woman dares not transgress the limits. This is an appalling condition of the human mind, and fully accounts for the tendency of women as a mass to crouch under the shelter of silence. But every stronghold of conservatism will fall in line with advancing civilization when it must. The struggle will be fierce. “Broad ideas are hated by partial ideas. This, in fact, is the struggle of progress.”

Among our representative women there is a class too ethereal to be troubled with affairs, whose mental lethargy is only disturbed by dreams of ante-bellum family legends, and whose thought-power is confined to devising ways and means for retaining their social prestige. With them “the virtue in most request is conformity.” They love “names and customs,” but shrink from “realities and creators.”

Then there is another and quite different class, composed of those who stand on higher intellectual ground, who realize their potentialities, and who have the courage to demand a field of thought and action commensurate with their aspirations. These are the New Women of the New South. To them the drowsy civilization of the age appeals for some invigorating incentive to higher aims and grander achievements. They believe with Emerson that “all have equal rights in virtue of being identical in nature.” They realize that liberty regards no sex, and justice bows before no idol. . . .

It may be said of the average woman of the South that she is satisfied with her condition. She loves her church and believes in her preacher. She is Pauline in her ideas and therefore loves the music of her chains. But with all this there is pervading this class a strong under-current of sentiment in the direction of larger liberty. With the downward trend of men, socially and politically, confronting them, and their growing sons and daughters around them, they are beginning to question the wisdom of existing customs. To the writer the widening of Southern women’s views is one of the most portentous and vital facts in the history of the South. “Events are more concise but tendencies constitute real history.”

One of the first noticeable tendencies is what might be termed the reign of woman club life. Literature has been exhausted and art despoiled to find names and
devices suitable to the taste and purposes of the women who compose the membership of these clubs. The framing of constitutions and by-laws, election of officers, discussions on ways and means and all the parliamentary usages which cleverness can bring to the aid of mimicry, go to make up this parody on the exercise of individual liberty. It is not difficult to recognize in these clubs the primary schools which lead to the university of politics.

Another and higher department in which the minds and hearts of advanced Southern women are earnestly enlisted is the investigation and revision of statutory law, regarding its application to the sexes alike. They find in the established codes enacted by men alone, for men alone, a most horrible crucifixion of justice. They see themselves taxed without their consent, their property often confiscated for base uses, their sex arraigned before judges and juries composed of men alone. They see in the barbarous "age of consent" laws young girls exposed to the animal lusts of brutes in human form awaiting their prey under the law's protection. They find all along the avenues of urban life dens of drunkenness and crime, with wide-open doors ready to receive the bodies and souls of their loved ones, and when they ask by what right these modern Gehennas exist, they are told that it is by a right secured from the same source that denies to woman the power to destroy them. They are excluded from town and city councils, from the higher state institutions of learning, and from boards of education of our public schools, all of which they are taxed to support.

Southern women have in the past five years resorted in many states to their constitutional right of petition upon the questions of property rights, "age of consent," and the licensed liquor laws. They have pleaded for admission into state universities, and asked for a division of state funds to establish industrial or reform schools for girls, in states which provide such schools for boys alone. They have asked that women be placed on boards of all public institutions for the benefit of both sexes, and in many cases sought and obtained the county superintendency of public schools. These departures from the line of established customs show that the apparent contentment with present conditions is only on the surface, and that there is a half realized idea among our women that in our social and political organism there is something out of gear.

Rising above the terrorism of popular ridicule, and fortified by the intensity of their convictions, a few leading women in the states of Virginia, South Carolina and Kentucky, directly descended from the founders of the republic, have individually petitioned their legislatures, asking that a power be created to which they can apply and receive their enfranchisement papers, pleading for the restoration of an inalienable right and at the same time testing the honesty of that spirit of chivalry which places much emphasis on the willingness to grant the franchise when women want it. This initiate move of these fearless women marks a crisis in Southern thought. It gave an impulse in a new direction to the active minds of both sexes.

Their petitions were disregarded by the majority, and ridiculed by some, but the thought force which they imparted is irresistible. Their heroism will prove an inspiration to timid souls illumined by visions of a new creation for woman. The monarchial
of political liberty for women of the South has been touched by the finger of manifest destiny, and no power on earth can silence its refrain. This forecast of opinion may and doubtless will be received with a smile of derision by some, but the laws which govern society are as fixed as the laws of the material world. The light of Neptune had not reached the lenses of Leverrier when he first announced its existence in space, but the planet was there. “Immense and continued impulses pushing together govern human facts, and lead them all within a given time to the logical state, that is to say, to equilibrium, or in other words, to equity.”

The writer of this article has in her possession the most convincing evidence of these immense and continued forces that are driving onward to that logical state, a completely rounded civilization, grounded on equity. She has received thousands of letters from the foremost and best women in the South, and the number increases each day, expressive of their deep solicitude for the success of the one cause that gives promise of release from social and political incarceration. Back of these facts stand in evidence the constitutional conventions of Mississippi and Kentucky, and the legislatures of South Carolina and Arkansas. Whenever the question of woman suffrage was touched by those bodies it met the approval and elicited the applause of thoughtful and intelligent women throughout the entire South.

As a unit of value in summarizing evidence of existing conditions and tendencies, there is not, nor could there be a fact more potent than the recent congressional contest in the Ashland District of Kentucky. The eyes of the world watched this contest with intense interest. The women of Kentucky forced the moral issue in American politics, and hence followed a political struggle the intensity of which stands unequalled in the history of politics. The very atmosphere seemed to darken under the tension of individual hate and partisan rancor. Woman’s softening influence was demanded and she responded with all the finer impulses of her nature strained to the highest point. She pushed her way to the front, and with her natural tact and matchless skill in using her limited power to the best advantage, she gave to the world a victory which her enfranchised ally would have lost without her aid.

There is nothing in history so pathetic as woman’s struggle for freedom. Men of the Old South, armed with all the implements of war, and supplied with the wealth of states, fought for empire based on slavery, and lost. The women of the New South, armed with clear-cut, unanswerable argument alone, are struggling for liberty based on justice, and will win. The failure of the former left our section in ruin and despair; the triumph of the latter will bring progress and hope. Woman’s political coronation depends upon herself. The average woman must be educated in the new school, and man must become possessed by new ideas. “The key to every man is his thought; sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea which commands his own.” The women of the South are impressing men with new ideas, and hence that ancient spirit of protection which has so long retarded human progress by dispossessing woman of her share of the common heritage, is losing its force as an element in our civilization.
In attestation of existing suffrage sentiment in the South I append the following extracts from letters from representative women in the different states, giving their opinions on the subject. These women are of the highest intelligence and social standing, among them being many lineal descendants of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the patriots of 1776, social leaders, noted housewives, literary women, teachers and taxpayers.

[Henry now lists a series of testimonials from women in various southern states as to why they want the vote.]

Memphis, Tennessee

We, the undersigned women of Tennessee do and should want the ballot,—

1. Because, being twenty-one years old, we object to being classed with minors.
2. Being American born, and loyal to her institutions, we protest, against being made perpetual aliens.
3. Costing the treasuries of our respective counties nothing, we protest against acknowledging the male pauper of Tennessee as our political superior.
4. Being obedient to law, we protest against the law that classes us with the unpardoned criminal, and makes the pardoned criminal and the ex-convict our political superiors.
5. Being sane, we object to being classed with the lunatic.
6. Possessing an average amount of intelligence, we protest against classification with the idiot.
7. We taxpayers claim the right to representation.
8. We married women want to own our own clothes.
9. We married bread winners want our own earnings.
10. We mothers want an equal partnership in our children.
11. We educated women want the power to offset the illiterate vote of our state.

Lide Meriwether, President Tennessee W.C.T.U. and W.S.A.

[A list of members of the Memphis Equal Suffrage Club next appears, followed by additional testimonials by women from other southern states, in support of women's suffrage.]