

Myth #47: Who Was the First Woman to Run for the U.S. Senate? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

According to University of Nevada, Reno, Professor Anne Howard in her biography of Anne Martin, even Miss Martin believed she was the first woman in U.S. history to run for the Senate when she campaigned in 1918. "She determined to run for the Senate," Howard wrote in *The Long Campaign* (1985), "encouraged by her friends, excited by the chance to be a 'first,' and eager to try her hand in practical politics on a national scale." Virtually every reference to Martin's political career in Nevada notes that she was the first female in American history to run for the U.S. Senate, but it's not true.



Born in the small, Carson River mill town of Empire just east of Carson City in 1875, Martin and her family moved to Reno in 1883, after a two-year stay in San Francisco. She attended the Bishop Whitaker School and Nevada State University. The aspiring young woman acquired a master's degree in history at Stanford and subsequently accepted a teaching position at Nevada State University in 1897.

By 1905, Martin had left the university in Reno. Wanderlust and family history inspired her to visit Ireland and England. She took an interest in Socialism and women's suffrage. She attended lectures featuring controversial playwright George Bernard Shaw and associated with the Fabian Socialist Society in London. Martin joined the Women's Social and Political Union, headed by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, and in 1910 was first arrested in a London suffrage demonstration.

"Anne Martin returned to the United States in time to carry the Nevada banner in a suffrage parade in New York City in 1911," wrote biographer Anne Howard. Her efforts in Nevada in concert with other suffragists resulted in women, age twenty-one and over, getting the right to vote and hold office in 1914. Montana also granted woman suffrage and the right to hold office in 1914. Two years later, Montana voters elected Jeannette Rankin the first woman to serve in Congress. In 1918 Rankin ran for the U.S. Senate, was narrowly defeated in the Republican primary, launched a third party race, and lost by a large margin in the general election. An inspired Anne Martin ran for the U.S. Senate in 1918 as an Independent in a four-way race. She failed in her initial bid to be the first woman elected to the Senate, garnering only eighteen-percent of the vote. She ran in 1920 and, after another hard-fought campaign, lost again. The votes cast for Martin in this close race probably cost the incumbent Democrat, Charles B. Henderson, his office. The 1920 defeat extinguished her political aspirations. Martin died on April 15, 1951 in Carmel, California claiming she was the first woman to ever run for the U.S. Senate.

In fact, the first woman known to run for the U.S. Senate was a famous one. According to biographer Kristen Iverson, Margaret "The Unsinkable Molly" Brown, aspired to be a U.S. Senator four years before Jeannette Rankin and Anne Martin. The sinking of the Titanic in 1912, and Molly's colorful role in the maritime tragedy, made the Denver socialite a national celebrity and a potential political figure. Colorado had granted women the right to vote and hold office in 1893, and the ratification of the seventeenth amendment in 1913 provided for the direct election of U.S. Senators. Supporters in 1914, including national women's groups like the Congressional Union, backed her running for either a House or Senate seat. Brown briefly ran for the U.S. Senate in the summer of 1914, however within a few weeks she dropped her campaign with the onset of World War I. Apparently Brown did not file for office, and her name never appeared on the Colorado ballot.

It seems Anne Martin was unaware of Margaret Brown's brief run for a U.S. Senate seat in Colorado. Martin probably considered herself the first female to run for the U.S. Senate because she declared her candidacy a few weeks before Jeanette Rankin. However, because Rankin's name appeared on the 1918

Myth #47: Who Was the First Woman to Run for the U.S. Senate? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Republican primary election ballot in August, she deserves to be recognized as the first official female candidate for the U.S. Senate.

Anne Martin lived to see Hattie Wyatt Caraway of Arkansas win a U.S. Senate seat in 1932 and become the nation's first elected female U.S. Senator. Over the first 200 years of the nation--from the inaugural Congress in 1789 until 1989--only four women have been elected to the Senate for full terms without succeeding husbands who had died in office. A record seventeen held the office in 2011.

Photo: Anne Martin's 1920 U.S. Senate Campaign. Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, December 1999 edition)