



- *Activist*
- *Author*
- *Journalist*
- *Politician*

Rebecca Latimer Felton

1835–1930

Inducted 1997

Rebecca Latimer Felton was the first woman to serve in the United States Senate, but that distinction, impressive as it is, does not by itself make her a Georgia Woman of Achievement. She served, after all, for just one day.

Her appointment to fill a vacancy created by the incumbent's death was something of a political ploy because it came while the Senate was in recess. Coming in 1922, however, so soon after ratification of the nineteenth amendment, the appointment took on immense symbolic importance, and women around the country campaigned for Mrs. Felton to be officially seated. When President Harding refused to call a special session, Senator Walter F. George agreed to delay presentation of his credentials for a day so that she might make history. In one sense it was a meaningless, perhaps even condescending parody; Mrs. Felton herself called it a "joke." But it acknowledged her years of political activism and set the stage for women to become serious participants in the political process. Minutes after being sworn in, the eighty-seven year old rose to address her temporary colleagues: "Mr. President, the women of this country are going to come and sit here. There may not be very many the next few years, but in time they will come. When they do I pledge that this body will get ability, integrity and unstinted usefulness."

Rebecca Latimer was born in 1835 to a plantation family in DeKalb County. After graduating first in her class from Madison Female College, she married Dr. William Felton, a widower from Cartersville who was twelve years her senior, a medical doctor, farmer, Methodist minister, state legislator, and congressman.

As her husband's secretary and counselor, Rebecca Felton had a ringside view of politics. She was an able assistant, effectively supporting Dr. Felton's efforts on behalf of prohibition, education, and penal reform, particularly ending the convict lease system. When he retired from politics, she continued to crusade for a separate women's penal institution, prohibition and women's suffrage. Although she held advanced views on many social and political issues, her opinions on race reflected the prevailing attitudes of white Southerners in

that era; in fact, she frequently used racial prejudice to justify her causes.

Her most far-reaching influence may have been through her writing. In 1899 she began a column for the Atlanta Journal's statewide Semi-Weekly Edition which she used to speak out on everything from making farm life more appealing to young people to advice on morals and manners. She also edited The Cartersville Courant for a year and wrote two books, My Memoirs of Georgia Politics in 1911, and Country life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth in 1919, many pamphlets, and numerous lectures. In addition to the issues already noted she pushed for compulsory school attendance, vocational training for poor white girls (she and a New York woman

"A Senator of the U.S., a woman, is still a sort of political joke with our masculine leaders in party politics. . . But the trail has been blazed! The road is apparently rough—maybe rocky—but the trail has been located. It is an established fact. While it is also a romantic adventure, it will ever remain an historical precedent—never to be erased."

— Rebecca Felton, Nov. 7, 1922

established the Georgia Training School For Girls in Atlanta), and the admission of women to the University of Georgia.

She was active in numerous civic and

fraternal organizations, and helped to manage the Atlanta and Chicago Expositions in the 1890's. She was State Chairman of the Women's Auxiliary to the "Bull Moose" Progressive National Convention in Chicago in 1912, and the sole woman to be called into conference when Warren Harding was made President of the United States. She bore five children, only one of whom, a son, survived to adulthood. She died in 1930 and is buried in Cartersville.

As a politically astute and active woman in an age when women were expected to sit quietly at home, an author, lecturer, reformer and leader, we take pride in honoring Rebecca Latimer Felton as a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

Additional Resources

Felton Papers

University of Georgia Libraries
(706) 542-3251

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-Rebecca Latimer Felton

Memoirs of Georgia Politics (1911)

Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth (1919)

-John E. Talmadge

Rebecca Latimer Felton: Nine Stormy Decades (1960)