

Minnie Fisher Cunningham

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Read by Cheryl Spencer, Library Associate in Special Collections

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Minnie Fisher Cunningham of New Waverly, Texas, was the principal orchestrator of the passage of women's suffrage in Texas, the first southern state to grant this right. She was a founder and national officer in the League of Women Voters. She was the first woman to run for a U.S. Senate seat from Texas and a candidate for governor who polled over 44,000 votes against the incumbent, Coke Stevenson. One of the first American women to pursue a career in party politics, her life spanned a half century, furthering our understanding of women in public life between the Progressive Era and the 1960s feminist movement. She taught women the skills of organizing, creating publicity campaigns, and lobbying and monitoring legislative bodies.

Born to Sally and Horatio Fisher on March 19, 1882, Minnie was educated in academics by her mother at home and in politics by her father, who had been a state representative and also a justice of the peace. In 1900, she entered the school of pharmacy at the University of Texas Medical School in Galveston. The term was interrupted by the catastrophic storm in September, the hurricane which devastated Galveston and killed over 5,000 citizens. She held meetings to raise funds and secure donated clothing and supplies for relief efforts organized by Clara Barton and the Red Cross.

Her pharmacy class could not begin its second and final year until November, but with extra work, they compressed the eight-month term into six. She was the sole woman in her fourteen-member class of 1901 and only the sixth to earn the Graduate Degree in Pharmacy. The majority of students just stayed in the program long enough to prepare for the exam and did not return for the second year. The degree did not bring her an advantage in the workplace, however. She found a job as a prescription clerk in a Huntsville drug store at \$75 a month, half of what her male counterparts earned. "And I was the professional," she protested to an interviewer 50 years later.

Marriage to B. J. Cunningham, a young lawyer, cut short her career, and like many other middleclass married women of her time, she found her most challenging and rewarding work in volunteering. She helped her husband in his successful campaign for Walker County Attorney in 1904 and moved with him to Galveston in 1907. The Women's Health Protective Association was heavily involved in restoring the island with sanitary projects including reburying the dead from the storm, replanting shrubs and trees, and a vigorous campaign to improve public health and sanitation. They forced public health issues into the political forum. During this time, she began to focus on women's right and responsibility to vote.

She became nationally prominent in Washington, D.C., in the 1920s, where she was resident director of the Women's National Democratic Club. She ran for U.S. Senator from Texas in 1928 and joined the supporters of Texas gubernatorial candidate Ross Sterling in 1930. She ran for governor herself in 1944. Although in Texas from 1928 to 1939, she retained her contacts in the nation's capitol and had frequent correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt and other prominent women. A lifelong Democrat, she was admired and respected by President Franklin Roosevelt, who called her "Minnie Fish."

In 1946, she moved back to New Waverly. Continuing her political interest, she campaigned for Adlai Stevenson and Ralph Yarborough in 1952. In 1960, she set up the Kennedy-Johnson headquarters in New Waverly.

She died December 9, 1964, and was buried in the Hardy Cemetary in New Waverly. She was honored with a Texas State Historical Marker at the site of her family home on State Highway 75 near her hometown.