

DR. MARTHA HUGHES CANNON

FIRST FEMALE STATE SENATOR

July 1, 1857–July 10, 1932
Born: Llandudno, Gwynedd, Wales
Died: Los Angeles, California
Activism, Medicine, Politics, Science

"All men and women are created free and equal."

Impacted by the deaths of her baby sister and father, Martha "Mattie" Hughes Cannon aspired to be a medical doctor in a time when women rarely attended college. While pursuing her chemistry degree at the University of Deseret (now the University of Utah), she worked as a typesetter at the *Woman's Exponent*, a women's rights newspaper, where she became immersed in the women's suffrage movement.

With her chemistry degree in hand, Mattie traveled East for medical school, earning three additional degrees by age 25: a medical degree from the University of Michigan; a degree in pharmaceuticals at the University of Pennsylvania (where she was the only female student); and a degree from the National School of Elocution and Oratory (public speaking) in Philadelphia. Mattie then set up a private medical practice and became the resident physician at the woman-run Deseret Hospital in Salt Lake City. She met her husband, Angus, while working at the hospital and became the fourth of his six wives.

As a women's suffrage leader, Mattie testified to congressional committees and was a featured speaker at the Chicago World's Fair and other suffrage conventions. When Utah gained statehood in 1896 and women's voting rights were returned, Mattie ran as a Democrat in an election for one of five senate positions in the new state's first legislature. Her victory won national attention not only because she was the first woman elected to a state senate in the United States, but also because she ran against and defeated her husband. Two additional women—Eurithe LaBarthe and Sarah Anderson—also won statewide elections that day, to the state House of Representatives.

Mattie served one four-year term with the otherwise all-male state Senate. She proposed several legislative bills that revolutionized public health, authoring sanitation laws, and founding the State Board of Health. Yet, the birth of her third child put an end to her political career. She returned to her medical practice, and later moved to Los Angeles due to her poor health. Mattie remained committed to public health causes, volunteering her medical skills and serving as the vice president of the National Congress of Tuberculosis.