

# The 1891 Women's Suffrage Petition - the *Monster Petition*

This article is the second of three prepared for the Society by Ann Paul on Women's Suffrage in Victoria. Ann's first article celebrating the recent International Women's Day can be found [here](#).

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Following the defeat of the 1889 Maloney Suffrage Bill, some claimed the suffrage movement was just a narrow group of radical women and not representative of the ordinary women of Victoria.

In 1891 Victorian Premier James Munro said he would introduce a women's suffrage bill if it were demonstrated that ordinary women wanted the right to vote.

In response the Victorian Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society undertook a petition campaign across Victoria. They collected nearly 30,000 women's signatures in just 6 weeks.

Lead signatories were Jane Munro, the Premier's wife and Margaret Higinbotham, wife of George Higinbotham, an outstanding colonial politician and law maker. Importantly ordinary women from all walks of life, from all over the State signed the petition and clearly demonstrated their support for the right to vote.

The Suffrage Petition became known as the Monster Petition due to its size - 260 meters long. It was made of the sheets of the petition papers pasted onto fabric and rolled onto a spindle. It was tabled in State Parliament in September 1891 and sought that "*women should vote on equal terms with men*" calling on the House to "*pass a measure for conferring the Parliamentary Franchise upon women, regarding this as a right which they most humbly desire*".

While the vote was not granted at this stage, the petition served to demonstrate the level of support for women's suffrage and to highlight the profile of the suffrage movement. It also played an important role in Federation, because in 1901 Australia became the first nation in the world to give women both the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament.

According to census figures the 30,000 signatures of the Monster Petition represented 10% of the women's population of Victoria in 1891.

The petition was also a remarkable achievement in logistics - many signatures were collected through women's networks but many were through a door knocking campaign, with women going door to door across the State, in urban, regional and rural areas. In all there are over 800 different locations listed on the petition, along with the women's signatures, in a time when people relied on trains, and horse and carriage for transport.

The [Monster Petition](#) has been digitally transcribed into a database and can be [searched](#) both by name and location. It is well worth checking the names of maternal ancestors to see if they were among the signatories and seeing the original handwriting of the signatories.



Women's Suffrage Petition of 1891  
(held at the Victorian Public Records Office)

There are no signatories recorded for Greensborough or Eltham, with one for Heidelberg and 21 in Diamond Creek. The majority are in inner suburbs like Brunswick and Richmond, but considerable numbers are spread across regional Victoria from Portland to Bairnsdale, showing the reach of the petitioners and probable influence of public transport routes and WCTU branches.

The Monster Petition is held in the Public Record office and is on the Victorian Heritage Register. A sculpture commemorating the Petition is located in Burston Reserve, East Melbourne, near Parliament House.

Anne Paul  
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#### Sources:

- Office of Women's Policy, Victorian Women Vote 1908 - 2008: Knowing our past, transforming our future.
- Beyond the Garden Gate, 2009 by Joanna Fitch, Victorian Women's Trust