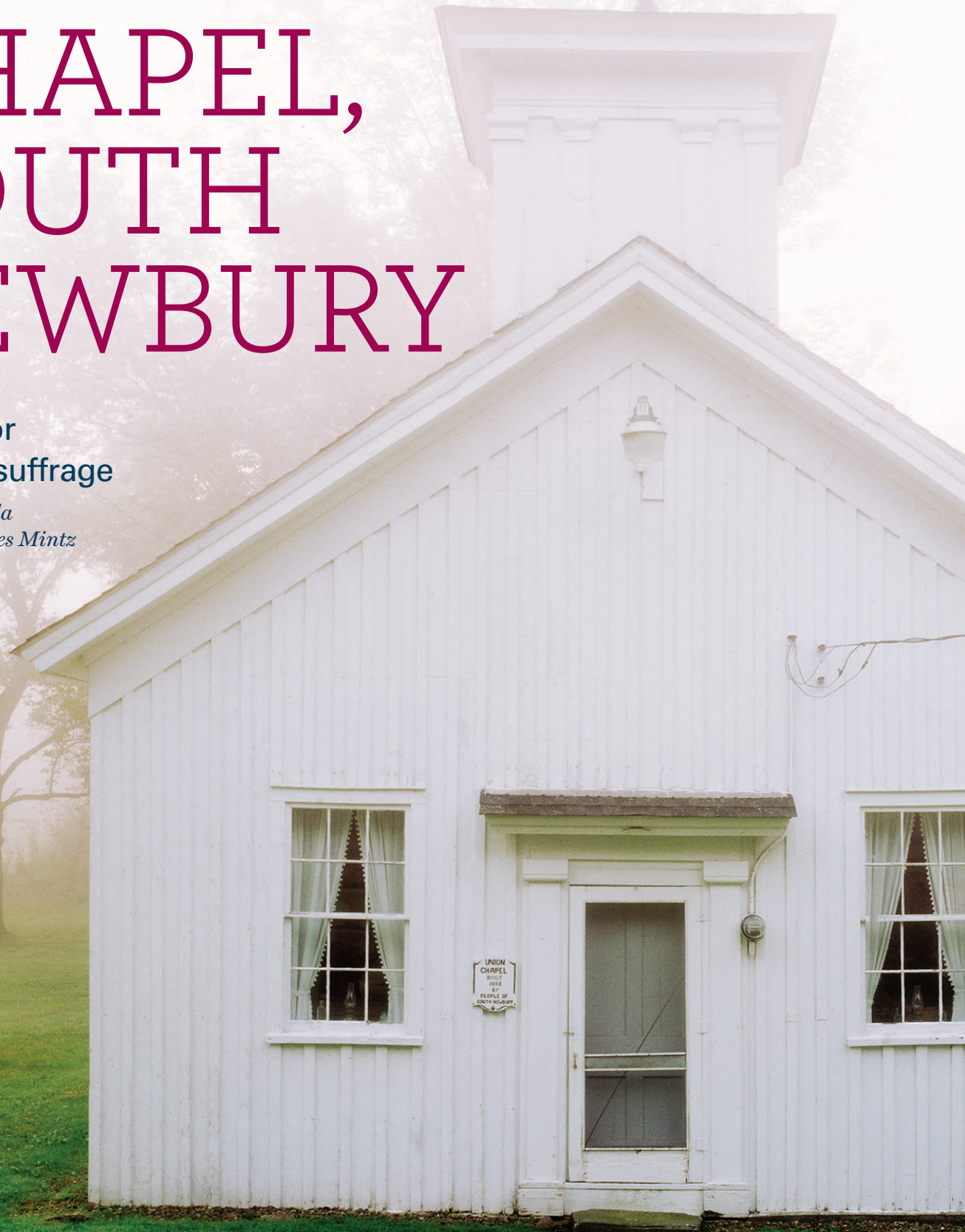




# UNION CHAPEL, SOUTH NEWBURY

A pulpit for  
women's suffrage

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Union Chapel, adorned with Doric pilasters like those decorating the early Republic's government buildings, provided a space for civic and civil debate.

On March 8 and 9, 1879, Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) visited South Newbury, Ohio. For two hours each evening the dedicated social reformer spoke, devoting one lecture to “woman suffrage” and another to temperance in drink and tobacco. Each evening an audience large enough to burst through the wood board-and-batten walls of the modest, one-room building listened, according to the *Geauga Republican*, “with close attention.”

American suffragists fought hard to find stages and pulpits from which to argue for women’s right to vote. The idea of women speaking in public—and to audiences of both women and men—still did not rest easy with many Americans. In South Newbury, however, townspeople had erected a building in which free speech was invited, protected, and applauded. Union Chapel, adorned with Doric pilasters like those decorating the early Republic’s government buildings, provided Anthony and her audiences a space for civic and civil debate.

#### A MEETING PLACE FOR SOCIAL REFORMERS

Twenty years earlier, the Union Chapel had been built to protect and promote free speech. According to local history, the principal at the Western Reserve Eclectic College in Hiram had been disinclined to speak at South Newbury’s Congregationalist Brick Church. That young teacher, future United States president James A. Garfield, was also a Disciples of Christ minister, so theological differences were likely the cause for the cancellation. Garfield spoke instead at a local tavern. Townspeople got to work building Union Chapel.

The building was never consecrated as a church, though it appears as such, capped with a bell tower and painted white. From the start Union Chapel served as a nondenominational community center, its deed stipulating its use as a “public hall or meeting house for literary, scientific, moral and religious purposes and lectures on all useful subjects.”

By the time Anthony visited, Union Chapel had served as the meeting place for South Newbury’s social reformers for at least a decade. Suffragism, temperance, and women’s dress reform were often addressed. Ellen Munn



In the nation's centennial year of 1876, the South Newbury Women's Suffrage Political Club planted a "Centennial Oak" on property across the road from the chapel.

(1833–1908) and others established the Northern Ohio Health and Dress Reform Association in September 1870. Munn, herself known to wear Bloomer-style baggy plaid trousers, invited "all women having courage to lay aside symbols of their servility and don the American Costume of "trousers and frock" to what would become an annual Independence Day picnic.

**"EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL!"**

In 1874, members of this group—including Munn, her mother Ruth, and Dr. Julia Green—helped to form the South Newbury Women's Suffrage Political Club, thought to be the second oldest in Ohio. Their motto? "Equal Rights for All! Taxation without Representation is Tyranny! Our foes, Tradition and Superstition." In the nation's centennial of 1876, the

club planted a "Centennial Oak" on property across the road from the chapel. The club's constitution, a list of founding members, and the minutes of its first meeting were buried beneath the tree.

In August 1919, Harriet Taylor Upton visited Union Chapel. As a long-time member of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association leadership and a leader in Ohio's suffrage movement, Upton spoke to commemorate the early suffragists "who accepted ridicule, contempt and social ostracism." The Suffrage Oak's growth represented the movement's strength as the 19th Amendment became a reality. Union Chapel by then had become a site of pilgrimage for suffragists, its tower bell calling them together, its stone foundation as sturdy as their determination to achieve equality. ♥

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