



## HISTORY STORIES



AUG 18, 2020

### The Woman Who Became Governor 11 Years Before Women's Suffrage

MICHELLE T. HARRIS

*Library of Congress*

More than a decade before American women gained the right to vote, a 32-year-old woman stepped into the role of governor of Oregon, becoming the first woman to assume a state's top office. While she was only governor over a weekend and her impact on the state was minimal, the fact that Carrie B. Shelton served as the state's chief executive helped garner respect for women's participation in politics and added to the call for women's suffrage.

Shelton never actively sought the governorship, but rather was well-placed when circumstances left the position open. On Saturday, February 27, 1909, Governor [George Chamberlain](#) of Oregon resigned from office before boarding a train cross-country. He was headed to Washington, D.C. to be sworn in as a U.S. Senator. Though Chamberlain hadn't yet finished his second term as governor, he needed to be in the capital by March 4 to be sworn in along with the rest of the freshman senate class. If he arrived late, every member would have seniority over him.

By Oregon law, Secretary of State Frank W. Benson would normally have assumed the role as acting governor over the weekend. However, Benson was too ill to immediately step in. This left Chamberlain's private secretary, Shelton, the next natural successor to take the governor's office over the next 48 hours. Meanwhile, Benson would have time to recover before being sworn in on Monday morning.

**READ MORE:** [A Timeline of the Fight for All Women's Right to Vote](#)

This is how Shelton became America's first female governor—11 years before the August 18, 1920 [ratification of the 19th Amendment](#) granted women the right to vote. In her brief role as governor, Shelton had the power to veto bills and sign executive orders—all before she could legally cast a ballot.

Genealogist [Anne Mitchell](#), a great-great-niece of Shelton, spent years collecting documents on her family history as well as many of Shelton's surviving possessions, which she donated to the [Willamette Heritage Center](#).

"She could run things on her own and was extremely knowledgeable," says Mitchell about Shelton. She says unfortunately, little documentation remains about Shelton's time in office.

**WATCH: The 19th Amendment**

## A Tragic Past

Born [Carrie Bertha Skiff](#) in 1876 to Willis and Mary Skiff, Shelton spent her early years in Union County, Oregon. On the night of July 24, 1886, her [father mysteriously disappeared](#) while waiting to board a train home. Two years later, her mother died, leaving Carrie along with siblings Nolan and Mabel, orphans. The trio were briefly left in care of their older brother Orrin and his wife Elizabeth. This arrangement didn't work out and they were then left in the custody of a local attorney, John W. Shelton.

Carrie's relationship with her guardian became the center of controversy when Mr. Shelton filed for divorce with his wife, who was away visiting family in California at the time. After crossing the border into Weiser, Idaho, 16-year-old Carrie married Shelton on October 27, 1892. The marriage didn't last long as her husband passed away just a month before her 18th birthday.

## Shelton's Career in Law and Politics

In 1895, Shelton took a job as a stenographer at a Portland law firm. A diligent worker and quick learner, her talents caught the attention of Chamberlain, an attorney and politician who entrusted her with responsibilities usually reserved for young lawyers, such as preparing legal papers.

Shelton continued working as Chamberlain's stenographer after he was elected to the Multnomah County district attorney's office in 1900, and then joined him in Salem after he was elected Governor of Oregon in 1902.

During his tenure as governor, Chamberlain promoted her as his private secretary, a title that up until that point, had been held by men. Shelton later discussed her experience with [The Sunday Oregonian](#) in 1914:

"It was not the office that had broadened so much—it was its legal significance. So, when the Senator went away for the first time after he had taken his oath of office as Governor of Oregon, I suddenly found that I was, so to speak, in his shoes, and was really 'Madam Governor.'"

On March 1, 1909, Benson was sworn in as governor. Shelton then moved to Washington, D.C. to work as Chamberlain's private secretary and overseeing a staff of at least three clerks, according to [official registers](#) from the time.

## Oregon Grants Women the Right to Vote in 1912

In 1913, Shelton marched in Washington, D.C. alongside [fellow suffragists](#). After women in Oregon were granted the right to vote in 1912, *The National Magazine* referenced her run as governor in a May 1913 issue:

"When the suffragettes marched to the Capitol on April 7th to present their petition in the Senate Building, there was one among them who enjoyed the unique distinction of having been the governor of a state and commonwealth. Although the state of Oregon but recently adopted 'votes for women,' yet one of the gentler sex has already acted as its chief executive."

Shelton continued working as Chamberlain's right-hand person and stayed by his side after he suffered a paralytic stroke. They married on July 12, 1926, however she found herself a widow once again when he died two years later. After returning home to Oregon to live with family, Carrie Bertha Chamberlain died on February 3, 1936.

"Shelton's role in the suffrage movement garnered more attention after she arrived in Washington D.C. resuming her position as Chamberlain's private secretary and later appointment to clerk of the Committee for Public Lands," says Kaylyn F. Mabey, a research assistant at the Willamette Heritage Center.

"We glean from newspaper accounts stories of the large number of women visitors she received and their insistence on referring to her as 'Governor' out of respect for the office she'd held, even if briefly."

**WATCH: [Susan B. Anthony: Rebel for the Cause](#) on HISTORY Vault**

**FACT CHECK:** We strive for accuracy and fairness. But if you see something that doesn't look right, [click here](#) to contact us! HISTORY reviews and updates its content regularly to ensure it is complete and accurate.

RELATED CONTENT

