Wilhelmina Kekelaokalaninui Widemann Dowsett was born on March 28, 1861 in Lihue in the kingdom of Hawaii to a Native Hawaiian mother and a German immigrant father. Her father served as a cabinet minister for Queen Lili‘uokalani. As members of the royal family, Hawaii’s king and queen were present at her 1888 wedding to Jack Dowsett. In 1893, pro-American interests in tandem with the United States Marines overthrew Queen Lili‘uokalani, establishing the Republic of Hawaii, which was then annexed to the United States in 1898.

When Hawaii was introduced as a new territory to the union, suffragists in mainland America looked to the Pacific to see if their efforts could gain any traction there. Susan B. Anthony and other leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association wrote the “Hawaiian Appeal” in 1899, asking the United States Congress to grant Hawaiian women the right to vote “upon whatever conditions and qualifications the right of suffrage is granted to Hawaiian men.” The Hawaiian Appeal drew criticism from almost every involved party. Local Hawaiian women, such as Dowsett, believed petitioning the territorial governments for greater civil rights was the appropriate course of action.

In 1912, Dowsett founded the first Hawaiian suffrage organization, the National Women’s Equal Suffrage Association of Hawaii, or WESAH. They modeled the organization after NAWSA, and even invited suffragists from the continental United States to come address the group. One such woman was Carrie Chapman Catt, who met with the group in 1918 and praised them publicly after the meeting. Due to the efforts of Dowsett and WESAH, President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill allowing Hawaiians to decide the matter for themselves.

Dowsett gathered Native Hawaiian and white suffragists at the capitol building the morning of March 4, 1919, the day of the Senate vote, declaring: “Sister Hawaiians, our foreign sisters are with us. Senator Wise asked us yesterday if the so-called ‘society women’ were leading us, and we told him that this was not so. We are all working together, and we want the legislature to know this. And we must also remember our Oriental sisters, who are not here today but who will also unite this great cause.” Dowsett was very adamant about including Asian women in her vision of Hawaii’s future success and enfranchisement, even despite the prejudice against Asians prevalent in the territory and the mainland.

Their bill did pass the Hawaiian Senate the same day, but the House was a different matter. As opposed to granting women’s suffrage immediately, they instead decided to push off the vote, putting it on the ballot of the Hawaiian electorate in 1920. Enraged by the House’s decision, Dowsett and five-hundred other women rushed onto the House floor brandishing banners that read “Votes for Women.” Acquiescing to the demonstrators, the House held hearings the next day for those both supporting and opposing the proposal to speak. Dowsett spoke alongside a wide variety of Hawaiian women, including Princess Kalaniana‘ole and Lahilahi Webb, a former lady-in-waiting from Queen Lili‘uokalani’s court. After a month, the Hawaiian House still had done nothing and the suffragists grew tired of waiting.

Dowsett and WESAH turned to lobbying directly to the United States Congress by means of their territorial representatives, Prince Kuhio. Additionally, they formed grassroots groups throughout the Hawaiian territory to prepare women for voting when they received the chance. In August 1920, they got that chance when Hawaiian women were enfranchised alongside mainland women with the passage of the 19th Amendment. Unfortunately, as residents of an American territory, their elected representation had limits. It would not be until nearly four decades later, in 1959, that Hawaii became the fiftieth state and its citizens gained full voting rights. Dowsett unfortunately did not live to see this, dying December 10, 1929, but leaving behind a legacy of tremendous work in winning the vote for Hawaiian women and supporting the cause of other suffragists in their collective struggle for suffrage.

Sources
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