

NATIONAL WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

AUGUST 26, 1920

Prior to 1776, women had the right to vote in several of the colonies in what would become the United States, but by 1807 every state constitution denied even limited suffrage. Women were denied the basic rights enjoyed by male citizens. For example, besides no female having the right to vote, married women could not own property and had no legal claim to their children, or to any money they might earn.

Beginning in the 1800s, women organized, petitioned, and picketed to win the right to vote, but it took them decades to accomplish their purpose. In July 1848, an organized movement for women's rights was launched on a national level with the Seneca Falls, New York convention which was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. A Declaration of Sentiments was adopted that called for equality between the sexes and the outcome of the convention also included a resolution urging women to secure the vote. After the convention, the demand for the vote became a center of the women's movement. Many legal arguments were struck down by the US Supreme Court so suffrage organizations called for a new constitutional amendment that would guarantee the women the right to vote. The amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1878.

Women and their allies worked tirelessly over the next 40 years and were often met with fierce resistance. Several generations of women suffrage supporters lectured, wrote, marched, lobbied, and practiced civil disobedience to achieve what many US citizens considered a radical change to the Constitution. Some opponents heckled the women, physically abused them, and women were arrested and placed in jails.

By 1916, almost all the major suffrage organizations were united behind the goal of a constitutional amendment. When New York adopted woman suffrage in 1917, President Wilson changed his position to now support a constitutional amendment so that in 1918, the political balance began to shift. On May 21, 1919, the US House of Representatives passed the amendment and two weeks later the US Senate followed. Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment on August 18, 1920. This signaled that the amendment passed its final hurdle of obtaining the agreement of three-fourths of the states. US Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby then certified the ratification on August 26, 1920, changing the face of the United States electorate forever.

The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution states that the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. On November 2nd of that same year, more than 8 million women across the US voted in elections for the first time.

Achieving this milestone required a lengthy and difficult struggle, a victory that took decades of agitation. The passage of the 19th amendment was not brought about by a singular event, individual, or group. It was women and their allies, working together for decades and spanning the turn of a century who fought and won the constitutional right to vote.

Michigan 3rd State in Nation to Ratify Suffrage Amendment

Beginning around 1849, the Michigan Legislature started taking up the issue of women's suffrage. Universal suffrage was recommended for placement in a revised state constitution based on the importance of natural rights and equality, and the deeply-held American belief that government must derive its power from the consent of the governed – including women. Debates ensued on extending suffrage to women, Black men, Native men, and recent immigrants. The new 1850 state constitution only granted the vote to male Native Americans who were at least 21 years old that did not belong to any tribe. By 1855, Michigan women were actively signing petitions asking for the right to vote. From this point forward, Michigan women would submit petitions asking for or demanding the vote at nearly every biennial legislative session thereafter.

In 1867, the Michigan House and Senate voted to ratify the 14th amendment to the US Constitution which granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the US – including former slaves – and guaranteed all citizens “equal protection of the laws.” But much to the chagrin of women's suffrage supporters, the word “male” had been inserted into the document. So, in 1874, the Michigan State Woman Suffrage Association during a special session of the Legislature asked them to strike out the word “male” from the state constitution stating that “Women are also governed, while they have no direct voice in the government, and made subject to laws affecting their personal rights and liberty, in whose enactment they have had no voice.” Both the House and Senate voted to submit a constitutional amendment to the voters, but the proposed amendment was defeated in dramatic fashion.

The tide finally began to turn in 1893. Once again, a bill was introduced that would have granted only municipal suffrage to women. This time, it stated that “women who are able to read the constitution of the State of Michigan, printed in the English language” would gain the vote. The legality of the new act came into question with the Supreme Court ruling that the state constitution did not give the Legislature the ability to create a new class of voters.

Governor Chase Osborn in 1912 called a special Legislative session where he specifically authorized and requested that the House and Senate consider an amendment to the constitution “providing for giving and insuring the right of (full) suffrage to the women of Michigan.” No chief executive had ever taken this bold of a stance. The Legislature voted down two different concurrent resolutions. Osborn promptly called a second special session and this time told them that they had to “consider legislation by and through which the question of amendment to the constitution shall be submitted to the electors of Michigan providing for giving and insuring the right of suffrage to the women of Michigan.”

Both the Senate and House voted to pass the resolution that called for a statewide vote on full female suffrage during the presidential election. The amendment did pass but was nullified by “political manipulation.” They tried again on the spring ballot in 1913, but it failed badly due to low voter turnout and an increasingly active anti-suffrage movement which was largely funded by the alcohol lobby.

In 1917, two major suffrage reforms worked their way through the Legislature, both were passed. One, granted women the right to vote for presidential electors and the other was a Joint Resolution placing another proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot in 1918. On November 5, 1918, voters went to the polls and finally passed the amendment giving Michigan women the right to vote beating the nationwide enfranchisement by two years. Finally, during a special session in June 1919, the Michigan Legislature became the third state in the nation to officially ratify the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution.

The Vote Delayed for Minority Women

The history of women's suffrage in the United States conjures up the names and images of very specific women: White women. But the fight for women's voting rights extended far beyond that. From social clubs in New York's Chinatown to conferences for Native American rights, in African American newspapers, and in pamphlets demanding equality for Spanish-speaking New Mexicans, these women struggled to build a movement that would truly include all women. American women of color were essential to the suffrage movement facing additional harassment against their skin color, heritage, and native language.

Native women were highly visible in early 20th century suffrage activism. White suffragists, fascinated by Native matriarchal power, invited Native women to speak at conferences, join parades and write for their publications. After the 19th amendment was ratified and celebrated by millions of women across the country, the Indigenous suffragist Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, also known as Zitkala-Sa, a citizen of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, reminded newly enfranchised white women that the fight was far from over. She urged them to remember their Native sisters, many of whom were not even recognized as United States citizens, but wards of the government without a political voice.

Latinas, especially Chicanas also played a major role in the women's suffrage movement. The first novel written by a Latina in English was published in 1872 by the author Maria Ampara Ruiz de Burton. Her book, "Who Would Have Thought It?" offered a better critique of racism in the US while supporting women's suffrage. The Latina advocacy for the vote grew out of their insistence that Spanish Americans, as they called themselves at the time, were equal citizens.

Maria Stewart, a Black woman who was the first woman to lecture about women's rights and the first to speak to mixed race audiences twenty years before the women's convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper actively pushed back against white suffragists in the 1850s in her famous speech, "We are all bound up together" at a time when doing so could conceivably have gotten her killed. By the 1890s, the women's suffrage movement had become increasingly racist and exclusionary. African American women organized separately through local women's clubs and the National Association of Colored Women. As the National American Woman Suffrage Association began gaining support for its cause, the members realized that the exclusion of African American women would gain greater support. Southern whites feared that African Americans would gain more political advantage and thus power.

And while the 19th Amendment itself guaranteed the right to vote for many women, it took several more decades for that right to be fully protected by the United States constitution for women of color.

Native American Women: The Dawes Act of 1887 is passed granting citizenship to Native Americans who give up their tribal affiliations (assimilate). The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted citizenship to Native Americans, but many states made laws and policies that prohibited them from voting. In 1947, legal barriers to Native Americans voting are removed.

Latina Women: The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 ends the Mexican American War and guarantees citizenship to Mexicans living in the territories conquered by the United States. However, English language requirements and violent intimidation limit access to voting rights.

Asian Women: The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 granted all people of Asian ancestry the right to become citizens and eligible to vote.

Black Women: In much of the country, hurdles like poll taxes and literacy tests kept Black voters disenfranchised until the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act which forbids states from imposing discriminatory restrictions on who can vote and provides mechanisms for the federal government to enforce its provisions.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and subsequent laws passed in 1970, 1975, and 1982 built stronger voting protections to allow all people to vote without intimidation, literacy tests, poll taxes and fraud. And the suppression of voting rights by federal and state officials continues to present time.