

A History of the Women's Suffrage Movement

In July 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY, and launched the woman suffrage movement. Many of the attendees to the convention were also abolitionists whose goals included universal suffrage. In 1870 this goal was partially realized when the 15th amendment to the Constitution, granting black men the right to vote, was ratified.

In the year following the ratification of the 15th amendment, a voting rights petition sent to the Senate and House of Representatives requested that suffrage rights be extended to women and that women be granted the privilege of being heard on the floor of Congress. It was signed by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and other suffragists. Well known in the United States suffrage movement, Anthony and Stanton organized the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1869.

The ideological and strategic differences that grew among suffrage leaders during and immediately after the Civil War formally split the women's movement into two rival associations. Stanton and Anthony, after accusing abolitionist and Republican supporters of emphasizing black civil rights at the expense of women's rights, formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in May of 1869. The American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), founded 6 months later by Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, protested the confrontational tactics of the NWSA and tied itself closely to the Republican Party while concentrating solely on securing the vote for women state by state. In 1890 the two suffrage organizations merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Stanton became its president, Anthony became its vice president, and Stone became chairman of the executive committee.

In 1919, one year before women gained the right to vote with the adoption of the 19th amendment, the NAWSA reorganized into the League of Women Voters.

The tactics of the suffragists went beyond petitions and memorials to Congress. Testing another strategy, Susan B. Anthony registered and voted in the 1872 election in Rochester, NY. As planned, she was arrested for "knowingly, wrongfully and unlawfully vot[ing] for a representative to the Congress of the United States," convicted by the State of New York, and fined \$100, which she insisted she would never pay a penny of. On January 12, 1874, Anthony petitioned the Congress of the United States requesting "that the fine imposed upon your petitioner be remitted, as an expression of the sense of this high tribunal that her conviction was unjust."

Wealthy white women were not the only supporters of woman suffrage. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and leader of the abolition movement, was also an advocate. He attended the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, and in an editorial published that year in *The North Star*, wrote, ". . . in respect to political rights, . . . there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the elective franchise, . . ." By 1877, when he was U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia, Douglass's family was also involved in the movement. His son, Frederick Douglass, Jr., and daughter, Mrs. Nathan Sprague, and son-in-law, Nathan Sprague, all signed this petition to the

U.S. Congress for woman suffrage ". . . to prohibit the several States from Disfranchising United States Citizens on account of Sex."

In addition, a growing number of black women actively supported woman's suffrage during this period. Prominent African American suffragists included Ida B. Wells-Barnett of Chicago, famous as a leading crusader against lynching; Mary Church Terrell, educator and first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW); and Adella Hunt Logan, Tuskegee Institute faculty member, who insisted in articles in *The Crisis*, that if white women needed the vote to protect their rights, then black women -- victims of racism as well as sexism -- needed the ballot even more.

By 1916 almost all of the major suffrage organizations were united behind the goal of a constitutional amendment. When New York adopted woman suffrage in 1917 and President Woodrow Wilson changed his position to support an amendment in 1918, the political balance began to shift in favor of the vote for women. There was still strong opposition to enfranchising women, however, as illustrated by this petition from the Women Voters Anti-Suffrage Party of New York at the beginning of U. S. involvement in World War I.

Early in 1919, the House of Representatives passed the 19th amendment by a vote of 304 to 90, and the Senate approved it 56 to 25. Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were the first states to ratify it. On August 18, 1920, it appeared that Tennessee had ratified the amendment--the result of a change of vote by 24 year-old legislator Harry Burn at the insistence of his elderly mother--but those against the amendment managed to delay official ratification. Anti-suffrage legislators fled the state to avoid a quorum and their associates held massive anti-suffrage rallies and attempted to convince pro-suffrage legislators to oppose ratification. However, Tennessee reaffirmed its vote and delivered the crucial 36th ratification necessary for final adoption.

Some states were slow with their endorsement even after the amendment became a part of the supreme law of the land. Maryland, for example, did not ratify the amendment until 1941, and did not transmit the ratification document to the State Department until 1958.

Questions

- 1. What was the purpose of the Seneca Falls Convention?**
- 2. Why did suffragettes split into two rival organizations (NWSA and AWSA)?**
- 3. How did these organizations change over time?**
- 4. What tactics did the suffragettes use to try to gain the right to vote?**
- 5. How did women finally get the right to vote?**