

The History of the Suffrage Movement, by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler

"Hundreds of women gave the accumulated possibilities of an entire lifetime, thousands gave years of their lives, hundreds of thousands gave constant interest, and such aid as they could. It was a continuous, seemingly endless, chain of activity. Young suffragists who helped forge the last links of that chain were not born when it began. Old suffragists who forged the first links were dead when it ended." - Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler. WOMAN SUFFRAGE AND POLITICS: THE INNER STORY OF THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT, 1923.

In 1995 we commemorated the passing of seventy-five years since the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which enfranchised American women. It required almost as many years for suffragists to achieve this victory: between 1848, when a resolution calling for woman suffrage was adopted at the Seneca Falls Convention, to 1920, when the federal woman suffrage amendment was finally ratified, several generations of suffragists labored tirelessly for the cause. Many did not live to see its successful conclusion.

Origins: 1848 - 1869

The woman suffrage movement, which began in the northeastern United States, developed in the context of antebellum reform. Many women including Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Abby Kelly, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone began speaking out for woman's rights when their efforts to participate equally with men in the great reform movements of the day--including antislavery and temperance--were rebuffed. These early feminists demanded a wide range of changes in woman's social, moral, legal, educational, and economic status; the right to vote was not their initial focus. Indeed, those present at the Seneca Falls Convention regarded the resolution demanding the vote as the most extreme of all their demands, and adopted it by a narrow margin at the insistence of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass.

After the Civil War, women's rights leaders saw enfranchisement as one of the most important, perhaps the most important of their goals. They were extremely disappointed when the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments did not provide universal suffrage for all Americans, but extended the franchise only to black men. Indeed, the woman's rights movement divided acrimoniously in 1869 largely over the issue of whether or not to support ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Suffrage Strategies During "the Schism": 1869 -1890

Two women suffrage organizations were founded in 1869, with different positions on the Fifteenth Amendment and different ideas about how to best promote woman suffrage. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, but called for a Sixteenth Amendment that would enfranchise women. Led exclusively by women, the New York-based NWSA focused upon the enfranchisement of women through federal action, and

adopted a more radical tone in promoting a wide variety of feminist reforms in its short-lived journal, *Revolution*.

The other organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was led by Lucy Stone with the aid of her husband Henry Blackwell, Mary Livermore, Julia Ward Howe, Henry Ward Beecher, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and others; it endorsed the Fifteenth Amendment while working for woman suffrage as well. While supporting a federal amendment for female enfranchisement, this organization concentrated on developing grass roots support for woman suffrage by forming state-level organizations; and, working through its organ, the *Woman's Journal*, the AWSA tried to make woman suffrage and other feminist reforms seem less radical and consistent with widely-shared American values.

In the 1870's, disheartened by the response to the proposed federal amendment, suffragists also tried other approaches to winning the vote. These included the use of the courts to challenge their exclusion from voting on the grounds that, as citizens, they could not be deprived of their rights as protected by the Constitution.

Victoria Woodhull, a beautiful, radical, and iconoclastic figure who briefly gained the support of Stanton and Anthony in the 1870s (before her scandalous personal life and advocacy of free love were revealed at great cost to the movement), made this argument before Congress in 1871.

In 1872, Susan B. Anthony attempted to vote, hoping to be arrested and to have the opportunity to test this strategy in the courts; she was arrested and indicted for "knowingly, wrongfully and unlawfully vot[ing] for a representative to the Congress of the United States." Found guilty and fined, she insisted she would never pay a dollar of it. Virginia Minor, a suffrage leader in St. Louis, succeeded in getting the issue before the United States Supreme Court, but in 1875 the Court ruled unanimously that citizenship did not automatically confer the right to vote and that the issue of female enfranchisement should be decided within the states.

The West Pioneers in Woman Suffrage

Even as the NWSA and the AWSA competed for support and tried several strategies for winning female enfranchisement to no avail, woman suffrage was making headway in the West. Indeed, while most eastern politicians were dead set against woman suffrage, politicians and voters in several western states enfranchised women and, at times, battled Congress for the right to do so. In 1869 Wyoming led the nation in the adoption of woman suffrage while still a territory; in 1890, when it appeared that Congress would not approve its application for statehood as long as the state allowed woman suffrage, the legislature declared "we will remain out of the Union a hundred years rather than come in without the women." Even the Mormon stronghold of Utah enacted woman suffrage as a territory in 1870 and came into the union with woman suffrage in 1896. Colorado (1893) and Idaho (1896) were the other "pioneering" suffrage states.

Historians differ as to the reason the West was so precocious in its adoption of the woman suffrage. One theory was that frontier conditions undermined traditional gender roles and that women, having proven their ability to conquer difficult conditions and do "men's work," were rewarded with the vote. Another theory was that the politicians hoped that women voters would help to "civilize" the West. Most historians stress practical politics as opposed to advanced ideology as the explanation, arguing that western politicians found it expedient to enfranchise women for a variety of reasons. In Utah, for example, Mormons hoped that the votes of women would help tip the balance of power in their favor in their ongoing power struggle with the non-Mormon population, consisting largely of miners, railroad construction workers, cowboys, and prospectors, who tended not to have women with them. For whatever reasons, these four western states were the only states to adopt woman suffrage in the nineteenth century. The next round of state victories did not come until 1910, and these were also in the West (Washington, 1910; California, 1911; Oregon, 1912; Kansas, 1912; and Arizona, 1912).

Woman Suffrage and Temperance

Meanwhile, the suffrage movement won a valuable ally when Frances Willard, as president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, led thousands of otherwise quite traditional women to endorse woman suffrage as a way of protecting the home, women and children. Following its official endorsement in 1880, the WCTU created a Department of Franchise under Zerelda Wallace and Dr. Anna Howard Shaw (later president of the NAWSA) which encouraged state WCTU chapters to endorse suffrage and distributed suffrage literature. Though Willard was a member of the AWSA and invited Anthony to speak before the WCTU, the temperance organization's work for woman suffrage was particularly valuable in creating support for suffrage among women who might have considered the existing suffrage organizations and their leaders eccentric or radical.

The WCTU endorsement, however, gained for the suffrage movement a powerful opponent when the liquor industry concluded that woman suffrage was a threat to be stopped at all costs. Indeed, NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt later referred to the liquor industry as "the Invisible Enemy" and believed that its corrupt manipulation of American politics long delayed the coming of woman suffrage.

Unity Restored Through the NAWSA: 1890

One of the most important turning points in the history of the woman suffrage movement came in 1890 as the two national suffrage organizations reunited in one major organization. At the instigation of younger suffragists, the movement's aging pioneers put aside their differences sufficiently to merge their rival organizations into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Elizabeth Cady Stanton was elected President; Lucy Stone, head of the Executive Committee; and Susan B. Anthony, Vice President; but it was Anthony who actually took command of the new organization. (She became president officially in 1892 and remained in office until 1900). While continuing to demand a federal amendment, NAWSA leaders concluded that they must first build

support within the states, winning enough state suffrage amendments that Congress would approve a federal amendment and three-fourths of the states would be sure to ratify.

Though Stanton continued to address a wide range of feminist issues, many of them quite radical (including her indictment of Christianity in her 1895 *The Woman's Bible*), most NAWSA leaders including Anthony thought it imperative that the movement focus almost exclusively on winning the vote. In keeping with the new approach and influenced by the conservatism of new recruits, the suffragists went to great lengths to avoid association with radical causes.

Woman Suffrage and the Race Issue

This new approach included shedding the traditional association of women's rights with the rights of blacks. Indeed, though the NAWSA never stopped using natural rights arguments for woman suffrage, white suffragists--still indignant that black men were enfranchised ahead of them and angry at the ease with which immigrant men were enfranchised--drifted away from insistence upon universal suffrage and increasingly employed racist and nativist rhetoric and tactics.

The new NAWSA strategy included building support in the South. There the historic connection between the woman's movement and antislavery made suffrage anathema to the white conservatives who once again controlled the region and made advocacy of woman suffrage quite difficult for the influential white women the NAWSA wished to recruit. In the 1890s, however, with Laura Clay of Kentucky as intermediary, NAWSA leaders went to great lengths to, in Clay's words, "bring in the South."

Using a strategy first suggested by Henry Blackwell, northern and southern leaders began to argue that woman suffrage--far from endangering white supremacy in the South--could be a means of restoring it. Indeed, they suggested, the adoption of woman suffrage with educational or property qualifications that would disqualify most black women, would allow the South to restore white supremacy in politics without "having to" disfranchise black men and risk Congressional repercussions.

The NAWSA spent considerable time and resources developing this "southern strategy," sending Catt and Anthony on speaking tours through the region, and holding the 1895 NAWSA convention in Atlanta; at the insistence of their southern hosts they even asked their aging hero Frederick Douglass--who was an honored participant in women's rights conventions elsewhere in the nation--to stay away. By 1903, however, it was clear that this southern strategy had failed; the region's politicians refused (in the words of one Mississippi politician) to "cower behind petticoats" and "use lovely women" to maintain white supremacy--and found other means to do so that did not involve the "destruction" of woman's traditional role.

Despite the fact that white suffragists largely turned their backs on them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, in the South, excluded them totally from white suffrage organizations, a growing number of black women actively supported

woman suffrage during this period. Following a path blazed by former slave Sojourner Truth and free blacks Harriet Forten Purvis and Margaretta Forten who spoke at antebellum women's rights conventions, and Massachusetts reformers Caroline Remond Putman and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin who were active in the AWSA in the 1870s, black women persevered in their advocacy of woman suffrage even in these difficult times. Prominent African American suffragists included Ida 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 faculty member, who, in articles in the *Crisis*, insisted 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.

Rebuilding: 1896 - 1910

Nevertheless, white suffrage leaders, who either shared the nativism or racism endemic to turn-of-the-century America or were convinced they must cater to it in order to succeed, continued in their attempts to shed the movement's radical image and enlarge their constituency. From the late 1890s to around 1910, in a period historians once described as "the doldrums" of the woman suffrage movement, the NAWSA went through a major period of rebuilding--in regard to membership as well as image.

Under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, president from 1900 to 1904, the NAWSA began successful efforts to recruit large members of socially prominent and politically influential women (the "society plan") and to convince the growing numbers of middle and upper-class women involved in women's clubs that woman suffrage would be a boon to their civic improvement efforts. They also reached out to the new generation of college-educated women, many of them professionals, reminding them that their opportunities were owed to the pioneers of the woman's movement, and challenging them to take up the torch. The movement profited greatly from the new ideas and energy of younger leaders such as Maud Wood Park and Inez Haynes Irwin who formed the College Equal Suffrage League, and Mary Hutcheson Page of Massachusetts and Harriot Stanton Blatch (the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton) of New York, who reinvigorated the suffrage movements in their states by introducing new tactics borrowed from English suffragists including open-air meetings and parades. Blatch also organized the Equality League of Self Supporting Women (1907), later called the Women's Political Union.

The NAWSA also expanded its educational efforts, distributing literature to schools and libraries, sponsoring debates, disseminating a new and less radical image of their movement's own history in which Anthony was virtually canonized. But particularly after Catt resigned in 1904 (owing to the illness of her husband) and Dr. Anna Howard Shaw inherited the presidency of the NAWSA, the decentralized NAWSA provided little in the way of a national political strategy. Between 1896 and 1910, no new states were won for woman suffrage; only six state campaigns were attempted and all of them failed.

The Suffrage Movement and Progressivism

There was, however, considerable grounds for optimism in 1910. The Progressive Movement, which began around 1900 at the grassroots level and swept both national political parties, was proving to be a tremendous boon to the cause of woman suffrage. In all sections of the United States, men and women who supported Progressive reforms (including pure food and drug legislation, protection for workers, an end to child labor, and legislation to curb political corruption) believed that women's votes would help secure such reforms. Countless women, many of them involved in civic improvement clubs, enlisted in the suffrage movement as they became frustrated at their inability to secure such reforms through "indirect influence" or lobbying alone.

Middle-class reformers such as Jane Addams, founder of the famous settlement house, Hull House, in Chicago and Florence Kelley, Executive Secretary of the National Consumer's League, were strong supporters of woman suffrage. And labor leaders including Rose Schneiderman, labor organizer and speaker with the Women's Trade Union League, and Agnes Nestor, President of the International Globe Workers Union, worked hard for suffrage as a means of achieving improved conditions for workers.

Many working-class women joined the movement, welcomed by middle-class leaders such as Harriot Stanton Blatch (who had objected to the NAWSA's "society plan") who worked to unite women of all classes into a revitalized suffrage movement. As opponents were quick to point out, many socialists supported woman suffrage, though some socialists who were more radical in approach including Emma Goldman thought it foolish to expect that much progress would come from female enfranchisement. As in the case of temperance and suffrage, however, the idea that women would support Progressive reforms provoked opposition: industries that stood to lose from Progressive reform, such as the cotton textile industry of the South, joined the liquor industry as formidable opponents of woman suffrage, and worked together with the growing number of anti-suffrage organizations to oppose state suffrage referenda.

Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party

Around 1912, the increased support for suffrage resulting from the Progressive movement, and the series of victories in the western states seemed to breathe new life into suffragists all over America. The return of Alice Paul from England, where she was inspired by the energy and boldness of the "militant" British suffragists, was also a major factor in the new suffrage activism.

Paul and her followers had no patience with the slow, state-by-state plodding that had consumed the NAWSA's energies since the 1890's, and demanded that the organization focus its attention almost exclusively upon the federal amendment. Though this infuriated a minority of southern suffragists who were states' rights activists and supported female enfranchisement by state action only, the NAWSA did indeed renew its campaign for a federal amendment--but not before it parted company with Paul and her followers.

The central issue in this new rift in the suffrage forces was Paul's advocacy of a strategy derived from the British suffragists, to oppose the "party-in-power" until it adopted

woman suffrage, a strategy that violated the NAWSA's long-standing policy of non-partisanship. Forming their own organization, soon known as the National Woman's Party (NWP), Paul and her followers continued to pursue a federal amendment using bold new tactics, many of them directed at forcing President Wilson to support the federal amendment; these ranged from mobilizing women voters in western states against Wilson's reelection in 1916 to burning his wartime speeches in praise of democracy publicly in front of the White House.

Carrie Chapman Catt and the "Winning Plan"

Carrie Chapman Catt was also eager for the NAWSA to bring the long struggle to a conclusion with the adoption of the federal suffrage amendment. Her return to the NAWSA presidency in late 1915 and the adoption shortly thereafter of her "Winning Plan" harnessed the power of the massive but sluggish NAWSA and initiated the final, victorious suffrage drive. Catt insisted that further state work was vital, but made it clear that the federal amendment was still the ultimate goal. Her plan called for suffragists in states which had not adopted woman suffrage--and where a victory seemed possible--to launch campaigns at once. In states where defeat was likely, she insisted that suffragists avoid such an embarrassment to the cause and seek only partial suffrage--municipal, presidential, or primary suffrage--as they thought best. She urged suffragists in states where women already voted to pressure on their national representatives to support the federal amendment.

Meanwhile Catt and her lieutenants, Maud Wood Park and Helen Gardner, worked hard to convince President Wilson to support woman suffrage by federal as well as state means, and conducted a massive lobbying effort to enlist congressional support. And when the United States entered World War I, Catt put aside her own pacifism and urged suffragists to support the war effort--a policy which enhanced the patriotic image of the movement with the public and powerful decision makers, including Wilson. A growing number of state victories and Woodrow Wilson's conversion (he began working for the federal amendment in 1918) eventually led Congress to approve the Nineteenth Amendment and to submit it to the states in June 1919.

Historians debate the relative contributions of Catt and the NAWSA vs. Paul and the NWP to the victory in Congress. But clearly Catt's careful coordination of suffragists all over the nation and skillful political maneuvering, together with the pressure of Wilson and members of Congress that Paul and her followers applied by less orthodox methods of persuasion, were all major factors.

The Fight for Ratification

The final chapter in the suffrage story was still ahead: thirty-six states had to ratify the amendment before it could become law. As the struggle over ratification began, Illinois and Wisconsin competed for the honor of the being the first to ratify, while Georgia and Alabama scrambled to be the first to pass a "rejection resolution." Most states took longer to act, and many battles were hard fought, with suffragists and antisuffragists using all

powers of persuasion at their command. By the summer of 1920, suffragists were dismayed to find that while only one more state was needed, no further legislative sessions were scheduled before the November 1920 election. Desperate, suffragists began pleading for special sessions. President Wilson was finally able to pressure the reluctant governor of Tennessee into calling such a session.

Thus the final battle over woman suffrage took place in Nashville, Tennessee in the long, hot summer of 1920. In that final, dramatic contest, antisuffragists as well as suffragists from all over the nation descended upon the state in a bitter struggle over ideology and influence. Despite the glare of national publicity, the suffragists watched with dismay as a comfortable margin in favor of ratification gradually disappeared, and they were quite uncertain of the result when the vote took place. When, on August 18, it appeared that Tennessee had ratified--the result of one twenty-four-year-old legislator from the mountains (Harry Burn) changing his vote at the insistence of his elderly mother--the antis still managed to delay official ratification through parliamentary tricks. While anti-suffrage legislators fled the state to avoid a quorum, their associates held massive anti-suffrage rallies and otherwise attempted to convince pro-suffrage legislators to oppose ratification. Finally, Tennessee reaffirmed its vote for ratification, and the Nineteenth Amendment was officially added to the United States Constitution on August 26, 1920.