



## WINNING THE RIGHT TO VOTE

*by Anna Lewis*

Understanding our country's past and what makes it what it is today is important for the progress of our future. The idea of women's rights, for example, is just one way that our country has grown into being such a strong respectable nation. This entire world is still working on making the terms fair. In 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was written, there was nowhere that allowed women or anyone who wasn't a white, land-owning male above the age of 21 to vote in national affairs, leaving only about 6% of the population with the power to vote in the election of George Washington. This was a patriarchal world. Women were viewed as the "weaker sex" (Janda, *The Challenge of Democracy*, pg. 476). However, many people were so frustrated with this fact, they decided that they wanted a change.

The first manifestation of women appearing to vote was by a Lydia Taft, a wealthy widow, in 1756. Taft married a man who was very connected to their town's responsibilities of Uxbridge, Massachusetts, by being a board selectman, town clerk, town moderator and war vet. Taft was allowed to vote for town affairs on behalf of her husband's name. Even though she wasn't allowed to vote for any national or statewide cases, this was an opening to the idea of women's suffrage.

In the early 1800s, more and more women were starting to see the true issue with women's suffrage and the rights that women deserve. Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimké, and Margaret Fuller were just some of the voices of these issues. Books were being written and nationally sold to reach out to women *and* men to voice their opinions on the matter. They were questioning the social idea of "womanhood," claiming the idea that women could be, and are, self-dependent. Also being promoted was how women should be able to make their own decisions and choose pathways of their future without letting any man or law get in the way of what they want. Although many opposed these radical ideas and thought they were "too extreme" or "non-traditional" (Wikipedia.org), the suffragists had some supporters who made little victories of great importance. Reverend Charles Grandison Finney was one of those supporters. In 1831, he allowed women to pray aloud in public groups of both men and women. Although a small act, in some cases, this is known to be the beginning of the Women's Reform.

During this time, the abolitionist movement was flourishing. William Lloyd Garrison was an organizer of different anti-slavery associations. He was only one of the leaders who reached out to women to help with this movement. Many wrote books, conversed with other abolition leaders, and spoke publicly about the topic. Different conventions were being held all over the world. The first World's Anti-Slavery Convention was in 1840 and Garrison was invited to attend. A dozen men and women traveled with him to London for the convention. Lucretia Coffin Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Wendell Phillips were a few of the people who attended with Garrison. The women were not allowed to participate in the convention or even sit in the same room and listen to the lecturers. The women were very bothered by this, so Phillips brought it to the board's attention that it should allow women participation in the convention. This idea was dismissed after a full day of debating the topic on which only the men were allowed to speak. After they got home from the convention, Mott and Stanton decided to get together to plan their own convention, dealing not with the concerns of the abolitionist movement, but for women's rights.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a moving public speaker who, when speaking on the Temperance Movement, brought a crowd of 100 women to tears. Stanton and Mott met often to discuss their grand event idea. They decided to have public women's meetings in many different cities around the east coast to reach more national participation. Mott pushed for the convention to be based around how women are expected to follow religious and social traditions. On July 19 and 20, 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention—the first women's rights convention—was held. It is known today as “the convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of women” (Judith Wellman, 2004). There, Stanton wrote the “Declaration of Sentiments,” a rewrite of the Declaration of Independence. It stated that “[a]ll men *and women* are created equal.” Judith Wellman, a women's rights historian, called it the “single most important factor in spreading news of the women's rights movement around the country in 1848 and into the future.”

Susan B. Anthony was one of the attendees. She joined the abolitionist movement to end slavery, but once she met Elizabeth Stanton, she joined the fight for women's suffrage. At the convention, Anthony met Frederick Douglass. Douglass was an African American man who published and spoke about his experience of being a slave. He spoke to great leaders like William Lloyd Garrison. Anthony and Douglass became very close friends, as they were both such determined citizens to make their country great. He argued to keep challenging the government with the Women's Rights movement to make a difference. Having such an influential man on their side was a great add-on for the Women's Rights fight, seeing that at this time, men were in charge of the world.

After the conference, conventions became a regular occurrence. But, even though these events brought such joy and encouragement to most, many were against the very idea and at times would act out violently; mostly men, but at times other women would be offended. They were opposed to the idea

of women's involvement in public interests. A woman should be taking care of the children and housework, not political affairs. Nevertheless, with all the outrageous corruptions, the issue was becoming progressively more aware to other citizens. The idea of women's suffrage was even brought to the attention of others all over the world. Harriet Taylor, a British philosopher, became very interested in the subject and wrote "The Enfranchisement of Women," which was also printed in the United States. This brought the global support that the fight for women's rights needed. Many *Suffragettes* (specifically, female suffragists) did some things themselves to get the attention they needed. Lucy Stone was a woman who found that it was obscure to ask certain people to pay for taxes, when they didn't have any say on how much or how they would be spent. So, in 1857, Stone refused to pay her taxes. Susan B. Anthony wanted to test the government, so she went to the voting polls in 1872 and voted. She was arrested, but she refused to pay the fine of \$100 because she believed it was an "unjust penalty."

At this time, it was getting very scary and nerve-wracking for women petitioners. They were too scared to move forward, and the abolitionist movement was taking off. In 1867, Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, created the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) to help *all* American citizens win the vote. After some time, Stone thought that they should focus on helping the African Americans win the vote: "Women must wait for the Negro." On the AERA's final day, Stanton and Anthony got together and formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). A few months later, Lucy Stone created the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Although both organizations were created for the same cause, a rivalry began between the two organizations. The NWSA reached out toward the federal side of issues, at times using action as needed, and was run only by women. The AWSA focused more on the state level and was led by both men and women. The two groups were very stubborn in what they wanted for this nation's future. Alice Stone Blackwell, Lucy Stone's daughter, thought it would be best if both groups merged; so, in 1890, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was created.

During all this, the Wyoming Territory decided to allow women to vote. It is interesting because it was neither state nor federal land. Since most of the towns already considered women's opinions because of their pilgrimage, they chose to make their decision a law. They allowed anyone over the age of twenty-one to be permitted to vote. This was a revolutionary step in the fight for women's rights.

Some NAWSA veterans opposed the idea, but came to see that it was the best choice. Others did not see that though. Many were still very much against even the thought of women being allowed to speak in public, let alone vote on nationwide decisions. Brewers and distillers opposed the idea because they believed that woman voters would favor the prohibition of alcohol. Many people in the church were opposed because they still believed that paternalistic families were the best and only answer. Business owners opposed the thought as well, because they presumed that women would be against child labor,

which is where they got most of their help for the production of their product. The *New York Times* even put out an article in 1912, publicly stating their opposition: "If the men are not firm and wise enough and, it may as well be said, masculine enough to prevent them." This was very difficult because these would be the people who would decide to allow women to vote. There were even other women who disagreed with the NAWSA. They were known as the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NYAOWS), or also known as "antis." This, however, was an assembly that went right along with what the NAWSA believed. These women created their own group without the leadership of men and with strong, independent women standing for what they believed in—standing for social betterment.

During the turn of the twentieth century, more and more suffrage organizations were developing. In 1893, New Zealand was the first country to enfranchise women nationwide. States were starting to allow women to vote in statewide affairs, which encouraged more women to join the different organizations and acquired more Congressional support. The idea of a "New Woman" was brought to the public's eye. This woman was independent, well-educated, drove, smoked, supported charities and organizations, and would work outside the home. She was still a white, native-born, middle-class woman, but she was able to do whatever she pleased. In 1910, the idea of a "feminist" sprang into society. Feminists would be described as new-spirited middle-class, liberating them.

The United States entered World War I in April 1917 and affected the women's suffrage movement greatly. Women were now allowed to replace men in the work field as they went to war. This showed the nation that women were able to do a "man's work." It was also a time for them to show their patriotism and love for their country by helping as much as they could with the war efforts. However, this caused violent disagreements by those whose views clashed with the working women. Despite this, it extended the idea of suffrage to many countries.

Suffragists began to picket important political leaders by marching and holding banners around political buildings. All that women had was the power of petitioning. At times, police would come to tell them to leave, but the suffragists did have the legal right to picket. Some banners would compare President Wilson to German leaders. The protesters called themselves the "Silent Sentinels." Wilson was slightly confused by it all, but often would treat them civilly, occasionally inviting some in for coffee. He knew he had to be careful because of all the publicity they were getting. In 1917, Alice Paul marched in front of the White House carrying a large banner that read "20 million American Women are not Self-Governed." The police got violently involved, and about 270 women were arrested and 100 went to jail. Although Wilson believed that this was "insulting, unfeminine, and unpatriotic" (PBS.org), he let them go because he now understood the issues. Carrie Chapman Catt, President of the NAWSA, personally wrote a letter to President Wilson as a "personal plea" to support the movement. The Suffrage Bill was first brought to the House of Representatives in 1915, but was denied. In 1918, Wilson personally presented the Bill to the House, and it passed. By 1919, the

Nineteenth Amendment was passed, prohibiting the denial of any United States citizen the right to vote on account of on sex.

In the election of 1920, many of the political parties reached out to the women for their vote, especially the Progressive Party. But, to the surprise of many, only 46% of women citizens voted in the election; 11% of those didn't vote because they were in disbelief that they could participate, and 2% because their husbands frowned upon it.

It wasn't until 1984 that women suffrage was completely ratified in all 50 states. Although the legal law changed, it took a lot longer for the social law to change since this was such unfamiliar territory. Even after winning the vote, women were, and sometimes are still, looked as lesser by the men. Women were looked on as either taking that great job or relegated to having a baby and raising a family, where the men were able to just focus on providing for the family. There is still discrimination in certain jobs where the men earn more than the women for the same task at hand.

Women are and always have been on a difficult path to winning the equality that they want. But it is getting better. We just had a woman run for the oval office and came very close. There was a time when African Americans weren't allowed to even own themselves, but we just had a black President for the past eight years. The time for a woman President will come one day. Although we are not yet where we wish to be for equality among all American citizens, we can look back on our history and see how far we have come. Patience, a little hard work, and passion are what makes America great. With that in mind, our future is open to so many possibilities.

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