

The Woman's Suffrage Movement: Dayton, Ohio (1890-1920)

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National Woman's Suffrage



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"...Now you understand just why my head's not bowed. I don't shout or jump about or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing it ought to make you proud... Cause I'm a woman phenomenally...Phenomenal woman – That's me."

– Maya Angelou, Phenomenal Woman, (1978) –

Beginnings of the Woman's Suffrage Movement

The women's suffrage movement began in the United States long before the first formal petitions and organized movements that later came to be known as such, but it was mostly championed by a few individuals.

Where and how did it begin?

The beginnings of the Women's Suffrage Movement can be traced to Rochester, New York, on June 29, 1848. Gerrit Smith would receive a presidential candidate nomination from the Liberty Party, and was first cousin to the later well known suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Their discourse on women's issues and the need to expand the role of women in society was well known, and his nomination represented a fundamental shift in politics to begin including the rights of women as a public political issue.

The National Liberty Convention was held June 14-15, 1848, in Buffalo, New York. Smith spoke on the topic of women's suffrage:

Neither here, nor in any other part of the world, is the right of suffrage allowed to extend beyond one of the sexes. This universal exclusion of woman... argues, conclusively, that, not as yet, is there one nation so far emerged from barbarism, and so far practically Christian, as to permit woman to rise up to the one level of the human family.

Smith's influence and political support for women's rights would also result in the nomination for Lucretia Mott to join the ballot as Smith's vice-president, and become the first woman in United States political history to be nominated for office at the federal level. Mott would go on to become a well known suffragist on the national level in her own right. Several years earlier, in London, England, Mott and Stanton had been present to speak at the World Anti-Slavery Conference, but Mott was denied the right to address the mostly male audience at that time despite being an official representative; for her to be nominated as a potential Vice-Presidential candidate for a political party eight years later is indicative of how things were changing in the United States. Those pushing for equality had begun engaging in a larger social battle for recognition that would ultimately culminate in the Seneca Falls Convention and the *Declaration of Sentiments*.

From July 19-20, 1848, Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann M'Clintock and Elizabeth Cady Stanton hosted the Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. Three hundred people attended the convention, including Frederick Douglass, who stood up to speak in favor of women's suffrage. The convention also adopted the now famous *Declaration of Sentiments*, providing a clear statement of a woman's right to protect her home and family.

Based on the *Declaration of Independence*, it reads:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

Through a review of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, it becomes clear that these women were no longer happy with or accepting of the status quo. They felt that their basic human rights were being infringed upon, and thus chose the familiar format and wording of the Declaration of Independence to make their point. They were demanding to be heard and for changes to come about.

Suffragists were not without opposition to their cause. Many whom supported the Women's Suffrage Movement also called for stricter laws on alcohol and other vices, and participated in other organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). As a result, "Opposition was to be found from those with liquor and saloon interests, recalcitrant foreigners, religious zealots and apathetic or outwardly antagonistic women. Suffrage also faced opposition from many upper class voters. Their largest opponent however remained the indifference of many to the cause," (MS-004, 10). The liquor and saloon interests feared women receiving the vote, because they assumed that it meant that prohibition would be a forgone conclusion. Others who opposed women's suffrage simply did not want the status quo to change, as they felt that a woman's place was in the home as wife and mother and that she had no need to look beyond her front door. Goodier notes:

The reasons women opposed suffrage are complex, but were intimately connected with their view of themselves as females, rather than as citizens. Anti-suffrage women were proud of what they considered to be women's unique importance to the polity; they did not want that uniqueness stifled by the addition of masculine political responsibilities. The anti-suffrage movement was a vibrant woman's movement, for anti-suffragists were convinced that they, like the suffragists, were fighting for women's rights (Abstract).

Women who did not want the suffragists to succeed for fear that it would compromise their role as wives and mothers joined anti-suffragist groups in speaking against the Women's Suffrage Movement. According to Ford in *Encyclopedia of Women and American Politics*:

Women "antis" drew large crowds when they speculated about a world where women voted: Women would ignore their families and household responsibilities, adopt masculine traits and habits, and bring chaos to the traditional family. Others argued that, once granted, the vote could not be restricted to white, well-educated women. This race-based campaign of fear was especially effective in states with high immigrant populations and in the South. In other cases, business and industry organized against women's suffrage, fearing the social reforms women advocated, including temperance, improved working conditions, and fair wages," (39).

The opposition preyed upon the feelings of uncertainty that many women faced in supporting the Women's Suffrage Movement, and the impact that their support would have on their personal lives and relationships. This "campaign of fear" proved to be an effective tool by the opposition, especially following the uncertain times that the ending of the Civil War brought to many homes. Many women who had stepped up and volunteered their services in their country's time of need had high hopes of being rewarded for their efforts in a public fashion. Instead the Fourteenth Amendment was passed without granting women the right to vote. In fact, it made the suffragists' battle all the harder. According to Hymowitz and Weissman:

They [congress] never seriously considered woman suffrage. This bias was clearly revealed in section two of the Fourteenth Amendment, which specifically referred to "male inhabitants" and "male citizens" in the section dealing with the right to vote. For the first time the Constitution contained the word "male" instead of speaking simply of "the people" or "citizens." With that word the amendment introduced the principle of discrimination by sex into the Constitution, with the implication that women were not citizens (156).

While this could have been a devastating blow to the Women's Suffrage Movement, it did little to stop the momentum that had been developing following the ending of the Civil War.

The next few decades would see suffragists attempt to use multiple tactics in their campaign for women's suffrage. Suffragists at times used unconventional means to bring attention to and raise money for their cause. Schultz calls this "physical activism . . . the articulation of physical activity and political activism – striking simultaneous blows to the myths of women's physical and political inferiority," (1133). Schultz goes on to write, "In the first decades of the twentieth century,

American women held swimming competitions, scaled mountains, piloted aeroplanes and staged large-scale parades in their quest for the right to vote. In effect, they spectacularized suffrage by positioning their bodies in the public sphere rather than confining their mission to the parlours and meeting-halls of their more conservative sisters," (1133). Schultz discusses two suffrage hikes in her article, and outlines their impact on the movement by providing a view of the national spotlight they received. She states:

The first was the 12-day, 170-mile 'Hike to Albany' in 1912. The second hike involved the 'army of Hudson' march on Washington, DC, which departed from Newark, New Jersey in 1913. Thirteen women (joined intermittently by others who completed various segments of the journey) completed the entirety of the arduous, often treacherous 225-mile route in just 16 days. In the end, Woman Voter estimated that the hikes resulted in \$3 million worth of advertising for the cause and declared that 'no propaganda work . . . had ever achieved such publicity,' (Schultz, 1133).

In the 1870s suffragists tried several times to vote and filed suit when they were denied. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony actually managed to vote and was later arrested and found guilty at a highly publicized trial. This publicity led to revitalization and increased interest in the Women's Suffrage Movement.

National women's suffrage groups had begun to move towards unification, and in 1890, leaders Susan B. Anthony with Elizabeth Cady Stanton from the National Women's Suffrage Movement, and Lucy Stone from the American Women's Suffrage movement, merged to form the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The merging of these organizations represented a significant shift in leadership and direction in the Women's Suffrage Movement, indicating growth within the organization to move away from political infighting and to shift focus onto the larger issues that needed to be addressed.

This would mark a new era of struggles suffragists faced from established governmental regulations. Many of these conflicts were minor debates and political skirmishes that resulted in little to report. However, as the years continued, so did the escalation of protesting and the critical response by the opposition to the movement. This would culminate on August 28 1917, as 10 members of the National Women's Party, a more radical and militant faction of the Women's Suffrage Movement led by Alice Paul, were arrested for protesting at the White House in Washington D.C. Many went to prison, and when they held a hunger strike were force fed and maltreated for their behavior and beliefs. President Woodrow Wilson, who had a political history of appeasing suffragists while opposing the platform, was appalled at the hunger strike and concerned about the negative publicity he would receive if it were allowed to continue. The protestors were released and their arrests declared unconstitutional, violating the protestors' Right To Free Speech that

was guaranteed by the U.S. Bill of Rights. Wilson finally agreed to a suffrage amendment in January of 1918, coming out publicly in favor of the Women's Suffrage Movement. After two years of debate, Congress ratified the 19th Amendment and it became part of the U.S. Constitution on August 18, 1920. It reads, "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," (U.S. Constitution).

Evans notes the impact of the amendment by showcasing it as a point of transformation for the American woman:

The irony of the vote is that what was won with a great collective effort permitted women to confront their newly attained citizenship in the solitude of the voting booth. The irony paralleled others in those same years as women – in the roles of housewives, professionals, and sexual beings – entered the scientific age. From suffragist to citizen, for housewife to home economist, from volunteer to social worker, from silence to euphemism to Freudian psychology, in each case modernity brought both gains and losses eroding the female community that had flourished in Victorian America, (173).

The passage of the 19th Amendment would establish women as a political audience and as influential members of society. Through ratification women gained a voice in local and national politics, and forced recognition of their morals, viewpoints, and ideology by many who had been quick to dismiss their concerns or invalidate their claims in the past.

Photo Citation: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Cabinet Card, n.d. (Wright State Special Collections and Archives).

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