BIOGRAPHY

HerStory: The Women Behind the 19th Amendment

On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was formally adopted into the U.S. Constitution. Here is a look at the events surrounding this important chapter in U.S. history and the women who made change happen.

GREG TIMMONS • AUG 22, 2017

On a warm August evening, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote. It was the culmination of a 144-year odyssey from the Declaration of Independence and clarified once and for all, the meaning of "all men are created equal." As was the case throughout this journey, the final vote did not come easy.

It all came down to one man, 24-year-old state legislator Harry Burn. On the morning of August 18, 1920, Mr. Burn, who had been against ratification, received a letter from his mother which stated, "Dear son... Vote for suffrage and don't keep them in doubt... Don't forget to be a good boy..."

As the roll call neared his name, he clutched the letter from his mother in his hand.

"Mr. Burns..." the assembly clerk called his name.

"Yea."

And then, it was done. The painful struggle was over. American women had the right to vote and with it, full citizenship. The arduous work of thousands of women—and men—had finally been rewarded. However, to truly appreciate this achievement, one has to understand how far American attitudes towards women had evolved from the previous century.

"All Men and Women Are Created Equal"

By the early 19th century, American society had fully embraced the "Cult of True Womanhood," an ideology that claimed women were best suited in the home, serving as the family's moral guide. This protected-class status was intended to shield women from being sullied by the nefarious influences of work, politics and making war. In reality, the custom paved the way for laws banning women from attending colleges, entering professional work, voting, serving on juries and testifying in court. Many states outlawed women from owning property or entering into contracts. From an early age, women were placed on the path of marriage and motherhood. For single women, options were limited to teaching or nursing, with the social label of being an "old maid."

However, during this time the United States was also going through a tremendous transformation. Industry was surpassing agriculture in productivity and profitability. Slavery's days were numbered, though its demise would only happen through civil war. Religious enlightenment was engaging Americans to think of themselves as a chosen people with a mission to improve society. The political climate was ripe and in need of women's moral guidance. At the top of the list was the abolition of slavery. Two sisters from a South Carolina planation, Angelina and Sara Grimke, wrote and spoke fervently to end slavery. The subsequent disapproval by some clergymen of their activities led them to expand their efforts towards women's rights.

Fueled by the writings of 18th century women's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, many women began to push for greater rights. The seminal moment for Elizabeth Cady Stanton came while attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London when she, and the other women attending, were banned from participating in the proceedings.

When Stanton returned to her hometown of Seneca Falls, New York, she and her friend Lucretia Mott organized the first women's right convention, held on July 19-20, 1848. There she introduced a "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" modeled after the Declaration of Independence. As she stood before the delegation, she nervously read from the document,

"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 unalienable rights; that among these life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The convention delegates nodded approvingly, hearing the familiar words spoken. Emboldened, Stanton introduced several resolutions, the last advocating a woman's right to vote. Many delegates, both men and women, were appalled at the audacity. Some doubted whether women were qualified to vote, while others felt that such a right was unnecessary as most women would likely vote with their husbands. After a stirring speech by African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the resolution passed. The partnership between abolition and suffrage had been solidified and, it seemed, the two movements would achieve their respective goals together.

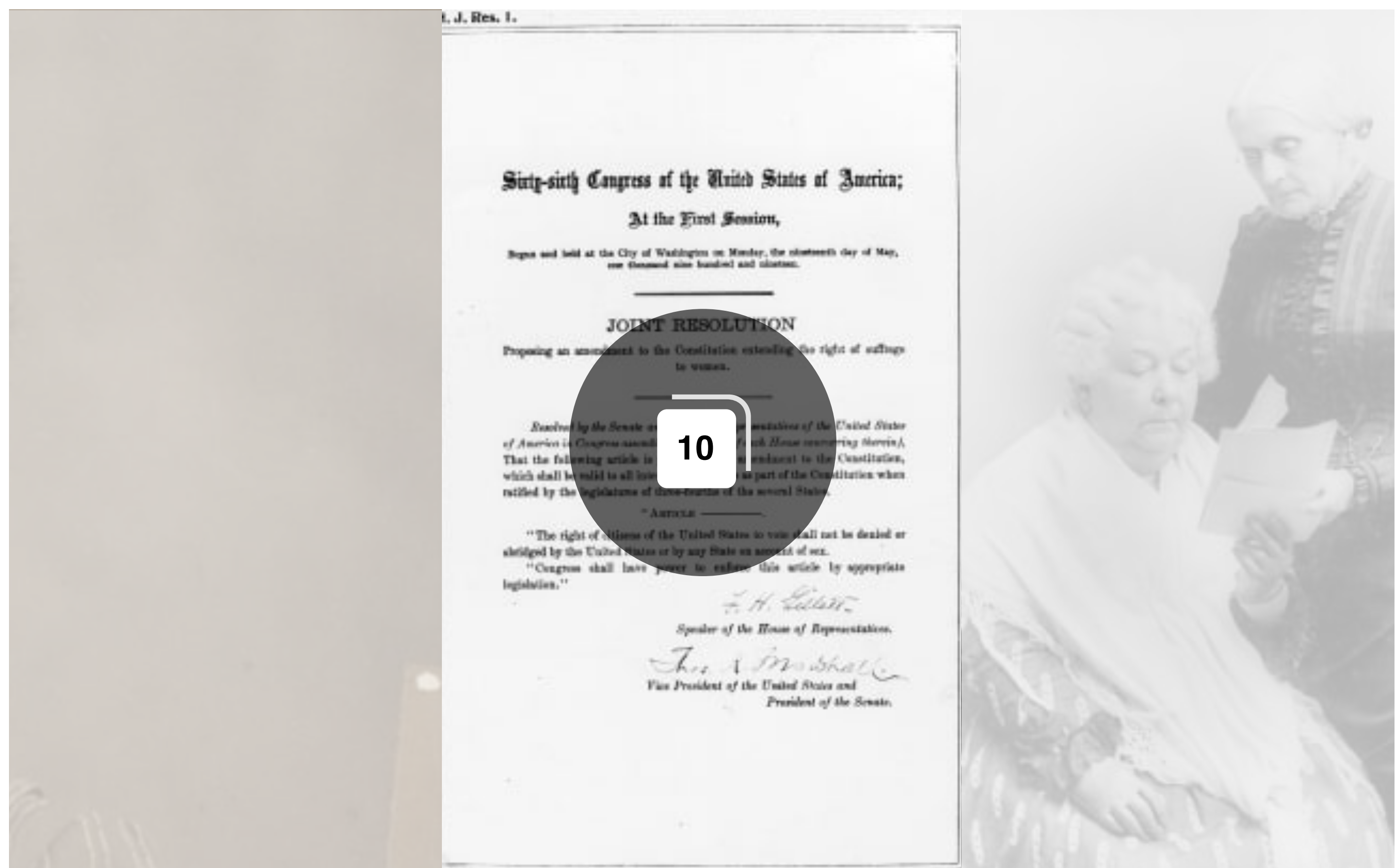
A Divided Movement

The next pivotal battle for women's equality took place in 1868 during Congressional debates on the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the right to vote. Women had worked hard over the past 20 years for black freedom and enfranchisement and expected they would be included in this goal. While many abolitionists were initially supportive of suffrage for both African Americans and women, leaders felt that it was now "the Negro's hour" and to ask for more would jeopardize the cause. In an unexpected turnaround, Frederick Douglass made an impassioned plea at the American Equal Rights Association convention to let the black man go first, turning the effort away from enfranchising women.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony saw this as a betrayal and campaigned against any amendment that denied women the right to vote. This caused a breach in the women's movement and led to Stanton and Anthony forming the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA), while Lucy Stone, her husband Henry Blackwell, and Julia Ward Howe founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), which supported the 15th Amendment.

Many African American women also pushed for women's rights, beginning with Sojourner Truth, who in 1851 made her impassioned "Ain't I a Woman" speech. Other African American women, such as Mary Anne Shadd Cary and Charlotte Forten Grimke (the niece of two abolitionists/suffragists Margaretta and Harriet Forten) participated in suffrage organizations. Unfortunately, as was the case in society, oftentimes African American women weren't always welcomed by white suffragists and had to participate in separate organizations. In 1896, many black women's clubs affiliated to form the National Association of Colored Women with Mary Church Terrell as president.

Through the second half of the 19th century, the suffrage movement remained divided. In the 1870s, some women used the language of the 14th Amendment to try to vote. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony was arrested when she illegally voted in a presidential election. She was fined $100, which she never paid, and moved on. This tactic of invoking the 14th Amendment to enfranchise women was permanently squashed when the Supreme Court ruled in Minor v. Happersett (1875) that the 14th Amendment did not grant women the right to vote.



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In 1874, Francis Willard founded the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) which soon became the largest and most powerful women's movement in the country. Its hundreds of thousands of members helped support the suffrage movement, but linking suffrage to prohibition was strongly opposed by many who were not against alcohol and weakening the effort.

By the 1890s, the acrimony between the two women's suffrage associations had subsided and they merged into the National American Suffrage Association (NAWSA). With the passing of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1902 and Susan B. Anthony in 1906, a new generation of leaders assumed control of the women's movement. NAWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt pursued a state-by-state strategy to win the vote for women, which by 1896, proved successful in four states—Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, and Colorado. Still, the goal of national suffrage was a long way off. However, Catt left the organization tired of the internal squabbling.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Progressive movement emerged to address issues associated with industrialization, immigration and urbanization. Many in the labor movement saw women as allies and potential voters for their cause. In 1906, Harriot Stanton Blatch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, founded the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women to organize working-class suffragists. In 1910, they conducted the first large-scale suffrage march in the United States. In addition, black women founded clubs that worked exclusively for woman's suffrage, such as the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, founded by Ida B. Wells in 1913.

In 1915, Carrie Chapman Catt returned as president of NAWSA and turned the organization into an effective political machine, recruiting key supporters, raising money, and conducting public demonstrations with participants wearing white uniforms designed to draw crowds and newspaper reporters. Catt set up a Washington office to exert pressure on members of Congress and convince the Democratic and Republican parties to support women's suffrage. In addition, she developed a close relationship with President Woodrow Wilson to gain his support.

In 1919, both the U.S. House of Representative and the Senate finally voted to approve the 19th Amendment. The bill went on to the states, seeking the approval of three-quarters of state legislatures. It finally happened a year later on that hot August night in Tennessee, when young Hank Burn followed the advice of his mother and cast his vote for women's suffrage.

However, the battle for women's equality didn't end there. Within a decade, state laws disenfranchised most African American women—and men—under the custom of Jim Crow. It would take another movement in the 1960s before all blacks in the South would be enfranchised. The struggle for gender equality continues today for equal pay and opportunity and equal justice in cases of rape and assault.

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