

Suffrage Movement

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

Women were granted the right to vote – suffrage – in 1920, returning to them a right that had been temporarily withdrawn. Sources indicate that there were no sex restrictions on the right to vote in the early days of the colonies. Ironically, it was soon after the Revolutionary War that New York became the first state to explicitly disenfranchise* all women.¹

Anti-Slavery

The abolitionist movement for the emancipation of blacks, strangely enough, was the springboard for the women's rights movement. Both women and men crusaded for the abolition of slavery, but the women were met with fierce hostility for "assuming man's place as public reformer."² Not only were they barred from membership in many organizations, but they had to wage an uphill battle for even the right to speak in public.

Eight women arrived in London, England as delegates to the 1840 Worldwide Abolition Convention (the faction included Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton). The horrified men spent an entire day debating whether or not the women should be seated. George Bradburn of Massachusetts cried, "Shall women be refused here in a convention seeking the emancipation of slaves throughout the world?"³ But the dissenters "danced around with Bible in hand, shaking it in the face of the opposition,"⁴ as Elizabeth Cady Stanton recounted later. The vote was overwhelmingly No. And that was that.

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton got together to commisserate; they both agreed that the issue of women's rights was as compelling as the abolition of slavery. Abbey Kelley, a prominent abolitionist and feminist, lent her voice to the growing dissention:

We have good cause to be grateful to the slave, for the benefit we have received to ourselves, in working for him. In striving to strike his irons off, we found most surely that we were manacled ourselves.⁵

The experience of working as abolitionists gave these women two things they did not have before – a militant idealogy of freedom and specific political skills. One historian explains:

This relationship between the anti-slavery and the women's rights movement helps explain why an organized feminist movement began in the United States instead of elsewhere. Concern over the status of women was fairly widespread in England and Western Europe, but it was the fight for the emancipation of women in the United States that ignited the international feminist movement.⁶

*disenfranchise - to remove the right to vote.

Convention in Session

The first women's rights convention took place on July 19, 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York in a small Wesleyan chapel (now a gas station). Despite the fact that it was the busy haying season, almost as many men as women showed up, and the place was packed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton read aloud the first public protest against the injustices inflicted upon women. This "Declaration of Sentiments" stated, in part:

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurptions on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of absolute tyranny over her... He has endeavored in every way he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.⁷

Also included for the first time in a public forum:

Resolved, that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure for themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.⁸

"The elective franchise" was, of course, the vote.



Mobs often broke up antislavery meetings where women speakers appeared on the program.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Yearly conventions were held thereafter, and the national campaign for women's rights was off and running. In the beginning of the movement, suffrage took second billing to other issues like dress reform, control of earnings, and resistance to oppressive female role models. Susan B. Anthony, one of the original suffragists,* put it in a nutshell:

We call for nothing less than emancipation from all political, industrial, social, and religious subjection.⁹

The campaign was basically "grass roots" – petitions, conventions, lots of public speeches and meetings. These early feminists were regularly pelted with rotten food and pushed off the stage, but they were getting attention. The press was anything but sympathetic, but all the same, people were beginning to talk.

*suffragist – The word "suffragette" was originally intended as a derogatory term used in reference to the more extreme faction of the women's rights movement. "Suffragist," then, was the respectful term.

Disappointment and Change

When the Civil War ended and the abolitionists gained political power, the suffragists were elated. From the very beginning they had been allied with abolitionist men, and had every reason to believe their new leaders would in turn support the feminist platform. However, their former allies did not extend their libertarianism to women. The Fourteenth Amendment was specifically worded to grant the the vote to all *men*, not to women black or white. The abolitionist Wendell Phillips wrote to Susan B. Anthony in May 1865, "I would not mix the movements. . . . I think such a mixture would lose for the Negro much more than [it] should gain for the woman." Anthony replied icily, "Do you believe the African race is composed entirely of males?"¹⁰

This setback caused many feminists to reconsider the suffrage issue. With the vote, they reasoned, they could support those candidates who would advance their cause, or even run for office themselves. From this point on, suffrage became the number one priority for this particular group of women.

Others, however, disagreed, and in 1869 the movement factionalized. The American Suffrage Association members occupied themselves solely with obtaining the vote. The National Suffrage Association, on the other hand, saw the vote merely as the means of securing more rights. Their list of grievances included discrimination against women in marriage, employment practices, and the law. A third faction was that of working-class women. Victims of work-related discrimination, they usually did not have the time to devote to campaigning. Still, many female factory workers were outspoken supporters of woman suffrage. Ella Reeve Bloor, a well-known labor organizer, explained:

We always tried to make clear that the object of our campaign was not alone to get the vote, but to prepare women to use the power of the ballot to get decent pay and decent conditions for women, and so to strengthen the position of the whole working class.¹¹

In Full Swing

The suffrage leaders' national strategy in the late 1800s was to organize a state-by-state campaign in hopes of



convincing a majority of states to pass amendments granting its female citizens total suffrage – at that point, the female vote would constitute a powerful force, and suffragists would be in a better position to drive for a national amendment. Suffrage crusaders devoted themselves to these state campaigns, with ever more lectures and canvassing door-todoor, meetings to attend and insults to ignore.

In 1869 Wyoming became the first state to grant full suffrage to its women, and Utah followed the next year. In 1893 Colorado also joined the ranks of suffrage states, as did Idaho three years later. On January 25, 1887 the Senate voted for the first time on a woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution of the United States. The bill was overwhelmingly defeated (over 2:1) but suffragists were encouraged by the fact that it came up at all.

In a desire to present a united front, a merger between the American and the National Associations was accomplished in 1890. The movement then single-mindedly devoted itself to the struggle to get the vote.

The next twenty-one years were bleak for the suffragists. It seemed they were working as hard as ever but with little result. Many of the movement foremothers (Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott) had since died, and the movement suffered something of a slump.

The lull ended in 1910 when the state of Washington voted in favor of woman suffrage, thus breaking a fourteenyear deadlock in that jurisdiction. The next spring California became the first state with a large population to give women the vote. In 1912 Oregon, Arizona, and Kansas all carried a state suffrage amendment. Over the next two years Illinois, Montana, and Nevada followed suit, and by 1914 the suffragists were proceeding full steam ahead.

LOCAL CAMPAIGN

Tompkins County was newly established in the early 1800s, and while a few abolitionist women across the land were beginning to contemplate women's rights, women hereabouts struggled to get their wash inside before it rained. Though possessed of strength enough to survive in the wilderness, they knew their place, and stayed there.



Susan B. Anthony

First Woman to Speak in Public

To stand up on a platform and command an audience implies, "I have something worthwhile to say and it's worth your time to listen." For a woman to take this stance was considered presumptuous indeed. It was with much aplomb that a group of ladies arrived in Ithaca to address a crowd on the subject of temperance. The date was June 6, 1853, and the act was historic.

We occupied nearly an hour, after which the audience quietly dispersed, seemingly highly gratified with what they had heard. And here we would remark that we were the first wom[en] who [had] ever spoken publicly in Ithaca. Some fears were entertained by the friends as to the result, and we were cautioned about talking women's rights.¹³

Stirrings of Interest

Tompkins County, small as it was, felt the repercussions of the growing national women's crusade of the mid-1800s. Citizens here soon caught on that the "woman question"



was becoming a popular topic for discussion.

On January 16, 1869, a motley crew of Ludlowvillians gathered at Burr's Hall to enjoy a debate as to whether the right of suffrage should be extended to women. The townspeople listened, and the debate judges decided: "Woman now occupies her proper sphere." There was music and refreshments, and everybody had a good time.¹⁴ Two weeks later, this reaction appeared in the *Ithacan*.

> I was quiet amused at a report in your paper, of a debate on "Womanhood Suffrage" held in Ludlowville a time age. Not so much the mere fact of the debate, but the "conclusion of the whole matter." It is a pity that humble village could not be scooped out of the hollow in which it grovels, and be set on a hill where the sunlight of progress and common sense could revitalize it.

One Ithacan was particularly magnanimous in discussing women's rights. He admitted, yes, a woman is *entitled* to better educational privileges, she *ought* to have control of her own property, and receive just compensation for her labor. He even went so far as to declare that she "ought not to be a slave to masculine whims."¹⁶ But *vote*?

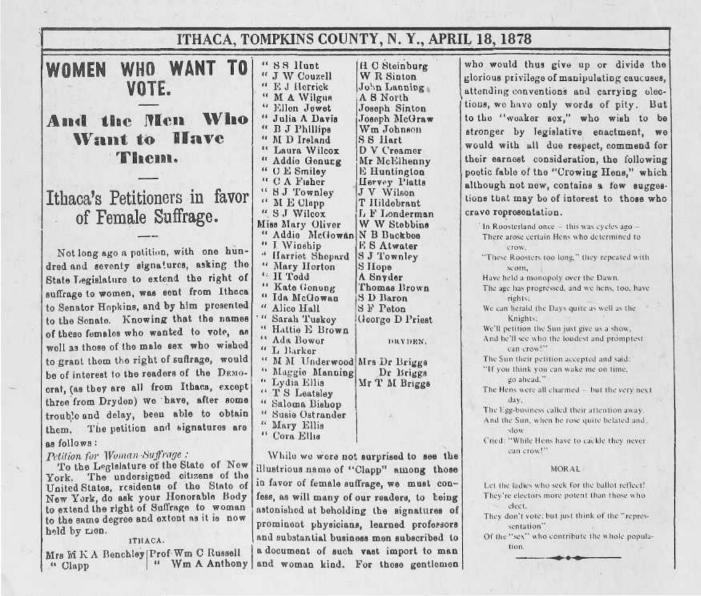
> Closely following this question is that of female Legislators, Judges, and Presidents. As the women outnumber the men, a great female

party might get control of the government, disenfranchise us and reduce us to a lower level that that which *they* now occupty – that is, if for any unforseen cause the dear creatures should cease to love us. Let us pray that the contingency may never arrive.¹⁷

The Contingency Arrives

On Wednesday evening, March 24, 1869, Susan B. Anthony and Sarah F. Norton arrived at Library Hall to speak. They had been invited by none other than Ezra Cornell. He wanted to admit women to the university, contrary to public sentiment, and hoped the eminent feminists could shed some light on the issue. One observer reviewed the speech:

Miss Anthony stepped forth and commenced... There was variety in her attacks, but she kept the weak point of her enemy directly under her eye, and concentrating her cannonade on these, endangered his entire line of defense. The griefs of women she believed to proceed from the social theory that every woman is born into the world to be supported by some man. The fact is, [she said,] the larger number of women not only support themselves, but also fathers, husbands, and children. . . In the copartnership of marriage woman should have a half of the earnings,



whereas now she has not a cent but by the husband's permission until he dies. As to marrying, when women have an opportunity to earn money like men, they will build their own brown stone fronts and then invite such gentlemen to come and share their dwellings with them as they please. Many a lazy, drinking, tobacco-chewing libertine will not be invited. Miss Anthony asked for the ballot because in this country it [is] the key to power.

One woman in the audience was so impressed by the address that she wrote this poem, reading in part:

- Now arose the mighty Susan thus spoke that veteran dame,
- "Read well your Village Charter, your normal rights to claim,
- A giant wave is rolling it speeds o'er earth and main,
- The wave of Revolution its foam runs in our veins.
- It thunders at the Capitol the prairies hear its roar.
- Proclaiming to the Universe that man shall rule no more!""

Not all the response was as sympathetic. The Ithaca Journal printed on March 30, 1869:

This lady appeared at Library Hall, on Wednesday evening last, and was greeted by a rather spare house. Miss Anthony is a very pleasant speaker, and is doubtless perfectly



............... VOMAN'S RIGHTS.

She's got the right to handle a broom, And why does she want any more? She may wash the dishes till the day of doom, And why does she want any more? She's got the right to a soul, oh, yes ! And why does she want any more ? The right to be pious for two, I guess, Could any one ask for more P And she has her representative now,

A piece of a man, somewhere, somehow, Mixed up in all the municipal row, And who can she want any more P

She also has the right to buy where she pleases and when she many Woman has pleases. rights and generally avails herself of them. Just now she has the privilege of redecorating her rooms with latest style papers, for very little money at

F. H. WARNER'S, 56 & 58 West State St.

******************** Ithaca Daily Journal, July 31, 1896.

convinced of the soundness of her own views. But she makes the same mistake that many other visionaries do - that is, entertains the opinion that all the ills of life can be cured by legislation. Her remedy for the female portion of humanity, is the ballot. It would seem that a person of Miss Anthony's opportunities for observation would have discovered before this, that the ballot has not redeemed the male portion of the human family from sin, and want, and misery, and that if would be very likely to fail with the weaker part of creation.

Before long appeared this heated reply:

You fail to see, do you, how the ballot will in any way relieve the wrongs to which woman is subjected, such as drunkenness, etc. If woman had a voice in framing the laws, she would never vote to pay men three times as much as women for the same amount of labor, nor to license traffic in intoxicating liquors. She would then be tried by a jury of her peers and, when she was obliged to see the law's protection from a brutal husband, she would get one half the property, the custody of her children, and if thrown upon her own resources could support herself without marrying for a home or selling her honor for bread. I see no occasion for depriving woman of

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the ballot, because millions of men go to the poor-house because they are too drunken, lazy, and shiftless to go anywhere else, or have no woman to support them.²⁰

Armchair philosophy ran rampant. There were those who contended that women should vote as was their natural right, others because it would make them better mothers and wives; some said women would lend the qualities of "refinement and goodness" to the political arena, while others warned that they would only lose those same qualities.

Progress in the Movement

When the Senate overwhelmingly defeated the first proposed woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution on January 25, 1887, the press was eager to pronounce death for the women's movement. However one visitor to the 26th Annual Woman's Suffrage Convention, held in Ithaca the following month, held another opinion. The day after our fate was decided, the newsboys of the capitol began shouting all about the murder of woman suffrage. The behavior of the suffragists last evening, however, seems to indicate that the corpse is a lively one.²¹

Florence Woolsey, another suffragist, remembered:

I personally took posters to all the little stores and buildings about a New York Suffrage meeting in Ithaca, after I had finished Cornell, about 1890. At every place we went, we were met with excuses, such as that this was the wrong time for a meeting, and they said we wouldn't have much of an audience. We hired a big hall, and it was filled. They were standing out in the street waiting to get in, lined up there before the door opened.²²

The New York State Suffrage Association Convention was held in Ithaca in April, 1911. The state membership was 6,474, and the *Ithaca Daily Journal* headlined the event: "Suffragists Invade Ithaca Next Tuesday"! At this time, the women's movement in Tompkins County and throughout the country was undergoing a revitalization (see Suffrage: National Campaign).

Rev. Dr. Anna Shaw, president of the National Woman's Suffrage Association (and this writer's favorite suffragist), was the guest speaker at this convention. She spoke at Cornell University's Rockefeller Hall on "Shall Women Vote?"

If a man had always to remember he is a man, how far would he get? That is the curse of the sex, that we have always to remember our sex. We must forget we are women and strike a strong, swift, sure blow.²⁴

On May 2, 1914, Ithaca suffragists compiled a four-page suffrage supplement to the *Ithaca Daily Journal*. It follows here, reprinted in its entirety.

BALLOT BATTLES

The procedure for adding an amendment to the New York State Constitution requires that the particular bill be passed by two different and successive legislatures, and finally submitted to the voters. The general election of 1915 included a statewide referendum on the issue of woman suffrage. Nationally, twelve western states had already passed similar constitutional amendments, and the trend appeared to be moving eastward. Suffrage crusaders worked tirelessly convincing voters in each state – all of whom were men – to vote for the cause. Tompkins County was no exception; local suffragists had their work cut out for them.

Pushing for the Vote

The winter of 1914 apparently started out slowly for the local contingent. Itinerant suffragist Martha Klapchen attempted to sell the political *Woman's Journal* and *Woman Voter*; when it was made public that suffrage papers were being sold on the streets of Ithaca for the first time in the history of the city, she laughed and said "she had not sold a single copy, although she had stood at the White memorial gate nearly all day, offering her publications to Cornell students and others who passed."²⁵

However, in February 1914 local suffragists organized a "Woman's Week in Ithaca" to stir up some hometown enthusiasm. The *Ithaca Daily Journal* excitedly reported:

Never in the history of the Woman's Suffrage Movement in this city has there been so important a series of events planned as that arranged for the next few days. Women whose names are

WOMAN SUFFRAGE SECTION

THIS SECTION WAS PREPARED BY WOMAN SUFFRAGE ORGANIZATIONS OF ITHACA **GROWTH OF WOMAN**

Woman Suffrage a Success-The Map Proves It

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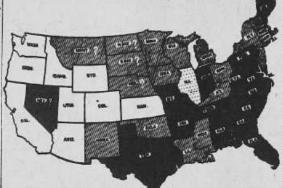
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New York State Women Take Up Gigantic Task Of Reaching All Voters

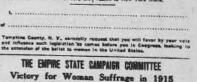
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HISTORY OF SUFFRAGE

MOVEMENT GOES BACK

Between-Early Days of Higher

Education for Women.

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THIS SECTION WAS PREPARED BY WOMAN SUPERAGE ORGANIZATIONS OF ITHACA

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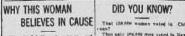
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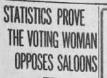
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Among the names was that of Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw:

Sibley Dome was packed at the mass meeting of the Suffrage Campaign Conference last night when Dr. Anna Howard Shaw spoke brilliantly and convincingly for the cause of woman suffrage. . . . "Three great reforms are needed in the United States today," declared Dr. Shaw. "First, women must be made financially independent; second, women must esteem themselves; thirdly, man must esteem women. Women should cease to be merely machines, and should become human beings. The great difficulty with regard to the status of women is that women do not respect themselves, and neither do the men. This is the result of centuries of tradition and prejudice.²⁷

That summer, the suffragists organized a "Sacrifice Day" to raise funds. Participants donated precious items, "the price of a meal,"²⁹ anything they could afford, and the effort proved extremely successful. As the day of judgement loomed near, the *Ithaca Daily Journal* warned:

As everybody knows, woman suffrage is to be voted on in New York State this fall and the women voters of the West, scenting battle from afar, are sending their best speakers eastward to help win the election. That is how it is that Mrs. Benedict is in New York this summer. She can vote herself; never has had to ask for the privilege, having been born and raised in Colorado. But this fact doesn't mollify her a bit about the political status of her voteless sisters in the East, and she is bending her best energies to help the New York women.⁷⁹

Such effort paid off. On Election Day, November 2, 1915, suffrage carried the county by 114 votes. The Town of Ithaca voted the highest proportion in favor of woman suffrage, and Enfield the lowest. The tally:

	YES	NO
Ithaca Town	212	118
Danby	121	93
Ithaca City	1376	1180
Dryden	347	381
Newfield	162	149
Lansing	215	204
Ulysses	281	280
Groton	311	390
Caroline	149	219
Enfield	97	143
TOTAL	3271	315730

Unfortunately, suffrage did not pass in the state, losing by nearly 195,000 votes. But 42 percent of the electoral population, all men, voted favorably, and suffragists knew that the prospects for the November 1917 election were promising.

War is Not Good for Suffrage Movements and Other Living Things

The outbreak of World War I in 1917 curbed the women's campaign for the 1917 general election. Many turned their energy toward the war effort. What was left of the suffrage movement likewise alligned itself with the issue; "Woman Suffrage is a necessary war measure," they cried, "We are standing by the country, will you stand by us?"³¹

Enthusiasm for suffrage, though diminished by the war, was still strong. In fact, zealous supporters claimed that the female vote would end graft and corruption, do away with war, and bring a peaceful millenium to the earth. It appears that as the women invested greater emotional energy in the sole issue of the vote, the tendency to exaggerate its importance became more pronounced. There was always a small minority of feminists who criticized the women's movement for attributing too much significance to suffrage. In *Women and Economics*, author Charlotte Gilman, a feminist in those troubled times, argued that woman's economic dependence was the basis of her oppression.³²

Meanwhile, the war raged on. Some suffragists chose to picket the White House, and let it be known that they were not abandoning their own private war simply because of the larger conflict in Europe. But this time public sentiment was not with them because their effort could be construed as unpatriotic. In Tompkins County, suffragists quickly circulated press releases which declared, "The Tompkins County Suffrage Party has no connection with the pickets at Washington and only condemnation for them."³³ During the summer of 1917, some 218 pickets were arrested for "obstructing the sidewalk" and literally thrown in jail.

Pickets or no pickets, most people supported woman suffrage. The tide had turned. With the November 1917 election came another chance for New Yorkers to vote on the suffrage question. This time, the newspapers could boldly report: "Suffrage Wins in New York State!"

All districts in this county voted in favor of woman suffrage, save one – the second district in the first ward in the City of Ithaca. The Town of Ithaca voted proportionately the highest percentage in favor of woman suffrage, and Newfield, City of Ithaca, Lansing, Danby, Dryden, Ulysses, Groton, Enfield, and Caroline followed respectively.³⁴

The Big Finish

On June 4, 1919, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the Sixty-Sixth Congress of the United States passed the woman suffrage amendment. Thirty-six states were still needed to ratify before the amendment could become federal law, and by the summer of 1920 only one more state was needed. Next in line to weigh the question was Tennessee. One historian recounted this climax of climaxes:

The end was dramatic. The suffragettes believed they had enough votes to carry the Tennessee legislature, but when the amendment came up for action, railroad, liquor, and business interests plied the legislators with so much liquor that a number of members wavered and reduced the women's margin to a tie. After several wild scenes, the tie was broken by a man who confessed that he was changing his vote because his mother wished him to support ratification.³⁵

Tennessee assented, and on August 26, 1920, women's right to suffrage as set forth in the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution became federal law.

Suffrage had won the day. From the first resolution at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, to the final ratification in 1920, the struggle for suffrage was vital to the cause of women's rights. In the course of the campaign, issues like employment, marriage and divorce, and property rights were examined and revised, paving the way for further reform. The law of the land finally upheld what many women had known all along – women have the right to vote.