

# **WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT**

## **1848 – 1920 HISTORY of WOMEN'S RIGHT TO VOTE**

By Roz Foster

The legal right of women to vote was established over the course of more than half a century, first in various states and localities, sometimes on a limited basis, and then nationally in 1920.

The movement for women's rights in the US actually began in July 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention. About 240 men and women attended the meeting, which had been organized by Quaker social activists, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The attendees drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, which listed grievances and a series of resolutions which called for specific reforms. Many delegates believed that a resolution advocating women's suffrage was too radical and barely passed only after Frederick Douglass, an abolitionist leader and former slave, gave it his strong support. By time of the First National Women's Rights Convention in 1850, suffrage was becoming an increasingly important agenda of the movement's activities. The suffrage movement grew slowly during the rest of the 1800s, partly because of the existence of several rival organizations. The first national suffrage organizations were established in 1869 when two competing organizations were formed, one led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the other by Lucy Stone.

Hoping that the U.S. Supreme Court would rule that women had a constitutional right to vote, suffragists made several attempts to vote in the early 1870s and then filed lawsuits when they were turned away. Susan B. Anthony actually succeeded in voting in 1872 but was arrested and found guilty in a widely publicized trial that gave the movement fresh momentum. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which was the largest women's organization at that time, was established in 1873 and also pursued women's suffrage, giving a huge boost to the movement. Suffragists began a decades-long campaign for an amendment to the Constitution that would enfranchise women after the Supreme Court ruled against them in 1875. Much of their efforts went toward working for suffrage on a state-by-state basis. After years of rivalry different women's suffrage

organizations merged in 1890 as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Susan B. Anthony as its leading force.

In 1916, a militant group was formed by Alice Paul called the National Woman's Party (NWP) that focused on the passage of a national suffrage amendment. Over 200 NWP supporters (referred to as the Silent Sentinels) were arrested in 1917 while picketing the White House. Some NWP members went on a hunger strike and endured forced feeding after being sent to prison. Under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, the two-million-member NAWSA also made a national suffrage amendment its top priority. During the Progressive Era, support for women's suffrage increased and a number of individual states adopted full voting rights for women.

The suffrage movement was significantly impacted when the U.S. entered into WWI in April 1917. To replace men who had gone into the military, women moved into workplaces that did not traditionally hire women, such as steel mills and oil refineries. The NAWSA cooperated with the war effort, with Catt and Shaw serving on the Women's Committee for the Council of National Defense. The NWP took no steps to cooperate and continued militant protests and was viewed by the public and other organizations as being unpatriotic. In September 1918, President Wilson spoke before the Senate, calling for approval of the suffrage amendment as a war measure saying, *"We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right? By the end of 1919, women effectively could vote for president in states with 326 electoral votes out of the total 531.*

After a hard-fought series of votes in the US Congress and in state legislatures, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed by Congress in 1919 and ratified and became part of the US Constitution on August 18, 1920. The Nineteenth Amendment states, *"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."*

***Florida was not one of the states that ratified the Nineteenth Amendment during 1919-1920. In fact, the Florida Legislature had not even voted on the amendment. Though the legislature would pass a***

***law in 1921 that provided the vote to all residents, the Nineteenth Amendment was not ratified by the Florida Legislature until May 22, 1969 without the signature of Governor Claude Kirk.***

## **Women's History Month in March\***

In 1971, the US Congress designated August 26<sup>th</sup> as Women's Equality Day in commemoration of the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment. The designation commended women and women's organizations, the historic triumph of women's suffrage and reminded the nation of the continued fight for equal rights.

President Jimmy Carter declared the first national Women's History Week in March 1980 to recognize and celebrate the contributions of women in American history. These local efforts culminated in 1987 with the first Presidential Proclamation recognizing March as "Women's History Month".

## **First Town in Florida to Give Women Voting Rights Before 1920**

Fellsmere had granted women the right to vote in municipal elections and was the first to do so in Florida by putting the necessary language in an amendment to its town charter on June 8, 1915. Section 35 of the Charter, Chapter 7154, Laws of Florida.

*Every registered individual, male or female, elector shall be qualified to vote at any general or special election held under the Charter to elect or recall commissioners, and at any other special election.....*

Activists for women's suffrage built on this victory and soon were changing charters in other municipalities. By November 1919 a total of 16 towns in 10 counties allowed women to vote in municipal elections including Cocoa and Aurantia in Brevard County, Orlando in Orange County and Orange City and Deland in Volusia County. Empowered to vote, women started to run for public offices in these towns and also served on county and state boards and commissions.

## THE NEW WOMAN



The concept of the New Woman emerged in the late nineteenth century to characterize the increasingly independent activity of women, especially the younger generation. The move from households to public spaces was expressed in many ways. In the late 1890s, riding bicycles was a newly popular activity that increased women's mobility even as it signaled rejection of traditional teachings about women's

weakness and fragility. Susan B. Anthony said bicycles had "done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world". Elizabeth Cady Stanton said that "Woman is riding to suffrage on the bicycle." Free movement of women allowed the newly formed feminists to break away from the dependency of their male counterparts. Women could be seen extending themselves into realms such as workforce, society and the fields of education. These dramatic alternations to the standard boundaries that women lived by assisted in creating a larger backing for the Suffragettes due to the new sense of independence.