The 19th Amendment:
The Struggle for Woman Suffrage

Twenty years before Tennessee became the sixteenth state admitted to the United States in 1796, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, who was then in Philadelphia as a member of the Continental Congress, and admonished him to, as she put it, to "remember the ladies." She wrote, "in the new code of laws, … I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors…. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

Perhaps the largest single reform movement of the progressive era was the fight for woman suffrage—a movement that attracted popular support from both women and men. The formal adoption of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution in August 1920 was the culmination of a nearly seventy-five years struggle to obtain the basic political rights for women that all men—after the ratification of the 15th Amendment—enjoyed. Achieving this milestone required a lengthy and difficult struggle; victory took decades of agitation and protest.

In the wake of the American Revolution, the United States Constitution gave the individual states the right to decide who could and could not vote. The states gradually abolished the initial requirement that men must own property to vote, and following the Civil War, granted blacks the right to vote with the passage of the 15th Amendment. Still, women did not have a constitutional right to vote.

The women's rights movement was formally launched in 1848 at the famous Seneca Falls convention. Most of these early pioneers of the movement were public reformers who supported moral reforms such as temperance and abolitionism. The antislavery movement, more so than any other reform movement, turned middle class women reformers into advocates of women's rights. These radical female reformers reached the conclusion that they were human beings first and women second; therefore, they argued, such as Sarah Grimke, that men and women were created equal. At Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, the leaders of the women's rights movement based their demands for equality not only on legal and moral arguments but also on the spirit of republican institutions cherished by all Americans. The convention's delegates seized on the Declaration of Independence as the model for their Sentiments and Resolutions, which denounced "the repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."

In 1878, a constitutional amendment, referred to by women's rights advocates as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, was first proposed that provided "The rights of citizens to vote shall not be abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." This same amendment would be introduced in every session of Congress for the next 41 years—each time, the amendment would fail to pass. For the next 41 years, the champions of woman suffrage worked tirelessly, but the strategies adopted for achieving their goal varied.

In 1890, the suffragists organized the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Their efforts, which invigorated a push for women's rights, yielded some positive results as several western states began to adopt woman suffrage during the 1890s and the early 1900s. The main reason for success in these sparsely populated western states was not the egalitarianism that Stanton and Anthony preached but rather the conviction that women's supposedly gentler and more nurturing nature would tame and civilize the men who had populated the frontier.

This notion reflected a subtle but important change in the thrust of the suffrage movement. Earlier generations had insisted that women were fundamentally equal to men, but a new generation of Progressive era suffragists argued that women were different from men. Many of the movement's new leaders began to couch their language and justification for suffrage in less threatening ways that did not overtly challenge the separate spheres in which men and women resided in American society. Women, they stressed, possessed a moral sense and a nurturing quality that men lacked. Consequently, they understood the civic obligations implied by the franchise and could be trusted to vote virtuously. Their votes would hasten to completion the progressive task of cleansing the political process of corruption. Their experience as mothers and household managers, moreover, would enable them to guide local and state governments in efforts to improve education, sanitation, family wholesomeness, and the condition of women and children in the workforce.

The involvement of popular progressive leaders such as Jane Addams lent added respectability to the cause. Addams, the founder of Hull House, observed, "Politics is housekeeping on a grand scale." Moreover, journalist Rheta Childe Door defined an expansive women's sphere when she noted in 1910 that a "woman's place is Home…. But Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual house. Home is the community. The city full of people is the Family. The public school is the real Nursery. And badly do the Home and Family need their Mother."

Slowly but surely, the suffrage movement began to overcome their opposition and to win substantial victories at the end of the nineteenth century. This was due in large part to the fact that this new generation of reformers were better organized and more politically astute than their opponents. Thousands of young, college-educated women campaigned door-to-door, held impromptu rallies, and pressured state legislators to adopt woman suffrage.

Whereas Progressive era suffragists argued that women, with their special and distinct virtues, would cure society's ills, some went so far as to claim that if women received the right to vote, war would become a thing of the past. They noted that because of their maternal instincts and their calming, peaceful nature, women would curb the natural belligerence of men. The senseless slaughter of human life exhibited later in World War I helped aid this argument and perhaps gave the decisive push to the movement for suffrage.

Some of the new Progressive era suffragists were slow to ally themselves with blacks, Asians, and other disenfranchised groups. Many suffragists, particularly those in the South and West, opposed the franchise for Americans of color.

Suffrage Parade, New York City, May 6, 1912
Library of Congress

Carrie Chapman Catt
Library of Congress

After a series of setbacks in eastern and Midwestern states in the 1910s, the movement regained momentum under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, a journalist from Iowa, who assumed the presidency of NAWSA from Susan B. Anthony in 1901 and set to work coordinating the myriads of grassroots campaigns throughout the nation. The NAWSA grew steadily from a membership of approximately 13,000 in 1893 to over 2,000,000 in 1917. Catt, received vital support for her cause from her second husband, a wealthy mining engineer who signed a prenuptial agreement that stated Catt would spend two months in the spring and two months in the fall devoted entirely to campaigning for suffrage. In 1916, Catt unveiled her "Winning Plan" for suffrage: a tightly centralized, coordinated state-by-state strategy of education and persuasion aimed at putting pressure on state legislators to secure a constitutional amendment.

Equally important to woman suffrage was Alice Paul, a fierce radical who founded the Congressional Union in 1913 and later renamed it the National Woman's Party. Paul and her followers directed their attention on the White House and Woodrow Wilson, picketing the president's home 24 hours a day. They unveiled large posters that charged Wilson with abandoning his democratic principles. Moreover, they dared the police to arrest them, and when jailed, the militant suffragists continued their protest by going on hunger strikes.

During World War I the suffragists launched a new campaign to petition President Wilson to support woman suffrage in light of their service in the war. Once the war was over, Wilson redirected his attention to domestic affairs and officially came out in support of a federal woman suffrage amendment. The House of Representatives then passed what was known as the Anthony amendment—in honor of the famed suffragist who had died in 1906—by a vote of 274 to 136, a two-thirds majority with only a single vote to spare. However, when the bill arrived in the Senate, tallies indicated that the measure would fall short by two votes.

First Day of the Picket Line in front of the White House, Feb. 1917, Library of Congress

Both the suffragists and the president increased pressure on those opposed to the bill. President Wilson told the Senate that "the democratic reconstruction of the world will not have been completely or adequately obtained until women are admitted to the suffrage." Wilson regarded "the concurrence of the Senate in the constitutional amendment proposing the extension of the suffrage to women as vitally essentially to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which we are engaged." The world is watching us, Wilson added, "looking to the great, powerful, famous democracy of the West to lead them to the new day… and they think, in their logical simplicity, that democracy means that women shall play their part in affairs alongside men and upon equal footing with them. If we reject measures like this, in ignorance or defiance of what a new age has brought forth, they will cease to follow or to trust us." Echoing the arguments of progressive reformers to grant the right to vote to women, Wilson concluded, "we shall need their moral sense to preserve what is right and fine and worthy in our system of life as well as to discover just what it is that ought to be purified and reformed. Without their

counselings we shall be only half wise." After Wilson's appeal, the Senate voted 62 to 34—the bill died on the Senate floor after failing to pick up the two votes needed for passage.

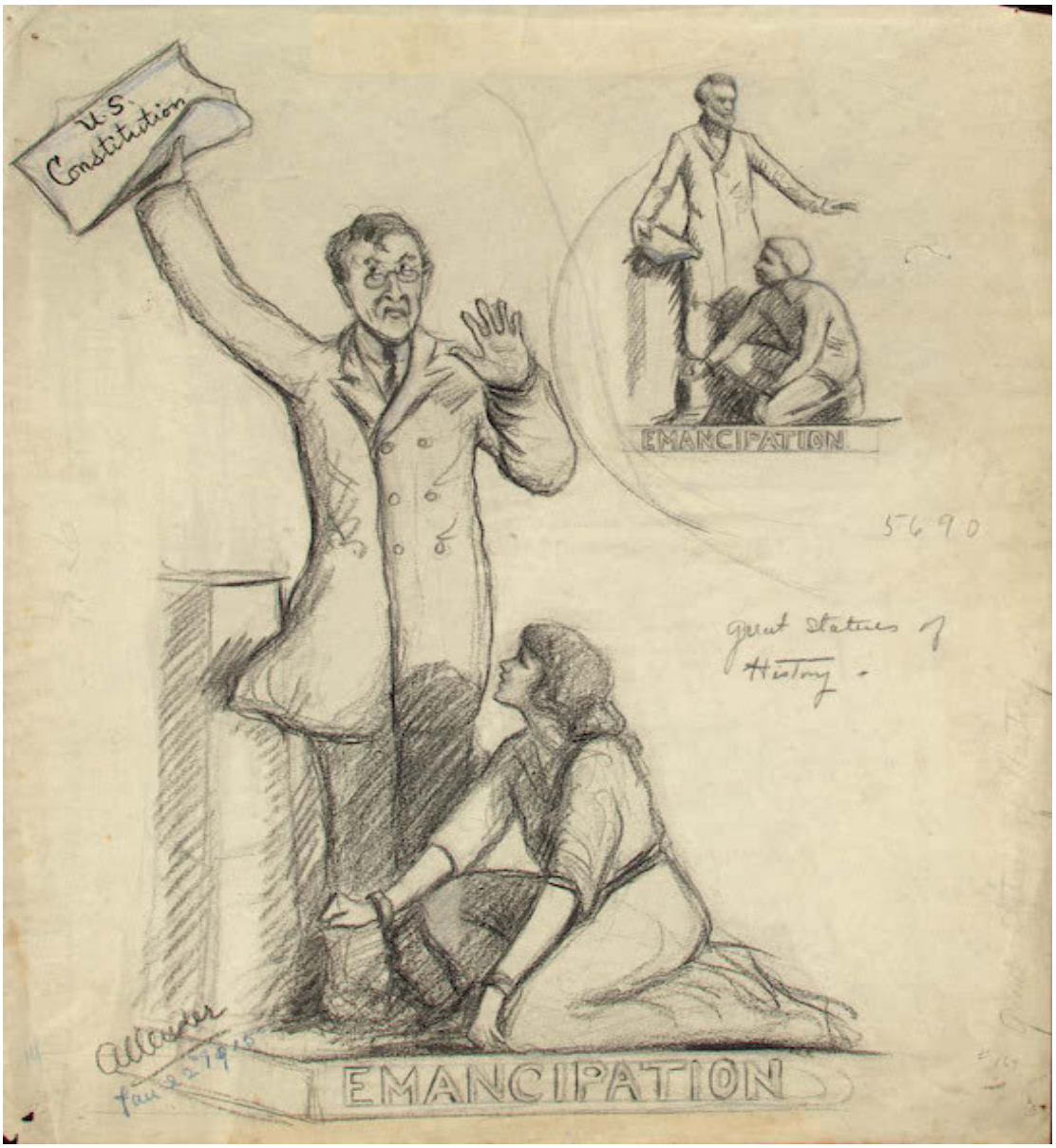
President Woodrow Wilson walks past the pickets at the gates of the White House,
***Carol Lynn Yellin and Janann Sherman, Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage* (1998)**

In the fall 1918 elections, the Democrats lost majority control in Congress and as a result, the Republican-controlled House re-passed the Anthony amendment by a vote of 304 to 90, 42 more votes than needed. Two weeks later, the Senate passed the amendment 66 to 30, two more votes than necessary, and thus submitted the Anthony amendment to the individual states for ratification on June 4, 1919.

Hostility to the measure in the Deep South meant that it would be necessary for the rest of the county to ratify the amendment to win the required three-fourths of the states—36—to make the 19th Amendment law. In August 20, with the ratification of the amendment by Tennessee, the 19th Amendment became law, changing the face of the American electorate forever. Some states were slow with their endorsement even after the amendment became a part of the Constitution, the supreme law of the land. Maryland, for example, did not ratify the amendment until 1941, and then, did not transmit the ratification document to the United States State Department until 1958.

19th Amendment Ratification Timetable

1.	Wisconsin	June 10, 1919
2.	Michigan	June 10, 1919
3.	Kansas	June 13, 1919
4.	Ohio	June 14, 1919
5.	New York	June 16, 1919
6.	Illinois	June 17, 1919
7.	Pennsylvania	June 24, 1919
8.	Massachusetts	June 25, 1919
9.	Texas	June 28, 1919
10.	Iowa	July 2, 1919
11.	Missouri	July 3, 1919
12.	Arkansas	July 20, 1919
13.	Montana	July 30, 1919
14.	Nebraska	August 2, 1919
15.	Minnesota	September 8, 1919
16.	New Hampshire	September 10, 1919
17.	Utah	September 30, 1919
18.	California	November 1, 1919
19.	Maine	November 5, 1919
20.	North Dakota	December 1, 1919
21.	South Dakota	December 4, 1919
22.	Colorado	December 12, 1919
23.	Rhode Island	January 6, 1920
24.	Kentucky	January 6, 1920
25.	Oregon	January 12, 1920
26.	Indiana	January 16, 1920
27.	Wyoming	January 27, 1920
28.	Nevada	February 7, 1920
29.	New Jersey	February 10, 1920
30.	Idaho	February 11, 1920
31.	Arizona	February 12, 1920
32.	New Mexico	February 19, 1920
33.	Oklahoma	February 27, 1920
34.	West Virginia	March 10, 1920
35.	Washington	March 22, 1920
36.	Tennessee	August 18, 1920



Adapting the statue of Abraham Lincoln giving emancipation to the slaves, the new statue depicts Woodrow Wilson rejecting the "emancipation" of women as he holds the U.S. Constitution away from a chained woman at his feet.
"Great Statues of History", Courtesy of the National Woman's Party Coalition, Washington, D.C.

Sources:
Library of Congress
The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum Collection, The National Woman's Party Coalition, Washington, D.C.
***Carol Lynn Yellin and Janann Sherman, Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage* (1998)**