

Forging a Path to the 19th Amendment: Understanding Women’s Suffrage

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The U.S. Constitution opens with the phrase “We the People,” but women were not included in that expression nor in the document as it was written in 1787. In fact, women remained excluded from the Constitution until ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which outlawed denying the right to vote on the basis of sex. The 19th Amendment was a landmark achievement, accomplished after decades of struggle between the 1830s and 1920, by a diverse group of activists using a variety of strategies. There is much to the suffrage story.

The nationwide commemoration in 2020 of the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment is an opportunity to explore not only women’s long struggle to achieve this landmark moment, but also to engage in an exploration of women’s civic engagement during the woman suffrage movement. The terms “woman suffrage” and “suffragist” often bring to mind images of women marching down wide boulevards in major cities, picketing at the White House gates, or gazing through prison bars. While these dramatic images represent the most visible activities that suffragists pursued, they were primarily carried out by a select group of mostly middle to upper class white women. Recent scholarship about the history of the woman suffrage movement has stressed the importance of broadening the story of women’s struggle for the vote to include the diversity of activists and activities that proved critical to its success.

Studying women’s petitions in the classroom engages students in this history. Suffrage petitions flowed to Washington, D.C., from around the country, bearing signatures from women

with backgrounds as diverse as the arguments they contained. Petitions also provide an opportunity to examine an essential strategy in the woman suffrage movement that reveals why women needed the right to vote.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century women who petitioned Congress lacked many of the rights American women have today. Considered dependents of their fathers or husbands, most women could not own property, control money they earned, make or sign contracts, represent in court, or vote. Excluded from the political arena for much of this period, women faced the constraints and challenges of working within a prescribed “women’s sphere,” by embracing one of the few political tools they did have—the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. This right, protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, provided women the means to add their voices to national debates on a number of issues, including pressing for women’s full exercise of citizenship through voting.

At the polls, male voters were

expected to represent themselves and their dependents. Many women, however, believed that men could not adequately represent women’s interests at the ballot box. Woman suffragists leveraged the power of the petition to argue that women needed the vote because laws and policies created and administered by men led to further gender inequality. The petitions featured in this story are a few of the thousands of woman suffrage petitions and memorials at the U.S. National Archives that demonstrate how the lack of the vote resulted in economic, political, and social harm to women, their children and their communities.

Wage-earning Women and the Vote

Although women’s sphere of influence remained concentrated in the home throughout much of the organized woman suffrage movement, increasing numbers of women needed to leave home to find paid employment to support their families. Wage-earning women received lower pay than men for working long hours, often in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Working-class women called the vote “a powerful weapon of self-defense” that strengthened their fight for greater equality in the workplace and for legislation that improved their working conditions. Emily Barber’s 1879 petition to Congress highlights the inequalities



Native American lawyer and suffragist Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin was a prominent advocate on behalf of Native women. She marched in the 1913 women's suffrage parade in Washington, D.C.



Civil rights crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett marched in the 1913 women's suffrage parade despite attempts by march organizer Alice Paul to exclude black women.

she endured as a wage-earning woman (see p. 251). A teacher, Barber pointedly noted that she paid equal taxes as men but had no say in how the taxes were spent, and that “with acknowledged superior capacities for teaching and governing schools,” she made only a third of male teachers’ pay at her school.

Intersection of Woman Suffrage and Other Reform Movements

Women’s petitioning energy was not focused solely on the cause of woman suffrage. Women organized around a number of reform causes including the antislavery movement, temperance campaigns to limit the sale and consumption of alcohol, and efforts to improve working conditions, public health, and education.

Not all women reformers were suf-

fragists, but many eventually fought for the vote as they came to view their enfranchisement as essential to the success of their particular cause. A critical endorsement for woman suffrage came in 1881 from the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the largest women’s organization in the country. The WCTU, frustrated by its limited ability to secure government regulation of alcohol, eventually printed woman suffrage petitions that asserted, “the ballot ... is a most potent element in all moral and social reforms.”

Petitions and Persistence

Petitions not only reveal women’s personal reasons for fighting for the vote, but also the decades of persistence—as many as 50 years—that some individuals gave to the cause. Women like Mary

O. Stevens, a former Civil War nurse, petitioned Congress to act in 1917, stating, “My father trained me in my childhood days to expect this right. I have given my help to the agitation and work for its coming a good many years. It seems as if the time was come for this great act of justice.”

The pleas of Stevens and millions of others for a federal woman suffrage amendment were finally answered on August 18, 1920, when Tennessee became the final state needed for the 19th Amendment to obtain ratification by three-fourths of the states. It was a victorious moment, but it did not win the vote for all women. In fact, millions of women were already voters thanks to successful woman suffrage campaigns in

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More than 5,000 suffragists marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, on March 3, 1913, one day before Woodrow Wilson's first presidential inauguration, demanding the right to vote.

Suggested Activities

Teacher Note: transcriptions for each of the documents are available on DocsTeach.org. Check out the DocsTeach Women's Rights page for more primary sources and teaching activities to share with your students www.docsteach.org/topics/women.

Why Did Women Want the Right to Vote?

1. Start by sharing the Emily Barber, National Woman's Christian Suffrage Union, and Mary O. Stevens petitions. pp. 251–254. Divide students into groups. Each group should analyze one petition using the following questions: Who wrote it? Who received it? When is it from? Where is it from? What issues are important to the author(s)? Why does/do the author(s) want the right to vote?
2. After students have analyzed their petitions, ask students to share their analysis with the rest of the class. Ask students how disenfranchisement—not being allowed to vote—impacted each of the authors of these petitions?
3. Share the text of the 19th Amendment with the class. "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. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."
4. Give each group a copy of the Lula Mury petition on p. 254. It may be helpful to provide the transcription of this petition to the students, or read through it together as a class. Ask each group to analyze the petition using the following questions: Who wrote it? Who received it? When is it from? Where is it from? What issues are important to the author? Why does the author want the right to vote?

5. Ask students to share their analysis. As a group, discuss why Lula Mury would need to send a petition for the right to vote in 1923? What might be happening in her state? How does this petition illustrate the limitations of the 19th Amendment?

Exercise Your Right to Petition!

Ask students to generate a list of issues they care about today. As a group that may or may not be able to vote yet, what can they do to draw attention to their issues? Invite students to write their own petitions to their representative, senators, or the president.

The Other Side

Not everyone was in favor of extending the right to vote to women. Many men and women opposed to women's suffrage also petitioned Congress. Share the DocsTeach Women's Rights page with your students. Ask students to choose a petition from "The Anti-Suffrage Movement" section and analyze its argument. Discuss students' findings as a class.

The Center for Legislative Archives

Petitions make up the greatest volume of congressional records. Find more petitions and lesson plans at www.archives.gov/legislative/resources.

Petition of Emily K. Barber for relief from
Political Disabilities.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the
United States, in Congress assembled:

Emily K. Barber, a citizen of the United States, and a
Resident of the State of Pennsylvania, County of Cass
and, Town of Steubens, hereby respectfully petitions your
Honorable Body for the removal of her political disabil-
ities, and that she may be invested with full power to exer-
cise her right of self-government at the ballot box, all
State constitutions and statute laws to the contrary not-
withstanding.

Your petitioner respectfully represents that she is com-
pelled to pay equal taxes on the same amount of prop-
erty as men, but is denied the right to a voice in their
disbursement, — that, with acknowledged superior cap-
acities for teaching and governing schools she has
been obliged to teach for one third of the wages accord-
ed to a male teacher in the same school.

" ALL INJUSTICE WORKS A LOSS. "

Department of Franchise



NATIONAL WOMAN'S
Christian Temperance
UNION.

HON.

E. G. Lapham

January 1875.

Believing that governments can be just only when deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that in a government professing to be a government of the people, all the people of mature age should have a voice, and that all class legislation and unjust discrimination against the rights and privileges of any citizen is fraught with danger to the republic, and inasmuch as the ballot in popular governments is a most potent element in all moral and social reforms:

We, therefore, on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Christian women engaged in philanthropic effort, pray you to use your influence, and vote for the passage of a 16th amendment to the Constitution of the United States, prohibiting the disfranchisement of any citizen on the ground of sex.

MISS FRANCES E. WILLARD,

Pres't of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union,
Evanston, Ill.

MRS. CAROLINE B. BUELL,

Corresponding Secretary, East Hampton, Conn.

MRS. MARY A. WOODBRIDGE,

Recording Secretary, Ravenna, Ohio.

MRS. L. M. N. STEVENS,

Assistant Recording Secretary, Stroudwater, Me.

MISS ESTHER PUGH,

Treasurer, Cleveland, Ohio

MRS. ZERELDA G. WALLACE,

Sup't of Department of Franchise, Indianapolis, Ind.

MRS. HENRIETTA B. WALL,

Sec'y of Department of Franchise, Akron, Ohio.



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NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
Association of Army Nurses of the Civil War
1861 - 1865

Office of the Secretary & Press Correspondent, of last year.

Peabody, Mass., May 1 1917

Hon. Edwin G. Webb,
Chairman Judiciary Com.,
U. S. House of Representatives: -

Dear Sir,

It seems to me right to ask you to help the cause of Woman Suffrage just now at this session of Congress by an immediate and favorable report on the Federal Suffrage Amendment Bill. My father trained me in my childhood days to expect this right. I have given my help to the agitation and work for its coming a good many years. It seems as if the time was come for this great act of justice and that this Congress doing most needed things for the whole world ought not to overlook the appeal of the women of our land.

Yours most sincerely,

Mary O. Stevens..

Hon. Calvin Coolidge
President of U.S.A.
White House
Washington D.C.

1705 ave. F. So.
Birmingham
Ala
OCT. 17-1923

THE WHITE HOUSE
OCT 19 1923
RECEIVED

RESPECTFULLY REFERRED
FOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT
AND CONSIDERATION.

John
W. B. Murphy
Secretary to the President.

Dear President:

As you are my Chief
Executive of our great Common wealth of
the Republic. I note you this
letter to introduce to you some of my many
Grievances. I had two Brothers to serve this
our Government in the time of it Greatest need
my needs an one of them lost his life in the defense
cause in time known as the world war. to
elocate to safe democracy. an here I stand denied
the constitution rights in article XIV. an XV. I was turn
down at the Board of Registrar of Jefferson County
I beign a woman the 19 Amendment of the Constitution
of U.S. So now I desire your assistance in getting
me justice along the lines so I am Looking to you
for Reply follows by an early adjutment telling
me just what steps to take.

Yours most Respectfully
Lula Murry

150337-12-1

OCT 29 1923

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UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE *from page 249*

the states. But for millions more, primarily non-white women, the 19th Amendment could do nothing to protect women from being blocked from the polls for reasons besides their sex.

Throughout the twentieth century, the struggle continued for women who encountered unequal voting rights as non-state residents, issues related to citizenship status, and especially racial discrimination in voting. Even before the 19th Amendment's ratification, Southern states began passing election laws and procedures that were designed to prevent black men from voting. These laws also kept black women from the polls after women got the vote in 1920. Underscoring the struggle that persisted for many women is Lula Mury's 1923 petition to President Calvin Coolidge (see p. 254). Pleading for his help, Mury explained that she remained unable to register to vote in Birmingham, Alabama, despite having the constitutional right to do so under the 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments.

Considered individually or collectively, woman suffrage petitions provide an opportunity for students to relate to the women engaged in the struggle to vote. By situating the story of the 19th amendment in a much longer narrative, students can better understand both the history of the movement and its relevance to contemporary issues. 🌐

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Document Citations

Petition for Relief from Political Disabilities from Emily Barber; 1879; (SEN46A-H11.2); Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/petition-emily-barber, August 6, 2019]

Petition from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union Department of Franchise to the Honorable E. G. Lapham; 1/1883; Petitions and Memorials, Resolutions of State Legislatures, and Related Documents which were Referred to the Select Committee on Woman Suffrage; (SEN48A-H29); Records of Early Select Committees, 1789–1921; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/petition-wctu, August 6, 2019]

Letter to the Honorable Edwin Webb from Mary Stevens; 5/29/1917; (HR65A-H8.14); Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233; National Archives Building, Washington, DC [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/webb-stevens, August 6, 2019]

Letter from Lula Mury to President Coolidge; 10/17/1923; 72-1-1; Class 72 (Elections and Political Activity) Litigation Case Files and Enclosures, 1919–1980; General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/mury-coolidge, August 6, 2019]

Image Citations

Image 1. Personnel File Photograph of Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin; ca. 1911; Official Personnel Folders-Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs; Records of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, Record Group 146; National Archives at St. Louis, St. Louis, MO. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/marie-louise-bottineau-baldwin>]

Image 2. Photograph of Ida B. Wells-Barnett by Mary Garrity ca. 1893/ Wikimedia Commons.

Image 3. Photograph 306-PS-57-7357; Women Marching in Suffrage Parade, Washington, D.C.; 3/3/1913; Master File Photographs of U.S. and Foreign Personalities, World Events, and American Economic, Social, and Cultural Life, ca. 1953 - ca. 1994; Records of the U.S. Information Agency, Record Group 306; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/marching-suffrage-parade-dc>]

About the *Rightfully Hers* Exhibit

Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment by looking beyond suffrage parades and protests to the often overlooked story behind this landmark moment in American history. This in-depth retelling of the struggle for women's voting rights illustrates the dynamic involvement of American women across the spectrum of race, ethnicity and class to reveal what it really takes to win the vote for one half of the people. The exhibit is available for viewing at the National Archives Museum - Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery in Washington, D.C., through January 3, 2020. More information can be found at <https://museum.archives.gov/rightfully-hers>.