

America's newspapers chronicled the struggle for women's rights

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Image 1. Headline reads "Pardoned Suffragettes refuse to leave Occoquan Workhouse" from the July 19, 1917, issue of the Washington Times. The Occoquan Workhouse was a short-term prison in Virginia where people were sentenced to hard labor. Women who protested in favor of voting rights were sent there. Photo from: Library of Congress.

On Election Day in 1920, millions of American women exercised their right to vote for the first time. For almost 100 years, women had been fighting for that right. They argued that women, like men, deserved all of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The leaders of the movement did not always agree with each other, but in the end, their commitment and sacrifice led to the enfranchisement of all American women.

Seneca Falls Convention

In July 1848, early women's rights advocates including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton held a two-day convention in Seneca Falls, New York. They gathered to discuss women's role in society. Convention attendees prepared a "Declaration of Sentiments," modeled on the Declaration of Independence. It outlined the "civil, social, political and religious rights" of women. After some debate, delegates added women's suffrage — the right to vote — to the declaration. Many

newspapers at the time were dismissive of the declaration and the convention as a whole. The idea that women would one day have equal rights with men seemed impossible in the United States and elsewhere.

The West Advances The Right To Vote

Despite these early Eastern efforts for women's rights, it was in the West that women first gained the right to vote. In 1890, Wyoming became the first state to grant women full suffrage. It soon was followed by Colorado, Utah and Idaho. In Utah, the Evening Dispatch reported, women's suffrage was rushed into the Utah constitution by lawmakers with enthusiastic support and "went into the constitution with a whoop."

Soon newspapers were debating the effects of women voters. In 1894 the Kansas Agitator published an article titled "Wyoming Leads in Morals." It suggested that women voters led to a smaller ratio of criminals than the "supposedly most civilized" Northeastern states. Later scholars have attributed Western states' early adoption of women's suffrage to various factors. They point to the need to attract women to an area populated mostly by men, and efforts to solidify political power by expanding the voter base.



The Anti's

As the women's rights movement gained momentum, so did opposition to suffrage. Opponents came from a wide political spectrum. Anarchist Emma Goldman claimed that it would lead to the legislation of morality. Progressives feared suffrage in the West would increase conservative voter bases. Some conservatives believed suffrage would undermine the family. The Oklahoma Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage accused suffrage activists of "discriminating against the mother." It urged voters to "protect the family and vote 'no' on the Woman Suffrage Amendment." The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, founded in 1897, asked "Why force women to vote?"

Travels At Home

As many American women were meeting locally in town halls, others took to the road to campaign for women's rights. Some traveled by car as well as by foot. Known as "Suffrage Hikes," these campaigns brought national attention to the issue of women's suffrage. Rosalie Gardiner Jones, known as "the General," organized the first such hike. Some 200 women left from Manhattan on December 16, 1912. They continued through sun, rain and snow, concluding their 170-mile journey 12 days later in Albany, the state capital.

And Travels Abroad

Some American suffragists traveled overseas to study successful efforts in other countries. Both Sweden and Norway, for example, had granted women the right to vote in the early years of the 20th century. American activists also offered support to women in countries where help was needed. Newspapers large and small reported on the foreign travels of Carrie Chapman Catt. Catt was a leader in the suffrage movement. She would later found the League of Women Voters. In 1912, the Daily Missoulan in Montana recounted Catt's attendance at the International Suffrage Convention, held in Stockholm, Sweden. With the objective "to organize the whole world for woman suffrage," Catt also met with women in Africa and Asia.



Things Heat Up: Picketing And Hunger Strikes

In 1913, suffragists such as Alice Paul and Lucy Burns launched more aggressive campaigns. They were inspired by Illinois lawmakers' decision to allow women to vote for president. This new generation of suffragists used more militant tactics than their elders. Holding street meetings and distributing pamphlets, they shifted attention away from state voting rights and toward a federal suffrage amendment. By 1917, the movement had pushed the country to a tipping point. That year the United States entered World War I, which President Woodrow Wilson declared a "War for Democracy." Because women supported the war effort, suffragists insisted they also should have the right to vote. Over the rest of the year, women organized demonstrations in front of the White House. Many were arrested and some put in jail. In October 1917, Alice Paul and some of her fellow prisoners organized a hunger strike. The protests resulted in what is remembered as "The Night of Terror" on November 10, 1917. This confrontation between jailed protesters and prison guards at the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia earned wide press coverage. Hunger strikes and women being beaten by police proved an embarrassment for President Wilson. In 1918, he finally announced his support for women's right to vote. A year later, the 19th Amendment was passed, prohibiting the denial of voting rights on the basis of sex. The amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, and became law.

Quiz

1 Which section from the article BEST explains how people thought women's suffrage would affect society?

- (A) Seneca Falls Convention
- (B) The Anti's
- (C) Travels At Home
- (D) Things Heat Up: Picketing And Hunger Strikes

2 Read the section "Seneca Falls Convention."

In July 1848, early women's rights advocates including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton held a two-day convention in Seneca Falls, New York. They gathered to discuss women's role in society. Convention attendees prepared a "Declaration of Sentiments," modeled on the Declaration of Independence. It outlined the "civil, social, political and religious rights" of women. After some debate, delegates added women's suffrage — the right to vote — to the declaration. Many newspapers at the time were dismissive of the declaration and the convention as a whole. The idea that women would one day have equal rights with men seemed impossible in the United States and elsewhere.

What conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph above?

- (A) Early women's rights advocates were not interested in women's suffrage.
- (B) Women did not hold an important place in society in 1848.
- (C) The "Declaration of Sentiments" contradicted the Declaration of Independence.
- (D) Suffragists had to change the mindset of people in the 1800s to win the right to vote.

3 Which of the following MOST influenced President Wilson in supporting women's suffrage?

- (A) Seneca Falls Convention
- (B) Illinois lawmakers
- (C) World War I
- (D) hunger strikes

4 Why were Western states important to the cause of women's suffrage?

- (A) They showed how important it is to change the U.S. Constitution.
- (B) They demonstrated the benefits of granting women voting rights.
- (C) They emphasized that women voters would improve the morals of the country.
- (D) They claimed that allowing women to vote would attract more women to the West.