

COMMEMORATING WOMEN'S EQUALITY DAY – AUGUST 26, 1920

Historically, Women's Equality Day is August 26, 1920 – the day the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote was finally ratified after a 72 year struggle by women to win that right. Tennessee was the pivotal 36th state to ratify the amendment on August 26. However, it was only in 1971, at the behest of Rep. Bella Abzug of NY that the U.S. Congress designated August 26 as Women's Equality Day each year. The observance of Women's Equality Day not only commemorates the passage of the 19th Amendment, it also calls attention to women's continuing efforts toward full equality.

That amendment to the United States Constitution states that: “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.”

It was in the summer of 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, the dynamic upstate village that became the birthplace of women's rights, that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Jane Hunt, and Martha Wright first called for women to secure their “right to elective franchise.” On July 19 and 20 this group, together with 300 women and men, convened in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel to discuss women's rights. At the Convention “The Declaration of Sentiments” heralded a list of rights of which women were deprived. This first clarion call – awakening our nation to the struggle for women's rights – started the suffrage movement.

The First Women's Rights Convention

On the morning of July 19, 1848, the streets of Seneca Falls were crowded with people making their way to the Wesleyan Chapel to attend the Women's Rights Convention. Many people arrived before the doors of the Chapel were unlocked, so Elizabeth Cady Stanton's nephew was lifted through the window to unlock the doors and allow them access to the building.

Once everyone was seated, the Convention began. One of the first orders of business was the reading of the Declaration of Sentiments by Stanton. The Declaration of Sentiments, based on the Declaration of Independence, listed many of the women's grievances against society and demanded basic rights of self determination. During the final hours of the Convention, The Declaration was approved intact and signed. One hundred people signed the document – 68 women and 32 men.

The Women's Rights Movement that grew from the First Women's Rights Convention of 1848 was closely tied to the Abolitionist Movement in the years preceding the Civil War. Frederick Douglass was one of the most fervent supporters of the rights of women.

With Union victory, there was support for a constitutional amendment to give freed slaves the right to vote. Many suffragists – as supporters of women's voting rights were called – assumed that they would be granted voting rights with the newly freed slaves.

The Fifteenth Amendment made no mention of women's voting rights however and it would be another half century before the Nineteenth Amendment granted women the right to vote.

The 72 year struggle for the vote was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a middle-class American housewife and mother, who was born in 1815 in Johnstown, NY, and her friend, Susan B. Anthony, a single woman, born in 1820 in Rochester, NY. Their friendship began in 1851 and lasted over fifty years. Anthony was free of the domestic duties that tied Cady Stanton to her home and so could travel and make speeches promoting women's rights. Cady Stanton would write those speeches from her home in Seneca Falls.

In 1872 Anthony and several other women actually voted and make headlines for doing it. She was arrested on Thanksgiving Day for her unlawful vote. She was convicted in 1873 at the U.S. Court House in Canandaigua, NY. She refused to pay her fine of \$100,

but Justice Ward Hunt allowed her to go free. Anthony called it, “the greatest judicial outrage history ever recorded.”

Sadly, although they both lived into their ‘80’s neither was alive to see women vote.

In the latter years of the 19th century the suffrage movement had many factions, was supported by many organizations and lacked a vision for obtaining its goals. As time went on, many other women joined the effort. One among them, Carrie Chapman Catt, who was born in 1859, founded the League of Women Voters.

Carrie Chapman Catt spent most of her childhood and young adulthood living in Iowa. After early widowhood, she married George Catt in 1890 who helped her in promoting the cause of suffrage through the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association. A legal prenuptial agreement guaranteed Carrie two months each spring and fall to devote to woman suffrage. Her skills brought her to the attention of the national leaders and she was elected President of the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1900. She had been Susan B. Anthony’s personally chosen successor to head the Association. She spent a large portion of the years from 1904 until 1915 working to develop the International Woman Suffrage Alliance to advance the condition of women all over the world. She organized the suffrage effort in New York City and New York State where she had moved. As president of NAWSA she initiated a national strategy to win congressional passage of the “Anthony amendment” as it was called to the US Constitution rather than fighting state by state.

After the amendment was ratified, Catt was ready with another plan. She said, “Winning the vote is only an opening wedge, to learn to use it is a bigger task.” She proposed the establishment of a League of Women Voters at the NAWSA convention of 1919 “to finish the fight and aid in the reconstruction of the nation.” The League would be non-partisan and non-sectarian in nature. It was founded on February 14, 1920, just before the final three states ratified the amendment

From the women's suffrage movement came a creative concept: the idea that an organization could provide nonpartisan information about voting, candidates and issues to newly enfranchised women voters.

Since its beginnings, the League has also been an advocacy organization, lobbying for changes in public policy after member study and agreement. Today the great idea which founded the League has been expanded to include advocacy for the rights of all citizens, young and old, male and female. Most importantly, the League continues its dedication to keeping our democracy strong by giving all citizens a voice in government through providing the tools for participation.

In addition to its strong education and advocacy agenda, the League has always sought to advance its founding mission of providing leadership training and encouragement to women to seek leadership roles in government. We are proud to claim that Eleanor Roosevelt was an active member of the New York State League. She gave full credit to the organization for grounding her in citizenship and government.

The League's organizational structure corresponds to the three levels of government: it is organized at the local, state, and national levels. The goal of the League is to build better communities at the grassroots through citizen participation and decision-making on all issues.

There are four other factors that help define the League and our role in building better communities:

1. The League of Women Voters is a political organization. We are deeply involved in political issues. For us politics is not a dirty word. Politics is the "art and science of government," according to Webster and we in the League understand participating in the governing process, from voting to lobbying, is a responsibility of citizenship.

We are political, and we are nonpartisan. From the beginning we have concentrated on issues rather than personalities.

2. The second characteristic of the League is that we **do** believe that citizens can change things for the better. Throughout the League's history, we have fought to improve the processes of government, from voter registration to campaign financing to protecting our natural and human resources.
3. None of those successes would have been possible without grassroots action. And that is our third characteristic – we are a grassroots, volunteer organization. Volunteers lead our organization and our members make the key decisions.
4. The fourth factor that characterizes the League is our concern for the common good. We stand up for citizens—we believe in citizen empowerment. And that citizen empowerment only begins with voting. Citizens must be involved in the day to day workings of government and so League members monitor legislative bodies, write letter to their elected leaders, testify at committee hearings and form coalitions with other organizations and we work hard to educate our fellow citizens on issues so they can be an informed electorate. We have worked on the national, state and local levels supporting the citizen's right to know and have access to public records of legislative and quasi-legislative bodies, known as “sunshine laws.”
5. A basic League principle since its founding has been the right of every citizen to vote and the League has worked systematically to break down the barriers to voting through reauthorization of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and then through a campaign for passage and implementation of the National Voter Registration Act in 1993. Most recently, when the 2000 election exposed the many problems facing the decentralized US election system, the League began to work on national election reform. The LWVUS took part in forming an election reform coalition to develop recommendations for the drafting of what has become the Help America Vote Act of 2002.

The NYS League is actively engaged in working to change public policies here in the state through our legislative agenda. Each year League members help determine what issues are “hot” and deserving of our priority attention during the legislative session. We

publish a yearly brochure on our NYS Legislative Agenda, which can be obtained from the state League office.

Membership in the League is open to all citizens, 18 years of age. Men have been welcomed as members since 1974. We encourage all of you here today to consider joining and helping us make our local, state, and national communities better places to live.

In closing, I would like to repeat the following quote from the Delaney Sisters, ages 104 and 102, in their autobiography, “It’s true you can’t change the world with your one vote, but if you don’t vote, you don’t have the right to complain – and honey, I surely do not want to give up my right to complain!” They didn’t miss an opportunity to vote since 1920!

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