WOMEN'S VOTE: THE ROAD TO NATIONAL SUFFRAGE GOES THROUGH WASHINGTON STATE

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American women asked for equal treatment as early as 1776, when Abigail Adams requested her husband John to "remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." He was leaving for the Continental Congress to adopt the Declaration of Independence.

Her pleas went unheard as American women fought nearly a century and a half to gain the national right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment to the US constitution was finally certified on August 26, 1920. It said:

> "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."

The Nineteenth Amendment gave white women in the US the right to vote, although women of color would not receive the right until passage of the *Civil Rights Voting Act of 1964*.

The road to women's suffrage began in Washington state

Washington almost became the first American territory or state to allow women to vote. In 1854, Arthur Denny brought a women's suffrage proposal to the territorial legislature, but it was defeated by one vote. The Washington territorial and state legislatures later allowed several short-term interludes of voting, but took away the right of women to vote again and again.

Despite the persistent efforts of early suffragists, women still did not have the right to vote when Washington became a state in 1889. They would not gain state suffrage until a different sort of campaign began in 1908.

After 50 years, a successful suffrage campaign

After 50 years of varied suffrage campaigns and tactics, Washington women began to use a 'quiet pursuit' strategy of gaining public support for a women's suffrage amendment to the state constitution. Suffragists appeared at local fairs and gatherings, spoke personally to the electorate, formed suffrage clubs to work within communities across the state, and distributed suffrage literature.

They purposely avoided the militant efforts of British women whose direct-action campaign was sometimes violent and law-breaking, and which resulted in imprisonment and hunger strikes with painful forced feeding as the outcome. These tactics spurred British media to satirize the participants as "suffragettes" – or "little suffragists" – to make them seem small.

The Washington state campaign was planned to convince the male electorate to vote for women's suffrage without antagonizing the men. It included such tactics as publishing a cook book with recipes by state-wide suffragists to act as a way to men's stomachs, a fundraiser, and a method of subtly planting the women's suffrage message in Washington homes. Pro-suffrage slogans and information were interspersed with recipes, and suffragists went door-to-door selling some 3,000 cook books while meticulously gathering contact information on every voter in every precinct in the state.

Suffragists also started a newspaper to spread the word, including a suffrage poster in each issue.

Planting a banner, attending an Exposition, and riding the 'Suffrage Special'

The campaign reached new heights on July 30, 1909, when Dr. Cora Smith Eaton led a climbing party and planted a “Votes for Women” banner at the summit of Mount Rainier. She was an experienced climber, member of the Mountaineers club, and had scaled Washington’s six highest peaks.

Suffragists planned a national women's suffrage conference in Seattle to coincide with the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific (A-Y-P) Exposition, Washington’s first world’s fair. During the first week of July 1909, some 600 women’s suffrage proponents from across the country gathered in Seattle to participate in the 41st Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and to celebrate Woman Suffrage Day at the A-Y-P, located on the University of Washington campus.

National suffragists traveled together on a Northern Pacific special train across the US, adding members to the party as they went west. Upon their arrival in Spokane, the suffragists were met by Washington Equal Suffrage Association president Emma Smith DeVoe of Tacoma and prominent suffragist May Arkwright Hutton of Spokane, among others. The ‘Suffrage Special’ train stopped in Pasco, Yakima, Ellensburg, Tacoma and other cities before reaching Seattle's King Street Station.

The Washington Equal Suffrage Association convention, held in Seattle the day before the National convention, drew suffragists from around the state. The state and national conventions and suffragists’ appearances in area clubs and churches received extensive newspaper coverage, and captured the attention of thousands of visiting male voters and their female family members.

Suffrage Day at the A-Y-P was celebrated on July 7, 1909, and was the highlight of the National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention. Fairgoers entered the grounds under huge banners bearing the slogan “Votes For Women”. While the national suffrage color was yellow, Washington suffragists used green on their banners to represent the Evergreen State. Suffragists considered the Exposition a massive public relations opportunity and pinned buttons with their suffrage message on almost everyone who crossed the threshold. Every toy balloon sold at the fair that day was imprinted with the “Votes for Women” slogan.

Success: Washington women gain the right to vote

Lobbying efforts by suffragists influenced a coalition of Progressive legislators to pass a bill amending the Washington Constitution to enable women to vote. A ratification vote of male voters was held on November 8, 1910. The suffrage amendment garnered 22,623 votes, winning nearly two to one.

Every county voted in favor of the amendment.

Washington leads the way to national ratification

The Washington state suffrage battle is often seen as a key event on the path to national women’s suffrage. As the first state in the twentieth century to grant women the right to vote – and the first state to adopt women’s suffrage in almost fifteen years – Washington revitalized the suffrage movement and inspired the national campaign that led to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Washington’s victory broke the suffrage dam nationwide. California passed women’s suffrage in 1911; Oregon, Alaska, Arizona and Kansas passed it in 1912; and Montana and Nevada in 1913. To get the vote nationwide, women would have to take a giant leap forward, but eventually they won.

The Nineteenth Amendment of the US Constitution required that three-fourths, or 36, state legislatures vote in favor of it. Washington was the 35th state to ratify it on March 22, 1920.

A Tennessee legislator receives a letter

The state of Tennessee then took up the amendment. Most thought the Tennessee legislature would vote against the Nineteenth Amendment and the vote appeared to be tied. But the very youngest legislator, Harry Burn, had received a letter from his mother. Febb E. Burn asked him to vote for the amendment – so he did.

The Nineteenth Amendment passed through a single vote by a Tennessee legislator who “remembered the ladies” when his mother asked him to. He voted yes and made it the law of the land.

Please celebrate the hard work of so many suffragists by voting in upcoming elections.