



Celebrating Women's History Month: The 19th Amendment

In the next installment of my Women's History Month blogs, I share the background of the 19th Amendment, which all started at the Seneca Falls Convention.

Seneca Falls Convention

In July 1848, 300 people gathered in Seneca Falls, New York for the first Women's Rights Convention in the United States. The name was later changed to the Seneca Falls Convention. The Declaration of Sentiments was the convention's manifesto, containing a list of demands and grievances as well as the stated purpose for the convention: equal rights for women. A series of resolutions were passed, including the ninth resolution, which demanded voting rights for women and marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement. More than 70 years later, the 19th Amendment was ratified by two thirds of the states, granting women the right to vote.

We are all familiar with the names of women suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Frances E.W. Harper, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell. They were strong leaders who spearheaded the women's suffrage movement, and they deserve much credit and thanks. This blog will take a deeper dive into events that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment and the incredible sacrifices and determination of the women who brought women's suffrage to fruition.

The Silent Sentinels

Following the Seneca Falls Convention, the suffrage movement struggled to find consensus. Some people favored militant suffrage, some favored civil disobedience,

others did not support the movement because it excluded Black women, and some wanted a Constitutional Amendment as opposed individual states enacting voting laws. Several splinter groups were formed, each with specific agendas and platforms. Frustrated by a lack of progress, members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, organized a suffrage parade. The parade took place the day before Woodrow Wilson's 1913 inauguration as president. Wilson was opposed to a Constitutional Amendment granting women the vote. During the suffrage parade, pro-Wilson spectators attacked the marchers, hospitalizing over 100 women. Within months, Paul and Burns formed the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage, later renamed the National Women's Party (NWP). The NWP made Wilson the target of their protests.

As Wilson was about to begin his second term in 1917, suffragists who called themselves the Silent Sentinels, began protesting outside of Wilson's White House office. Their goal was to embarrass Wilson into supporting women's suffrage. The Silent Sentinels wore distinctive clothing indicating they were suffragists and they carried signs that asked, "Mr. President, How Long Must We Wait for Liberty?" Initially, Wilson tolerated the protesters, often smiling as he passed them and inviting them into the White House for coffee, even though they refused his gesture. But when the U.S. entered World War I in April of 1917, Wilson became annoyed with the persistence of the suffragists. He was concerned with the optics of suppressing women's rights at the same time the U.S. was deploying soldiers to liberate Europe from tyranny. The police began arresting the Silent Sentinels for minor violations without penalties. And yet, the Silent Sentinels returned to the picket line again and again. In August of 1917, the Silent Sentinels upped the rhetoric with a banner that said, "Kaiser Wilson, have you forgotten your sympathy with the poor Germans because they were not self-governed? 20,000,000 American women are not self-governed. Take the beam out of your own eye." Annoyed at the tactics, the police began placing the Silent Sentinels under arrest. On November 13, 1917, 33 Silent Sentinels were arrested near the White House and taken to Occoquan Workhouse, a prison in Fairfax County, Virginia, where they were no longer appeased and tolerated.

The Night of Terror

Upon their arrival at Occoquan prison, the Silent Sentinels demanded they be treated as political prisoners, but they were denied. In retaliation, the prison

superintendent instructed guards to physically assault the women prisoners. The guards literally threw the women into dirty cells with force, slamming their bodies across iron benches and beds. Lucy Burns was shackled with her hands raised over her head, forcing her to stand naked until morning. One woman suffered a heart attack and was denied medical treatment until the following day. The superintendent refused the Silent Sentinels access to counsel, and Marines were called to guard the prison to keep the press and attorneys from entering. Following what became known as the Night of Terror, many of the women prisoners protested the abuse by starting hunger-strikes. Prison officials responded to the hunger strikes by force feeding the strikers raw eggs and milk. The women who did not participate in the hunger strike were given food infested with worms. The prison cells and the bedding were filthy, the water was unclean, and the overall conditions were unsanitary and inhumane. News of the attack and the horrid conditions reached suffragists outside the prison and soon the public was made aware of the atrocities. By late November, under intense public pressure, federal authorities released the Silent Sentinels from prison. In early 1918, the D.C. Court of Appeals ruled the women had been illegally arrested, convicted, and imprisoned.

Within months of the Silent Sentinels' release from prison, President Wilson changed his position and publicly asked Congress to act on the federal suffrage amendment. But the Silent Sentinels continued protesting, setting fires they called "watch fires of liberty" outside of public buildings and burning Wilson's speeches on freedom and democracy in acts of defiance and as a symbol of denouncing the president's words. The arrests continued, the hunger-strikes continued, and the forced feedings continued. But the women behind the suffrage movement were determined to win the vote.

The 19th Amendment

The first women's suffrage amendment was introduced in Congress in 1878, and it was raised again in 1918 when it failed to pass the Senate by two votes. On May 21, 1919, Congress passed what was popularly known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment and now known as the 19th Amendment, by a vote of 304 to 89. Two weeks later, the Senate narrowly passed the Amendment with the required two-thirds margin, 56 in favor, 25 against, and 14 not voting. But the fight was not over yet because 36 states had to ratify the Amendment to the Constitution. Suffrage leaders

Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul began mobilizing members of the NAWSA and NWP to pressure states to ratify the Amendment. By March of 1920, 35 states had approved the amendment, but the outlook was grim. Southern states had defeated the amendment when Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia voted against ratification. Ratification would be determined by Tennessee.

Lobbyists from both the suffragists movement and the anti-suffragists movement poured into Nashville applying intense pressure on legislators. The leaders of the NAWSA and the NWP worked with Tennessee suffrage leaders Anne Dallas Dudley, Abby Crawford Milton, and Sue Shelton White to counter the equally organized anti-suffragists. The anti-suffragists were led by Josephine Pearson, state president of the Southern Women's Rejection League of the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, and Anne Pleasant, president of the Louisiana Women's Rejection League. On August 13, 1919, the Tennessee Senate voted to pass the amendment 24-5. In order to prevent Tennessee from being the state responsible for ratification or rejection of the 19th Amendment, the Tennessee House Speaker made two attempts to table the ratification resolution. His motion failed to pass 48-48 on the first vote and 48-48 on the second vote. Representative Harry Burn voted to table the resolution both times. When the final vote was taken, Burn said he supported women's suffrage as a moral right, but he had voted against it previously because he believed his constituents were opposed to it. In the moments before the final vote, he changed his position when he received a note from his mother urging him to vote yes. The final vote was recorded with 50 in favor of ratification and 49 against. Tennessee was the final state to ratify the 19th Amendment, making the United States the twenty-seventh country in the world to give women the right to vote. The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously upheld the amendment's legality in *Leser v. Garnett, et. al.* [\[1\]](#)

It is not possible to recognize all of the women who contributed to the passage of the 19th Amendment. I am humbled by the sacrifices they made and their dedication to the cause. Adoption of the amendment enfranchised 26 million American women. The amendment was the beginning of what continues to be the ongoing struggle for equal rights for women. And without the right to vote, women would not be self-governed.

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[\[1\]](#) 258 U.S. 130 (1922).