

Phenomenal Suffragists

Christine Brooks Cote



ONE DAY WHEN I WAS ABOUT fourteen, I was sitting on a bench in front of May Co. department store in Mission Valley Shopping Center in San Diego. The city bus that picked me up in front of my high school dropped me off there everyday so I could transfer to the bus that would take me home. An old man was sitting next to me on the bench. He was talking to me, though I don't really remember if I was talking back. All

I remember is that he told me that the worst thing that happened to this country was that women were given the right to vote.

To say I was shocked would be an understatement, and all these years later, I still remember the incident vividly. How could anyone think such a thing?

The year 2020 will mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the passage of the nineteenth amendment, giving women in this country the

Is there a difference between a suffragist and a suffragette? Yes, and it matters.

right to vote. On August 18, 1920, the state of Tennessee ratified the amendment, granting its approval by the required two-thirds of the states and thereby making it law. After a seventy-year struggle to make it happen, the words of the amendment were few but profound: "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 did indeed require a struggle to make it happen. Many women—many phenomenal women—worked diligently to make it happen, waging campaigns, marching through the streets, writing articles, delivering speeches, organizing events. And when the battle was finally won, it was by the slimmest of margins, indicating just how hard they had to fight. On the national level, the House of Representatives passed suffrage by exactly the number needed. In the Senate, suffrage passed by only two votes. The last state to ratify for women's votes was Tennessee, and it passed the legislature there in 1920 by only a single vote, during a recount.

The right to vote is the most important indicator of equality in a democratic society. Having a vote means having a voice. And since everyone can vote only once, every vote, every person who votes is equally important. The women who fought for this right were phenomenal, and we should never take our right to vote for granted. Let's look at some of the phenomenal women who helped make this possible.

The suffrage movement had its roots in abolitionism. In 1840 [Lucretia Mott](#) and [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) were among the women barred from attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London. This event convinced them of the importance of work on reforms that would improve the status of women in society. They decided to hold a Women's Convention for which Stanton wrote the "[Declaration of Sentiments](#)" to be presented at the convention. Held in Seneca Falls, New York, this event is considered the beginning of the suffrage movement in the U.S. To conclude the "Declaration of Sentiments," Stanton wrote: "In view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation, in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States."

Little needs be said about the contributions of [Susan B. Anthony](#) as she is the most well-known of the suffragists. Born into a Quaker family committed to social equality, she became a social reformer and women's rights activist. She traveled constantly, giving speeches and taking part in events. In a speech in 1889, she noted that women had always been taught

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott

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that their purpose was to serve men, but ideas had begun to change: “Now, after forty years of agitation, the idea is beginning to prevail that women were created for themselves, for their own happiness, and for the welfare of the world.” Anthony was sure that women’s suffrage would be achieved, though she did not live to see it, but she feared that people would forget how difficult it was to achieve it.

Lucy Stone, the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree—from Oberlin College—contributed to women’s suffrage by organizing the first National Women’s Rights Convention, which took place in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850. She is credited with influencing Susan B. Anthony to take up the cause of suffrage. Two early experiences played a role in Stone’s interest in women’s rights. The first had to do with her mother having to turn over to her husband the money she earned selling eggs and cheese because her husband had sole authority over the family’s money. Second, Stone began teaching when she was sixteen, but earned less than her brother when he had taught. When

she protested, she was told that she earned “woman’s pay.” She later came to realize that custom was to blame, but the injustices only demonstrated “the necessity of making custom right.” A superb orator, she spent much of her time writing and delivering speeches. She also published her work, primarily in the influential *Woman’s Journal* that she founded.

Watch Kerry Washington deliver Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech. A MUST SEE!

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery but escaped to freedom with her infant daughter when she was about thirty. After going to court to recover her son two years later, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man. She became an activist to end slavery and to secure rights for women. In 1851 she attended the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in Akron where she delivered her famous extemporaneous speech on women’s rights, later known as “Ain’t I a Woman?” At its conclusion, there were roars of applause, teary eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. After the Civil War she became involved in efforts



Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Clarina Irene Howard Nichols

[image info](#)

to improve the lives of former slaves. She also worked on desegregation and prison reform, and preached against capital punishment.

Elizabeth Oakes Smith is known for her feminist writings, including *Woman and Her Needs*, a series of essays published in the *New York Tribune* between 1850 and 1851. She argued for support of women’s spiritual and intellectual capacities as well as women’s equal rights to educational, political, and economic opportunities.

Clarina Irene Howard Nichols fell on hard times after divorcing her first husband. Supporting herself and her children on “women’s wages” — one-half to one-third what men received for similar work—she began writing for a newspaper in Brattleboro, Vermont, the *Windham County Democrat*. She married the editor and publisher, George Nichols, and when he became an invalid, she took over his duties at the paper. Her new profession gave her diverse opportunities to promote various reform movements of the day. She became a popular orator and debater on women’s rights issues.

Antoinette Brown Blackwell was the first woman in the U.S. to be ordained a mainstream Protestant minister. After about six years, however, she decided to leave the ministry and gradually increased her efforts working for women’s rights. Though many activists opposed religion on the basis that it served to oppress women, Blackwell was steadfast in her belief that women’s active participation in religion could serve to further their status in society. Unlike many of her peers, she saw improving women’s status in society to be more important than suffrage. She believed that men were ineffective in representing women in politics; thus suffrage would have little positive impact for women unless it was coupled with tangible leadership opportunities.

Caroline Maria Seymour Severance had a conservative upbringing, but she credited her husband, Theodoric C. Severance, with turning her into a social activist. Severance became an abolitionist and activist for women’s rights and social justice. She was the founder of the New England Women’s Club in 1868, the first of its kind, a place where women could meet to



Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Caroline Maria Seymour Severance, Margaret Foley

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discuss social issues, literature, and art, as well as direct their efforts toward the betterment of society as a whole. Having devoted her life to the creation and support of organizations for women, she became known as “The Mother of Clubs.”

Margaret Foley was one of very few Irish Catholic suffragists from Boston. Tall and confident, with a powerful, classically trained voice, she was a remarkably effective public speaker. She addressed hundreds of audiences—often as an audience member herself, earning the title of “The Grand Heckler.” If women were given the vote, she argued, they could become a major force in improving working conditions in factories and fighting government corruption.

After working as a tutor on a Virginia plantation, **Mary Livermore** joined the cause of the abolitionists. In the months preceding the 1860 election, she campaigned for Abraham Lincoln, working as one of very few women reporters and writing numerous essays for publication. During the Civil War, she visited army posts and hospitals, nursing patients and making sure that

food and medical supplies were stocked. As a woman working directly with soldiers, Livermore had the task of confronting soldiers who were suspected of being female, not an uncommon occurrence. Following the war, she devoted herself to women’s suffrage and temperance. She founded *The Agitator*, which merged with the *Woman’s Journal* after Livermore moved to Boston in 1870 and became associate editor. She was the first president of the Association for Advancement of Women, as well as president of the American Woman Suffrage Association.

Victoria Woodhull suffered an abusive and insecure childhood. She married at fifteen, but divorced her alcoholic and womanizing husband after two children were born. Her interests in women’s rights included marriage and sexual rights. She believed that women shouldn’t be forced to stay in unbearable marriages. Furthermore, she believed that the choice to have sex or not was, in every case, the woman’s choice, saying that a woman owned her sexual organs and had the right to control them. In 1871 Woodhull arranged to testify on women’s suffrage



Mary Livermore, Victoria Woodhull, Matilda Joslyn Gage

[image info](#)

before the House Judiciary Committee. She argued that women already had the right to vote—all they had to do was use it—since the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments guaranteed the protection of that right for all citizens. Learning of Woodhull’s planned address, suffrage leaders postponed the opening of the 1871 National Woman Suffrage Association’s third annual convention in Washington in order to attend the committee hearing. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Isabella Beecher Hooker, saw Woodhull as the newest champion of their cause. They applauded her statement: “Women are the equals of men before the law, and are equal in all their rights.”

Matilda Joslyn Gage was a tireless worker, brilliant speaker, and a prolific author, who was “born with a hatred of oppression.” Gage’s views on suffrage and feminism were considered too radical by many members of the suffrage association, and in consequence, she organized in 1890 the Woman’s National Liberal Union, whose objects were: To assert woman’s natural right to self-government; to

show the cause of delay in the recognition of her demand; to preserve the principles of civil and religious liberty; to arouse public opinion to the danger of a union of church and state through an amendment to the constitution, and to denounce the doctrine of woman’s inferiority.” She was an avid opponent of the Christian church, having analyzed centuries of Christian practices as degrading and oppressive to women. She saw the Christian church as central to the process of men subjugating women, a process in which church doctrine and authority were used to portray women as morally inferior and inherently sinful.

A mere one hundred years ago, after a seventy-year battle, women weren’t *given* the right to vote; women *won* the right to vote. Voting is a universal right in a democracy, regardless of sex, race, or religion. Could there still be people who think that women—or people within any racial or religious segments of society—shouldn’t be allowed to vote? We cannot forget how hard these phenomenal suffragists worked to win the battle. We must remain vigilant. ❖