

1920-2020

WOMAN SUFFRAGE CENTENNIAL

Oregon's Journey to Woman Suffrage



Abigail Scott Duniway, c. 1879
Oregon Historical Society Research Library, ba018089

In Oregon, women's rights activists began the struggle for suffrage in the 1870s. They formed the first suffrage organizations across the state, echoing a national trend. Abigail Scott Duniway rose as one of the earliest leaders, publishing a suffrage newspaper and eventually working for over forty years to achieve the vote. The suffragists knew legislation was needed to provide equal rights but the process to bring any measure to a vote was a challenging one. Any legislation that would change the Oregon constitution required passage in both houses of the legislature followed by ratification by the voting public—all men. New promise came in 1902 with the implementation of a groundbreaking system whereby any measure could be brought to a vote by gathering a required number of signatures on a petition, making it far easier to bring an issue to the ballot.

As the twentieth century dawned, woman suffrage supporters were enthusiastic about testing the new initiative system by bringing votes for women to the ballot. In 1905, the yearly NAWSA convention was held in Portland for the first time, in conjunction with the Lewis and Clark Exposition, attended by national leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and NAWSA president Dr. Anna Howard Shaw. The event created momentum in the Oregon

movement and drew eager supporters with new ideas and fresh perspectives. With support from the national leaders, Oregon suffragists brought votes for women to the 1906 ballot and launched an energetic, grassroots campaign leading up to the vote. Dr. Esther Pohl Lovejoy emerged as a local leader and a strong proponent of the modern tactics, rallying groups of women to use media and organize events. The activists coordinated speeches and meetings, posted advertisements, made banners and buttons, organized parade floats, and distributed suffrage fliers.

Despite the hard work and effort that activists put into the campaign, the 1906 measure was defeated. Liquor interests, concerned with women's support of alcohol prohibition, launched an extensive campaign against woman suffrage and were successful. After the discouraging results, the movement lost steam. Lackluster campaigns in 1908 and 1910 likely resulted in the failure of those year's ballot measures. Though the defeats were disappointing, the suffragists redoubled their efforts.

By 1912, women in all surrounding Western states had achieved suffrage: Idaho in 1896, Washington in 1910, and California in 1911. Oregon women believed that voting rights were within their grasp and increased their efforts to organize and reach the public. Local organizers, with the support of national leaders, increased their use of mass media, canvassing, and public events to reach and sway the opinions of as many voters as possible. Activist Hattie Redmond engaged African Americans in the cause, forming Oregon's first Black woman suffrage group and organizing lectures and events. By 1912, Portland alone had at least 23 woman suffrage organizations. Finally, after forty years of fighting for voting rights in Oregon, women achieved victory on November 5, 1912, when male voters passed a woman suffrage amendment with 52 percent approval.



Hattie Redmond, c. 1890
Oregon Historical Society Research Library, bb09628



Esther Pohl Lovejoy, 1918
Courtesy of OHSU Historical Collections & Archives

The National Suffrage Fight

In 1848, writer and activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton began the fight for woman suffrage, or voting rights, when she organized the first American women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York with abolitionist Lucretia Mott. During the convention, 100 of the 300 attendees, including abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, signed a Declaration of Rights and Sentiments written by Stanton. The Declaration proclaimed the equality of all and named injustices and demands, among them that women could not vote, married women could not own property, and women were taxed without representation. Three years later, Elizabeth Cady Stanton met Susan B. Anthony, a Quaker abolitionist, and spurred her to join the cause. The two became a dynamic team, with Stanton writing powerful speeches and articles and Anthony lecturing as they traveled the country.



Sojourner Truth, 1864. Born into slavery as Isabella Baumfree in New York, Sojourner Truth escaped to freedom in 1826 and changed her name in 1843. She became a noted abolitionist, women's rights activist, and speaker, attending rights conventions and lecturing across the eastern U.S. During a time when women and Black people were prevented from public speaking, Truth persevered and became one of the most outspoken advocates for the equality movement.
Library of Congress, The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana



Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, 1880
Library of Congress, LC-USZ61-791

Additional women's conferences followed as greater numbers joined the movement. Women of color faced racism and oppression related to issues of legal, class, and financial status, but they participated from the earliest days of the movement, and their numbers grew over time. Leaders included Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and formerly enslaved woman, who became one of the cause's greatest speakers and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the first Black female publisher of a newspaper. Women from diverse backgrounds formed suffrage clubs, presenting lectures and educating women about citizenship rights, and later canvassing and organizing meetings and rallies for the cause. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, eventually joining forces with others to become the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the largest suffrage group in the nation.

By March 1913, women from across the country came together to participate in the first national suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., organized by militant suffragists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns. Additional parades and marches followed over the next several years, as women expanded their public demonstrations. Soon after the 1913 parade, Paul and Burns formed the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, renamed the National Woman's Party (NWP) in 1916, to work towards a national constitutional amendment.

Soon, the NWP began to employ more radical tactics. On January 10, 1917, a contingent known as the "Silent Sentinels," began picketing the White House,

demanding voting rights. As the pickets continued, women were arrested and beaten by police during their first night in jail. In protest, the women went on hunger strikes. Jail staff retaliated by making the women perform hard labor and force-feeding some with tubes stuck down their throats, causing injuries. Police released the women after they served terms ranging from two to five weeks. Within two months, President Wilson announced the introduction of a woman's voting rights bill.

With little action on the bill, the Silent Sentinels staged a protest, torching an effigy of President Wilson and keeping "watchfires of freedom" burning at the White House for several weeks, resulting in 22 arrests. Finally, on June 4, 1919, the U.S. Congress passed the long-awaited Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote. One by one, the amendment was ratified by the necessary three-fourths of states. In Oregon, Representative Sylvia Thompson, the only woman in the Oregon legislature in 1920, proposed a ratification resolution in the House. The state ratified the amendment on January 14, 1920. Then, on August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th and final state to ratify the amendment. The 70 year battle was finally over.



Alice Paul unfurls ratification flag at National Woman's Party Headquarters in Washington, D.C., 1920
Library of Congress, LC-H27- A-1112 [P&P], Harris and Ewing Photo Collection, Library of Congress



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Content from the Oregon Historical Society exhibit *Nevertheless, They Persisted: Women's Voting Rights and the Nineteenth Amendment*, on display in Portland, March 14 to Nov. 8, 2020.