

INTRODUCTION

In 1923, Alice Paul, leader of the National Woman’s Party, used the power of history when she proposed the Equal Rights Amendment in Seneca Falls on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Woman’s Rights Convention. Paul stated, “We tie this amendment to the 1848 movement. It is easier to get support for something with tradition behind it . . .”¹ Seventy-five years earlier, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott also summoned the past when they based the Declaration of Sentiments on the language of the Declaration of Independence, stating, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men *and women* are created equal.” These women understood the power of the past and used it to gain freedoms that were not awarded to them by the Founding Fathers.

On November 6, 1917, New York State passed the referendum for women’s suffrage. This victory was an important event for New York State and the nation for several reasons. Passage of women’s suffrage in New York State was the national suffrage movement’s first electoral triumph east of the Mississippi River. The Empire State carried forty-seven electoral votes and assured forty-five seats in the US House of Representatives. Suffrage in New York State signaled that the national passage of suffrage would soon follow, and in August 1920, “Votes for Women” were constitutionally guaranteed.

Women began asserting their independence long before 1848. However, the coordinated work for women’s suffrage began in earnest in 1848. The Seneca Falls convention served as a catalyst for debates and action on both the national and state levels. Women like Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage organized and rallied for support of women’s suffrage throughout upstate New York at women’s rights conventions that culminated with the third national meeting held in Syracuse in 1852 (the first two meetings were held in Worcester, Massachusetts). Reforms during this time were not strictly focused on voting rights. Women wanted equal access to education; better jobs; changes in marriage, divorce, and property laws; and dress reform.

Prior to the Civil War, advocates for the rights of women were first involved with abolitionist activities, but after the war debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments split the women’s movement. Some women’s rights advocates (including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony) refused to support any suffrage amendment that did not include women, while others (Frederick Douglass and Lucy Stone) felt that supporting African American males would be a

pathway toward women's suffrage. In response to this split, in 1869, Stanton and Anthony organized the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in New York City to work toward woman suffrage. This group advocated for a federal amendment to ensure women the vote until it merged with the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in 1890, thus creating the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Elizabeth Cady Stanton was elected as its first president.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the political and social landscape was much different in New York State than fifty years before. The state had experienced dramatic advances in industrialization and urban growth, and several large waves of immigrants settled there. Many women worked outside the home and, as a result, the reformers' priorities shifted to labor issues, health care, and temperance, in addition to women's suffrage. At this time, a new group of reformers from across the state began, again, working toward suffrage with new tactics. Harriot Stanton Blatch formed the Women's Political Union, Carrie Chapman Catt organized the state's suffrage workers under the Empire State Campaign Committee, and thousands of other women organized, marched in parades, attended meetings, and signed petitions. During this time, anti-suffrage sentiment was strong and the New York State suffrage amendment was voted down in 1915. Nonetheless, two years later, on November 6, 1917, New Yorkers finally approved women's suffrage with 53 percent voting yes. Immediately following this victory, the state's reformers used New York's momentum to help propel the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

After New York's women won the vote, its leaders continued reform efforts throughout the twentieth century. African American women made progress for civil rights through club activities—the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Secretary of the Department of Labor Frances Perkins made history on the state and national levels. Betty Friedan wrote the *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and three years later helped to found the National Organization for Women (NOW), a feminist organization whose leaders worked toward equal job opportunities and pay for women. In the 1970s, Gloria Steinem and others founded *Ms.* magazine, which served as a voice for the new feminist movement. In 1972, pathbreaker Shirley Chisholm of Brooklyn became the first African American woman to run for the office of president for the Democratic Party, and in more recent decades, New York women, including Bella Abzug, Geraldine Ferraro, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Kirsten Gillibrand, sought and were elected to positions in public office, continuing the work that began in Seneca Falls in 1848.

The *Votes for Women* catalog presents research about and artifacts from the exhibition at the New York State Museum between November 4, 2017 and May 13, 2018. Focused essays from historians on various aspects of the suffrage and equal rights movements around New York State provide greater detail about local stories with statewide significance. Judith Wellman writes about the powerful mix of diversity in Seneca Falls and the zeitgeist of its geographic location that helped to start the women's rights movement. Sally Roesch Wagner's essay discusses how a small group of New York women used civil disobedience to sway the opinions set by passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Shannon Risk and Traci Langworthy write about the movement in western New York; Risk focuses on Buffalo and the numerous women's rights workers and organizations at the local level, while Langworthy focuses on Chautauqua County and area grassroots organizations there that supported suffrage such as the Grange and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Karen Pastorello's essay discusses the role of men and their collaborations with women in the fight for suffrage in New York State, while Susan Goodier's essay focuses on Sarah Jane Thompson Garnet, an African American woman who worked to combat both racism and sexism and led the Colored Women's Suffrage League in Brooklyn in the late nineteenth century.



Anita Pollitzer and Alice Paul at Susan B. Anthony gravesite, July 1923, Rochester, New York, photograph.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Jessica Derleth writes about the role of marriage and motherhood in the suffrage movement. Lauren Santangelo recounts the protest organized in 1886 by Lillie Devereux Blake at the dedication ceremony of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. The irony of a giant female statue dedicated to women was not lost on the New York City suffragists. Lastly, Robert Chiles writes about women's voting patterns and how New York politicians dealt with their new constituency.

The centennial of women's suffrage in New York State provides an opportunity to reexamine the efforts of the state's women and men who worked for the vote and the efforts toward equality since the vote. In June 2016, on the evening when Hillary Rodham Clinton was the first female to be declared the presumptive presidential nominee from a major political party, she evoked the power of the past: "Tonight's victory is not about one person, it belongs to generations of women and men who struggled and sacrificed and made this moment possible. In our country, it started right here in New York, a place called Seneca Falls."²

It is with the idea that there is power in the past that we celebrate the centennial of the passage of women's suffrage in New York State in 2017.