Women’s VOTE Centennial

“Forward, out of error, Leave behind the night, Forward through the darkness, Forward into light!”

- Inez Milholland

Celebrating the anniversary of the 19th Amendment and working toward a future of equity, respect, and justice for all.
Women's Suffrage in the Champlain Valley

The legacy of women's rights and the fight for suffrage in the Champlain Valley is a complex story. It is a tale of countless known and unknown women and men who fought for justice and equality, while sometimes falling into the traps of injustice themselves. Women's suffrage is not a story of linear progress that ended when women received the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. It is a cycle of progress and pitfalls that continues to this day.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Lake Champlain was a transportation corridor for the international exchange of goods, ideas, and ideals among New York, Vermont, and Québec. Each place had unique experiences with suffrage that were shaped by their local cultures, politics, and societal values. Events in New York State—including the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention—often receive the most attention, but the hills and towns of New York's North Country also played important roles in the movement. Across the lake, Vermont in the 19th century was both a bastion of progressive social and religious thought, and a sheltered and traditionalist corner of New England. Even more conservative was Québec, which kept women from voting in provincial elections until 1940.

The suffrage movement was deeply linked to other progressive movements. It was part of a complex web of causes, ideas, and cultural values that shifted throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Women finally received the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920—132 years after the U.S. Constitution was ratified. Work to secure women's rights in the Champlain Valley and nationwide continues today.

The image of a suffrage parade in Waterbury, Vermont, during the early 1900s shows the grassroots and local efforts that made up the suffrage movement in the Champlain Valley.
Well-known abolitionist speaker Frederick Douglass was the only African American present at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. He encouraged leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to not only press for women’s rights, but also for suffrage. He advocated the ideal: “Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are brethren.” After the Civil War, the suffrage movement split over the issue of racial equality and voting, leading to conflicts that continued into the 20th century. Douglass remained an important leader for both racial and gender equality throughout his life. He felt, however, that the suffrage movement should be led by women themselves, which was unusual for the time.

Many efforts led by women in the 19th century were touted as “crusades,” a term framed in Christian religiosity. There was the “Crusade for Women’s Education,” “the Temperance Crusade,” and the crusading iconography of Inez Milholland and Alice Paul’s 1913 procession in Washington, DC.

Temperance societies—groups opposed to the sale and consumption of alcohol—argued that heavy drinking was a threat to the Christian home. Women often led temperance efforts, which were characterized by the contemporary notions of family life. Freedom from abusive or negligent fathers and husbands were major themes in both the suffrage and temperance movements.

The communities of the Champlain Valley overwhelmingly approved slavery. The perception of racial equality in the north, however, was challenged after the Civil War when the 15th Amendment granted only African American men the right to vote. This created a rift between the amendment’s supporters and some very prominent suffragists, who employed overt racism to make their case for exclusion. Apart from some notable exceptions, women of color were mostly left out of the northern movement.

Women entered a new political sphere in the mid-1800s by organizing to publicly advocate for social causes that were important to them, including abolition, temperance, and the fight for suffrage. These movements acted both within the politics of this Champlain, Erie and Cheney county. These movements used these intersecting landwaterways of Lake Champlain as a conduit for movements about sex, gender, class, and race. While these movements often overlapped and often supported each other, there was some tension and disagreement among their proponents and leaders.

Women comprised about a third of the population of Vermont, but were excluded from political activity. Women’s participation was considered an improper activity by the “male sex,” while the others believed suffrage would “civilize” a corrupt political sphere.

The 19th century was marked by debates on the role of women in society. Women living in Quaker communities in the Champlain Valley wore simple dresses as a way of thinking about thought, speech, and action. This went against the ideal of “Republican motherhood,” which regarded maternity as a business of American democracy. Many saw women participating in politics as an improper activity by the “male sex,” while others believed suffrage would “civilize” a corrupt political sphere.

A Complex Movement

1920 - 2020

Women of African American, Native American to the movement were often marginalized. This cartoon, which incorporates a powerful, woman by the name of Frances Elizabeth Putnam from anti-abolitionist literature, highlights the struggle of American women to achieve their rights. Putnam was a suffragist and social activist and the owner of Puck Magazine. The poster on the left was adopted member and honorary chief of the Iroquois nation.

The suffrage movement across the nation used novel strategies to argue for the enfranchisement of women. The “Mock Parliament” was a public spectacle in which a panel of women acted out granting men the right to vote, demonstrating the contradictions in the arguments against suffrage. The poster advertised an Addison County County organizing Vermont suffragists.

The Real Liquor Questions. 1. What has the 20th Amendment done? 2. When will the 21st Amendment be enacted? 3. Will it be a good law or not? 4. What is the future of prohibition? These are the Real Liquor Questions and your vote will help answer them. In case of an important election, who will you vote for? Yes or No.
The issue of temperance and suffrage were intimately related in Vermont, with fears about alcohol prohibition stymieing suffrage efforts at the state level right up to the passage of the 19th Amendment. As this poster demonstrates, Republicans in Vermont were blocking ratification of the amendment, but it would ultimately be a Democratic governor, Percival Clement, who would block the effort. Vermont did not ratify until February of 1921, missing its chance to be the deciding 36th state to ratify.

As suffrage movement by the turn of the 20th century waned. Eventually, temperance and suffrage efforts in Vermont converged with the national movements for strong anti-liquor laws and for women’s municipal suffrage, kicking off a cultural shift toward better education for women.

During the latter part of the 1800s, Vermont evolved into a socially conservative state, but the nuanced politics of the time meant that many reforms espoused within women’s organizations. Suffrage leaders were both progressive and conservative, seeing themselves as moving American culture forward while sheltering it from outside influences. The movements for strong anti-liquor laws and women’s municipal suffrage wound and wound. Eventually, temperance and suffrage efforts in Vermont converged with the national suffrage movement by the turn of the 20th century.

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Vermont: Progress Versus Tradition

Although it was a small, rural state, Vermont contributed to the suffrage movement in significant ways. In the early 1800s, the Champlain Valley was home to a vibrant community of Quakers who practiced a religious tradition that granted women increased agency, including formal learning beyond domestic training. Eunice Willard—although not a Quaker herself—opened a school in Middlebury in 1814 to teach girls about geography and history, which facilitated a cultural shift toward better education for women.

Temperance was the first issue to politically empower women in Vermont. Although it began through a strategy of “moral suasion”—encouraging neighbors and relatives to change their behavior through social pressure—the temperance efforts eventually led to a state-wide prohibition that lasted until 1912. Many pro-liquor groups associated suffrage activists with temperance and assumed that women would vote for increased prohibition of alcohol. This remained a wedge-issue right up to the 19th Amendment and the Prohibition Era itself.

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New York was home to a call-starved cast of suffragists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Willard, and Sojourner Truth were born and lived there. Carrie Chapman Catt, and Mary burner Talbot were residents of the state, and while most of the women’s rights efforts were centered in New York City and the state’s major metropolitan areas, the North Country produced many notable suffrage leaders. Helen Winstead Rich, the “First of the Adirondacks,” was credited by Frances Willard as “the first woman in Northern New York to embrace woman suffrage.”

Susan B. Anthony—who grew up in Batavia and located in Washington County—exemplifies the suffrage movement in Champagnolly towns (continuously) in winter of 1895 that the nearly collapsed. The walking tours of the town made the Adirondacks and Lake Champlain a popular destination for suffrage leaders, and with the vacations, came the suffrage movement. “Suffrage clubs” were established. Newspapers, like the Plattsburgh Sentinel, published in the 1890s by Hannah Straight Lansing, the “Mother of Suffrage in Clinton County,” spread the word. That word must have reached Inez Milholland, who visited her cousin on her family’s property in Lewis, New York.

Milholland (seen below on horseback) was part of a new group of educated women that took the lead of the suffrage movement in the early 20th century. Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, Chrystal Eastman, and others separated from the conservative National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1914. They formed the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, which later became the National Women’s Party, to aggressively push for a constitutional amendment. Their efforts were successful. Women won the right to vote in New York on November 6, 1917. New York became the first east coast state to ratify the 19th Amendment on June 16, 1919.

The women's movement held on the New York shore of Lake Champlain heated up around the turn of the century. Advocates gave speeches, rallies, and even held auto “invasions” like this one, photographed outside the Hotel Wetherill in Plattsburgh to a “large and enthusiastic crowd.” New York was home to an all-star cast of suffragists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Willard, and Sojourner Truth were born and lived there. Carrie Chapman Catt, and Mary Burner Talbot were residents of the state, and while most of the women’s rights efforts were centered in New York City and the state’s major metropolitan areas, the North Country produced many notable suffrage leaders. Helen Winstead Rich, the “First of the Adirondacks,” was credited by Frances Willard as “the first woman in Northern New York to embrace woman suffrage.”

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The women's movement held memorial events—some drawing 10,000 people—for Inez Milholland at her gravesite in Lewis, New York. A New York Times account of one graveside event noted that Alice Paul failed to invite African American speakers to a memorial in Lewis in 1924: a reminder that racial disparities continued to play a role at both the local and national level. Here, Alice Paul and friends stand at her grave in front of Mount Discovery, renamed Mount Inez in her honor in 2019.
Québec was one of the more progressive territories for women under British colonial rule. The Constitutional Act of 1791 allowed propertied women to vote. This “constitutional oversight” granting limited suffrage to women was removed in 1849. Some historians believe this was in response to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention that started the women’s rights movement in the United States.

Canadian women were part of a global movement toward suffrage in the early 1900s. They used their important roles in World War I field hospitals and on the home front as leverage to attain federal suffrage in 1918. In Québec, however, while women could vote for members of the Canadian parliament, they couldn’t participate in provincial or local elections until 1940.

The vast majority of the public, most politicians, and the powerful Catholic Church opposed municipal and provincial suffrage for women. Leaders like Thérèse Casgrain and Idola Saint-Jean persevered against this opposition. They led annual marches on the Québec Parliament Building. Idola Saint-Jean ran in the 1930 federal election to promote the cause. In 1935, activists collected 10,000 signatures in favor of Québec suffrage and sent the petition to King George V. From 1922 to 1939, 13 suffrage bills were rejected in the Québec legislature.

On April 25, 1940, the activists’ persistence paid off: Québec passed the act granting women the right to vote and to be eligible as candidates. It was the last Canadian province to grant full voting rights to women.
Many western states had already granted women the right to vote long before the passage of the 19th Amendment. As with most American movements, individual communities and states often led the way to change at the national level. After the passage of the 19th Amendment, Alice Paul and the National Women's Party continued their efforts. After helping to initiate the Equal Rights Amendment, Alice Paul lived for a time in Vermont while working for the United Nations to advance women's rights worldwide.

The National Women's Party created banners like this prior to the ratification of 19th Amendment that were used in suffrage rallies and parades across the country in the early 1900s.

By 1918, public opinion was swinging toward suffrage. When the ratification process began in 1919, New York—which granted women state-wide suffrage in 1917—approved the measure with only a single abstaining vote. Vermont failed to become the deciding vote because the anti-prohibition governor, Percival Clements, refused to call the legislature into session. Instead, Tennessee holds the honor of being the 36th state required to ratify the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920.

The struggle for women's rights didn't end with suffrage. Women could vote, but many felt that stronger protections of women's rights should be embedded in the constitution. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was written by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman and submitted to Congress in 1923. It guaranteed equal rights for all Americans regardless of sex. New York passed the amendment in 1972 and Vermont in 1973. While approaching the required 38 states needed to ratify the amendment, a national anti-ERA movement arose against it. Led by Phyllis Schlafly, the “STOP ERA” campaign effectively blocked passage of the ERA.

While the 1979 deadline for the ERA's passage was passed, several states have recently approved the amendment: Nevada (2018), Illinois (2019) and Virginia (2020). While new movements continue the fight, the gender pay gap (women receive 80 percent of a man's salary for the same job), the glass ceiling (women and minorities are not able to rise to positions of power in the workplace), and sexual harassment and violence (best known by the #MeToo movement) are just some of the issues facing modern society.

The Women's March has brought together some of the largest protest crowds in American history. Today, women and men across the globe continue women's rights to modern causes. Just as suffrage was tied to a patchwork of other ideas in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the continued importance of these issues is a reminder that women's suffrage was a key step toward social equality, but that work continues in the Champlain Valley, North America, and across the globe.

Some of the largest protests in American history were part of the Women's March movement. Since 2017, these events have been held in multiple cities across the globe. The first Women's March, pictured here in Washington, D.C., on January 21, 2017, has been criticized for omitting the voices of non-white women, demonstrating that racial inequality continues to plague the fight for women's rights.

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A modern emblem in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Efforts to pass this amendment continue.

Differing opinions about the role of women in society remain. The 1970s ratification of the ERA was prevented by the STOP ERA movement led by Phyllis Schlafly, who believed women were better served by their traditional family roles. Note: STOP was an acronym for “Stop Taking Our Privileges.”

1920 - 2020

Her Work Continues