

The Fight for Washington Women's Suffrage: A Brief History **by Shanna Stevenson, WHC Coordinator**

Women's voices and influence have always been a part of Washington's history, even without the vote. The fight for permanent woman's suffrage in Washington, however, spans over 50 years in territorial and state history. Washington was the first state in the 20th century and the fifth state in the Union to enact women's suffrage. Washington women's success in 1910 helped inspire the campaign that culminated in passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, when women won the right to vote nationally.

As a territory, Washington could enact voter qualifications by legislative action under its Federal Organic Act. As early as 1854, a mere six years after the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, the first Washington Territorial Legislature considered enacting women's suffrage. House member Arthur A. Denny introduced an amendment for women's suffrage to a pending voting bill and the amendment failed by only one vote.

In 1867 the Washington Territorial Legislature passed a law giving the right to vote "to all white citizens above the age of 21." This law became the rallying point for early women's suffrage advocates who cited the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in conjunction with the law which defined "citizen" as being "all persons born or naturalized in the United States."

Suffragists tested their voting rights based on the 14th Amendment rationale in 1869 at White River, but their votes were rejected. However, fifteen women successfully voted in Thurston County in 1870.

In 1871, prominent national suffrage advocate Susan B. Anthony traveled to Washington Territory, as did suffragists Laura Deforce Gordon from California and Abigail Scott Duniway from Oregon. The Territorial Legislature failed to pass a "declaratory" suffrage bill in 1871 by a slim margin. However, Anthony's visit spurred the creation of suffrage associations in the Territory. That same year, territorial legislators rejected women's intense lobbying by enacting a law which declared that women could not vote until the U.S. Congress made it the law of the land.

In 1875, Territorial Legislators introduced a women's suffrage bill, but the measure lost in the House by a vote of 11 in favor to 15 opposed.

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, women had alternately been allowed and then restricted from participating in school district meetings to choose local school boards. Finally, in 1877 the Territorial Legislature passed a law enfranchising tax-paying women in school meeting elections. This role in school elections reflected a prevailing belief that women had a "sphere" that included home and family matters.

Despite a petition signed by 600 men and women demanding that it be included, delegates to the

first Washington State Constitutional Convention held in Walla Walla in 1878 excluded women's suffrage from the proposed constitution by a vote of seven to eight. Washington male voters rejected two separate ballot issues related to suffrage by a three to one margin as part of the vote on the State Constitution.

In 1881, the Washington House of Representatives passed a women's suffrage bill by a vote of 13-11, but the measure lost in the Council by a vote of five to seven.

Finally, in 1883 both houses of the Washington Territorial Legislature passed women's suffrage. Governor William Newell signed the bill into law effective on November 23, 1883. Only Wyoming and Utah territories had enacted women's suffrage prior to Washington, in the post Civil War era.

In 1884, the Territorial Supreme Court reaffirmed women's suffrage in a challenge relating to women as jurors.

In 1886, the Territorial Legislature clarified the wording of voting rights to state "[a]ll American citizens, male and female" could vote rather than the somewhat vague wording of 1883 legislation which stipulated that where "his" was used it was to be construed as "his" and "her." The legislation was signed on November 26, 1886 by Governor Watson Squire.

After gaining voting rights, women voted for reforms in local elections, and helped to send a Democrat to Congress, a rarity in Washington Territory. Women's votes played a role in enacting local option prohibition.

Because of a technicality in the enacting clause of the 1886 legislation, in 1887 the Washington Territorial Supreme Court revoked suffrage in a suit brought by a gambler indicted by a grand jury that included women stating that title of the 1883 Act and its amendatory version of 1886 did not reflect the content of the legislation.

On January 18, 1888 the Washington Legislature reenacted the suffrage law with an appropriate title. The measure excluded women from serving on juries. However, that same year the Washington Territorial Supreme Court decided another suffrage case. They ruled that the Federal government had intended to put the word "male" before "citizenship" in the Washington Territory Organic Act when establishing voter qualifications - taking away the right of Washington women to vote.

This disqualification of women from voting weakened the cause of suffrage at the 1889 Washington State Constitutional Convention since women could not vote for electors to the conclave. Women's suffrage was a separate issue on the state constitutional ballot in 1889, but lost by 19,000 votes.

After statehood, enactment of women's suffrage required a Washington State constitutional

amendment. In 1890 the legislature reinstated the limited right of women to vote in school elections, which had been authorized by the State Constitution in 1889.

The Fusionist and Populist reformers in the 1897 state legislature passed a bill for a statewide vote to amend the Washington Constitution to grant women's suffrage. Leading the efforts in the legislature was Laura Hall Peters who worked for the final passage of the legislation and in fact had to rescue the bill. She discovered a the true bill had been stolen and another substituted during a recess but with the help of a supporters, she reversed the error and carried the correct bill to then Governor John Rogers for his signature. Despite work by suffrage groups statewide, the ratification vote on the amendment lost by a vote of 30,540 to 20,658 the following year.

After a lull in efforts around the turn of the 20th century, by 1906, new, more organized efforts to win women's suffrage began in earnest in Washington under the leadership of Tacoma resident Emma Smith DeVoe, who a was professional organizer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and noted suffragist May Arkwright Hutton of Spokane.

Organizers enrolled suffragists throughout the state; by 1909, they were poised for an onslaught in Olympia to influence the legislature to pass a measure that would allow a vote to amend the State Constitution to enable women's suffrage. Lobbying efforts by women influenced a coalition of Progressives in the legislature to pass legislation in February, 1909 amending the Washington Constitution to enable women to vote, pending a ratification vote of the male voters in November, 1910.

During the 1909-10 campaign, the suffragists followed the "still hunt" strategy. The emphasis was not generally on public rallies but the personal, intensive work of wives, mothers and sisters to influence the men who went to vote at the polls. The suffragists distributed one million pieces of literature. The Washington State Grange, Labor Unions, the Farmer's Union and other groups backed ratification as well.

The ballot measure to amend Article VI of the Washington Constitution won by majority of 22,623, on November 8, 1910, a favorable vote of nearly 2 to 1. Every county voted in favor of the amendment. Washington State joined the western states of Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Idaho, that had already enacted women's suffrage. Washington was the first state in the 20th century to pass women's suffrage, helping to inspire the nationwide campaign and setting the stage for the eventual national suffrage constitutional amendment in 1920. The Washington law, however, allowed only those who could read and speak English to vote. Many women, including immigrant Asians and Native Americans, who were subject to other restrictive citizenship laws, were still denied the right to vote.

Washington's first women legislators--Representatives Frances Axtell and Nena J. Croake--were elected in 1912 and served in the 1913 State Legislature. On March 22, 1920, in a Special Session called by Governor Louis Hart, the Washington State Legislature ratified the 19th Amendment to U.S. Constitution, known was the "Susan B. Anthony Amendment," enabling

national suffrage for women. Representative Frances Haskell from Pierce County introduced the resolution and the only other woman legislator at the time, Representative Anna Colwell of Snohomish addressed the session along with suffragists Emma Smith DeVoe and Carrie Hill. Washington was the 35th of the 36 states needed to ratify the national amendment which became effective on August 26, 1920.

The campaign for women's rights in Washington, however, did not end in 1910, but continues to the present. By commemorating the Suffrage Centennial, Washingtonians celebrate the long and arduous road to the achievement of women's suffrage, the continuing struggle for women's rights and the significant role of women in public and private life. The victory in 1910 was an important culmination of the fight for the rights of women as citizens but only the beginning of a century of women's activism to shape Washington. After the 1910 Washington state constitutional amendment, women had new tools to continue the reforms they had begun earlier.