

WOMEN'S LONG ROAD

MAINE STATE MUSEUM TEACHER MATERIALS



Introduction to Maine Women's Suffrage

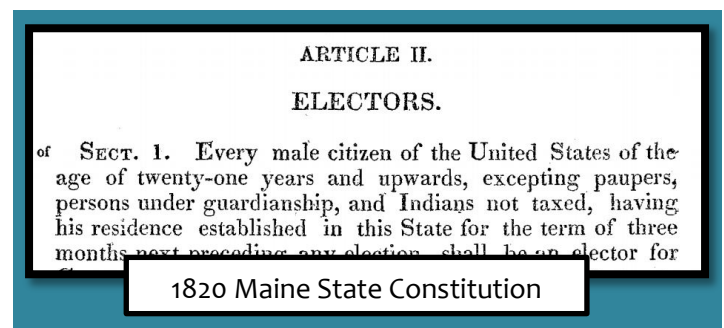
A guide for teachers and students

*Note—this text is at an approximate 6-8th grade reading level.

Suffrage: the right to vote.

When Maine became a state in 1820, over half of all Mainers didn't have the right to vote. The brand-new Maine State Constitution gave voting rights to male citizens who were 21 and older. You couldn't vote if you were:

- a woman
- a Native American living on tribal land
- a poor person getting public charity
- “under guardianship,” meaning supervised by someone else because of a mental or physical disability

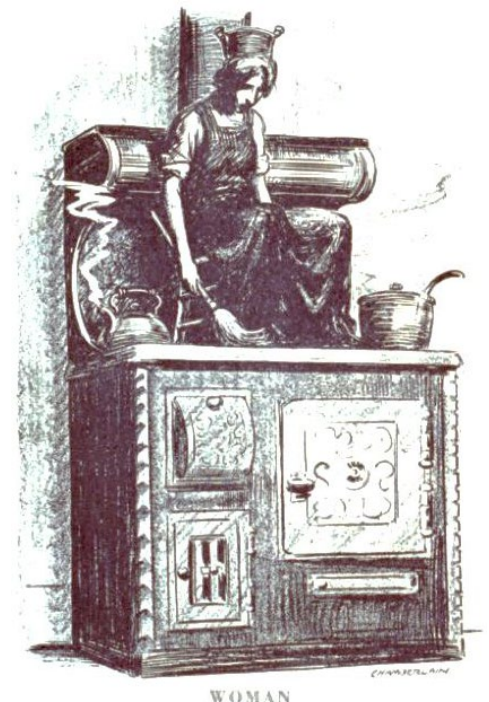


The Problem

Why did people put up with this injustice? To understand, it is important to look at what people believed at the time. In 1820, the American economy still depended on enslaved people. Many people in America were denied their basic rights.

Women were supposed to be dutiful daughters and mothers. Their work was mostly in the home—cooking, cleaning, and childcare. They had limited options for their education and careers. If a woman cared about politics, the best she could do was try to influence the men in her life. Can you imagine being a young woman in 1820? If you were lucky, your father, brother, or husband might listen to you. Since many men thought women could not understand politics, they probably would not listen.

Voting wasn't the only right women had to fight for. In early American history, a man had total legal control over his wife and



1914 cartoon by Kenneth Russell Chamberlain. Library of Congress.

children. A married woman's money and everything she owned belonged to her husband. Even though women couldn't vote on laws, they still had to follow them. Even though they couldn't decide how state money was spent, they still had to pay taxes. In 1857, married Maine women gained the right to control their wages. In 1862, they gained the right to enter into contracts and decide what happened to their property when they died. In 1884, a woman named Sarah N. Mace convinced the Maine Legislature to give married women the right to own property.



1912 Anti-suffrage Poster

<http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/289759.html>

Suffragists were women and men who supported women's voting rights. John Neal, a Portland-born suffragist, said *"Slavery of our women ... is the very illustration of taxation without representation, which our fathers struggled against."*

It can be hard to understand why many people believed that women should not have the right to vote. They were called anti-suffragists, or just "antis." They had many reasons for their beliefs. They were afraid of what would happen if women could vote. Women might become more like men, and stop taking care of homes and children. Some people thought voting would add extra difficulty to women's lives—that it was a burden. Others thought women's brains were not made to understand politics. Lots of people were afraid that women's suffrage would change American society forever. It did!

Most of the anti-suffragist leaders were upper-class women. They were married to or related to men with political and economic power. They already had political influence through the men in their families. Why try to get more?

The origins of the movement--Abolition and Suffrage

Many of the earliest and most famous suffragists were also abolitionists (people who opposed slavery). The two movements were tied together. American laws and practices in the 1800s treated enslaved people as property, not as human beings.

Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth also fought for women's rights. The abolition movement taught many women how to be activists. They learned how to do political work locally and in national organizations.



Sojourner Truth

Even after slavery was abolished, African Americans still could not vote. Black men finally got the vote through the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870. Many suffragists opposed the amendment because it did not give women the vote. Others supported it because they thought racial prejudice was a more important priority than gender prejudice. Black men's very lives were at risk. In either case, Black women were left out.

After the 15th Amendment, more than half a million Black men became voters in the South. Life changed when Reconstruction ended and federal troops left the South in 1877. The Ku Klux Klan, an American white supremacist hate group, became more powerful. Racially biased voting laws made it almost impossible for African Americans to vote. Black voters were also threatened with violence. Most Black men and women couldn't vote in the South until the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965.

The Fight

Mainers who lived one hundred years ago were ready to fight for their rights, just like people do today. Maine's suffrage movement was an important part of a huge national movement. People visited and wrote letters to suffragists across America. They shared ideas and supported each other. Maine suffragists traveled to national woman's rights meetings. Some brought national leaders such as Susan B. Anthony to Maine to give speeches.

The suffrage movement grew bigger and louder. In 1857, suffragists across Maine started asking the Maine Legislature for help. The lawmakers mostly ignored them. Women's clubs began to form. In 1873 between 200-300 people met in Augusta to form the Maine Woman Suffrage Association. Maine women were becoming trained and experienced activists.



Suffragists in a Portland, Maine parade, 1914. Source: Personal collection on loan to the Maine State Museum.

From 1875 to 1889, Mainers sent eight different petitions to the Legislature. They asked for new laws to give women the right to vote. Women across the state signed the petitions, hoping their voices would be heard. The Legislature either ignored or defeated every suffrage proposal.

Up until this point, suffrage petitions mostly asked for the right to just vote in local elections. Local elections were just for positions like school board, mayor, and city council. After 1907 the petitions asked for full suffrage, so that women could vote in all elections.



The anti-suffragists also increased their efforts. They formed the Maine Association Opposed to Suffrage for Woman in 1913. The “anti’s” claimed that Maine women were happier not voting. They thought that women weren’t suffering from any problems that voting would help. They tried to convince people that only a few loud, radical women wanted to vote.

Not all suffragists were women. In 1914, Maine men formed the Men’s Equal Rights League of Maine to support women’s voting rights.

1917 was a huge year for women’s suffrage in Maine. The Maine Legislature finally put a suffrage proposal to referendum. This meant the (male) citizens of Maine could vote on whether or not to give women voting rights. Suffragists across the state worked incredibly hard to get support. They held parades, protests, gave speeches, and wrote letters. They asked Maine to give women voting rights. Maine voters said “no.” There were 20,604 votes for suffrage and 38,838 votes against.

Division within the movement

The story of women’s suffrage is not simple, and it is not always pretty. Just like today, even people on the same side of the issue disagree about things. Some suffrage activists wanted to be loud and force people to listen. Others thought aggressive protests would make suffragists unpopular.

There were also divisions around the issues of race and economic class. Both sides of the issue—suffragists and anti-suffragists—were guilty of prejudice. The leaders of both suffrage and anti-suffrage groups were usually wealthy white women. They had more access to education and the world of politics. More people listened when they talked.



An optimistic illustration by Thomas Nast in 1869, showing equality for Americans of different races and genders.

Library of Congress

There was widespread racism and classism within the women's suffrage movement. Some Americans argued that educated upper-class women deserved suffrage more than black



Ida B. Wells, 1893

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ida_B._Wells

men, immigrants, and uneducated poor men. Those men could already vote. Some anti-suffragists shared this prejudice. They didn't want women to vote at all, especially not if it meant that Black women, immigrant women, and uneducated poor women could vote.

Northern groups worried that Southern voters would not support suffrage if they thought African American women would get more power. Ultimately, many of the leaders of the suffrage movement decided that it was more important to get rights for white women immediately than to wait longer to get rights for everyone. Therefore, they cut out African American suffragists like Ida B. Wells.

Black suffragists continued to do important work across the country. They formed groups, protested, wrote, and educated people. They often worked alongside white suffragists even though there was so much racism in the national movement. Many suffragists did truly care about and fight for equal rights for everyone.

In Maine, Native Americans were also left out. Maine's tribal members could not vote until 1954, when Maine finally followed the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act. Maine was one of the last states in the country to give Native Americans the right to vote.

Today, we know the most about a few big suffrage names (Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, etc.) because they were famous. People saved their letters, photographs, and articles written about them. We know less about the thousands of women in cities and small towns around the United States who fought this battle every day in little ways.

These women were poor and rich. They were from every race. They were teachers and factory workers. Some had college degrees and some couldn't read. Some of the women toured the country speaking onstage. Others changed minds just by talking at the dinner table.



Lucy Nicolar Poolaw, 1954. She was Penobscot, and the first member of a Maine tribe to vote. Photograph courtesy of Bangor Daily News.

Sometimes speaking out meant that women risked their relationships, jobs, even lives. Some women were thrown in jail for protesting and went on hunger strikes. Without women across the country playing their parts, big or small, women would not have won the vote.

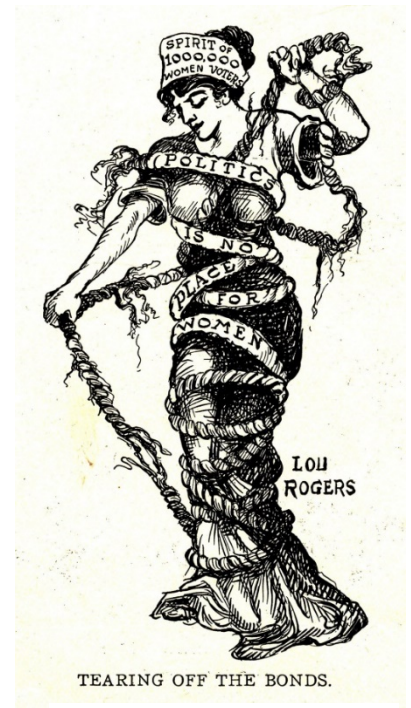
Victory—Mostly

In 1919, U.S. Congress passed the 19th Amendment, which would give equal suffrage to men and women. The fight wasn't over, because 36 states had needed to vote to approve it for the Amendment to count. Suffragists across America had a huge job ahead of them. They had to rally broad popular support in almost every state.

On November 5, 1919, Maine became the 19th state to ratify the 19th Amendment. In August 1920, Tennessee was the 36th states voted to support the amendment. It was finally official. In November 1920, Maine women voted in their first presidential election.

Again, not all women were able to vote in 1920. There were Black and Native women who worked hard in the suffrage movement but still had to wait decades after white women got the vote.

Looking at the big picture of women's rights, the fight for equality was just beginning. The 19th Amendment was a huge accomplishment, and it was a step in the right direction. In 1921, the Maine Supreme Court ruled that women are eligible to hold all public offices in Maine. Ninety-seven years later, Maine elected its first female governor, Janet Mills.



TEARING OFF THE BONDS.

<http://cblidf.org/2017/03/she-changed-comics-lou-rogers->



1915 map by Henry Mayer, published in Puck Magazine.

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-1915-map-that-helped-all-women-get-the-right-to-vote>

Maine State Museum Curriculum

More women hold state legislative offices in Maine than in most other states. In the 2018 election, women won a record 39% of seats in the Maine Legislature.

Today (in 2019), there is an average of one woman for every three men in the United States Senate, Congress, and state legislatures. There are only nine female governors in the fifty states. A woman has never been elected president.

Reflection questions

- What did it mean to be a suffragist?
- Why did voting rights matter to women?
- Why were some women against women's suffrage?
- How is the women's suffrage movement connected to abolition?
- How did suffragists fight for the vote?
- Was it easy for women to gain equal suffrage? Why or why not?
- Thinking about Native American and Black women, why can't people today celebrate the 19th Amendment as an event that brought true equality to women?
- Do you think women today still need to fight for equal rights? Why or why not?



Vocab

Amendment— to “amend” means to change. A Constitutional Amendment is an official change to the US Constitution.

Abolitionist— Abolitionists were people who wanted to end slavery, especially in the United States before the Civil War.

Constitution—the written principles and laws of a nation, state, or social group. The Constitution determines the powers and duties of the government and guarantees certain rights to the people in it

Maine Legislature –a group of people who hold elected positions and have the power to make laws for the State of Maine. We all have state legislators who represent the region we live in.

Petition— a formal written request asking an authority for help with a cause or issue. Usually has many signatures from people who support the cause.

Suffrage—the right to vote.

Suffrage movement—all of the individuals and groups of people across America working together to get voting rights for women.

Suffragist—a woman or man who believed women should have the right to vote.