On a hot July day in 1848, over 300 people listened as Elizabeth Cady Stanton read "The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" in Seneca Falls, New York. The document followed the structure of the Declaration of Independence, but instead proclaimed that "all men and women are created equal". While many in attendance agreed with 16 of the 17 positions expressed, one in particular caused debate:

"HAVING DEPRIVED HER OF THIS FIRST RIGHT AS A CITIZEN, THE ELECTIVE FRANCHISE, THEREBY LEAVING HER WITHOUT REPRESENTATION IN THE HALLS OF LEGISLATION, HE HAS OPPRESSED HER ON ALL SIDES."

The sentiment remained in the document, and 100 of the attendees signed the declaration.

Seventy-two years later, women finally won the national right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The battle over the decades was often ugly, including incidents of racism, violence, and torture. Delaware, as a small state which could readily approve amendments to its state constitution, was a target for suffragists and anti-suffragists alike.

The work of guaranteeing women’s full citizenship did not end with the 19th Amendment. After 1920, Delaware still held an important place in the continuing struggle for equal rights.
In 1868, Mary Ann Sorden Stuart of Greenwood began the fight for women’s right to vote in Delaware. She, along with famous suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, addressed the Delaware General Assembly in 1881 in hopes of amending the state constitution to allow women’s suffrage, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton stating

“Fifty years from now men will wonder why they ever objected to placing the ballot in women’s hands.”

However, the fight for women’s suffrage was never simply a case of men versus women. The ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870, which prohibited denying the right to vote based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude”, greatly divided the suffrage movement. Leaders such as Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglass thought that enfranchising African American men was the only possible step at that moment, whereas Stanton and Anthony opposed the amendment because it did not include women.

There were also women opposed to gaining suffrage, such as humanitarian Emily Bissell of Wilmington, who testified in 1900 before the U.S. House and Senate committees against it. In 1911, the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage was formed. The Delaware branch, with Emily Bissell as vice-president and Mary Wilson Thompson as president, was created in 1914.

Left, Blanche Williams Stroh. Courtesy of H. Gordon Fleming. Right, Emma Gibson Sykes (far right is group shot). Courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society. Delaware was a segregated state. Local Wilmington newspapers, particularly The Evening, routinely printed editorials opposing suffrage by belittling African American women as potential voters and supporting white supremacy. African American suffragists defended their names publicly in letters and speeches, as well as in their organizations. In Wilmington, the Equal Suffrage Study Club, founded in 1914, became a center of black women’s suffrage activism. The group’s first president, Alice Ruth Dunbar-Nelson, a teacher at Howard High School, was a poet, journalist, and political activist, who in 1915 spent several months touring Pennsylvania in support of a suffrage referendum. The Club’s members, led by Blanche Williams Stroh and Emma Gibson Sykes, marched in Wilmington’s first big suffrage parade on May 2, 1914. On occasion, Club members spoke to white audiences at NWP-sponsored pro-suffrage gatherings.

Courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society. In 1899, Delaware held its first Women’s Rights Convention. The first vote on women’s suffrage occurred in Delaware at the 1897 constitutional convention; the General Assembly voted three more times before the 1920 vote on ratifying the national amendment.

CALL TO THE NINETEENTH CONVENTION OF THE DELAWARE EQUAL SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION

The Delaware Equal Suffrage Association invites the call to all members and friends to be held in Wilmington, Delaware, at First National Bank, 9 West Street, Thursday, November 11, 1911.

To the long-expected call, Equal Suffrage, no year has been so crowded with self-sacrificing labors for the cause as this, and so we shall gather convention this year with renewed and new strength for women is touring this land. It seems borne in spirit that the most active in a matter of time when wise and patriotic women friendship be granted to women as an inestimable resource of our domesticity, and the last step in the great experiment of self-government.

The roll of 152,881 votes for women suffrage at the several elections in New Jersey on October 11th, we regard as having been a foretaste of the realization of the greatWoman, the women of the country, East as well as West. For, if you believe that women and men should sit at an equality before the law, and that there were women in Delaware. Come and help to dispel the false assumptions that women are too ignorant, or too pretty, or too emotional to sustain and discharge city duties that are to his lot. Remember that this is your interest, your responsibility. You may not recognize it, but you cannot evade it. You are all, by your very plain day to help discharge this duty by helping the women of your life’s work, the work of the women, gone before. It is your one and only duty...

We shall have a fine convention. It will help you, and your presence will help us. Our national president, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, will be with us. Come.

MARTHA D. CRANTON, President, Delaware Equal Suffrage Association.
MARY E. CALDWELL, Corresponding Secretary, Delaware Equal Suffrage Association.
In 1912, new life was brought to the suffrage movement with Alice Paul becoming chair of the National American Woman Suffrage Association’s (NAWSA) Congressional Committee and a year later forming the Congressional Union. In 1913, Wilmington native Mabel Vernon was hired as the Congressional Union organizer for the Delaware NAWSA affiliate and established headquarters on Seventh and Shipley streets. Vernon spoke to any organization at every opportunity, and at the Delaware state fair her speech was heard by Florence Bayard Hilles, a member of a distinguished Delaware political family, joined the movement with gusto and planned the first suffrage parade in Delaware on May 2, 1914 in Wilmington.

On January 9, 1917, Mabel Vernon and a group of suffragists met with President Woodrow Wilson and presented him with a set of resolutions. Wilson responded coldly and left the meeting. On January 10, Vernon led the first of many suffragists, later dubbed the “Silent Sentinels”, to picket in front of the White House. Although tolerated at first, once the United States entered World War I in April, the picketers were attacked by bystanders and eventually arrested on charges such as “obstructing traffic.” While at first given brief sentences to be served at a local jail, eventually many of the picketers were sent to the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia.
The brutal treatment of the picketers who engaged in hunger strikes while in prison garnered sympathy for the movement and criticism toward President Woodrow Wilson for his inaction. On January 9, 1918, Wilson publicly endorsed women’s suffrage and by June 4, 1919 both the U.S. House and Senate approved the amendment. It was then up to the states—36 were needed to ratify the amendment for it to be officially added to the Constitution.

After the 35th state ratified (Washington on March 22, 1920), all eyes turned towards Delaware. As a Republican state with a governor, John G. Townsend, Jr, who supported the amendment, suffragists were hopeful. Beginning on March 22, the General Assembly held a Special Session to consider the amendment. Suffrage and anti-suffrage groups descended on Dover, hosting parades and rallies. When it became clear that the amendment did not have enough support in the legislature, suffragists supposedly “kidnapped” Committee Chairman Walter E. Hart to delay the vote and buy themselves more time.

On April 1 it was immediately voted down in the House, leading to an educational campaign in Sussex County (where every representative had voted against the amendment). On May 5, the Senate voted to approve it. However, on June 2 the House adjourned without reconsidering its April vote and the amendment failed in Delaware.

Above. Courtesy of the National Woman’s Party.
Interested citizens crowded inside the Delaware State House as the amendment was considered. The suffrage debate in the state drew national as well as local attention.

Overseas. Courtesy of the Delaware Public Archives.

Image courtesy of the National Woman’s Party.
A young girl hands Delaware U.S. Senator Lewis Heister Ball, who voted for women’s suffrage, a yellow flower. Both pro- and anti-suffragists used flowers to show their allegiance. In what was called “The War of the Roses”, suffragists used yellow flowers—usually daffodils—as their symbol while anti-suffragists took up the red rose.


Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
After the local defeat, several Delaware suffragists traveled to Tennessee to lend their support. Florence Bayard Hilles (black dress, center), at the National Woman’s Party headquarters in Nashville, met with presidential candidate Parley P. Christensen (white suit, right of Hilles), who supported the amendment.

Ratification would ultimately take place in Tennessee on August 18, 1920.
While the passage of the 19th Amendment was an enormous achievement, there was still much to be done in the promotion of equal rights. In 1920, the National American Woman Suffrage Association joined with the National Council of Women Voters to form the League of Women Voters, a group dedicated to helping women become responsible voters. The Equal Suffrage Study Club also re-oriented to encourage African American women to register and vote.

The members of the National Woman’s Party began to campaign for the Lucretia Mott Amendment to ensure that “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” Later, re-worded and known as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), it did not gain momentum until a second wave of feminism took hold in the 1960s. Congress finally approved the ERA on March 22, 1972. Delaware was the third state to ratify it, due in part to the efforts of state Senator Louise T. Connor. However, not enough states ratified for it to be added to the Constitution.

Although black men won the right to vote in 1870, African Americans faced continuing hurdles to voting and general equal rights. Jim Crow laws, enacted primarily in the South during the 1890-1910 era, enforced segregation and disenfranchisement. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed, which outlawed literacy tests and other obstacles placed by states to prevent African Americans from voting.

President Calvin Coolidge with Four Ojibwe Indians, 1925. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

What about other groups? In 1924, Calvin Coolidge signed the Indian Citizenship Act, which gave full U.S. citizenship to Indigenous peoples. However, many states instituted laws and policies which prevented Native Americans from voting. Chinese-born and Japanese-born Americans were not granted citizenship, and therefore the right to vote, until 1943 and 1952 respectively. Amendments to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, such as the 1975 requirement for voting materials to be printed in multiple languages, expanded enfranchisement.

**Woman’s Suffrage Around the World as of 1908.** Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Since New Zealand first enfranchised women in 1893, more countries have steadily allowed women to vote. The most recent country to give women the vote was Saudi Arabia in 2011.
The way women today actively participate in government would have been unfathomable to many in 1920. A higher proportion of women than men have been voting in every presidential election since 1980, and every midterm election since 1998. In 2018, a record-breaking 102 women were elected to the House of Representatives.

Women also continue to stage bold protests for their rights in general. In recent years, there has been a renewed push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Many states, including Delaware, have added equivalent amendments to their own constitutions. In 2018, Representative Valerie Longhurst introduced a bill to add an ERA to the state’s constitution; after passing two consecutive sessions of the General Assembly, it went into effect on January 16, 2019.

Delaware’s contribution to the women’s suffrage movement was significant. Although its status as a border state complicated the issue of women’s suffrage far more than supporters had hoped, Delaware provided a determined array of suffrage leaders, such as Mabel Vernon, Florence Bayard Hilles, Alice Ruth Dunbar-Nelson, and Mabel Ridgely, and hosted one of the most vibrant ratification debates in the nation. In doing so, Delaware helped set the stage for future progress in women’s rights. Delaware suffragists joined a national movement and often risked bodily harm, their freedom, and their reputations to advance equal rights.