

5 minutes (plus 30 seconds) promo-- 19th Amendment and LWV centennial --- for June 15, 2019, "Ignite" talk at the Progressive Summit in Manchester.

One hundred and seventy-one years ago, 300 women and men met in Seneca Falls NY for the first Women's Rights Convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton opened the convention thus:

"We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed—to declare our right to be free as man is free, ..."

The convention discussed 11 resolutions on women's rights. All passed unanimously--except the one that demanded the right to vote. Stanton and abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave impassioned speeches in its defense before it eventually (but barely) passed.

What followed was first public shaming, for daring to ask for women's suffrage, and then 72 years of working state by state and at the federal level for women's right to vote.

That work was interrupted, though, by the Civil War. Most suffragists put their cause on hold to devote themselves to abolition, and then to passage of the 15th amendment that would give voting rights to former male slaves. That amendment is its own story, and the way many states—northern and southern—restricted black voting rights for 100 years is a shameful part of our history.

Between 1870 and 1917, various states granted women certain voting rights, but the federal government dragged its feet, despite the growing roles of women.

Throughout the Progressive Era of the 1890s and early 20th century, women were making their marks in social justice work.

The first world war, terrible though it was, was a boon to women's push for their rights. They took over jobs left vacant as men became soldiers in Europe. Some women even served in the war, as telephone operators in France and as army nurses. By the time the war was over, President Woodrow Wilson had come to see that women had earned their right to vote.

On June 4 of 1919, Congress passed the 19th amendment for women's suffrage. The battle turned to the states, where 36 states had to ratify it.

Some, including New Hampshire, did so quickly. But parts of the country wanted nothing to do with increasing the voting rolls, particularly with black women voters who would likely vote Republican (the party of Lincoln).

The suffragists by this time were divided between those cajoling the states to ratify, and those who had grown impatient, copying the militant tactics of the British suffragettes. Some were imprisoned, where they were force-fed and maltreated.

The National American Woman Suffrage Association was the largest national organization working on ratification.

When Congress had passed the amendment, discussion began about what would follow ratification. If women got the vote, now they had to learn how to use it, how to understand issues, to vote their consciences, and to work to protect democracy.

Thus was born the League of Women Voters, a direct descendant of NAWSA. On Valentine's Day 1920, the NAWSA national convention changed its name to the League of Women Voters.

The thousands of members in local and state chapters began their work to prepare women to vote in the 1920 election. In New Hampshire the League created weekend "citizenship schools" to teach women about current issues and government.

In November 1920, 8 million women voted for the first time in a national election!

And here in New Hampshire, two women were elected to our state House as write-in candidates, Democrat Mary Farnum of Boscawen and Republican Jessie Doe of Rollinsford.

While we are eager to celebrate the historic passage of the 19th amendment and the centennial of the League of Women Voters, we recognize that not all women got the right to vote in 1920.

Black women were subject to the same Jim Crow laws that had plagued black men since 1870.

Native Americans did not achieve citizenship and voting rights until 1924.

Young women were out of luck: the voting age was 21 until 1971.

And of course we never did ratify a federal Equal Rights Amendment!

But we do need to commemorate momentous steps. As we head toward August 26, 2020, please join in recognizing the centennial of women's right to vote and also the centennial of the League of Women Voters, who continue the fight to protect voting rights.

(League members have permission to use this script, adding your own phrasing if you wish, to make short presentations about the suffrage centennial and the League's founding.)