

There was no straight line to final victory. It took more than 800 campaigns before women won from men the right to vote.

The suffragists' struggle

ELLEN GOODMAN

Today it all seems inevitable. "The Cause," as they called it, the campaign for woman suffrage, seems as quaint as the clothes suffragists wore and the banners they held aloft: "Thoughts Have Gone Forth Whose Power Shall Sleep No More."

It seems incredible that there was ever a time when American women — my own grandmother — were forbidden to vote. A time when only men's opinions were, literally, counted.

To our modern ears, Susan B. Anthony's last public words — "failure is impossible" — sound less like a final defiant cry than a statement of fact. On the 75th anniversary of suffrage, Aug. 26, we have forgotten that failure wasn't impossible.

When a small band assembled in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1848 to declare that "all men and women are created equally," American women were not even allowed to keep their money in marriage or to determine the fate of their children. Nevertheless, these radicals resolved "that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise."

There was no straight line from that first declaration to final victory. It took more than 800 campaigns directed at state legislatures, at party conventions, at state referendums, and Congress before women won from men the right to vote.

No insult was ever heaped on a feminist that wasn't hurled at a suffragist. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was told by The New York Times to "attend a little more to her domestic duties." Susan B. Anthony was described, even in her Washington Post 1906 obituary, as "a leader of that circle of masculine womanhood that clamored for 'woman's rights.'"

If women voted, it was said, they would lose their femininity, the home would fall apart, children would be neglected. "Woman," wrote one newspaper, "should not unsex herself by dabbling in the filthy pool of politics." Another called woman suffrage "a half-fledged, unmusical, Promethean abomination" that would "reduce masculinity even by the obliteration of femininity."

doldrums."

It wasn't until the war years when a newly energized generation of women came with more aggressive tactics that the final countdown began. But victory was not inevitable until the very last moment in the very last state when a young Tennessee legislator heeded his mother's plea and switched sides. The amendment was ratified by one vote.

As the suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt wrote later, "Hundreds of women gave the accumulated possibilities of an entire lifetime, thousands gave years of their lives, hundreds of thousands gave constant interest and such aid as they could. It was a continuous, seemingly endless chain of activity. Young suffragists who helped forge the last links of that chain were not born when it began. Old suffragists who forged the first links were dead when it ended."

So this anniversary is not just to celebrate victory, but also the struggle. How long this took. How hard the fight.

Today, women are living in another moment of stalemate, backlash, lopsided change. The next generation of historians may describe the 1980s and '90s as our "doldrums."

Women have used "the key" the suffragists saw as the tool to unlock many doors, but we don't have the full equality they imagined at Seneca Falls.

It took two generations before women voted in equal numbers to men. Now we vote in nearly equally low numbers. It's taken 75 years to win 8 percent of the Senate seats, 11 percent of the House seats, 20 percent of the state legislature slots. Women are becoming doctors and lawyers in full proportion. But not politicians, not lawmakers, policy makers, world leaders.

Younger women today take progress for granted the way their mothers take the vote for granted. But success is easy to erode. And failure? Failure is not — ever — impossible.

Among all the fine speeches to be read this Aug. 26, maybe we need most to hear the words an aging Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke to the next generation more than 100 years ago:

"I urge the young women especially to prepare themselves to take up the work so soon to fall from our hands. You have had opportunities for education such as we had not. You hold today the chance-

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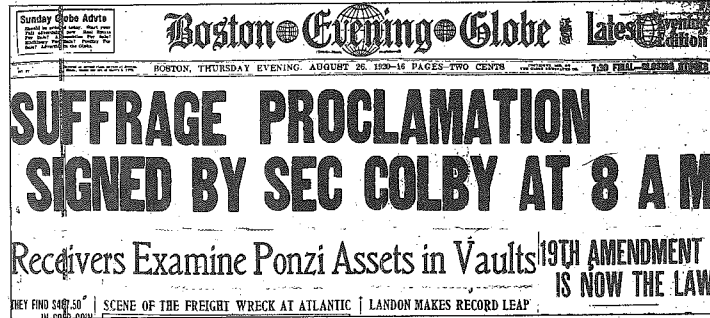
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The birth of a right

The 19th amendment to the US Constitution giving women the right to vote was adopted 75 years ago today. From the declaration that originally launched the women's suffrage movement at Seneca Falls, N.Y., to ratification by the 36th state - Tennessee - in 1920, the struggle to enfranchise women spanned generations. Below are the voices of that movement, including one dissenting voice.



"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise;

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice;

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns. . . .

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. . . .

"The last speaker alluded to this movement as being that of a few disappointed women. From the first years to which my memory stretches, I have

been a disappointed woman. When, with my brothers, I reached forth after the sources of knowledge, I was reproved with, 'It isn't fit for you, it doesn't belong to women.' . . . I was dis-

appointed when I came to seek a profession worthy of an immortal being - every profession was closed to me except those of the teacher, the seamstress and the housekeeper.

In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows to it no longer."

Lucy Stone at the National Women's Rights Convention, Oct. 17, 1855

"We saw, in broad daylight, in a public hall in the city of New York, a gathering of unsexed women - unsexed in mind all of them, and many in habiliments - publicly propounding the doctrine that that they should be allowed to step out of their appropriate sphere and mingle in the busy walks of everyday life, to the neglect of those duties which both human and divine law have assigned to them. . . . It is almost needless for us to say that these women are almost entirely devoid of personal attractions. They are generally thin maiden ladies, or women who, perhaps disappointed in their endeavors . . . to induce any old or young man into the matrimonial noose, have turned out un-

employments, and from those she is permitted to follow she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine or law she is not known. . . .

Now, in view of this entire disenfranchisement of one-half of the people in this country, their social and religious degradation, in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States."

Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions at Seneca Falls, by Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, July 19, 1848

"We are free to say that in respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for man. We go farther and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for woman. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman; and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to women the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in the making and administering the laws of her land. . . . "Right is of no sex." We therefore bid the women engaged in this movement our humble Godspeed."

Editorial by Frederick Douglass in The Northstar, July 28, 1848

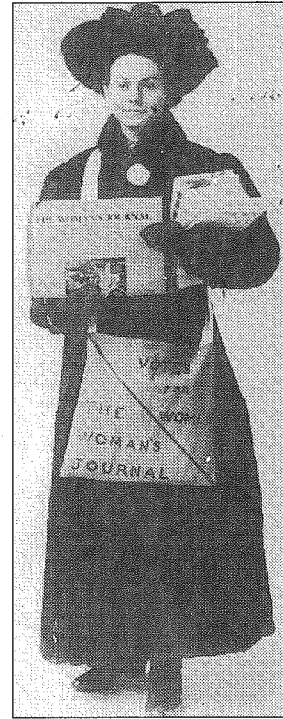
"And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have borne 13 children, and seen 'em most all sold off to slavery. And when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman? . . .

That little man in black dar, he says woman can't have as much rights as men because Christ wasn't a woman. Where do you think Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside-down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again. And now they is asking to do it, and the men better let 'em."

Sojourner Truth, speaking at Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention, May 1851

en ladies, or women who, perhaps disappointed in their endeavors . . . to induce any old or young man into the matrimonial noose, have turned out upon the world and are now endeavoring to revenge themselves upon the sex that has slighted them."

Editorial, New York Herald, 1853



GLOBE FILE PHOTO

"What is this little thing we are asking for? It seems so little, yet it is everything. What does your right to vote in this country, men and brethren, say to you? What does that right say to every possible man, native and foreign, black and white, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, drunk and sober, to every possible man outside the state prison, the idiot and the lunatic asylum? What does it everywhere under the American flag say to every man? It says: Your judgment is sound, your opinion is worthy to be counted.

And now, on the other hand, what does it say to every woman, native and foreign, black and white, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, virtuous and vicious, to every possible woman under the shadow of our flag? It says: Your judgment is not sound, your opinion is not worthy to be counted. . . .

We women cannot rise in open rebellion. Men are our fathers and brothers and husbands and sons. But we shall stand and plead and demand the right to be heard and to have our votes counted . . . until the very crack of doom, if need be."

Susan B. Anthony, in a speech before the New England Women's Suffrage Festival in Boston, May 30, 1888

"We now have 35 and a half states. The opposition of every sort in here is fighting with no scruple, desperately. . . . We believe they are buying votes. We have a poll of the House showing victory, but they are trying to break a quorum, and God only knows the outcome. We are terribly worried, and so is the other side. We hope our fate is decided this week, but God only knows that. I've been here a month. It is hot, muggy, nasty, and this last battle is desperate. We are low in our minds. Even if we win, we who have been here will never remember it with anything but a shudder."

-- Carrie Chapman Catt in a letter from Tennessee, Aug. 15, 1920

"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

Nineteenth amendment to the US Constitution, adopted Aug. 26, 1920