

The Fight for Women's Suffrage

by Judith Schiffer

At the time the United States became a nation, women citizens did not share the same rights as men, including the right to vote. While some people had pushed for women's rights for many years, it was not until 1848 that women began to organize on a large scale. They worked to create a movement to give women rights they did not have, including suffrage. Suffrage is the right to vote.

The women who organized and fought for the passage of the 19th Amendment were called "suffragists." They were called this because they were fighting to get suffrage for women. Some of the most prominent activists for women's suffrage were Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Alice Paul.



Suffrage Parade in New York City, 1913

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an activist for equality between men and women. During her lifetime, most married women were not able to do certain things because of the general belief that "a woman's place is in the home," and that only men should govern. She wanted women to be allowed to work outside the home, to participate in politics, and to be able to vote.

In 1848, Stanton and another suffragist, Lucretia Mott, created the Seneca Falls Convention, where 240 women and men met to make a plan of action to fight for new rights for women, especially the right to vote. Many other women's groups joined them, and eventually these groups established a new organization, "The National Woman Suffrage Association." These women fought to have Congress and the states pass an amendment to the United States Constitution that would give women citizens of voting age the right to vote, a "universal suffrage" amendment.

Some supporters of the universal suffrage amendment notably did not support another important suffrage amendment - the 15th amendment. That amendment guaranteed black men the right to vote, and was debated and ultimately passed after the Civil War ended. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were both in the faction of suffragists that did not support the 15th amendment, and pushed for a universal suffrage amendment instead. Other suffragists did not want to risk not passing the 15th amendment. They took their fight for women's suffrage to the state level, rather than pushing for a constitutional amendment.

Eventually, after the 15th amendment passed, these two factions laid their differences aside. In 1890, they merged to form a single group - the National American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Stanton. Although some members of this group still held prejudiced views, African American activists like Mary Church Terrell and Coralie Franklin Cook joined and influenced the organization, reminding suffragists that they could not ignore black women in their quest for the vote. The new group used tactics like organizing campaigns and suffrage organizations all around the country to build support for women's suffrage. They fought for states to give all women the right to vote, while also pushing for a constitutional amendment.

In 1913, on the day that Woodrow Wilson became the president of the United States, women and men held a huge parade in front of his new home, the White House, to rally for women's right to vote. Some women were arrested and went to jail. Some were even beaten in jail. This got many citizens angry, and many men and women began to support the suffragists' cause.

In 1916, a woman named Alice Paul founded the "National Women's Party" to take new and bold action towards getting new rights for women, especially the right to vote. From 1916 to 1920 they did things to get public attention and support for their cause. They marched in the streets with signs saying things like, "Help us to get the Vote." They gave out flyers to people on the streets explaining why this amendment should be passed. They pointed out that during World War I women proved that they were just as patriotic and deserving of being able to vote as men were.

World War I started in 1914 and ended in 1918. In 1917, the United States joined the war that was being fought in Europe. American women did many of the jobs that men could not do because men were away from home, fighting in the war. Some women worked in factories that made war weapons. Others were firefighters, railroad and bus conductors, bank tellers, farm workers, and government workers.

As part of her efforts, Alice Paul went on a hunger strike, which gained lots of public attention and support. She refused to eat until the 19th Amendment was passed. When news of her hunger strike became known, more people joined the movement for women's suffrage.

Finally, in 1919, seventy years after the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, Congress voted to pass the 19th Amendment. It was ratified, or approved, by three-fourths of the states and became law in 1920. All women in every state who were 21 years old or older would now have the right to vote!

Before the 19th Amendment was passed, many states had already given women the right to vote, and also the right to hold political positions, such as governor of their state. After the amendment became law, women in *every state* could now vote and also hold political office. We now have many women who hold high positions in state governments and the Federal Government.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who were "suffragists"?

- A. men who prevented women from voting
- B. women who helped in American war efforts
- C. women who organized and fought for the right to vote
- D. women who ran for political office

2. What does the text describe?

- A. the presidency and leadership of Woodrow Wilson
- B. a sequence of events leading up to the passage of the 19th Amendment
- C. the causes and effects of World War I
- D. people who were against the women's suffrage movement

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

"In 1913, on the day that President Woodrow Wilson became the president of the United States, women and men held a huge parade in front of his new home, the White House, to rally for women's right to vote in the United States. Some women were arrested and went to jail. Some were even beaten in jail. This got many citizens angry, and many men and women began to support the suffragists' cause."

Which conclusion does this information support?

- A. The fight for suffrage was difficult.
- B. The fight for suffrage was ineffective.
- C. The fight for suffrage was easy.
- D. The fight for suffrage did not get national attention.

4. Why did the suffragists go on hunger strikes and do other things to get public attention?

- A. to discourage people from supporting women's right to vote
- B. to get more people to support women's right to vote
- C. to show that women are physically strong
- D. to help more women realize they can be politically active

5. What is the main idea of the text?

- A. In 1848, Stanton and Lucretia Mott created the Seneca Falls Convention, where 240 women and men met to make a plan of action to fight for new rights for women.
- B. During World War I, American women did many of the jobs that men could not do because men were away from home, fighting in the war.
- C. Suffragists fought hard to increase support for women's right to vote by organizing, holding parades, and going on hunger strikes.
- D. Before the 19th Amendment was passed, many states had already given women the right to vote, and also the right to hold political positions.

6. Read the following sentences from the text.

"Many other women's groups joined them, and eventually these groups established a new organization, 'The National Woman Suffrage Association.' These women fought hard to have Congress and the states pass an amendment to the United States Constitution that would give women citizens of voting age the right to vote."

Based on the text, what does the word "establish" most nearly mean?

- A. destroy
- B. form
- C. make faster
- D. grow

7. Choose the answer that best completes this sentence below.

The National Women's Party took bold actions to get more support for women's right to vote. _____, they marched and gave out flyers to people on the streets.

- A. Therefore
- B. However
- C. Furthermore
- D. Specifically

8. What was the National American Woman Suffrage Association?

9. How did Alice Paul support the women's suffrage movement? Use information from the text to support your answer.

10. How can the suffragists best be described? Use information from the text to support your answer.
