AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Developed by Audi Hecht, Director of Education and Innovation

Women's History Month celebrates women's contributions to American society, coinciding with International Women's Day. President Jimmy Carter declared National Women's History Week the week of March 8th, proclaiming the following message. Please note that while the ERA, the Equal Rights Amendment mentioned at the end of this proclamation, was not ultimately ratified, and the 27th Amendment pertains to congressional salaries, not equal rights for women, the monumental work women championed is alive and strong.

Source 1: President Jimmy Carter (1980, March 8). Proclamation 4751—Women's History Week, 1980.

“From the first settlers who came to our shores, from the first American Indian families who befriended them, men and women have worked together to build this nation. Too often, the women were unsung, and sometimes their contributions went unnoticed. But the achievements, leadership, courage, strength, and love of the women who built America was as vital as that of the men whose names we know so well.

As Dr. Gerda Lerner has noted, “Women’s History is Women’s Right.” – It is an essential and indispensable heritage from which we can draw pride, comfort, courage, and long-range vision.”

I ask my fellow Americans to recognize this heritage with appropriate activities during National Women’s History Week, March 2-8, 1980.

I urge libraries, schools, and community organizations to focus their observances on the leaders who struggled for equality – – Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, and Alice Paul.

Understanding the true history of our country will help us to comprehend the need for full equality under the law for all our people.

This goal can be achieved by ratifying the 27th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states that “Equality of Rights under the Law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think the quote by historian Dr. Gerda Lerner, "Women's History is Women's Right" means? Which contributions of women in American history do you revere most, and why are they especially meaningful to you?
2. President Carter lists several remarkable women who have helped the future of women in America: Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, and Alice Paul. Can you identify the accomplishments of these women and women who continued to build on the work that each of them started?
3. This proclamation lists the noble characteristics of women who built America. Which additional characteristics would you add to this list?

Source 2: New Jersey Constitution of 1776, Article 4. Retrieved from NJ State Archives.

In 1776, New Jersey allowed women property owners to vote. In 1807, the New Jersey Legislature limited the right of franchise to males.

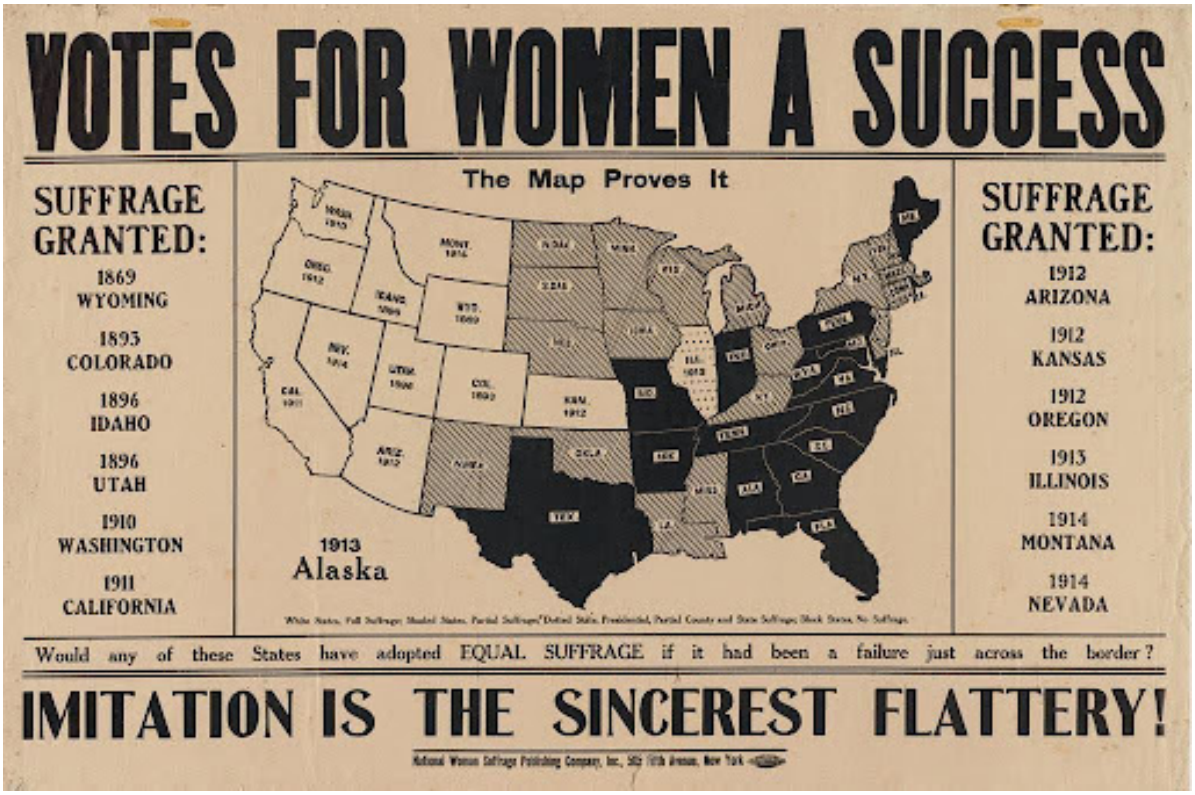
4. That all Inhabitants of this Colony of full Age, who are worth Fifty Pounds proclamation Money clear Estate in the same, & have resided within the County in which they claim a Vote for twelve Months immediately preceding the Election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council & Assembly; and also for all other publick Officers that shall be elected by the People of the County at Large.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you consider the right of propertied women to vote in early New Jersey state history as a sign of progress? Why or why not?
2. How do the voter requirements listed here differ from our Constitutional voter requirements? Can you identify all the Amendments in the US Constitution that address voting rights?

Source 3: Women's Suffrage in the US Map. National Women Suffrage Publishing Co. (1913). "Votes for Women: A Success." New York: National Women Suffrage Publishing Co.

Prior to the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, granting women's suffrage across the nation, women's right to the ballot was granted on a statewide basis.



Questions for Discussion:

1. How is our system of Federalism expressed in this map?
2. In what ways does a federal and state government model offer opportunities for progress? In what ways do you think it presents limitations?
3. What do you notice about the states that were pioneers in granting women's suffrage early on? Is there anything about our national history that sheds light on this pattern?

Source 4: Anthony, Susan B. (1872) Retrieved from historyplace.com. Excerpt

After her arrest, indictment, and conviction of voting illegally in 1872, Suffragist Susan B. Anthony embarked on a speaking tour to spread her insistence on women's right to vote. Below is an excerpt from her speech.

Is it a Crime for a Citizen of the United States to Vote?
Friends and Fellow-citizens: I stand before you to-night, under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last Presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's right, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any State to deny.

Our democratic-republican government is based on the idea of the natural right of every individual member thereof to a voice and a vote in making and executing the laws. We assert the province of government to be to secure the people in the enjoyment of their unalienable rights. We throw to the winds the old dogma that governments can give rights. Before governments were organized, no one denies that each individual possessed the right to protect his own life. liberty and property. And when 100 or 1,000,000 people enter into a free government, they do not barter away their natural rights; they simply pledge themselves to protect each other in the enjoyment of them, through prescribed judicial and legislative tribunals. They agree to abandon the methods of brute force in the adjustment of their differences, and adopt those of civilization.

Nor can you find a word in any of the grand documents left us by the fathers that assumes for government the power to create or to confer rights. The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the constitutions of the several states and the organic laws of the territories, all alike propose to protect the people in the exercise of their God-given rights. Not one of them pretends to bestow rights.
"All men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Here is no shadow of government authority over rights, nor exclusion of any from their full and equal enjoyment. Here is pronounced the right of all men, and "consequently," as the Quaker preacher said, "of all women," to a voice in the government. And here, in this very first paragraph of the declaration, is the assertion of the natural right of all to the ballot; for, how can "the consent of the governed" be given, if the right to vote be denied. Again:

"That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such forms as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

Surely, the right of the whole people to vote is here clearly implied. For however destructive in their happiness this government might become, a disfranchised class could neither alter nor abolish it, nor institute a new one, except by the old brute force method of insurrection and rebellion. One-half of the people of this nation to-day are utterly powerless to blot from the statute books an unjust law, or to write there a new and a just one. The women, dissatisfied as they are with this form of government, that enforces taxation without representation,-that compels them to obey laws to which they have never given their consent, -that imprisons and hangs them without a trial by a jury of their peers, that robs them, in marriage, of the custody of their own persons, wages and children,-are this half of the people left wholly at the mercy of the other half, in direct violation of the spirit and letter of the declarations of the framers of this government, every one of which was based on the immutable principle of equal rights to all. By those declarations, kings, priests, popes, aristocrats, were all alike dethroned, and placed on a common level politically, with the lowliest born subject or serf. By them, too, me, as such, were deprived of their divine right to rule, and placed on a political level with women. By the practice of those declarations all class and caste distinction will be abolished; and slave, serf, plebeian, wife, woman, all alike, bound from their subject position to the proud platform of equality.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Anthony use “natural rights” as an argument for women’s franchise rights?
2. How does Anthony invoke Enlightenment philosopher John Locke’s Contract Theory?
3. How does she draw connections between her predecessors who stood up to what they believed to be unjust?