NORTH CAROLINA
WOMEN
BREAKING
BARRIERS

RESOURCE TOOLKIT

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NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

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The Year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, guaranteeing and protecting women’s constitutional right to vote. Despite decades of marches, petitions, and passage of the 19th Amendment, it did not grant voting rights for all, specifically women of color. The ongoing fight for equity continues today. While we celebrate the women who led the struggle, we also honor the women who inspired them. Projects and events throughout the United States are ongoing and underway to commemorate this historic milestone.

“She Changed the World: NC Women Breaking Barriers,” an initiative by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, celebrates the achievements of North Carolina women and explores the diversity of their experiences and impact on our history.

We invite you to join us by sharing your story with #SheChangedtheWorld and #NCHerstory.
I. The 19th Amendment

From 2019-2020, the United States will celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the 19th Amendment and women’s constitutional right to vote.

Suffragists began their organized fight for women’s suffrage (meaning the “right to vote”) in 1848 when they demanded the franchise during the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. For the next 72 years, women leaders lobbied, marched, picketed, and protested for the right to the ballot. The U.S. House of Representatives finally approved the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment,” which guaranteed women the right to vote, on May 21, 1919; the U.S. Senate followed two weeks later, and then the 19th Amendment went to the states for ratification. Thirty-six states needed to approve the Amendment for it to become part of the Constitution. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th and final state needed to ratify. U.S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby issued a proclamation declaring the 19th Amendment ratified and part of the U.S. Constitution on August 26, 1920, forever protecting American women’s right to vote.

Today, more than 68 million women vote in elections because of the courageous suffragists who never gave up the fight for equality.

II. Suffrage and North Carolina

The women suffrage movement in North Carolina began in 1894 with the formation of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association in Asheville. Association president Helen Morris sought a state amendment extending the vote to women, and Senator J. L. Hyatt of Yancey County introduced a bill to this effect in the 1897 legislative session. The Senate leader, however, reflecting the sentiment of his colleagues, referred it to the Committee on Insane Asylums, where it died. Little was attempted or accomplished during the next 15 years. The state’s women suffrage movement lay dormant, as it did in much of the rest of the nation.


The movement revived in late 1913 with Gertrude Weil’s formation of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage League in Charlotte. Weil, a Smith College graduate, ran for governor in 1916. North Carolina women were not allowed to vote, but all-white male politicians thought it was an ingenious way to block her. However, Gertrude Weil’s campaign raised awareness and increased support for women’s right to vote. In April 1914, on the occasion of President Woodrow Wilson’s visit to Asheville, a crowd of 5,000 people gathered and heard a woman demand the right to vote. The United States had come a long way since 1894. The state’s women suffrage movement was no longer dormant.

The Battery Park Hotel, 1 Battle Square, at the corner of O. Henry St., Asheville, N.C. was the site of the second annual convention of the Equal Suffrage Association of N.C. held October 29, 1915. President Barbara Henderson and the other members discussed the growing interest in women’s suffrage across the state.

Postcard of Battery Park Hotel in Asheville, 1914. Western Regional Archives.
(Massachusetts) graduate, was the daughter of a German Jewish immigrant who had settled in Goldsboro just before the Civil War. She was one of the South’s “new women” who had acquired some postsecondary education, participated in a range of club activities, and enjoyed paid working experiences as the region began to modernize. The Equal Suffrage League helped develop local groups while lobbying legislators and publicizing its cause through pamphlets and speeches. In 1915 Lilian Exum Clement of Asheville started a branch of the Congressional Union, later renamed the National Woman’s Party, a more militant group determined to obtain suffrage through a federal amendment. Still, the 1915 legislature voted down all attempts to grant women the vote; representatives from the agricultural counties with the largest African American populations led the opposition. Much of the controversy over women suffrage concerned race: antisuffragists feared that allowing women to vote would increase pressure to reverse laws that prevented African Americans from voting.

As they did elsewhere, suffragists stepped up their efforts in North Carolina after the outbreak of World War I, convinced that women’s contribution to the war effort would compel President Woodrow Wilson and Congress to relent. But their activism gained little support in the General Assembly. Legislative initiatives aimed at allowing women to vote in the primaries, the municipal elections, or all elections were defeated as late as 1919. Suffrage activism, however, was more effective on the national stage. On 10 Jan. 1918 the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Nineteenth (or Susan B. Anthony) Amendment—with the affirmative vote of only one North Carolina representative, Edwin Y. Webb. In the Senate, North Carolinians Furnifold M. Simmons and Lee S. Overman joined the minority opposition in the final tally on 4 June 1919.

Congressional adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment prompted antisuffrage
organization in North Carolina in the summer of 1920, when Mary Hilliard Hinton of Wake County formed a state branch of the Southern Rejection League in Raleigh, assisted by the National Association Opposed to Women’s Suffrage. The state’s antisuffrage movement derived its strongest support from politicians eager to retain the control they had obtained after Reconstruction; the textile mill industry, which feared the impact of women’s votes on child labor issues; and railroad officials, who worried that women would target them in the progressive attack on corruption in big business. Yet the Southern Rejection League in Raleigh was a small group of perhaps only 20 active members, although Raleigh men also organized the States’ Rights Defense League at the same time. Moreover, North Carolina can claim the only southern antisuffrage journal, the State’s Defense, but this too was a last-minute affair, published only four times before the ratification battle ended.

In August 1920 Governor Thomas W. Bickett called a special session of the General Assembly to vote the Nineteenth Amendment up or down. President Wilson sent Bickett a telegram urging ratification, but the governor responded with the hope that Tennessee, then also meeting in a special convention, would relieve the pressure on North Carolina by being the thirty-sixth and final state to vote for ratification. Bickett nevertheless encouraged the legislature to ratify the amendment, arguing for a graceful accession to the inevitable. On 17 August the State Senate, by a vote of 25 to 23, postponed consideration of women suffrage until the 1921 session. After the Tennessee legislature had voted for ratification on 18 August, the North Carolina General Assembly met to consider the amendment the next day. Despite Tennessee’s approval, the General Assembly still rejected the measure by a vote of 71 to 41, arguing that women suffrage would threaten the sanctity of the family, state rights, and white supremacy. With ratification a fait accompli and thus with nothing to gain nationally, legislators sought not to alienate the prevailing antisuffrage sentiment at home. Not until 1971 did the General Assembly of North Carolina endorse the Nineteenth Amendment.
### III. Resources

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IV. Centennial Activities

Display a Suffrage Exhibit
Create an exhibit about your community’s suffrage story using the archives of state and local historical societies, libraries, and museums. Display exhibits in state capitols, city halls, town halls, museums, or other community centers.

Performances by Orchestras and Ensembles
Hold a “Women’s Vote 100” or “Suffrage Centennial” concert featuring female composers, patriotic pieces, or music from the suffrage movement, which can be found online through the Library of Congress. Record videos of full or impromptu performances to share on social media featuring women artists.

Film Screenings
Hold film screenings on capitol lawns or in parks throughout your state, featuring commercial films focused on women’s empowerment, such as A League of One’s Own, or historical dramas or documentaries focused on the women’s suffrage movement, such as Iron Jawed Angels or Suffragette.

Suffrage Art Projects
Participate in the Susan B. Anthony House’s 2020 Quilt Project, or start your own quilt or other textile project in your community. Visit the WSCC’s “Suffrage Sisters” YouTube channel to find more suffrage centennial arts & crafts activities to do with students or with your family.

Wear Suffrage Gear to Parades
March in state and community parades wearing suffrage sashes, “Votes for Women” buttons, and yellow rose pins. Carry banners in celebration of the 19th Amendment.

Provide Suffrage Gear at Events
Distribute suffrage sashes, “Votes for Women” buttons, and yellow rose pins at state and local fairs and community events.

Start a Suffrage Book Club
Form a book club that reads and discusses books about the women’s suffrage movement. Post photos of your book club group and share what you learn on social media.

Share on Social Media
Highlight your state and local suffrage stories on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram using the hashtags #SheChangedtheWorld and #NCHerstory. Share historical photographs or post photos from suffrage centennial events.

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