

## Early Movements for Women’s Suffrage

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Earlier this year, the United States celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which declared “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,” and that “Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” The suffragist movement went on for decades before the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s ratification in 1920, with famous figures such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth paving the way for the amendment and its legacy.

One of the first women to suggest women’s political representation was the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft, whose treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792. Wollstonecraft wrote, “I have already inveighed against the custom of confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments; for by thus narrowing their minds they are rendered unfit to fulfill [*sic*] the peculiar duties which nature has assigned them.” Even during the days of the Early Republic (c. 1780 – 1830), American men and women recognized the complicated relationship between politics and gender. Although there were frequent proclamations for “the rights of women” from men, American men distinguished “men’s rights involved liberties that allowed choices, while women’s rights consisted of benefits that imposed duties. Rather than an abstract, universal proposition, rights became a gendered variable” (Zagarri, 1998).

However, white middle- and upper-class women used those “imposed duties” to their political advantage and found alternative ways to let their voices be heard, even before the suffragist movement gained steam in the United States. During the American colonial era up until the Early Republic era, women’s roles in the household were mostly limited to duties such as cooking, needlework, hosting guests, and motherhood. Wealthier women were also often responsible for their young children’s education. At the Francis Land House (c. 1805), for example, Ann Gardner Land likely would have taught her two daughters Mary and Ann basic arithmetic and how to read and write. The girls likely would have also learned how to sew and other needlework crafts from their mother, as well as the qualities of a good hostess and proper etiquette, and – during the early days of the new nation – what it meant to be a good citizen.

The Lands lived during the Early Republic, and Francis Land VI served in a local militia during the War of 1812. During this exciting political period of the newfound country, politics were often discussed at the dining table, far from the social taboo it is widely considered to be today. Although lacking their right to vote, wealthier women like Ann Gardner Land would have used their hosting skills and husbands’ connections to weigh in on the pressing issues of the day. They likely had a hand in influencing their own husbands’ opinions and voting records (Berkin, 2005).



*Women's Suffrage Rally at the Virginia State Capitol, 1916. The Valentine Museum Collection, X.49.37.43*



Unfortunately, enslaved women and other women of color were left out of the conversation of women's political representation and their suffrage. Outspoken supporters of women's suffrage often likened women's inability to vote to second-class citizenship and slavery, while tiptoeing around or outright ignoring the hypocrisy of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States during the time (Zagarri, 1998). Even after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment's ratification, women of color still fought against discriminatory voting laws to ensure their constitutional rights were fulfilled and upheld. As early as the mid-1800s, activist and escaped slave Sojourner Truth spoke out in support of not only abolition, but also securing the right to vote for both formerly enslaved men and women simultaneously.

As we make plans to vote this year – and every year – it is important to recognize that women's right to vote is a fairly new concept in history, and the women before us fought to secure this right for future generations. Yet even before women's suffrage came to prominence, women used their allotted gender roles and expectations to show their influence in the political sphere.

## References

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Zagarri, Rosemarie. "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1998): 203-30.

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