

THE STORY OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN INDIANA

On Aug. 26, 1920, Hoosier women won the right to vote. At first glance, the meaning behind that statement is simple. But the real story goes much deeper.

In Indiana, almost seventy years passed between the first calls for women's voting rights and the passage of the 19th Amendment. And though momentous, 1920 is just one milestone in a long and ongoing journey, and the right to vote is just one part of what it means to be an equal part of the democratic process.

Discover the key moments in the long march to the voting booth and learn the stories of the inspiring Hoosiers who led the way.

First U.S. women's rights convention

The first women's rights convention in America, organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, takes place in Seneca Falls, New York. Stanton issues the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, which is the first document to call for women's right to vote.

First woman speaks to the Indiana General Assembly

Richmond physician Dr. Mary F. Thomas becomes the first woman to speak before the Indiana General Assembly. Thomas will guide the Indiana Woman's Suffrage Association (the group changes its name in 1870) until her death in 1888.



Women's suffrage bill passes in Indiana, but disappears from the records

The Indiana General Assembly, at the urging of May Wright Sewall's Equal Suffrage Society, passes a suffrage bill. To ensure it passes again in the 1883 session, as required by state law to amend the state constitution, Hoosier women organize letter-writing campaigns and other efforts to pressure legislators. The bill fails in 1883, however, when it mysteriously disappears from the 1881 legislative records.



Susan B. Anthony makes her case in front of the Indiana General Assembly

Susan B. Anthony speaks before the Indiana General Assembly, urging legislators to grant women the right to vote: "Make the brain under the bonnet count for as much as the brain under the hat."



Indiana women get active

The Indiana Federation of Clubs is founded; club women—racially, religiously and socioeconomically diverse—are the primary drivers of suffrage activism at the grassroots level going forward.

Women begin to lobby at the statehouse

Clarke founds a powerful lobbying group, the Legislative Council of Indiana, representing 50,000 women from across the state who lobby legislators for suffrage and other reforms even though women do not yet have the vote.



Congress approves the 19th Amendment

The U.S. House of Representatives approves the 19th Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote. With a tight contest, Indiana's Henry Barnhart is carried from his hospital bed to vote in favor of the legislation. The following year, it is passed by the U.S. Senate, but the Indiana General Assembly refuses to call a special session.

Women in Indiana and across the U.S. secure the right to vote

JANUARY 3

The Woman's Franchise League again calls for a special session; this time two-thirds of Indiana legislators agree and the session is called.

JANUARY 16

The Indiana General Assembly ratifies the 19th Amendment.

AUGUST 26

The final paperwork needed to put the suffrage amendment into effect is completed in Congress.

NOVEMBER 2

Indiana women turn out to vote in elections across the state for the first time.

1848

1851

1859

1868-69

1881-83

1894

1897

1909

1912

1914

1917

1918

1920

First Indiana women's rights convention

The first Indiana women's rights convention, organized by Randolph County's Amanda Way, a Quaker reformer, is held in Dublin. Women ask for many rights, including suffrage. The next year they form the Indiana Woman's Rights Association.

Suffragists split over 15th Amendment

Following the Civil War, the 14th and 15th Amendments, guaranteeing citizenship and equal protection to those born in the U.S., as well as universal male suffrage, are passed. Suffragists split over support for the 15th Amendment, with some arguing that white women deserve the right to vote before black men, or withholding support because the 15th Amendment inserts language about gender and rights into the Constitution for the first time.



Helen Gougar votes and takes case to the Indiana Supreme Court

Activist Helen Gougar challenges voting laws by attempting to vote. Many other women in Indiana attempt to vote that day, but only Gougar pushes her case through the courts, where she ultimately loses before the Indiana Supreme Court.

Women use high-profile tactics to gain support

The Woman's Franchise League is founded in Indianapolis by Grace Julian Clarke and Dr. Amelia Keller. Clarke, seeing that 60-plus years of direct appeals to legislators haven't worked, pushes instead for direct action, organizing motor car rallies, parades and other high-profile activities to build mass support for women's suffrage.



African American women join the fight

Branch No. 7 of the Equal Suffrage Association, comprised of African American members, is founded in the Indianapolis home of Madam C.J. Walker. F.B. Ransom is named first chapter president, but he immediately resigns and hands duties over to a woman, Carrie Barnes Ross. African American suffrage groups are also documented in Marion and Muncie.

Auto tours ignite support

The first auto tours promoting suffrage, organized by the Women's Franchise League, take place in Hamilton County; the auto tours represent the use of new technology and new grassroots tactics in the long campaign for voting rights.

Indiana women again win right to vote, then lose it

The Indiana General Assembly passes the Maston-McKinley Partial Suffrage Act, which would allow women to start voting in some state and local elections, and a bill calling for a suffrage amendment to the state constitution. Thousands of women across the state rush out to register to vote. However, men opposed to suffrage bring lawsuits, claiming that the extra poll workers and separate ballot boxes to accommodate women voters and the cost of a special convention would constitute an undue burden to taxpayers. The Indiana Supreme Court agrees, and Hoosier women lose the right to vote just a few days before the 1917 municipal elections.



Photo credits: Dr. Mary F. Thomas (Rutgers University, compliments of Elaine Gepford and the Mincer Family Descendants), May Wright Sewall (Library of Congress), Helen Gougar (Tippecanoe County Historical Association), Susan B. Anthony (Library of Congress), Madam C.J. Walker (Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society) and Grace Julian Clarke (Indiana State Library)