“We Stand on their Shoulders”

A History of Wisconsin Women and Voting

At the founding of the United States, only land-owning white men over the age of 21 could vote in the vast majority of states. In the centuries since, other people won the right to vote. Major voting victories include the 15th Amendment, suffrage for all male citizens regardless of race, and the 19th Amendment, suffrage for women. These amendments deserve celebrations, but dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and citizenship complicate these laws.

“Stones wear away with constant dropping. So do prejudices, which are much tougher.”
—Theodora Winton Youmans, Wisconsin suffragist, 1921

Theodora Winton Youmans, president of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association, poses in one of the tunics worn by Wisconsinites at the suffrage parade she led during the Republican National Convention in Chicago in June 1916.

WHI Image 1927
“It Is Coming as the Harvest Follows the Patient”

A Timeline of Wisconsin’s Suffrage History

1846 - The 1st Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York

1847 - The American Anti-Slavery Society hosts the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

1848 - Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments is adopted.

1870 - The 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution is ratified, granting African American men the right to vote.

1874 - The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution is ratified, granting American men the right to vote.

1884 - The 14th and 15th Amendments do not apply to Elk, an Indigenous man living in Omaha, Nebraska, and born on tribal lands.

1893 - Indian citizenship is granted to all people born in United States territory.

1897 - The Indian Citizenship Act grants citizenship to all people born in United States territory.

1900 - Senator David James of Richland Center introduces a bill in 1911 that would give Wisconsin women full suffrage. It passes in the assembly but is voted down 135,736 to 227,054.

1904 - Senator James of Richland Center reports to the proper bureau in Washington, DC, to file Wisconsin's ratification documents. Wisconsin becomes the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment.

1911-1912 - Post-Civil War women in Wisconsin host the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

1912 - Wisconsin suffrage convention in Janesville.

1914 - Reverend Olympia Brown tests the school suffrage law and attempts to vote in a municipal election that impacts school matters. The Wisconsin Supreme Court decides to vote in a municipal election that impacts school matters.

1917 - World War I begins in Europe.

1919 - The 19th Amendment is ratified, granting women the right to vote.

1920 - The 26th Amendment is ratified, granting nineteen-year-olds the right to vote.

1924 - In Elk v. Wilkins, the US Supreme Court decides that the 15th Amendment does not apply to American Indians born in United States territory. In states that have purposefully excluded American Indians born in United States territory from voting, state action is required.

1930 - The Voting Rights Act is passed, prohibiting all states and local governments from imposing any voting law that results in discrimination against racial or language minorities.

1965 - The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is strengthened, specifically by banning the use of tests used to discriminate against voters.

1966 - The US Constitution, which would give women the right to vote.

1967 - The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is strengthened, specifically by banning the use of tests used to discriminate against voters.

1970 - The 26th Amendment is strengthened, specifically by strengthening the right of the voting age to 18.

1971 - Special provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are extended to include a general prohibition on discriminatory voting laws.

1975 - Wisconsin becomes the seventh state to ratify the 15th Amendment, granting all male citizens the right to vote.

Learn more at WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY! womeninwisconsin.org/Timeline
“I Received a Signed Statement that Wisconsin was First”

Wisconsin Ratifies the 19th Amendment

Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois all ratified the 19th Amendment on June 10, 1919. Wisconsin then sent 76-year-old former state senator David James, the husband of suffragist Laura James and father of political leader Ada James, racing to Washington, DC, to file the official paperwork.

Thirty-six states had to ratify the 19th Amendment before women could vote. Women officially gained their right on August 26, 1920.

“I received a signed statement that Wisconsin was first... just in time for the entrance of the messenger from Illinois. He walked up and slapped his papers down on the table. ‘I’ve brought papers to show Illinois was first,’ he said, and was interrupted by our peals of laughter.”

—David James, 1919
“Wisconsin is Already in Advance of Most Other States”

Passing the Equal Rights Amendment of 1921

“Women shall have the same rights and privileges under the law as men in the exercise of suffrage, freedom of contract, choice of residence for voting purposes, jury service, holding office, holding and conveying property, care and custody of children and in all other respects.” So read Wisconsin’s Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), signed into law by Governor John Blaine in 1921. In 1922, 9 states tried to pass similar legislation, but all failed. Unfortunately, generalities in the Wisconsin ERA’s language made the law basically meaningless.

“This makes Wisconsin the only spot in the United States where women have, or ever have had since the beginning of our country, full equality with men.”

—ERA advocate Alice Paul congratulating Wisconsin National Woman’s Party Chair Mabel Raef Putnam, 1921
"Declared to be Citizens of the United States"

**Affirming American Indian Suffrage**

Prior to Wisconsin statehood, Native women played varying key roles within their respective communities. For example, Ho-poe-kaw (Glory of the Morning) led the largest Ho-Chunk village for 40 years starting around 1727 and is one of the first women noted in the written record of Wisconsin.

The 1848 Wisconsin Constitution extended the vote to American Indian men if they were citizens of the United States. However, American Indians not considered citizens were denied the voting rights provided by the federal 15th and 19th Amendments. Finally, in 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act declared all people born within the territorial limits of the United States to be citizens, extending suffrage to all American Indians and providing them with the right to vote in US elections while also retaining tribal citizenship to sovereign Native nations.

"It is a cause of astonishment to us that you white women are only now, in this twentieth century, claiming what has been the Indian woman's privilege as far back as history traces."

—Oneida Nation member Laura Cornelius Kellogg, 1915
“No Voting Qualification or Prerequisite to Voting”

Protecting Voting Rights

Despite previous legislation, many state laws and regulations still kept people from the polls in the mid-1900s. These laws, sometimes called Jim Crow Laws, required individuals to pay additional taxes, take literacy tests, perform memorization tasks, and more in order to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, part of a larger civil rights movement in which Wisconsin women were active, banned any voting law that discriminated against racial or language minorities. Further legislation in 1970, 1975, and 1982 reaffirmed and strengthened voting protections.

My mother and father were always involved in some kind of organization for the betterment of people . . . especially my mother—ooh! My father was the worker but my mother was out there.”

—Milwaukee-based activist Shirley Butler, 2007

Bernice Lindsay posing with the street sign named after her, 1967.

Bernice Lindsay worked as an activist and community leader in Milwaukee. In 1957, she was appointed to the Governor’s Council on Human Rights.

WHI IMAGE ID: 118870


Nelson donated the artifacts on the table so the Wisconsin Historical Society could better tell the stories of the Civil Rights movement in Wisconsin. Rozga and Nelson are activists from Milwaukee.

Columns, Wisconsin Historical Society, May–July 2017

“‘No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting’ — Public Law 89-110, Voting Rights Act of 1965, Eighty-ninth Congress of the United States of America

Pages from a literacy test used in Louisiana ca. 1963.

Courtesy of Civil Rights Movement Veterans
Women Will Have to Make as Hard a Struggle for Positions in our Governing Bodies as We Did for Suffrage

Wisconsin’s Women Leaders

Belle Case La Follette speaking outdoors, 1919.
Belle Case La Follette was the wife and political teammate of Robert M. La Follette, Sr. Upon her husband’s death in 1925, she was offered his seat in the United States Senate, but she turned down the opportunity, which would have made her Wisconsin’s first woman senator. It would take almost 90 years before a woman represented Wisconsin in the US Senate.

Wisconsin Secretary of State Vel Phillips, 1979.
Vel Phillips served as a Milwaukee Common Council member, Milwaukee County judge, and Wisconsin secretary of state. She was the first woman and first African American to serve in each of these positions.

Doris Oyette Emery addressing the Tribal Council, 1974.
Doris Oyette Emery held various positions including councilperson, tribal judge, chief judge of the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, health director, housing authority director, and tribal administrator.

Doris Oyette Emery addressing the Tribal Council, 1974.

Wisconsin’s Women Leaders

Each generation is accountable, at least, from birth for the next 200 years. It is a perpetual state of responsibility held in common by each new generation.”

—First Nations organizer Denise Sweet, 2019
Women have voted in higher numbers than men in every election since 1964. In 2018, about 10 million more women than men reported as registered voters. Yet only 55% of eligible women and 51.8% of eligible men cast ballots in the November 2018 midterm election.

The 19th Amendment was a watershed moment that future movements built upon, and the fight for voting rights continues. Today, questions surrounding citizenship, identification, and gerrymandering, among other issues, are being discussed. Generations of Americans have fought for access to the polls. Stand on their shoulders and let your voice be heard.

“Actions are being taken to collect, preserve, and share the stories of Wisconsin women in history. To learn more visit wisconsinhistory.org/votesforwomen.”

“Continuing to Fight for Voting Rights”

“We Stand on their Shoulders”

Wisconsin Assembly Joint Resolution 30, 2019.

On April 25, 2019, a bipartisan effort recognized the work and legacy of Wisconsin suffragists.

Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2018.

In 2018, 6 of the 7 justices were women, including the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Patience Roggensack. Justices in Wisconsin are elected to serve 10-year terms.

Trumelia Ruth Shank and Mary Kae Nelson, members of the League of Women Voters, 2016.

Founded on February 14, 1920, the League is still active today as a nonpartisan organization promoting women’s political platforms.

Wisconsin Supreme Court

Trumelia Ruth Shank and Mary Kae Nelson, members of the League of Women Voters, 2016.