



Episode Four | TRANSCRIPT

Maine and the 19th Amendment



HOSTED BY:

League of Women Voters of Maine
Featuring Shenna Bellows

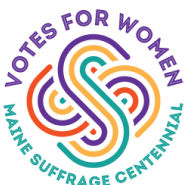


MARKER LOCATION:

Maine State House
Augusta, Maine

lwvme.org/SuffrageTrail

- 0:22 You're listening to the "Road to the 19th Amendment" podcast, and we're telling the story of Maine's suffragists, and bringing this history the recognition it deserves. This project is made possible by the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative, chaired by Ellen Alderman, led by Anne Gass, and with support from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation and other donors like you.
- 0:53 The episode covers the Nineteenth Amendment, the story told by Shenna Bellows, our current Secretary of State.
- 1:05 I'm Shanna Bellows, Maine's fiftieth Secretary of State and first female Secretary of State. Suffrage in Maine started as early as the 1850s. Early on, Maine suffragists invited national speakers, like Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone, to come to Maine, and there are records of their visits to our state in the Maine state archives as early as 1854.
- 1:35 Shortly thereafter, women started organizing, forming local groups in cities and towns across the state, including my hometown of Ellsworth, and that activism continued for more than 65 years until we finally saw passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the right to vote, at least from white women. Unfortunately, here in Maine, Native American women were denied the right to vote until the mid-1950s.
- 2:09 The strategies that suffragists use to lobby for voting rights at the state level look a lot like strategies we employ today: public education, community organizing, petitions to the legislature, and legislative efforts, including public hearings, and resolutions, marches, referendum campaigns, an old-fashioned canvassing with leafleading and putting up posters and signs.
- 2:41 The public education started in the 1850s. For example, in Ellsworth, there was a lecture series that started in 1857. They had house parties.

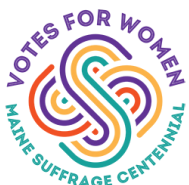


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One of my favorite examples are Women's Rights balls. But, you know, when you look at some of the later history, for example in 1917, when there was a statewide suffrage referendum that unfortunately was defeated, there were more than 500 meetings in private homes. They also had a series of conventions. So there was a women's suffrage convention in 1873 in Augusta with literally hundreds of attendees.

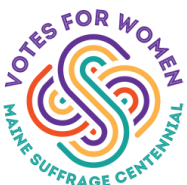
- 3:17 I want to speak for a moment about the organizing. There were very diverse suffrage organizations. They tended to be more fragmented than we see today. You saw, for example, the formation of Equal Rights Rockland in 1868. There was the Maine Women's Suffrage Association that came later in the 1870s. There was a college equal suffrage league, a men's equal suffrage league, the National Women's Part. There were a variety of groups across the state.
- 3:47 Talking about the efforts to win suffrage state-by-state versus amending the U.S. Constitution, unfortunately, that debate served to prevent progress on suffrage nationally. Sometimes states would tell women to go to Congress, and then Congress would say, "No this is the State's Issue," and unfortunately, many states had very conservative laws on amending their constitutions which also served to thwart progress.
- 4:16 Repeated defeats at the state level led many suffragists in Maine to turn their efforts to work on the federal amendment. They worked for both the national American Women Suffrage Association and the National Women's Party. Gail Laughlin, who is the first woman to practice law in the state of Maine and later became, means, the first woman elected to Maine Senate in 1929. She served, for example, as the Vice President of the National Women's party. Now interestingly enough, this tension was manifest in terms of the timing of ratification and women in Maine's very first vote. Maine was the nineteenth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment in November 1919.
- 5:03 However, it's important to note that we needed to wait for enough states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment until it can be formally added to the United States Constitution. That didn't take place until August of 1920. The very first general election in which Maine women were allowed to vote was September of 1920. Suffragists at the State level had worked hard to put a question about presidential suffrage on the statewide ballot. So one of the first votes Maine women took was on the issue, of suffrage in September of 1920. The referendum passed easily.



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- 5:54 I would like to quote from the opponents, because it's just so indicative of some of the sentiments at the time, and some of the sexism we continue to hear today, unfortunately. So this is a quote from a pamphlet published in 1915 by the Maine association opposed to suffrage. Keep in mind opponents of suffrage organized in the same way as proponents of suffrage. So here's the quote, and it is very objectionable.
- 6:27 Quote: "Opponents of suffrage believe that political life, for its antagonisms, its jealousies, its excitements, its strivings, would be unmendable to the repose of life, which is essential to women's nature, and she would bring to her task that poise of nervous and physical strength, which ensures the best development of the race which she bears." End quote.
- 6:56 So there's saying, essentially, that women can't handle the nastiness of politics, and that it might undermine her role as mother and wife. These arguments are arguments that we hear today against women's equality. Sometimes, essentially, it's "Don't worry your pretty little head." There were also arguments made, at sometimes, that women didn't want the right to vote, and that the right to vote shouldn't be forced on them. Arguments that today sound so incredibly absurd. But we need to recognize the fight for women's equality is not over. We continue to see that in the fight for bodily autonomy and women's health care, including the right to abortion,
- 7:45 It cannot be overemphasize [that] the efforts of people dedicated to equality and suffrage for all [took] over more than 65 years of dedicated activism contributed to this victory. They never gave up. They never took no for an answer. For example, in the wake of the 1917 referendum loss, leaders of the movement here in Maine didn't give up and go home. They dedicated themselves to building greater political power. They brought more limited suffrage issues to the legislature to move forward with incremental progress and wins. They continued to bring about pressure on elected leaders.
- 8:26 So for example, when United States Senator Frederick Hale of Maine, refused to vote for suffrage, citing the 1917 referendum loss is the reason for his vote, Florence Brooks Whitehouse and Alice Paul really turned out the heat, lobbying him to change his mind. They Secured signatures from three-quarters of the state Legislature to sign a petition calling on Senator Hale to change his vote. The victory really was the combination of years of hard work, and it's really touching. I



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think what it meant for women is that they were finally able to vote. And after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment when Maine women went to vote in their first election — the General Election that year was held on September thirteenth — they were able to vote for the Presidential Suffrage Bill [that] they placed on the Maine ballot, and it passed easily.

- 9:26 The marker is located between the Maine State House and the cultural building that houses the Maine State Museum, the Maine Library, and Maine State Archives, which holds the precious documents, including the multiple petitions, signed by people dedicated to suffrage that were presented to the Legislature.
- 9:48 So the marker is placed between the entity that houses the history of suffrage in our state and the State House where suffrage was finally passed, but that also embodies the future of women’s equality. It’s a really significant location to have this marker in our state’s capital, at the center of political activity, in the very place that there was so much suffrage activity, so many legislative hearings, bills and resolutions introduced, and finally ratification.
- 10:24 And for me, as Maine’s first female Secretary of State, the Marker represents part of the journey in th fight for equality that continues today. Personally, I find it a very beautiful spot. It’s right on the edge of a small park built for reflection and contemplation, and to sit in that park, to see the marker between a building that represents our past and a building where our future is shaped, is particularly meaningful.



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Bio.

Maine and the 19th Amendment

In 1854 Sen. Thomas McCulloch Hayes of Saco asked the Maine legislature to consider women’s voting rights. This was followed, in 1857, by a petition authored by national suffrage leaders Alice Blackwell, Lucy Stone, and Antoinette Rose. This was the first “memorial” (petition) to the Maine Legislature. No action was taken.

These earliest attempts to win woman suffrage through state action were followed by petitions submitted at least 12 more times, in 1869, 1870, 1872, 1883, 1887, 1895, 1901, 1905, 1907, 1909, 1911, 1913, and 1915. All of these petitions were considered in some fashion by the legislature in the Maine State House, at its current location in Augusta, Maine.

Some years, there would be hearings in front of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary, followed by votes in each respective chamber. It wasn’t until 1917 that the legislature passed a full suffrage bill with the two-thirds majorities needed to send it to voters. Sadly, Maine’s first-ever suffrage referendum was soundly defeated.

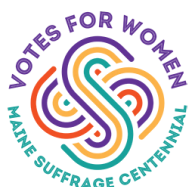
The US Congress approved the 19th Amendment in June 1919, and sent the measure to the states for ratification. Maine Governor Carl Milliken called the legislature into special session on November 4 and 5 for the ratification vote. Despite some last minute machinations from the anti-suffragists, the measure passed the Senate easily on November 4th with a two-thirds majority. The following day, following some vigorous arm twisting by National Woman’s Party Chair Alice Paul and

Maine suffrage leader Florence Brooks Whitehouse, it squeaked through the House with only four votes to spare. Maine became the 19th state to ratify the 19th Amendment, in November 1919.

Thus, it was not until the 19th Amendment was fully ratified that most Maine women won the right to vote (Native Americans would not be fully enfranchised until 1967). Over the years, the Maine State House was the primary focus of women’s efforts to win voting rights through state action, to lobby the legislature to pressure Maine’s US Senator Frederick Hale to support passage of the federal suffrage measure, and, finally, to ratify the 19th Amendment.

Currently, there is very little evidence of women’s history in the Maine State House. In an effort to rectify this, on February 27, 2020 the Legislative Council gave its unanimous approval to a Pomeroy Foundation suffrage marker to be placed in a prominent position on the State House grounds. This fulfills a goal of the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative and the Legislative Council to have a marker honoring women’s fight for suffrage at the State House.

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