

Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment

By Rosemary H. Knower

The original production of *Failure is Impossible* occurred on August 26, 1995, for the [National Archives commemoration](#) of the 75th anniversary of the 19th amendment.

Cast of Characters:

Narrator1, 2, 3, 4

Reader #1

Reader #2

Reader #3

Each reader portrayed several different people in the suffrage movement. However, a teacher could also assign different students to read the part of each individual.

In order of appearance:

Abigail Adams

Sarah Grimke

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Frederick Douglass

Susan B. Anthony

Sojourner Truth

Frances Gage

Lucy Stone

Clara Barton

Mr. Reagan, of Texas

Mary Ware Dennett

Harriot Stanton Blatch

Woodrow Wilson

Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Schuler

Based on Eyewitness Accounts and Original Documents

Narrator 1 & 2 talking together.

Narrator 1: August 20, 2017, is the ninety-seventh anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote.

Narrator 2: Wait a minute, the country is two hundred and forty-one years old, and women have only been voting for 97 years? What's the problem here?

Narrator 1: The problem began with the words of the Founding Fathers. Not the ones they put **in**. The ones they left out. In 1776, when John Adams sat with a committee of men in Philadelphia, writing the Declaration of Independence, he got a letter from his wife, Abigail:

Abigail Adams (writing a letter): John, in the new code of laws . . . remember the ladies. . . . Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. . . . We . . . will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.

Narrator 1: But when the Founding Fathers sat down to write the Declaration and the Constitution, they left out one critical word: "Women." Nearly sixty years later, when Sarah and Angelina Grimke spoke to state legislatures about the evils of slavery, their actions were denounced from the pulpit as contrary to God's law and the natural order.

Reader #2 (pastoral letter): The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from that weakness God has given her for her protection. When she steps into the place and takes the tone of a man as a public campaigner, her character becomes unnatural, and the way is opened for wickedness and deterioration.

Narrator 2: Sarah Grimke had an answer for that.

Sarah Grimke: What is this distinction between the duties of men and women as decent people? A quality that would be considered an Asset in men is Evil in women?! All I ask of our fellow mankind is that they take their feet off our necks and permit us to stand upright.

Narrator 1: In 1848 a group of women organized the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. It took great courage. In the 1840s respectable women did not even speak in public, let alone call meetings. Elizabeth Cady Stanton said later:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: We felt as helpless and hopeless as if we had suddenly been asked to construct a steam engine.

Narrator 2: But they were determined. They rewrote the Declaration of Independence.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men **and women** are created equal . . ."

Narrator 2: And they called for equal rights under the law. At the convention, abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke in favor of women voting. Reporting the resolutions of the convention in his newspaper, The North Star, he said:

Frederick Douglass: In respect to political rights . . . there can be no reason in the world for denying to a woman the ability and right to vote.

(Narrator 3 & 4 have joined 1 & 2)

Narrator 3: In the 1850s, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone led a group of courageous women who plunged headlong into the fight for abolition - the fight against slavery - and universal suffrage. They formed the American Equal Rights Association (AERA). One newspaper criticized them as:

Reader #1 (Newspaper editor): Shriveled and fossilized females, having no domestic duties, habits, and natural loves.

Narrator 4: In fact, most of the women were married, with children. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote suffrage speeches while nursing her sixth child, a daughter who would grow up and continue her mother's work. When the Civil War began in 1861, suffragists postponed their campaign for the vote to give full attention to the national crisis. Annie T. Wittenmeyer was appointed superintendent of all army diet kitchens. Mary Walker served as the first female surgeon. Louisa May Alcott and thousands of other women served as nurses. Anna Ella Carroll was one of Lincoln's advisers on strategy.

In 1865, when the war was over, and Congress debated an amendment to give freed slaves the right to vote, the suffragists petitioned Congress to include women, too.

Susan B. Anthony: We represent fifteen million people—one-half the entire population of the country—and the Constitution classifies us as "free people," yet we are governed without our consent, bound to pay taxes without appeal, and punished for violations of law without judge or juror. You are now amending the Constitution, and . . . placing new safeguards around the individual rights of four million emancipated slaves. We ask that you extend the right of suffrage to women—the only remaining class of disfranchised citizens—and thus fulfill your constitutional obligation.

Narrator 3: Sojourner Truth, whose speech "Ain't I a Woman?" had so moved the Equal Rights Convention in 1851, spoke again in 1867 for women's right to vote.

Sojourner Truth: I . . . speak for the rights of colored women. I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is cracked. . . . You have been having our rights for so long, that you think, like a slaveholder, that you own us.

Frances Gage: Suffragist Frances Gage wrote, "Fifty-two thousand pulpits in this country have been teaching women the lesson that has been taught them for centuries, that they must not **think** about voting. But when fifty-two thousand pulpits at the beginning of this war, lifted up their voices and asked of women, 'come out and help us' did women stand back? In every home in the whole United States, women rose up and went to **work for the nation.**"

Narrator 3: But in spite of the petitions and the passion, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were silent on the issue of voting rights for women. Nevertheless, the suffragists would not give up. In 1869 Lucy Stone sent out "An Appeal to the Men and Women of America":

Lucy Stone: Get every man or woman to sign [this petition] who is not satisfied while women, idiots, felons, and lunatics are the only classes excluded from the exercise of the right of suffrage. Let the great army of working-women, who wish to secure a fair day's wages for a fair day's work, Sign It. Let the wife, from whom the law takes the right to what she earns, Sign It. Let the mother, who has no legal right to her own children, Sign It . . .

Narrator4: Civil War nurse Clara Barton spoke at the Suffrage Convention in 1870:

Clara Barton: Brothers, when you were weak, and I was strong, I toiled for you. Now you are strong, and I ask your help. I ask the ballot for myself and all women. As I stood by you, I pray you stand by me and mine.

Narrator 3: When the Senate considered "**The Woman Question**" again in 1872, the same tired old arguments were raised to oppose women voting.

Mr. Reagan, of Texas: I hope sir, that it will not be considered ungracious in me that I oppose the will of any lady. But when she so far misunderstands her duty as to want to go to working on the road and serving in the army, I want to protect her against it. [Should] we attempt to overturn the social status of the world as it has existed for 6,000 years?!?

Narrator 4: The congressman from Texas wasn't the only lawmaker who argued that if the Founding Fathers had meant women to vote, they would have said so directly. Elizabeth Cady Stanton responded:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women did vote in America at the time the Constitution was adopted. If the Framers of the Constitution meant they should not, why did they not distinctly say so? The women of the country, having at last roused up to their rights and duties as citizens, have a word to say. . . . It is not safe to leave the "intentions" of the [Founding] Fathers, or of the Heavenly Father, wholly to masculine and manly interpretation.

Narrator 1: Congress appointed a committee to study the floods of petitions arriving daily from women. This is how it worked:

Feeler Feelix," Cracker-Barrel Philosopher: Women's petitions are generally referred to a fool committee of fools, . . . carefully laid on the floor of the committee room to be a target at which to shoot tobacco juice. And the committee man who can hit the mark oftenest is regarded as having done the most to kill the petition. . . .

Narrator 2: Even the President of the United States remained indifferent to the poignant arguments of the suffragists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton said of President Rutherford Hayes:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: In President Hayes's last message, he reviews the interests of the Republic, from the army [and] the navy to . . . the crowded condition of the mummies, dead ducks and fishes in the Smithsonian Institution. Yet [he] forgets to mention twenty million women citizens robbed of their social, civil, and political rights. Resolved, that a committee be appointed to wait upon the President and remind him of the existence of one-half of the American people whom he has accidentally overlooked.

Narrator 2: The pioneer women who were then settling the West had no intention of being overlooked. Women in the territory of Wyoming won the vote in 1869, followed shortly by women in the neighboring territories of Utah, Colorado, and Idaho. When Wyoming applied for statehood in 1890, a furious block of senators opposed its admission because it allowed women to vote. The senator from Tennessee called it "a reform against nature" and predicted it would "unsex and degrade the women of America." But Wyoming's citizens refused to give in. Their legislature cabled back to Washington:

Wyoming legislator: "We will remain out of the Union a hundred years rather than come in without our women!"

Narrator 1: Encouraging words, but as the years of struggle rolled by, the women of Seneca Falls realized that they would not live to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: We are sowing winter wheat, which other hands than ours will reap and enjoy.

Narrator 2: Twenty-four hours before she died, in 1902, Stanton dictated this plea to Theodore Roosevelt:

Stanton: Mr. President, Abraham Lincoln immortalized himself by the emancipation of four million slaves. Immortalize yourself by bringing about the complete emancipation of thirty-six million women.

Narrator 4: By 1900, over three million women worked for wages outside the home, often in hazardous and exploitative conditions, often with their children beside them at the machinery. They needed the ballot to give them a voice in making labor laws. In the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, 146 workers were killed trying to escape an unsafe building into which they had been locked to keep them at work. Suffragist Mary Ware Dennett wrote:

Mary Ware Dennett: It is enough to silence forever the selfish idiotic drivel of the anti-suffragists who say that working women can safely trust their welfare to their "natural protectors"!!? Trust the men who allow seven hundred women to sit wedged between the machines, in a ten-story building with no outside fire escapes, and the exits shuttered and locked? We claim in no uncertain voice that the time has come when women should have the one efficient tool with which to make for themselves decent and safe working conditions—the ballot.

Narrator 2: Working women flocked to the suffragist banner. With this new army of supporters, **women succeeded** in putting suffrage on the states' agendas.

Reader #1: (with emphasis) In 1912 the suffrage referendum was passed in Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon.

Reader #2: (sadly) Defeated in Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin . . .

Narrator 1: In 1913, **five thousand** women marched down Pennsylvania Avenue on the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, asking for the vote. They were mobbed by a hostile crowd.

Reader #1: (victoriously) In 1914 the suffrage referendum **passed in Montana and Nevada.**

Reader #2: (sadly) Defeated in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri.

Reader #1: (sadly) 1915. The suffrage referendum failed in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.

Reader #3: (with optimism) In Massachusetts, the saloons handed out pink tickets printed with "Good for Two Drinks if Woman Suffrage is Defeated."

Narrator 2: When the United States entered World War I in 1917, women were urged, once again, to put aside their cause for the war effort. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter reminded them:

Harriot Stanton Blatch: The suffragists of Civil War days gave up their campaign to work for their country, expecting to be enfranchised in return for all their good services. . . .

They were told they must wait. Now in 1917, women [are] still waiting.

Narrator 3: But the suffragists of 1917 had **read** history. They worked for the war, and they continued to work for the vote. While women in unprecedented numbers entered war service, standing in for soldiers in factories and on farms, they also held mass meetings, handed out countless leaflets, sponsored parades, plays, lectures, and teas—anything to get the arguments for women's suffrage before the public.

Reader #2: One suffragist said, "Some days I got up at 5:30 and did not get home until midnight, going from office to office, talking the question out."

Reader #3 (eyewitness article): In New York, 1,030,000 women signed a petition asking for the right to vote. The petitions were pasted on placards borne by women marchers in a suffrage parade. The procession of the petitions alone covered more than half a mile.

Narrator 1: Other suffragists turned to the militant tactics of the Women's Party. They picketed outside the White House, keeping their vigil in rain and cold. This was a new tactic in 1917! The police finally arrested them for "obstructing traffic." One eyewitness described the arrests:

Reader #2 (Suffragist): An intense silence fell. The watchers . . . saw not only younger women, but white-haired grandmothers, hoisted into the crowded patrol [wagon], their heads erect, and their frail hands holding tightly to the banner until [it was] wrested from them by brute force.

Narrator 2: Other suffrage organizations lobbied, appealed to every state, and canvassed every legislature while the White House pickets kept public attention focused on the issue. Finally, in 1917, at the height of the First World War, President Wilson spoke to urge the Congress to act on suffrage:

Woodrow Wilson: This is a people's war. They think that democracy means that women shall play their part alongside men, and upon an equal footing with them. If we reject measures like this, in ignorant defiance of what a new age has brought forth, they will cease to follow us or trust us.

Narrator 3: In January of 1918, the Nineteenth Amendment to give women the right to vote came before the House:

Carrie Chapman Catt: Down the roll-call, name by name. The voice of the Clerk droned. Mann of Illinois and Barnhart of Indiana had come from hospital beds to vote for suffrage; Sims of Tennessee came, in agony from a broken shoulder, to vote yes; Hicks of New York came from his wife's deathbed to keep his promise to her and vote for suffrage.

Nettie Rogers Schuler: (emphasize the words somewhat slowly) Yes—No—name-by-name came the vote. It was close, but it was enough.

Reader #1: When the vote was over, the corridors filled with smiling, happy women. On the way to the elevators a woman began to sing, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow," with the words of the suffragists:

(Sweet Adelines sing:)

Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow

Praise Him All Women Here Below—

(They continue singing, softly)

Narrator 3: Despite this monumental triumph, the suffragists still had much work to do. It would be another year before the Senate passed the suffrage amendment, and another year beyond that before the necessary thirty-six states would ratify it. Finally, on August 26, 1920, seventy-five years ago today, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women throughout the nation the right to vote.

At the last Suffrage Convention of 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt spoke to the joyful women:

Carrie Chapman Catt: (with victorious passion and emphasis)

Ours has been a movement with a soul, ever leading on. Women came, women served, and women passed on, but other women came to take their places. Who shall say that all the hosts of the millions of women who have toiled and hoped and met delay are not here today, and joining in the rejoicing? Their cause has won.

Be glad today.

Let your joy be unconfined. Let it speak so clearly that its echo will be heard around the world.

[Let] it find its way into the soul of every woman . . . who is longing for the opportunity and liberty still denied her.

Let your voices ring out the gladness in your hearts! . . .

Let us sing, together, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee . . .

(Sweet Adelines begin "My Country 'Tis of Thee" on this cue; the audience joins in:)

My Country 'Tis of Thee,

Sweet Land of Liberty,

Of Thee I Sing.

Land Where My Fathers Died

Land of My Mothers' Pride
From Every Mountainside
Let Freedom Ring.

© 1995 by Rosemary H. Knower. No permission or royalty fees are required for educational uses of this script. Commercial Users: Please apply to the playwright: 13841 Willoughby Road, Upper Marlboro, MD 20772, for permission and royalty fees. A fully annotated version of the script is available on request.