

Suffrage Movement Worth Celebrating in Spite of Flaws

Christine Nobles Heller Published 6:00 a.m. ET Sept. 14, 2017



From left, Carrie Chapman Catt, Harriet Tubman and Mary Garrett Hay. Drawings of these and other notable New York suffragists by Christine Nobles Heller can be viewed at The History Center from Sept. 23 to Nov. 4. (Photo: Provided photo)

In the past eight months, I made a series of drawings to honor suffragists from New York state to celebrate the centennial of the women's right to vote here in New York.

I used crayon pencil on archival mylar, which was then used to create a small edition of original lithographic prints by master printer Tim Sheesley, at Corridor Press in Otego.

Women worked for 70 years to get the vote, and without their work, no woman would have suffrage today. Some of the women I selected are well known — for example, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton — but hundreds are still unrecognized today, like Louisa Lord Riley (1836-1917) and Juanita Breckinridge Bates (1860-1946). They worked on the local level in Ithaca beginning in the late 1890s. I also have included three inspirational African-American

women — Harriet Tubman, Hester Jeffrey and Mary Burnett Talbert — who labored to better the lives of black women and mothers. All three transcended racial barriers when it was rare to do so.

The suffrage movement began in the mid-19th century. Women were then considered physically and intellectually inferior to men. Society and churches considered their rightful place to be in the home, raising children and running the households. Husband and wife were thought of as one person. Once a woman married, her properties were put her husband's name and she had no claim to their possessions. Her husband had rights to her wages, and she could not claim custody of their children. And most important, women were not educated outside the home, nor did they have the right to vote.

However, those brought up in Quaker families were taught that all people were equal, and these were the women who, for the most part, made up the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848. They became suffragists and abolitionists.

During the Civil War, they set aside their suffrage work to help abolish slavery with the promise that the abolitionists would help women get the vote after the war. But when the war ended, abolitionists felt the country was not ready for universal suffrage; they wanted black men to get the vote before women. Some women suffragists were furious that the abolitionists betrayed them, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who made racist statements about black men.

This split the women suffrage movement into two groups: one that supported universal suffrage and the other that advocated for black men to get the vote before women. Black men did end up getting the vote via the 15th Amendment in 1870, 50 years before women got the vote. However, Jim Crow laws severely limited suffrage for black men, especially in the South. It was not until 1917 that women in New York state got the right to vote.

Immediately after the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting all American women the vote, suffragists began working on the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have granted equal pay for equal work. It has yet to be passed and ratified.

I have spoken with many young women who do not support suffragists, and one shocked me by saying, "the suffragists were racist as (expletive)." My answer to her is, suffrage history was long, complicated and tortured with massive setbacks amid the victories. I believe we can acknowledge the terrible racist episodes of the movement without discounting the 70-year effort that secured women the vote, and for that achievement, the suffragists should be honored for their courage, determination and perseverance. They can serve as role models for all of us in the battles to come.

The drawings in my series of 15 suffragists from New York state will be on view at The History Center in Tompkins County from Sept. 23 through Nov. 4.

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