

VOTES FOR WOMEN

THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Women's suffrage has long been a struggle throughout the United States. Though full suffrage is defined as both the right to vote and the right to hold public office, the popular understanding of women's suffrage is the right to vote. It was this right that was granted in Oklahoma in 1918. Oklahoma did not grant full suffrage until 1942, when women were finally allowed to run for all state executive offices.

While Oklahoma was a territory, only four states allowed women to vote: Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho. With the ability to decide their own voter qualifications, the 1890 Oklahoma Territorial Legislature determined that women could vote in school elections and would be eligible to hold public offices anywhere outside of first class cities, which had populations of 2,500 or more. However, women were not otherwise considered "qualified voters." The introduction of a bill granting equal suffrage, put forth by Robert J. Barker of Logan County, quickly failed.

At the same time, the national movement for women's suffrage was growing. The National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. In 1895, the National American Woman Suffrage Association sent a representative on a speaking tour to towns throughout Oklahoma Territory. In Guthrie, Margaret Rees, "the Mother of Equal Suffrage," became president of the newly formed Woman Suffrage Association of Oklahoma. By 1896, organization efforts resulted in the establishment of more than twenty local suffrage clubs across Oklahoma Territory.



Women posing in front of a Guthrie voting booth, June 1899 (PWC Collections, OWL).

Equal suffrage continued to be brought up in the Territorial Legislature as time passed. In 1897, a measure for suffrage passed the House but died in the Council. Just before the 1898 legislative session, the National American Woman Suffrage Association sent Carrie Chapman Catt to organize and try to push suffrage through the session. She spoke in front of the House and Council Election Committees and legislators began receiving petitions of support from various territory towns. James P. Gandy of Woods County introduced House Bill 41, "An Act Defining the Rights of Women" on January 16, 1899. However, much like earlier suffrage measures introduced in the legislature, this proposal did not survive the Council. Nevertheless, women persisted, becoming active in politics and slowly running for county offices. The Woman Suffrage Association of Oklahoma and Indian Territory was established in 1904. By 1906, the question of female voting was pushed forward in territorial politics once again.



Suffragettes in Washington, DC, 1917 (photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress).