

Champions by Choice: The Long Climb to the Top

Legacy of Woman Suffrage in Washington State

This series was created to honor and celebrate the contributions made by women in Washington state to advance suffrage and equal rights over the past 100 years. This program will run in The Sunday Seattle Times from October 31 – December 5, 2010.

CHAPTER 1:

Woman Suffrage Marks 100 Years: Staking Early Claims to Equal Rights

This year, Washington state celebrates the 100th anniversary of woman suffrage. While women played an important role in the settling and development of the West, they could not vote in government elections for many years. Washington Territory women won the right to vote in 1910 – nearly 80 years after the first Euro-Americans began to make their homes here.

Events celebrating this centennial will continue throughout the year, identifying and honoring a century of champions whose determination and leadership provided today's young women with voices in government, equal rights and opportunities to pursue their dreams. The Seattle Times Newspapers in Education program has partnered with HistoryLink.org and Heritage 4Culture to produce this six-week series.

Owning Land

With the exception of scattered groups of missionaries and fur traders, non-natives did not settle in Washington until the mid-1800s. In an incentive to bring new settlers to the wilds of the Oregon Territory, Congress passed the Donation Land Claim Act in 1850. This act granted each adult U.S. citizen 320 acres of land if he arrived before

December of 1850 and resided on the claim for four years. A married couple was entitled to double the amount of land, with the second 320 acres awarded in the wife's name. Savvy women realized that becoming landowners and establishing legal partnerships with their husbands was an important first step toward obtaining equal rights.

The western migration was on – spurred by the lure of free land. The Donation Land Claim Act was soon extended to accommodate the thousands of men and women who arrived in the Oregon Territory over the next few years. Although land was no longer free, it could be purchased for \$1.25 an acre. The first

What is suffrage?

Suffrage is another word for the right to vote.

settlements in Puget Sound's King County region were established with the arrival of the Collins and Denny parties in 1851 – and soon, major development and expansion began. Reported claims under the Donation Land

Claim Act in King County numbered 58. When Washington Territory was created only two years later, the official census counted 3,965 residents, 1,682 of whom were listed as eligible male voters. Women, even the landowners who came West to be equal partners with their husbands, were not allowed to vote. It was time for change.

Early Suffrage Legislation

In 1848, at the first women's rights convention in the nation, women's desire for political reform was summarized in a list of rights that women should be entitled to as U.S. citizens. This document, called the Declaration of Sentiments, outlined a concrete foundation of women's rights to be used by the territorial governments forming across the nation. Women who championed their right to vote were known as suffragists.

Influenced by the Declaration of Sentiments, Seattle pioneer Arthur Denny, who was now a senator, proposed to amend a pending bill to give all adult white women the right to vote. This legislation was proposed at the first Washington Territorial Legislature in 1854, but failed by one vote. Legislation that same year did allow certain women to vote in school elections.

Over the next 12 years, territorial voting qualifications and requirements were reworded and amended to

accommodate changes in the growing population. By 1867, the territorial voting law clearly stated that all adult white American citizens had the right to vote. Based on the wording of this law, women suffragists encouraged their peers to finally exercise their votes.

Time to think!

Why is it important to have the right to vote? Why do you think being able to own land was so important?

Remember to vote – you have had 100 years of choices!



Catharine Paine Blaine (1829 – 1908)
Courtesy MOHAI

Catharine Paine Blaine:

Catharine Paine Blaine, an early supporter of women's rights, was just 18 years old when she signed the Declaration of Sentiments. Catharine and her new husband moved to Seattle in 1853, where he had been assigned to a pastorate. Within a year, she had established the first school in Seattle – while continuing to champion woman suffrage.

Did you know?

The official colors for the suffragist movement were purple (representing loyalty), white (representing purity) and green (representing hope). Most suffragists dressed in white, but Washington suffragists wore orange ribbons in honor of Judge Orange Jacobs, a prominent supporter of women's rights who served on the Washington Territorial Supreme Court from 1869 – 1875.