

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

APRIL 5, 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT
FOR THE CENTENNIAL
COMMEMORATION OF THE 19TH
AMENDMENT





INTRODUCTION

In the quieter annals of American history lie stories of bright, persistent women whose triumph is almost universally taken for granted. These are the stories of the suffragists: American mothers, daughters, sister and wives devoted to the simplest of American truths: that there should be no taxation without representation. While their goals were as diverse as their backgrounds, their common pursuit of the vote made them a controversial, conflicted coalition united for a movement so profound it took a constitutional amendment to correct the injustice.

Although they were American citizens, bore armies and paid taxes, at the turn of the 20th century, American women were still denied the right to vote simply because they were women. There were dozens of other beleaguering indignities built into law and code that forbade women from owning property, divorcing, and keeping their own children or wages, but the solution to them all seemed to lead through the ballot box. Whether it began in 1776 at the behest of Abigail Adams who entreated her husband John to “remember the ladies and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.” Or whether it began in 1848, with the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York and the oratory of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Fredrick Douglas, the fight for women’s suffrage in America was started, and did not see its end for generations.

It is in the spirit of the suffragists that the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission was created by Congress in 2017 to “remember the ladies” and devote effort and esteem to the commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of women’s enfranchisement. Its charter entitles the entity to the following duties:

- (1) to encourage, plan, develop, and execute programs, projects, and activities to commemorate the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment;
- (2) to catalog and coordinate activities and programs developed by or with federal entities commemorating the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment;
- (3) to encourage private organizations and State and local governments to organize and participate in activities commemorating the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment;

(4) to facilitate and coordinate activities throughout the United States relating to the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment;

(5) to serve as a clearinghouse for the collection and dissemination of information about events and plans for the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment; and

(6) to develop recommendations for Congress and the President for commemorating the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment.

This report chiefly reflects the early recommendations of the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission for Congress and the President for commemorating the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Because the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission members were not sworn in until late 2018, the commission has only conducted three meetings in which decisions were made in the context of the commission’s official duties, including delivering recommendations to Congress and the President. (The first meeting, in accordance with the commission’s charter, was for administrative purposes only.) The commission anticipates continued and further communication with both the Congress and the White House as the commission’s duration as a chartered federal micro agency continues. This report introduces basic concepts and ideas for potential execution between the commonly honored anniversary dates of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment: June 4, 2019 (the centennial of the 19th Amendment’s passage out of the Capitol and onto the states) and August 26, 2020 (the centennial of the 19th Amendment’s addition to the U.S. Constitution).

CONGRESSIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Although much of the outward lobbying and dismay over delays in allowing female enfranchisement was focused on President Woodrow Wilson in the final years of the women’s suffrage effort, the only remedy remained a Constitutional Amendment, in which Wilson could have no participation. (A judicial solution, sought in court cases such as Susan B. Anthony’s after she voted in a presidential election and was jailed for it, was foiled in a variety of ways.) That left the U.S. Congress to right the Constitutional ship and produce an Amendment. On May 21, 1919, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the 19th Amendment out of their chamber. The U.S. Senate followed on June 4, 1919.¹ From June 4, 1919, through August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment entered a race for ratification across the 48 states. 36 were needed to ratify. Wisconsin was the first state legislature to deliver their ratification paperwork to Washington D.C. Tennessee and its “War of the Roses” represented the anti-suffragists’ last stand. It was state number 36 for ratification.²

The Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission proposes a fitting “launch” to its year and three-month centennial commemorative period that involves the original body that “launched” the

¹ <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=63>

² <https://tnmuseum.org/Stories/posts/a-look-back-at-tennessees-war-of-the-roses>

19th Amendment into legislative chambers countrywide. The Commission proposes that the 116th Congress commemorate its predecessors' virtue in passing the 19th Amendment by reaffirming the 1919 effort with a joint resolution, or separate resolutions in the House and Senate. Alternatively, floor speeches dedicated to the suffragists and the women's suffrage movement and the ratification of the 19th Amendment might be made.

The Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission has met with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and garnered initial support for this early recommendation. The commission is also seeking meetings with Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer to seek the same.

After careful consultation with Congressional leaders, the commission will be able to determine whether the joint resolution or separate resolutions hold the most promise for execution. Both May 21, the anniversary of House passage, and June 4, the anniversary of Senate passage are scheduled session days for the Congress.

A Congressional resolution may mark the moment in history but may not make a countrywide impression, and that is why the commission recommends an additional layer to the resolution commemoration. In a nod to the final battle for ratification, the "War of the Roses" in Tennessee, the commission suggests a reenactment of sorts to put U.S. legislators on the right side of history. The War of the Roses was the name given to the weeks leading to the Tennessee vote for ratification. Activists, both the suffragists and the anti-suffragists, set up headquarters at a hotel across from the Tennessee capitol. In order to identify their allegiances, the suffragists pinned yellow roses to their dresses and lapels and encouraged like-minded legislators to do the same. Anti-suffragists wore red roses and legislators who pledged to vote against women's right to vote did likewise. On the day of the vote, the Tennessee Speaker of the House, who was against women's suffrage, could count with the gallery the roses pinned to the lapels of his members. The red roses, identifying legislators against women's suffrage, outnumbered the yellow roses (pro-suffrage). It was clear by a count that the "antis" had two more supporters on the floor than the suffragists. Upon this realization, the Speaker called the roll and every member voted as his rose color suggested he would until the moment rested upon 21-year old Representative Harry Burn, who wore a red rose, but voted...yes.³

The Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission recommends that the members of the U.S. Congress, on the day of the resolution vote, all wear yellow roses on their lapels, signifying their support of women's right to vote. The commission also recommends the resolution(s) be supported unanimously. The image of hundreds of legislators wearing yellow roses projects that the War of the Roses is over, has been won, and that American women are the victors for exercising their rights at the ballot box. This powerful visual has the potential to be seen by million of Americans and unify the Congress and constituents over a truly American ideal: equality at the voting booth.

The Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission will provide both the yellow roses for members' lapels and the media materials and talking points for members on the 100th anniversary, the

³ <https://www.americanheritage.com/countdown-tennessee-1920>

history of the women's suffrage movement, and how constituents can get involved in the historic centennial. The commission further encourages members to send media releases and invite interviews in their districts regarding their stand with women's suffrage on the floor of their chamber. In-district media has a powerful localizing effect and can reach and motivate readers, viewers and listeners of local outlets in a way national media outlets cannot.

A resolution has been drafted and reviewed by the House Historian and is included with this report.

The commission also recommends that members promote the centennial at all in-district listening sessions and events and become involved in their state celebrations. Thirty-six states will celebrate anniversaries of their own ratification of the 19th Amendment. All states will be requested to unite with the country in a large week-long commemoration during the week of August 26, 2020, when governors will be asked to issue an executive order declaring a "Women's Vote Centennial Week" or "Women's Suffrage Centennial Week". Additionally, legislatures will be asked to pass a joint resolution reaffirming the 19th Amendment, and state capitol grounds crews will be requested to light state capitol buildings in gold, the color most consistently associated with the women's suffrage movement. Congresspeople and U.S. Senators have the opportunity to be vocal proponents of these state commemorative activities.

Other recommendations that may or may not directly involve each member of the U.S. Congress, but appropriations by members are as follows:

- 1) Support the creation of a U.S. Treasury Women's Suffrage Centennial coin and or medal, produced and sold by the United States Mint.
- 2) Plan a series of events for the week leading up to August 26, 2020. This series may include symbolic events (such as the planting of a tree on Capitol grounds) in Washington, D.C. and in other key locations, such as Tennessee. The events will be planned utilizing the expertise of the WSCC's national events director to maximize impact, both in-person and digitally.
- 3) Consult with the Interior Department about the 4th of July celebration on the National Mall in 2020. Determine if the Washington Monument could be illuminated in gold to commemorate the women's suffrage centennial and whether the centennial could be incorporated otherwise into the celebration. Work with other entities, such as the United States Capitol, about similar lighting opportunities to highlight the centennial.
- 4) Develop national games or art, poetry and/or song writing contests that celebrate suffrage history
- 5) Provide resources /content for national travelling museum exhibit and or theater tour
- 6) Provide template for mock suffragist conventions in schools

WHITE HOUSE RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the White House had no formal role in the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the president and presidential candidates played pivotal roles in the battle for women's suffrage. Importantly, women's suffrage leader Alice Paul conducted countless non-violent protests outside President Woodrow Wilson's White House. Paul and her followers are often credited with the first picket protests outside the First Family's famous residence. Paul's efforts also gained notoriety for their sensational visuals and scale. She staged "watch fires" in Washington D.C., even once ordering the burning of the president in effigy.⁴ Paul also staged the visually spectacular "suffragist parade" down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1913.

While President Wilson was not pleased by Paul's tactics⁵, he *was* arguably persuaded by a rival activist, Carrie Chapman Catt⁶, whose methods were less attention-grabbing and more focused on conventional lobbying and persuasion. President Wilson corresponded with Catt from the White House, during the fight for ratification, he so respected her approach.

Wilson had been known to many suffragists as a tepid supporter, but the Constitution clearly limited the president's power to provide for women's rights to vote. However, the president, like the presidential candidates at the time, Republican Warren Harding and Democrat James Cox, both from Ohio, did have the power of the bully pulpit. All three wielded the bully pulpit power weakly according to many suffragists of the day.

This White House has the power to change that and use the voices of the President and First Family to herald this great American anniversary. The Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission recommends the White House use as many principals as are willing to avail themselves of opportunities to salute this centennial. Specifically, the commission recommends that President Donald Trump participate in a ceremonial planting ceremony in the White House Rose Garden of a "Suffrage Centennial Rose" in spring of 2020.

The commission proposes the President issue an Executive Order declaring August 26, 2020 "Women's Equality Day" across the country and encourage communities across America to make observances.

The commission also recommends that the President and First Family promote the centennial at all appropriate events and consider travel for involvement in state celebrations. Thirty-six states will celebrate anniversaries of their own ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Further, the commission suggests the First Lady or First Daughter host a White House-based event to celebrate women's suffrage. As a reflection of the suffragists themselves, and the 14 diverse women who comprise the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission, the commission proposes the White House invite a diverse group of ladies to participate.

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/collections/women-of-protest/articles-and-essays/historial-timeline-of-the-national-womans-party/1918-to-1920/>

⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/suffragist-alice-paul-clashed-woodrow-wilson/>

⁶ <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/6335>

The commission also intends to draft letters to both major political parties (RNC and DNC) about the women's suffrage centennial and urge them to develop programming at their respective 2020 conventions to commemorate the anniversary.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission additionally suggests the inclusion of historical visuals that allow Americans to connect to the suffragists through the President, First Family and members of Congress. Visual events, demonstrations or dedications can be powerfully amplified with the attendance of a principal who can attract media attention. An example might include involvement of the Justice Bell, cast in the heat of for women's right to vote. The bell is cast in bronze, one of the most profound metaphors history has produced for the women's suffrage movement. The alloy is known for its strength under pressure, its durability and beauty...all noted qualities of the women's suffrage movement. Bronze is also resistant to corrosion. It has been used to form everything from weapons to ornaments. It may patina, but the outward facing layer is to protect the bronze from deteriorating. It was the perfect choice for this voiceless bell.

The Justice Bell was cast as a replica of the Liberty Bell, but its clapper was intentionally chained to its side so that it could not ring.⁷ Suffrage activists suggested that the bell would ring out for justice once women had the right to vote, but it remained silent as intrigue built around the symbol. The bell toured states, mostly in the eastern U.S., and began to receive great fanfare when it arrived in towns. Neighbors would hold parades and reporters would cover the events. Families would watch as the bell arrived and suffragists would give speeches. "Finally, in 1920, after passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave all the nation's women the right to vote, the Justice Bell was finally rung in a huge celebration at Independence Square in Philadelphia."⁸

Events involving historic symbols with terrific visual and audio appeal like the Justice Bell could serve to bring great attention to the centennial of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment, a worthy and noble moment in American history.

⁷ <https://www.nps.gov/articles/dyk-justice-bell.htm>

⁸ <https://www.justicebell.org/the-justice-bell-story>