

Recognizing Rights

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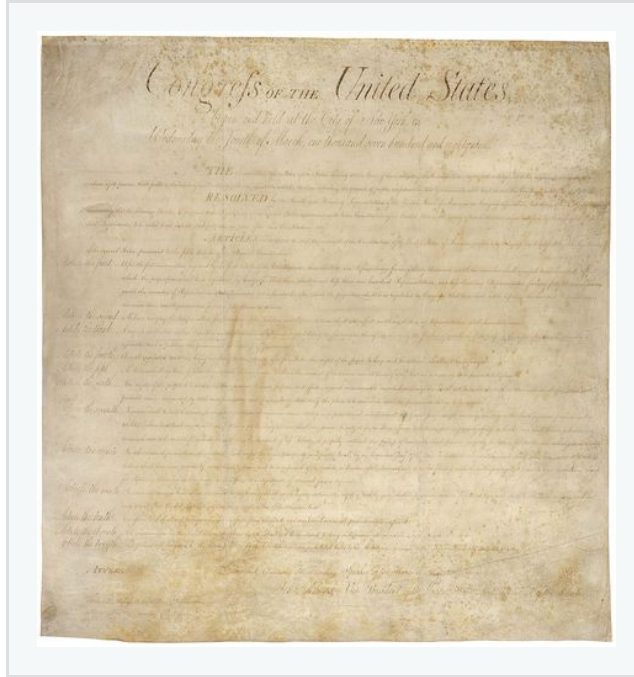
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George Washington Recognized Equal Status of Jewish Americans, August 1790

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Credit: Wiki Commons

Bill of Rights

Do you go to church or temple? If you want to, you can go to whatever kind of religious institution you prefer. This kind of religious freedom doesn't exist everywhere in the world. In the United States, freedom of religion is upheld by the First Amendment to the Constitution. This amendment was written in 1789. Not long after, the members of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, presented George Washington with a congratulatory address when he visited their city on August 17, 1790.

The First Amendment and nine other amendments make up the Bill of Rights, which was adopted in 1791. The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

After his visit, George Washington wrote a response to the address written by Moses Seixas, a member of the Hebrew Congregation. Both addresses appeared at the same time in several newspapers. These are important because they mark the first presidential declaration of the free

and equal status of Jewish-American citizens. Why do you think religious freedom is important?

The Ratification of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution

The text is from the "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.



Credit: Photo by Jeff Kubina. In the Public domain.

Outside the Supreme Court

On July 28, 1868, the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified. The amendment grants citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States" which included former slaves who had just been freed after the Civil War. The amendment had been rejected by most Southern states but was ratified by the required three-fourths of the states. Known as the "Reconstruction Amendment," it forbids any state to deny any person "life, liberty or property, without due process of law" or to "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Other groups tried to use the 14th Amendment to further their causes. Women attempted to use it to proclaim their right to vote, and African Americans tried to use it as well. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" facilities were considered sufficient to satisfy the 14th Amendment. It wasn't until May 17, 1954, however, that the Court reversed the *Plessy* decision, bringing the era of government-sanctioned segregation to an end.

It was the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, which finally gave African Americans the right to vote. It states that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." In

practice, however, it took almost 100 more years and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to remove barriers such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation that prevented African Americans and other people of color from freely exercising their right to vote. Note that the 15th amendment makes no mention of sex. It was not until the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 that women were explicitly given the vote.

The Nineteenth Amendment

The text and images are from “America’s Story from America’s Library” by the Library of Congress.

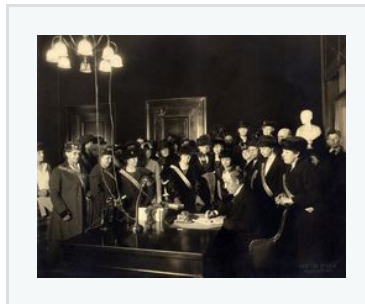


Credit: “Suffrage parade, New York City, May 6, 1912,” 1912. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-10845.

Suffrage parade, women march to win their right to vote in New York City, May 6, 1912

Nineteenth Amendment Granting Women's Suffrage Was Sent to the States June 4, 1919

Do you ever hear people talking about voting or elections? Could you imagine if only men could vote but women could not? More than likely, when your great grandmother was young, she wasn't allowed to vote, even though your great grandfather could.



Credit: “Governor Edwin P. Morrow signing the Anthony Amendment,” 1920. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-78691.

*Kentucky governor Edwin P. Morrow
signing the 19th Amendment*

Today, your mother and grandmother can participate in electing public officials because of the hard work of a lot of women. More than eighty years ago, women were on their way to gaining the right to vote after Congress approved the women's suffrage amendment. On June 4, 1919, Congress sent the potential amendment to the Constitution to the individual states for ratification, or approval. It took more than a year to complete ratification.



Once three - fourths of the states had ratified the 19th Amendment, women were granted the right to vote in 1920. A woman named Alice Paul, who had fought for suffrage, stitched the final star in a banner celebrating the victory of the suffrage movement. Women like Alice Paul were called suffragettes, and they fought for more than seventy years for the right to vote alongside men on Election Day.

Credit: "Miss Alice Paul is shown sewing the thirty-sixth star on the suffrage ratification banner, the stars having been added from time to time as the various states ratified," 1920. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Nu

Alice Paul stitching the final star on the celebratory banner

Granting Citizenship to Native Americans

The text and images are from “America’s Story from America’s Library” by the Library of Congress.



Credit: Curtis, Edward, photographer. “Salish Childhood,” 1910. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-98071.

A Salish Native American child in 1910

Congress Granted Citizenship to All Native Americans Born in the U.S. June 2, 1924

Native Americans have long struggled to retain their culture. Until 1924, Native Americans were not citizens of the United States. Many Native Americans had, and still have, separate nations within the U.S. on designated reservation land. But on June 2, 1924, Congress granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the U.S. Yet even after the Indian Citizenship Act, some Native Americans weren't allowed to vote because the right to vote was governed by state law. Until 1957, some states barred Native Americans from voting.

At the time of the Indian Citizenship Act, an act called the Dawes Severalty Act shaped U.S. Indian policy. Since 1887, the government had encouraged Native Americans to become more like mainstream America. Hoping to turn Indians into farmers, the federal government gave out tribal



Credit: Johnston, Frances Benjamin, photographer. "Native Americans During Mathematics Class at Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania." 1903. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-72450.

Native Americans in math class at Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1903

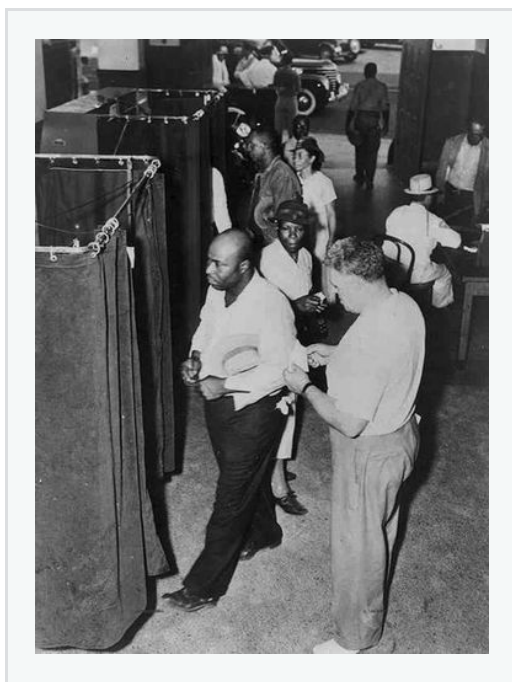
lands to individuals in 160-acre parcels. Unclaimed or "surplus" land was sold, and the money was used to establish Indian schools. In them, Native American children learned reading, writing, and social habits of mainstream America. By 1932, the sale of unclaimed land and allotted land resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the 138 million acres Native Americans had held prior to the Act.

A 1928 study known as the Meriam Report assessed the problems of Native Americans. The report revealed to the government that its policies had oppressed Native Americans and destroyed their culture and society. The people suffered from poverty, exploitation and discrimination. This study spurred the passage of the 1934 Indian

Reorganization Act. This Act returned some of the surplus land to Native Americans and urged tribes to engage in active self-government. The U.S. government invested in the development of health care, education and community structure. Quality of life on Indian lands improved. Today some Native Americans run successful businesses, while others still live in poverty.

Ending the Poll Tax

The text and image are from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.



Credit: "Voters at the Voting Booths, ca. 1945," (?). Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Voters at the voting booths in 1945

The 24th Amendment Ended the Poll Tax January 23, 1964

Imagine that you are finally old enough to vote in your first election. But, do you have enough money? Money, to vote? Not long ago, citizens in some states had to pay a fee to vote in a national election. This fee was called a poll tax. On January 23, 1964, the United States ratified the 24th Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting any poll tax in elections for federal officials.

Many Southern states adopted a poll tax in the late 1800s. This meant that even though the 15th Amendment gave former slaves the right to vote, many poor people, both blacks and whites, did not have enough money to vote. "Do you know I've never voted in my life, never been able to exercise my right as a citizen because of the poll tax?" "Mr. Trout" to Mr. Pike, interviewer, Atlanta, Georgia. American Life Histories, 1936 - 1940. More than 20 years after "Mr. Trout" spoke those words, the poll tax was abolished. At the ceremony in 1964 formalizing the 24th Amendment,

President Lyndon Johnson noted that: "There can be no one too poor to vote." Thanks to the 24th Amendment, the right of all U.S. citizens to freely cast their votes has been secured.

Fighting for Rights at the Seneca Falls Convention

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statue of Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the U.S. Capitol

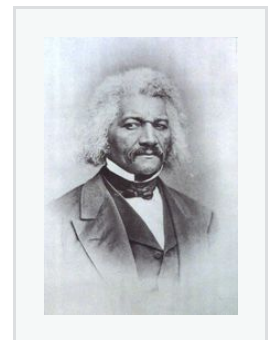
Today, women in the United States can vote, own property, and hold political office, but it wasn't always this way. One hundred fifty years ago, women did not have the same privileges as men in many ways, and they had to fight for their rights. In July 1848, a group of women and men interested in discussing the position of women in American society met at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. On the second day of the convention, July 20, 1848, the people in attendance discussed Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments," which she had read the day before.

The assembled group also considered and voted on a number of resolutions, 11 of which were passed by a large majority and without much argument. The one point that was met with strong opposition was the following:

Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise [the right to vote].

In the end, after great debate, "The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" passed unanimously and was signed by 68 women and 32 men in attendance. Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, a former slave, stood with Stanton at the convention and argued forcefully for women's right to vote.

The fight for women's equal rights was a long, hard battle. After the signing of "The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" in 1848, it took 72 years of organized struggle before most women won the right to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed in 1920. (In some states, women had the right to vote in state and federal elections before passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.) How far have women come since then?



Frederick Douglass, a strong supporter of women's rights



a flyer from the National Woman's Party demands equality for all women