



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS[®] of the Fairfax Area

National Women's History Month - March 2003

DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

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The seed that developed into National Women's History Month began with the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as U.S. President in 1961. The country was invigorated. All things seemed possible. Dormant since the Great Depression, the women's movement revived in the 1960s and 70s.

The spark was politically motivated. President John F. Kennedy, not at all committed to promoting women's rights, was very dependent on their volunteer efforts and votes. In 1961, he appointed a Commission on the Status of Women, at the urging of the ranking woman in his administration, Esther Peterson. As assistant secretary of labor and director of the Women's Bureau, Peterson's intent was: First, to deflect any pro-equal rights amendment (ERA) activities then still opposed by organized labor; second, laws to guarantee equal pay for equal work.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Esther Peterson headed the commission composed of many prominent women, consultants, and Women's Bureau staff. Their 60-page report attracted little attention but did result in passage of the first federal law prohibiting sex discrimination, the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

A Citizens Advisory Council on the Status of Women was established, states and localities began appointing their own commissions. In recent years, however, numerous commissions have been de-funded. This includes the Virginia Council on the Status of Women and the Prince William County Commission for Women. The commissions of Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax City and County, Falls Church, Loudoun, and the Mayor's Committee for the Concerns of Women in Richmond remain operational.

In 1963, Betty Friedan, mother of modern American feminism, published *The Feminine Mystique*. It disparaged the common stereotype of women achieving fulfillment solely through their roles as wives and mothers.

Delegates to a 1966 meeting of state women 5 commissions organized the National Organization of Women (NOW) with Betty Friedan as its first president to promote adoption and enforcement of women's rights legislation.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson signed executive order 11375 adding sex to race, color, religion and national origin as categories that employers holding federal contracts were

prohibited from discriminating against. The following year, Shirley Chisholm (D-NY) became the first African American Congresswoman. San Diego State University established the first women's studies baccalaureate degree program in 1969. Today most colleges offer women's history courses and most major graduate programs offer doctoral degrees in the field.

By the end of the decade, offbeat protests dedicated to bettering the political and social status of women were being held. "Women's lib" joined the vernacular and "feminism" returned to our vocabulary.

Along with Congresswomen Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm and others, Friedan participated in the 1971 founding of the National Women's Political Caucus which pressures political parties in favor of women's interests. Other women's groups with a specific focus were formed in this same time period. Also in 1971, the U.S. Congress at the behest of Rep. Bella Abzug by Joint Resolution set August 26 as Women's Equality Day and asked that the president issue a proclamation to that effect. That date commemorates final ratification of the 19th Amendment establishing women's right to vote.

The Education Amendments of 1972 prohibited sexual discrimination in a wide variety of federally funded or aided education programs, including sports. Title IX has achieved remarkable results in encouraging female athletic involvement and is once again in the news, being challenged by those who claim it discriminates against males.

Intensive lobbying efforts by proponents of equality resulted in Congress passing the ERA in 1972. Significantly, a time limit was set for ratification. Such a time limit had been proposed and defeated on ratification of the 19th Amendment. Initially, the majority of Americans supported ERA. Twenty-eight states ratified within the first year. After that, opponents began to mount a counter-campaign. Phyllis Schafley, strident editor of her own newsletter and the Eagle Forum Newsletter, adroitly created a chasm between housewives and feminists. The time limitation allowed opponents to focus on key areas and maintain momentum there. ERA has not as yet been ratified.

The League of Women Voters had continued from its inception to work for beneficial legislation for all Americans (women and child labor laws, the rights of married women to employment during the Depression, extending the merit system within civil service, improvement of public school education, the Social Security Act of 1935, the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1938, etc.) By the 1960s it began to change its stance on ERA. The League and other women's groups had opposed ERA because it was feared that its adoption would nullify protective legislation for women and children that had taken years of hard work to attain. A concerted effort was made but they were unable to effect final ratification of ERA.

Widely touted as "the battle of the sexes" on prime time television, Billy Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in three straight sets of tennis in 1973. That event opened the world of women's tennis to higher stakes competitions. Further, it symbolically represented women's efforts to change chauvinistic attitudes in all areas.

That same year, the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade* struck down anti-abortion laws. The decision brought a more basic change in the lives of women than any other ruling in the Court's history. A serious consequence of *Roe v. Wade* was the creation of violent right-to-life groups. The divisiveness of this issue continues.

The United Nations designated 1975 as the first International Women's Year with a conference in Mexico City. A three-day National Women's Conference took place in Houston in 1977. That event, chaired by former Congresswoman Bella Abzug, drew over twenty thousand participants and observers. Those were heady days.

Largely due to pressure from the women's movement, Congress passed legislation to admit women to the military service academies (West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy) in 1976. In more recent years, the same concept of equal access to government-funded institutions opened the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington and the Citadel in Charleston to women.

The following year saw the election of the first woman to the U.S. Senate in her own right. Nancy Landon Kassebaum represented the state of Kansas.

And, in 1978 the Education Task Force of the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women initiated a "Women's History Week" celebration to address the void in women's history in K-12 curriculum. The week of March 8, International Women's Day, was used as a focal point. A year later, it resulted in a meeting with Women's History Institutes of Sara Lawrence College and national leaders of organizations for women and girls. This led to a Joint Congressional Resolution, sponsored by Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and then Representative Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), for a National Women's History Week. President Ronald Reagan issued a proclamation setting March 7-13, 1982, as the first National Women's History Week.

The Fairfax League celebrated in 1982 with a special ceremony to erect a historic roadside marker in Lorton at the site of the former Occoquan Workhouse where suffragists were incarcerated in 1917. They had picketed the White House for women's suffrage. This marker is the first in Virginia to recognize civil or women's rights.

Another result was the formation in California of the National Women's History Project to make information, materials and programs on women's diverse and historic accomplishments available to educators and the public.

The 1980s featured other women's milestones:

(1981) Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

(1983) Physicist Sally Ride traveled in space.

(1984) Rep. Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY) accepted nomination as the Democratic Party's vice-presidential candidate.

(1985) Wilma Mankiller was chosen as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and held that position until 1995.

(1987) The National Museum of Women in the arts opened in Washington, D.C. It is dedicated to all aspects of women's art through the ages.

(1987) Congress was petitioned by the National Women's history project to expand the March commemorative to a full month. This was done and President Ronald Reagan issued such a proclamation on March 12, 1987.

The following information comes from the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress: "Commemorative proclamations can be issued by Presidents without any action by Congress, and have been regularly throughout American history. Since 1789, when President George Washington Issued the first proclamation declaring November 26 of that year a National Day of Thanksgiving, there have been hundreds of such designations. On more than 1,300 occasions; however, Congress initiated such actions by passing a joint resolution requesting such a designation. Although most commemorative observances approved by Congress are only applicable for a single year or single Congress, more than 40 perpetual observance resolutions that call for the President to issue annual proclamations automatically have been approved since 1914. Historically, national commemorative observances were recommended by Congress through the legislative process. This practice was discontinued by the House of Representatives in January 1995, although the Senate continues to issue sense of the Senate resolutions recommending the establishment of commemoratives. It has now become standard practice for special observances to be designated by a proclamation issued by the President."

Neither National Women's History Month nor Women's Equality Day is included in the list of perpetual observances. Whatever the official status, such special observances enable us to view our history and possibilities for now and the future.

Sources:

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