

Nineteenth Amendment, Reflections on

2010 marks the 90th anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment to the United States Constitution, which gave women the right to vote. This is a milestone in America's, and indeed the world's march toward social equality.

Longfellow's poem *Paul Revere's Ride* begins with the words "On the eighteenth of April in seventy-five, hardly a man is now alive...." (he wrote it in 1863). The same can no longer be said of those women who cast their first vote in the election of 1920; the youngest of whom would be not less than 111 this year. If one of Longfellow's successors were to pen a parallel poem for women, it would begin "On the eighteenth of August in 1920..."

After many years of struggle, a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution bearing the title "Amendment XIX" was sent to the states June 4th, 1919, by the Sixty-sixth Congress. It was ratified August 18, 1920. 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 sex." It further states "Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

A search of Colebrook's voting lists produces the following interesting facts: In the years immediately following the First World War, new voters averaged three to five per year. In 1920, in addition to the three or four men, there were 27 names of women. There is no doubt that many, if not most have descendants who still live in the area. Here is that list, in the order it appears in our Town records:

Alice Gilman, Bessie Deming, Harriet Deming, Elizabeth Anderson, Anna Johnson, Genevieve Newth, Harriet Cooper, Naomi Martin, Elsie Northway, Carrie Phillips, Ellen McCormack, Leila Palmer, Mary Phillips, Leonora Verchot, Emma J. Allen, Belle Seymour, Barbara Ulrich, Katherine Carrington, Sarah Carrington, Lena V. Tucker, Martha Thompson, Wally Vining, Sarah Norton, Grace Deming, Annie Durst and Lucy Whitman.

These ladies were the first to benefit from many years of long, hard-fought battles. All of us, men and women alike, ought to not only exercise our right to vote, but, when the opportunity presents itself, honor the memories of those pioneers who led the way.

In order to illustrate the barriers and mental attitudes that obstructed the path of equal rights for women, here is an editorial taken from *The Winsted Herald* on November 23, 1883:

"Men who have been accustomed to attend meetings of deliberate bodies have occasion to be alarmed at the smoothness and order with which women are able to conduct conventions with a little practice. We have been a pretty regular attendant upon the meetings of the Woman's Temperance convention held in this village this week and are frank to confess that women can do some things as well as other people and the conduct of conventions is one of the things they can do. How long it will be, if things go on, ere men will be compelled to share with them the conduct of town meetings, we cannot tell, but this much is clearly evident to us – if it never was before – and the day fast approaches – they will exercise the privilege with certainty and as much intelligence as those who are now the voting class."

A person might well ask why it took our government so long to pass legislation concerning the rights of women. An example using the introduction of some of our modern coinage might hold the answer.

In 1979 our government finally came to grips with the fact that something needed to be done about our coinage; the cost of producing one dollar bills was totally out of hand, and the country was approaching the 60th anniversary of the XIX Amendment. The Washington Brain Trust came up with the brilliant idea of killing two birds with one stone; they would make a one dollar coin with the image of the great Susan B. Anthony on it. Amid great fanfare, the plans were made public. Immediately there arose voices advocating caution and more planning. To begin with, the physical size of this “silver dollar” was reduced to approximately that of a quarter. From the birth of our nation until 1978, our dollar, beginning with the coin it was based upon, the Spanish Milled Dollar, or “Piece of Eight”, was basically 1 ½ inches in diameter, and the 25¢ piece, or “quarter” has a diameter of about one inch. This size reduction further alienated the public, because the quarter-sized dollar did not seem to be worth one dollar. The concerns of the public were put to rest by the announcement that the one dollar bill was not to be produced any more, and the public would have to use the new coin whether they wanted to or not. What the Mint failed to anticipate was the uproar this announcement made; it became a political hot potato, and any thought of abandoning the sacred one dollar bill, regardless of how inefficient it might be, was quickly dropped.

Plans weren't dropped on making the Anthony dollar, however. A government survey indicated that the general public would accept the new coin by a margin of 83%. This figure did not sit well with many people, and an independent survey was conducted in several widely-scattered states using questionnaires given to sixth graders. The results were eye-opening; this survey said that 86% of the citizens would reject the new coin, based upon its physical size alone. The federal survey cost tax payers millions, the other cost nothing. By the end of 1979, the government admitted that the general public was rejecting the new dollar by something like 83%.

The U.S. Mint made nearly 667,000,000 Anthony dollars in 1979 reduced that to less than 90,000,000 in 1980 and 10,000,000 in 1981. The government then gave up production, and the coins were placed in storage, where most of them remain to this day.

At first, there does not seem to be much of a comparison with women's rights and some problems with U.S. money, but when the bullheadedness of some official views are taken into account, a parallel can be discerned, and the reason for undue delays are more easily explained. Let's hope that equal pay for equal work and the so-called “glass ceiling” in the corporate world will not take another hundred years to be achieved!

Historic Bytes

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