

# American history since 1865 essay sample



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As a woman myself, it is hard to imagine a time when I would not have been allowed to attend college, let alone be writing this paper. As children most of us heard stories from our grandparent's about what life was like they were young. I can remember laughing at the thought of “ walking up hill both ways” to get to school. With the liberties American Women have today, it is easy to take for granted everything the women before us fought so hard for. It is easy to forget the treatment they suffered in their struggle to bring us to today. In this paper we will examine the lives, struggles, and small victories of women that have led us to today. We will begin in the latter half of the 19th century when the first women's rights convention took place. Then we will journey into the early 20th century and discuss the 19th Amendment and birth control. Next, we will move forward to the late 20th century to examine women's job and pay equality. Finally, we will discuss women of the 21st century.

Women made their first stride toward equal rights in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York when the first women's rights convention took place. This convention was headed by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and resulted in the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments for women, a document declaring men and women to be equals. This document, drafted by Stanton, was signed by 68 women and 32 men. “ It was a powerful symbol and the beginning of a long struggle for legal, professional, educational, and voting rights” (Bowles, 2011). In 1890, Stanton along with Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony formed the organization National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). “ Stanton, and others like Susan B. Anthony, labored through the late 19th century to achieve victory, but by the time of their

deaths in 1902 and 1906, they still were not welcome at the ballot box” (Bowles, 2011).

At the beginning of the 20th century the American household painted a very different landscape than the households of today. During this time women experienced limitations. There were places women could and could not go and jobs that women were not permitted to hold. The few employment opportunities that women were allowed to obtain were that of a teacher, nurse, social worker or clerical work. “ Catholic women had an option of joining a convent and becoming a nun. For many, the vow of poverty and a life of religious service was a welcome professional and spiritual path” (Bowles, 2011). While there were some women’s colleges and coeducational colleges, women were still not allowed to attend notable institutions, such as Yale and Harvard. “ Even for women who did attain a diploma, there was little that they could do with it professionally once they graduated, unless they had basic clerical skills or sought work as a teacher” (Bowles, 2011). It was during this time skirts and hair styles began to get shorter and women began to wear makeup. It was also during this time that women began smoking. “ Typically, the only women who smoked worked in brothels, but by the second decade of the 20th century, smoking represented an act of defiance and freedom for many women” (Bowles, 2011).

These are not the only things that began to change. “ Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL) on November 10, 1921 at the First American Birth Control Conference in New York City” (American, 2010). “ This let women explore their sexuality without having to concern themselves with unwanted babies” (Bowles, 2011). “ It was Sanger who

actually coined the phrase “ birth control” (Spooner, 2005). “ She established the ABCL to offer an ambitious program of education, legislative reform, and research. Her goal was to build a truly national organization with representation in every region of the country” (American, 2010). There were many who protested and fought to pass anti-contraceptive laws. Most men and some women during this time felt a woman’s place was inside the home caring for the needs of her husband and children. Many also believed it was the man’s decision as to how many children his wife should have. Sanger continued her quest opening a birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, New York, in 1916; one year later, the authorities arrested her for giving contraceptives to immigrant women (Bowles, 2011).

At first glance it appears that Sanger had good intentions. “ Others criticized her for involvement with eugenics, which was a scientific movement in which its practitioners advocated the notion that all mental and physical “ abnormalities” were linked to hereditary and, with selective breeding, could be eliminated. They questioned whether or not Sanger’s insistence on birth control and abortion was in fact a way to limit the growth of ethnic populations” (Bowles, 2011). “ Of course, her activism put her directly at odds with law-enforcement officials and the Catholic Church, but little discussed is the actual extent to which her early Marxism guided much of what she managed to achieve. Her good friends included ultra-radicals like John Reed and Emma Goldman, and the truth is that Margaret’s feminism, and her support for eugenic ‘ sexual science’, were both simply part-and-parcel of her own unique Marxist vision. Humanitarianism, per se, had little to do with what motivated Margaret Sanger” (Spooner, 2005). Sanger’s

actions and motivations are a controversial topic that have been analyzed and debated for years.

“ According to her New York Times obituary, dated September 7, 1966, Sanger specifically recommended the practice of birth control to prevent procreation among those of the poor prone to producing heritably ‘ subnormal’ children, and, in the early years of the 20th Century, the masthead of her Feminist-Socialist magazine, *The Woman Rebel*, defiantly proclaimed “ No Gods! No Masters!” to its readership” (Spooner, 2005). “ The debate over birth control and abortion was ongoing; however, what needed immediate resolution in the minds of many was that it was not enough to have the power to change one’s own appearance or to explore sexuality. Women needed the right to vote” (Bowles, 2005). In 1900 Carrie Chapman Catt succeeded the 80-year-old activist Susan B. Anthony and became president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). “ The idea was to focus on winning the right to vote by promoting education of the issue at the state level. This way she could tailor her message more directly to the people” (Bowles, 2011). Catt’s strategy proved successful as by 1914 ten western states allowed women to vote in state elections.

In 1904 Catt stepped down as president of the NAWSA to take care of her sick husband and after his death in 1905 she worked on women’s rights in the international arena. “ Under other leadership, the national organization, NAWSA, became divided, sorely in need of Catt’s energy and direction” (Carrie, 2001). In 1915 Catt came back as president of the NAWSA and this is where she clashed with Alice Paul. Paul had a “ more militant strategy, which

was quite different from the more controlled and refined suffrage movement in the 19th century” (Bowles, 2011). “ Paul organized 5, 000 women in 1913 to protest the inauguration of new president Woodrow Wilson because, at the time, he was not certain that women should be allowed to vote” (Bowles, 2011). Paul’s difference in strategy led her and her followers to leave the NAWSA and form what would become the National Woman’s Party. Paul was also the organizer behind a group called the “ Silent Sentinels”. On January 1, 1917 they became the first group ever to picket in front of the White House. This picket led to Paul’s arrest. Paul was eventually released due to public demand. “ Fifty-one years after Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton founded NAWSA, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the vote in 1920” (Carrie, 2001).

“ In November of that year, women across the nation voted in their first presidential election” (Bowles, 2011). While women had gained the right to vote, they were still only able to obtain certain jobs. The jobs women were able to obtain were still not being paid as much as men. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th 1941 America entered into World War II. This created a very large number of job opportunities for women because the men were away at war. “ Because of the large number of American women taking jobs in the war industries during World War II, the National War Labor Board urged employers in 1942 to voluntarily make “ adjustments which equalize wage or salary rates paid to females with the rates paid to males for comparable quality and quantity of work on the same or similar operations” (Brunner, 2007). Needless to say, this did not happen. Not only did employers not pay women equal wages, but women were actually forced out

of these jobs when the war was over and the men returned. All the way up until the early 1960s newspapers posted job listings separately for male and female positions.

“ In some cases the ads ran identical jobs under male and female listings— but with separate pay scales. Separate, of course, meant unequal: between 1950 and 1960, women with full time jobs earned on average between 59–64 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earned in the same job” (Brunner, 2007). “ The first bill prohibiting pay discrimination against women was called the “ Women’s Equal Pay Act of 1945” and was introduced by Senators Pepper and Morse on June 21, 1945” (A Brief, 2012). This bill did not pass. There were other bills introduced every year after and they continued to be overlooked and refused. Finally, in June of 1963 John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act (EPA) into law to become effective on June 11, 1964. With the passing of this bill it became illegal to pay women lower wages than men based solely on their sex. “ If one compares a woman in 1900 with her counterpart in 2000, the gains have been significant” (Bowles, 2011). The 21st century is full of examples of ways women are continuing to gain independence. In 2008 Hillary Clinton ran against Obama for president. Women are now making up over half of all graduate students and in 2000, made up 46 percent of all workers. Women are continuing to grow in numbers in the military.

With all the accomplishments women have made over the years, they are still fighting on some grounds to become truly equal. The fact remains that even after the Equal Pay Act was passed over forty years ago, women still do not earn equal wages. “ Women have made enormous progress in the

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workforce since the Equal Pay Act, but the stubborn fact remains that four-and-a-half decades later the basic goal of the act has not been realized” (Brunner, 2007). “ In 2010, women earned 77% of men’s wages, which is only an improvement of a penny a year since 1963” (A Brief, 2012).

In 2009, President Obama signed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, which allows victims of pay discrimination to file a complaint with the government against their employer within 180 days of their last paycheck. Previously, victims were only allowed 180 days from the date of the first unfair paycheck. This Act is named after a former employee of Goodyear who alleged that she was paid 15-40 percent less than her male counterparts, which was later found to be accurate. President Obama has vowed to reduce the wage gap between the genders: women currently make approximately 80 cents for every dollar that men earn (Brunner, 2007). Looking back at the women of American History we see the sacrifices and struggles endured by many brave women. By following in the footsteps of these courageous women, the complete equality to men, that women have for so long fought for, will one day become a reality.

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