

Receiving, Losing, and Winning Back the Vote: The Story of Utah Women's Suffrage



By Barbara Jones Brown and Naomi Watkins

Introduction

Today, both women and men in Utah in the United States have the right to vote, but it wasn't always so. This text tells the story of how women in Utah received, lost, and then won back the right to vote.



An early women's suffrage button

Receiving the Vote: Enfranchisement (1870)

Utah was at the forefront of the women's **suffrage movement**, a national effort to give women the right to vote in political elections. **Suffrage** means “the right to vote.” Wyoming Territory first granted voting rights to women in December 1869. Utah Territory did the same several weeks later, in February 1870.



“Council Hall,” where the Utah Territorial Legislature voted to grant women’s suffrage on February 12, 1870. This structure stands across the street from Utah’s Capitol building today.

This **statute**, or law, allowed women in Utah to vote, but they were still not allowed to hold political office. Since Utah held its next election before Wyoming did, women in Salt Lake City became the first to vote (in a local election) in the modern nation.



Charlotte Cobb Godbe Kirby was one of the first in Utah to speak in favor of women's suffrage, as early as 1869.

On February 14, 1870, a schoolteacher named Seraph Young became the first woman to vote in Utah and in the modern nation.



This mural depiction of women first voting in Utah, by painter David Koch, hangs in the Utah Capitol Building.

In the 1800s, some members of the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practiced **polygamy**, in which a husband could have more than one living wife. Latter-day Saints, or “Mormons,” called it “plural marriage” and considered it a religious practice.



Brigham Young and some of his wives

After slavery was **abolished** and black men received voting rights through the 15th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, many American reformers turned their attention from ending slavery to ending polygamy. They considered polygamy morally wrong and oppressive to women. Some believed giving Utah women voting rights would **empower** them to end polygamy.



Many political cartoons in the late 1800s depicted women in Utah as being slaves of the LDS Church because of its practice of polygamy.

Latter-day Saints believed that Mormon women in Utah would use their vote to show their support for their religious practice of polygamy. They also thought that giving Utah women the vote would be a way to change negative views and perceptions about Utah women and the LDS Church. They wanted to show that Mormon women were not oppressed, helpless and enslaved as many anti-polygamists believed.



Mormon women marching in favor of polygamy

After receiving the vote, women throughout Utah became very involved in political life. The Relief Society, the women's organization of the LDS Church, developed programs to educate women throughout Utah about the political process and civic engagement.



Emily S. Richards co-organized the Utah Woman Suffrage Association, created local suffrage associations, and was a featured speaker at national and international suffrage conventions. Image courtesy of Bruce J. Nelson

Losing the Vote: Disfranchisement (1871-1887)

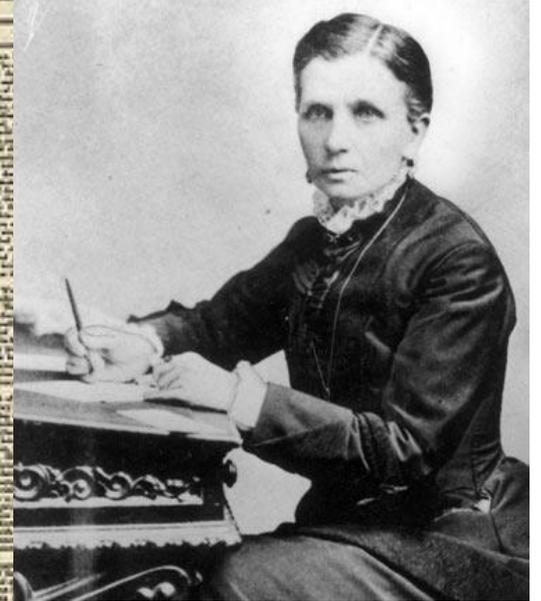
Since giving Utah women the vote did not end polygamy, anti-polygamists worked through Congress to pressure the LDS Church to **disavow** polygamy through a series of anti-polygamy laws.



Jennie Froiseth, editor of a Salt Lake City newspaper called the *Anti-Polygamy Standard*. Although she was a suffragist, she was so strongly opposed to polygamy that she thought Utah women should lose the vote until after polygamy was abolished.

Utah women chose delegates like Emmeline B. Wells to represent them at national suffrage conventions. Utah women formed ties with leading national suffragists like Susan B. Anthony.

However, most Utah women did not vote for candidates opposed to polygamy like anti-polygamists had hoped.



For 40 years, Emmeline B. Wells edited and wrote for the *Woman's Exponent*, a pro-suffrage newspaper.

In 1887, seventeen years after Utah women began exercising their voting rights, Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act in an effort to end polygamy. Part of this legislation took away the voting rights of *all* Utah women, whether they were Mormon or non-Mormon, polygamous or **monogamous**, married or single.



An 1882 quilt made by Utah women and others opposed to polygamy, given to Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont for passing anti-polygamy legislation.

Winning Back the Vote: Re-enfranchisement (1888-1896)

For seventeen years, Utah women enjoyed the privilege of exercising voting rights, so many of them felt outraged when Congress took those rights away. They worked hard to win them back. In 1888 they created the Utah Suffrage Association, an **affiliate** of Susan B. Anthony's National Woman Suffrage Association, and created local chapters throughout Utah.



Utah Woman's Suffrage Organization Banner, 1893
Image courtesy of International Society Daughters of Utah
Pioneers

In 1890, LDS Church president Wilford Woodruff officially announced the end of the **contracting** of new plural marriages in Utah. With this official change in policy, Utah was in a position to petition for statehood. During its 1895 Constitutional Convention, delegates debated whether to include women's suffrage and right to hold public office in the state constitution that Utah would propose to Congress.



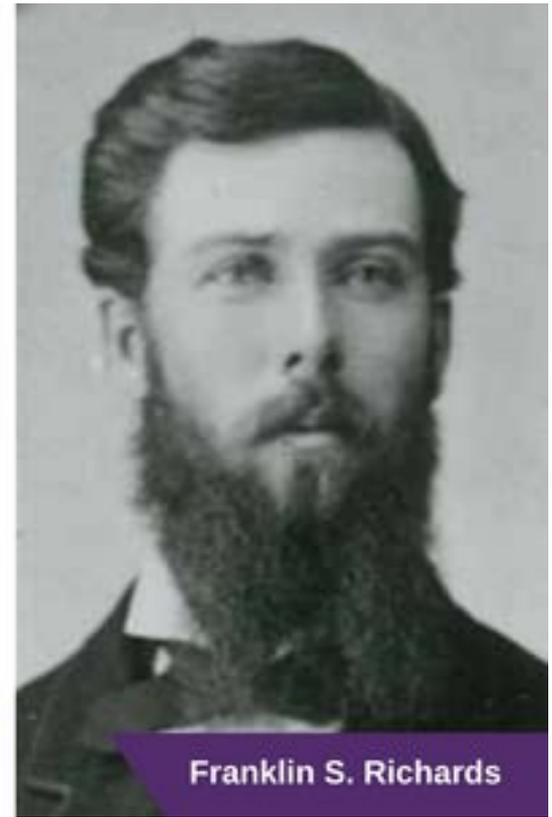
Wilford Woodruff

In contrast to other areas of the nation, most Utahns supported a woman's right to vote and hold public office. Both political parties in Utah supported these rights in their party platforms, and women's suffrage organizations throughout the territory lobbied delegates to include these rights in Utah's constitution.



The newly completed Salt Lake City and County building, which still stands today, was the site for Utah's 1895 Constitutional Convention, where delegates voted to include women's suffrage and right to hold public office in Utah's Constitution.

Despite minor opposition, the delegates voted to include a clause in the constitution that guaranteed women's suffrage and right to hold office. Utah voters, all of them male, then voted overwhelmingly to approve the proposed constitution. Utah women were given back the vote, or **re-enfranchised**, in 1896, after Congress accepted Utah's constitution and granted Utah statehood.



During the Utah state constitutional debates, B. H. Roberts strongly opposed including suffrage in the proposed constitution. Franklin S. Richards spoke in favor of it.

Utah Women and the National Suffrage Movement (1896-1920)

Even though Utah women had voting rights again, they remained committed to winning those rights for other women throughout the nation. They continued to work with national suffrage organizations, helping to fund these organizations, serving as leaders in them, and attending national and international women's rights conventions.



Utah and other Western Suffragists with national suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony (center) in 1895 in Salt Lake City.

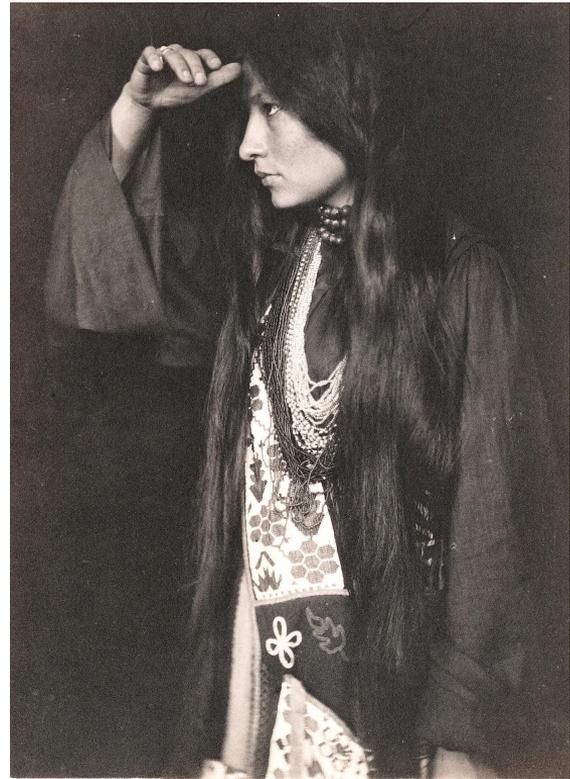
In August of 1920, Congress **ratified** the 19th Amendment, granting women's suffrage throughout the United States. Even though there was now an amendment granting women's suffrage nationally, many minorities were still not able to vote. The fight for universal suffrage was not yet over.



Women celebrating the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Conclusion

Even though American Indians were born in U.S. territory, they were denied full citizenship and voting rights until Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924. Many Asian immigrants to the U.S. were legally prohibited from becoming citizens (with voting rights) until the passing of McCarran–Walter Act of 1952. And legal barriers put in place by some states made it practically impossible for African Americans to vote until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



Zitkala-Sa, a Native woman who lived in Utah and fought for citizenship and voting rights for American Indians.

Courageous people in Utah and throughout the nation have made voting rights available to nearly all U.S. citizens today.

