How American women won the right to vote: a Tennessee perspective (part two)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 2, 2026)

The Women's Suffrage Museum in downtown Knoxville is scheduled to open in 2028 or early 2029. Wanda Sobieski, founder of the museum, recently gave a talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge on the history of the suffrage movement and plans for the museum being completed at 706 S. Gay St. According to its flyer, this museum that has more than 1,000 artifacts will tell the story of "one of the longest, most arduous and ultimately most transformative movements in American history" that won the right to vote for 27 million American women citizens in 1920.

Sobieski is also founder of the law firm Sobieski, Messer and Associates and the Suffrage Coalition, Inc., which is dedicated to honoring men and women who have worked to win the right to vote for women in Tennessee. Carolyn Krause heard her talk and gives a summary in this three-part series. This article focuses on Sobieski's summary of the history of the women's suffrage movement in the United States. Some of the information comes from online sources.

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Women in 23 countries won the right to vote before American women were enfranchised. What helped American women win the right to vote was not only seven decades of meetings, protests, arguments, picketing, ridicule, hunger strikes and forced feedings in jail experienced by passionate, dedicated women but also the decisions of men who changed their minds. Two key men were President Woodrow Wilson and Harry Burn, who cast the vote in the Tennessee Legislature that enabled the ratification of the 19th Amendment that Wilson finally supported and that gave American women the right to vote, as described in the previous article in this series.

The Women's Suffrage Museum that will open in less than two years in downtown Knoxville will tell the stories of the key women involved in the suffrage movement, including those in Tennessee, as well as key men who opposed and then later supported the movement. In her talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge, Wanda Sobieski mentioned many of the important people in the movement. This article will also list a few other people that will be featured in the museum.

Key women suffragists. "Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very unhappy with the position of women in 1848," Sobieski said. "Her husband Henry Stanton was an international, well-known abolitionist. While working with him in the abolition movement, she recognized that there were striking, legal similarities between the laws as they affected women and the lives of people of color, especially those who were enslaved."

Stanton was elected as a delegate to the World Abolition Conference in London. But the men there refused to seat her and Lucretia Mott, another elected delegate, because they were women. The men ultimately decided that the women could attend the conference, but they had to sit in the balcony behind a veil and not speak. Because they were excluded solely because of their gender, Stanton and Mott decided to call a convention to focus on American women's grievances concerning their lack of rights including the right to vote.

"Married women basically had no rights," Sobieski said. "They were the property of their husbands. He made all the decisions. He inherited or took her property. She could not own property. She could not go to court to sue over any kind of grievance. She could not leave an abusive husband.

"Her children belonged to her husband. Girls couldn't go to school like boys did. Because the conditions for females were so bad in 1848, Stanton realized that women not having a voice in government and not being able to influence government policies was a particularly large barrier to their progress."

The organized fight for women's suffrage was launched in July 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. Stanton drafted the Declaration of Sentiments, intentionally reflecting the Declaration of Independence by stating that "all men and women are created equal" and demanding enfranchisement.

"When word got out about the convention where crazy women were calling for the right to vote, a firestorm of ridicule began," Sobieski said. It was the first of many firestorms, she added, noting that even today some American men argue that women should no longer have the right to vote.

Following the Civil War (1861-65), the suffrage movement split over the 15th Amendment, which granted voting rights to Black men but excluded all women. When the 15th Amendment passed, leaving women as the largest class of people excluded from the vote, Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) to push for a federal constitutional amendment guaranteeing all women the right to vote.

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Anthony, who had joined forces with Stanton in 1851 as a close friend, was an exceptional organizer and strategist. She spent decades traveling the country, organizing petitions and giving speeches. In 1872, she was arrested for "illegally" voting in Rochester, New York (although many legal scholars thought the 14th Amendment implicitly enfranchised women). She died in 1906, four years after Stanton passed away.

Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). It initially supported the 15th Amendment (although it granted voting rights only to more men), and advocated a state-by-state approach to women's enfranchisement. The two groups reunited in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

By the early 1900s, western states – Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Idaho – began giving women a largely unrestricted right to vote. These states experienced no significant evidence that female voters disrupted the political or domestic order. Sobieski said that propaganda opposing suffrage claimed that if women had the right to vote, they might become violent or they would cherish their liberty and decide not to marry, meaning that fewer children would be born.

Prominent Black abolitionists included Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mary Church Terrell (from Tennessee), Juno Frankie Pierce, Mattie E. Coleman, and many more. Ida B. Wells was a Black investigative journalist, anti-lynching activist and suffragist. Wells founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago and famously chose to Integrate the Illinois delegation at the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession, although some white attendees suggested they march at the back of the parade.

Carrie Chapman Catt served as president of NAWSA from 1900 to 1904 and 1915 to 1920. She devised the "Winning Plan," a coordinated campaign that combined state-by-state campaigns with lobbying for a federal constitutional amendment.

Alice Paul and Lucy Burns led the radical wing. After studying tactics used by militant British suffragettes, Paul and Burns formed the National Woman's Party (NWP), but they were nonviolent. They introduced nonviolent direct action to the U.S. movement, organizing daily pickets outside the White House when President Wilson refused to actively support them. They rejected the violent tactics of the British women, who started fires and broke the Parliament's windows but still won the vote in 1917.

Suffs, the award-winning Broadway musical that dramatizes the final, decisive years of the American women's suffrage movement leading up to the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment, accurately highlights the friction between the older NAWSA members and the younger NWP members, as well as the marginalization of Black suffragists such as Ida B. Wells by some white movement leaders.

The leading character in Suffs is Alice Paul. "Alice was herself a Quaker and she was committed to non-violence," said Sobieski. "She challenged the existing suffrage people to bring more attention to the issue of suffrage and get more public involvement. She was committed to a federal constitutional change that would affect everybody in the country and be much harder to overturn." The movement's goal was to "concert public opinion in their favor."

President Wilson's actions. When Woodrow Wilson became president in 1913, he expressed opposition to a federal suffrage amendment. A Southern Democrat committed to state's rights, Wilson argued that individual states should decide who was eligible to vote.

Beginning in January 1917, Alice Paul's National Woman's Party stationed picketers – known as the Silent Sentinels – outside the White House gates. Carrying gold, white and violet banners addressing Wilson directly ("Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?"), they became the first group to systematically picket the White House.

"President Wilson tried to treat their presence as a joke," Sobieski said. "When he went in and out of the White House, he'd tip his hat at them and act all friendly, even inviting them in for coffee on at least one occasion."

When the U.S. entered World War I in April 1917, the picketers continued. Public perception shifted as police arrested the women who stood next to the White House fence for "obstructing traffic" (the charges against them were overturned on appeal). The commissioner of police for the District of Columbia who issued the order to the D.C. police to start arresting the suffragists at the gates was Louis Brownlow, a former resident of Knoxville who was a grandson of a congressman, according to Sobieski.

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Imprisoned at the Occoquan Workhouse, suffragists suffered brutal conditions and, partly because they refused to eat the wormy oatmeal they were given, they went on hunger strikes. As a result, they were subjected to forced-feeding in which raw eggs were dropped in a funnel connected to a hose forced down into each prisoner's stomach. Reports of the "Night of Terror" in November 1917, where guards beat jailed activists, causing heart attacks and concussions, created severe public outrage and embarrassed the Wilson administration.

Because thousands of American women filled critical industrial, agricultural and voluntary roles during World War I (1914-18), Carrie Chapman Catt argued that a nation fighting for democracy abroad could not credibly deny democracy to half its citizens at home. Wilson had framed America's entry into the war as a crusade "to make the world safe for democracy." Using his words against him, the suffragists highlighted his hypocrisy, threatening his international credibility and moral authority.

By 1917, women possessed the right to vote in several key electoral states, including New York. As the 1918 midterm elections approached, Wilson realized that opposing suffrage risked alienating millions of voting women in states crucial to Democratic control of Congress. In January 1918, President Wilson formally declared his support for a federal suffrage amendment.

Addressing the U.S. Senate on September 30, 1918, Wilson framed the amendment as a necessary war measure: "We have made partners of the women in this war... Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege, and right?"

Following Wilson's endorsement, Congress passed the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919. The ratification campaign came down to the Tennessee Legislature on Aug. 18, 1920, and thanks to House Representative Harry Burn's change of mind, American women won the right to vote.

But the suffering and sacrifice of the suffragists should not be forgotten, and their experiences and toughness will continue to be remembered when the Women's Suffrage Museum opens in 2028 in Knoxville. Here's what Sobieski said about Alice Paul.

"Government officials decided to break Alice Paul. She was in jail for seven months. During that period, she was force-fed, causing her health complications for the rest of her life. A government psychiatrist was sent to examine her. It was thought that, if it was proven she is crazy, that finding would take the edge off the suffrage movement. So, you can imagine the government's disappointment when the psychiatrist came out and said, 'She's not crazy, but she has the spirit of Joan of Arc.'"

Next: The third and last article in this series will feature one important suffragist in Knoxville, who will also be celebrated in the Women's Suffrage Museum. If you wish to make a donation to the Women's Suffrage Museum, write a check to Suffrage Coalition, Inc. and mail it to Suffrage Coalition, Inc. P.O. Box 14322, Knoxville, TN 39714 or direct your donation electronically on the womenssuffragemuseum.org website.

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Thank you, Carolyn, for continuing to provide insight into the women's suffrage movement.

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Burn Memorial commemorating Febb Burn and her son Harry



Wanda Sobieski will open the Women's Suffrage Museum in Knoxville

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Tennessee Woman Suffrage Memorial