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Famous Firsts in American Women's History

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American women's history has been full of pioneers: Women who fought for their rights, worked hard to be treated equally and made great strides in fields like science, politics, sports, literature and art. These are just a few of the remarkable accomplishments that historians not to mention people across the United States celebrate. What "Famous Firsts" will American women achieve next?

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LEAD STORY

Elizabeth becomes queen, 1952

On this day in 1952, after a long illness, King George VI of Great Britain and Northern Ireland dies in his sleep at the royal estate at Sandringham...

First women's-rights convention meets in Seneca Falls, New York, 1848

In July 1848, some 240 men and women gathered in upstate New York for a meeting convened, said organizers, "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." One hundred of the delegates—68 women and 32 men—signed a Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, declaring that women, like men, were citizens with an "inalienable right to the elective franchise." The Seneca Falls Convention marked the beginning of the campaign for woman suffrage.

Wyoming Territory is first to grant women the vote, 1869

In 1869, Wyoming's territorial legislature declared that "every woman of the age of twenty-one years, residing in this territory, may at every election...cast her vote." Though Congress lobbied hard against it, Wyoming's women kept their right to vote when the territory became a state in 1890. In 1924, the state's voters elected the nation's first female governor, Nellie Tayloe Ross.

Recommended Articles



The Fight for Women's Suffrage
The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the right to vote and declared that they deserve full citizenship.



Women Who Fought for the Vote
In 1920, American women voted for the first time, thanks to activists such as Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.



Women's History Month
In the United States, March is Women's History Month, a time for celebrating the diverse and historic accomplishments of women.



Women's Movement
Largely based in the United States, this movement seeks equal

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Californian Julia Morgan is first woman admitted to the Ecole de Beaux-Arts in Paris, 1898

The 26-year-old Morgan had already earned a degree in civil engineering from Berkeley, where she was one of just 100 female students in the entire university (and the only female engineer). After she received her certification in architecture from the Ecole de Beaux-Arts, the best architecture school in the world, Morgan returned to California. There, she became the first woman licensed to practice architecture in the state and an influential champion of the Arts and Crafts movement. Though she is most famous for building the "Hearst Castle," a massive compound for the publisher William Randolph Hearst in San Simeon, California, Morgan designed more than 700 buildings in her long career. She died in 1957.

opportunities for women in their economic activities, personal lives and politics.

Did You Know?

The 15 states that never ratified the Equal Rights Amendment are:
Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia.

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Amelia Earhart on Bio.com
 Explore the life and the mysterious disappearance of the pioneering aviatrix through video, photos, and her featured biography on Bio.com.

Margaret Sanger opens first birth-control clinic in the United States, 1916

In October 1916, the nurse and women's-rights activist Margaret Sanger opened the first American birth-control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Since state "Comstock Laws" banned contraceptives and the dissemination of information about them, Sanger's clinic was illegal; as a result, on October 26, the city vice squad raided the clinic, arresting its staff and seizing its stock of diaphragms and condoms. Sanger tried to reopen the clinic twice more, but police forced her landlord to evict her the next month, closing it for good. In 1921, Sanger formed the American Birth Control League, the organization that eventually became Planned Parenthood.

Edith Wharton is the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, 1921

Wharton won the prize for her 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*. Like many of Wharton's books, *The Age of Innocence* was a critique of the insularity and hypocrisy of the upper class in turn-of-the-century New York. The book has inspired several stage and screen adaptations, and the writer Cecily Von Ziegesar has said that it was the model for her popular *Gossip Girl* series of books.

Activist Alice Paul proposes the Equal Rights Amendment for the first time, 1923

For almost 50 years, women's-rights advocates like Alice Paul tried to get Congress to approve the amendment; finally, in 1972, they succeeded. In March of that year, Congress sent the proposed amendment—"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex"—to the states for ratification. Twenty-two of the required 38 states ratified it right away, but then conservative activists mobilized against it. (The ERA's straightforward language hid all kinds of sinister threats, they claimed: It would force wives to support their husbands, send women into combat and validate gay marriages.) This anti-ratification campaign was a success: In 1977, Indiana became the 35th and last state to ratify the ERA. In June 1982, the ratification deadline expired. The amendment has never been passed.

Amelia Earhart is the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an airplane, 1928

After that first trip across the ocean, which took more than 20 hours, Earhart became a celebrity: She won countless awards, got a ticker-tape parade down Broadway, wrote a best-selling book about her famous flight and became an editor at *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In 1937, Earhart attempted to be the first female pilot to fly around the world, and the first pilot of any gender to circumnavigate the globe at its widest point, the Equator. Along with her navigator Fred Noonan, Earhart successfully hoppedscotched from Miami to Brazil, Africa, India and Australia. Six weeks after they began their journey, Earhart and Noonan left New Guinea for the U.S. territory of Howland Island, but they never arrived. No trace of Earhart, Noonan or their plane was ever found.

Frances Perkins becomes the first female member of a Presidential cabinet, 1933

Perkins, a sociologist and Progressive reformer in New York, served as Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor. She kept her job until 1945.

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League becomes the first professional baseball league for female players, 1943

Women had been playing professional baseball for decades: Starting in the 1890s, gender-integrated "Bloomer Girls" teams (named after the feminist Amelia Bloomer) traveled around the country, challenging men's teams to games—and frequently winning. As the men's minor leagues expanded, however, playing opportunities for Bloomer Girls decreased, and the last of the teams called it quits in 1934. But by 1943, so many major-league stars had joined the armed services and gone off to war that stadium owners and baseball executives worried that the game would never recover. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was the solution to this problem: It would keep ballparks filled and fans entertained until the war was over. For 12 seasons, more than 600 women played for the league's teams, including the Racine (Wisconsin) Belles, the Rockford (Illinois) Peaches, the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Chicks and the Fort Wayne (Indiana) Daisies. The AAGPBL disbanded in 1954.

The FDA announces its approval of "The Pill," the first birth-control drug, 1960

In October 1959, the pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle applied for a license from the federal Food and Drug Administration to sell its drug Enovid, a combination of the hormones estrogen and progesterone, for use as an oral contraceptive. FDA approval was not guaranteed: For one thing, the agency was uncomfortable with the idea of allowing doctors to prescribe drugs to healthy people; for another, the young bureaucrat assigned to the case was fixated on moral and religious, not scientific, objections to the pill. Despite all this, Enovid was approved for short-term use in October 1960.

Janet Guthrie is the first woman to drive in the Indy 500, 1977

Guthrie was an aerospace engineer, training to be an astronaut, when she was cut from the space program because she didn't have her PhD. She turned to car racing instead and became the first woman to qualify for the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500. Mechanical difficulties forced her out of the 1977 Indy race, but the next year she finished in ninth place (with a broken wrist). The helmet and suit that Guthrie wore in her first Indy race are on display in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

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President Ronald Reagan nominates Sandra Day O'Connor to be the first woman on the Supreme Court, 1981

O'Connor was confirmed that September. She did not have much judicial experience when she began her Supreme Court term—she had only been a judge for a few years and had never served on a federal court—but she soon made a name for herself as one of the Court's most thoughtful centrists. O'Connor retired in 2006.

Joan Benoit wins the first women's Olympic Marathon, 1984

At the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles, Joan Benoit (today known as Joan Benoit Samuelson) finished the first-ever women's marathon in 2:24.52. She finished 400 meters ahead of the silver medalist, Norway's Grete Waitz.

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Manon Rheaume is the first woman to play in an NHL game, 1992

Manon Rheaume, a goalie from Quebec City, Canada, was no stranger to firsts: She was well-known for being the first female player to take the ice in a major boys' junior hockey game. In 1992, Rheaume was the starting goalie for the National Hockey League's Tampa Bay Lightning in a preseason exhibition game, making her the first woman to play in any of the major men's sports leagues in the U.S. In that game, she deflected seven of nine shots; however, she was taken out of the game early and never played in a regular-season game. Rheaume led the Canadian women's national team to victory in the 1992 and 1994 World Hockey Championships. The team also won silver at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan.

[Valentine's Day Infographic](#)
How many people celebrate it?

Madeleine Albright becomes the first female Secretary of State, 1997

In January 1997, the international-relations expert Madeleine K. Albright was sworn in as the United States' 64th Secretary of State. She was the first woman to hold that job, which made her the highest-ranking woman in the federal government's history. Before President Bill Clinton asked her to be part of his Cabinet, Albright had served as the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. In 2004, Condoleezza Rice became the second woman--and first African-American woman to hold the job. Five years later, in January 2009, the former Senator (and First Lady) Hillary Rodham Clinton became the third female Secretary of State.

Kathryn Bigelow becomes the first woman to win an Oscar for Best Director, 2010

The American film director Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 film "The Hurt Locker" garnered six Oscars on March 7, 2010, including the Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture. Written by Mark Boal, a former journalist who covered the war in Iraq, the movie follows an Army bomb squad unit as they conduct dangerous missions and battle personal demons in war-torn Baghdad. Bigelow, whose previous films include "Strange Days" and "Point Break," was the first woman to take home the Best Director distinction. She triumphed over her former husband, James Cameron, whose science fiction epic "Avatar" was another presumed front-runner.

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Meet a Super Scientist!

Astronauts aren't born — they go to school and learn about science just like everyone else! Dr. Mae Jemison's curiosity and energy led her to learn about many things. She went to the library and dancing school. She even acted in school plays and was elected to her school government. And even though astronauts are brave, Dr. Jemison had to conquer her own feelings of fear growing up, too, as all children do.

Mae Jemison: The First Black Woman Astronaut

It was the first day of school, 1961. Five-year-old Mae Carol Jemison was a confident kindergartner who could already read. When her teacher asked her, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mae replied: "A scientist." Her teacher looked surprised: Not many women became scientists then, and certainly few black women. But that was Mae's first and only choice.

Mae's love for science took her to the library. She read books about the universe. She also enjoyed science fiction books. In sixth grade she read Madeline L'Engle's books *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Arm of the Starfish*. "Those books stand out because they had women scientists and girl heroines," Mae remembers.

Books weren't the only way Mae learned. She was active in student government, acted in plays, and studied dance. "In dance class, I grew stronger and gained an appreciation for hard work, physical strength, and grace," she says.

When Mae was 12, there were civil rights demonstrations near her neighborhood in Chicago. To prevent protests before an important political meeting, the mayor of Chicago called in the National Guard, which marched through Mae's mostly African-American neighborhood with rifles. Mae watched, scared, confused, and angry. She promised herself she would never feel that frightened again. "I reminded myself that I was as much a part of this United States as the Guardsmen," she remembers.

In college, Mae studied the physical and social sciences, and learned to speak Russian and the African language Swahili. She earned a degree in chemical engineering and African studies. After college, she studied medicine for four years, and became a medical doctor.

In 1987, Mae was accepted into NASA's astronaut program. She trained in Texas, learning about space exploration. She worked for NASA, and waited for a shuttle assignment.

When the space shuttle *Endeavour* launched into orbit in 1992, Mae became the first African-American woman to orbit the earth. Mae looked down from the shuttle and saw Chicago. She remembered visiting the library, making science fair projects, and dancing. "I felt like I belonged right there in space," she remembers. "I realized I would feel comfortable anywhere in the universe — because I belonged to and was a part of it, as much as any star, planet, asteroid, comet, or nebula."



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Historical Figures

♥ denotes Ohio figure



- Abigail Smith Adams (1744-1818) - Wife of John Adams, 2nd President of the United States and mother of John Quincy Adams, 6th President. Known for her letters and opinions on society.
- Jane Addams (1860-1935) - Social Activist, founder of Hull House, charter member of the NAACP, Nobel Peace Prize winner and labor union organizer.
- Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) - Seamstress, servant, teacher, Civil War nurse, and finally, author and novelist.
- Marian Anderson (1902-1995) - First African American to sing leading role with Metropolitan Opera, delegate to U.N.
- Susan Brownell Anthony (1820-1906) - Napoleon of the women's suffrage movement, mother of the 19th Amendment, abolitionist.
- Josephine Baker (1906-1975) - African-American international star, civil rights activist, World War II heroine.
- Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931) - African-American educator, newspaperwoman, anti-lynching campaigner, founder NAACP.
- Clara Barton (1821-1912) - Civil War nurse, founder of the American Red Cross.
- Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) African-American educator, founder of Bethune-Cookman College, Daytona Beach, Florida, Presidential advisor, recipient of Spingarn Medal.
- Sarah Bolton (1841-1916) - Noted Cleveland author of biographies, poetry and a temperance novel. ♥
- Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) - Groundbreaking photo-journalist and author
- Mary Elizabeth Bowser (1839-?) - African-American Union spy in the Confederate White House.
- Belle Boyd (1844-1900) - Confederate spy during the Civil War.
- Margaret "Molly" Tobin Brown (1867-1932) - Titanic survivor and a woman who was determined to break the rules of "high society."
- Eliza Bryant (1827-1907) - African-American founder of the The Cleveland Home for Aged Colored People. ♥
- Abbie Burgess (Grant) (1839-1892) - Lighthouse keeper at Matinicus Rock and Whitehead Light Stations in Maine, commissioned by U.S. Coast Guard.
- Martha Jane "Calamity Jane" Cannary (1852-1903) - A lone woman in the wilds of the Rocky Mountain west
- Rachel Carson (1907-1964) - Marine biologist, science writer, and environmentalist.
- Rebecca Carter (1766-1827) - Pioneer woman of Cleveland. ♥
- Mary Ann Shadd Cary (1823-1893) African-American born pioneer journalist and lecturer.
- Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) - Suffragette, founder of the League of Women Voters.
- Cassie L. Chadwick (1857-1907) - Most infamous Cleveland financial con-artist. ♥
- Bessie Coleman (1893-1926) - First African-American woman to get pilot's license.
- Dorothy Dandridge (1923-1965) - Actress, singer and dancer. Star of *Carmen Jones* and *Porgy and Bess*. ♥
- Isadora Duncan (1875-1929) - Mother of modern dance.

- Amelia Earhart (1897-1937) - Aviatix.
- Mary Fields (1832?-1914) - African-American entrepreneur, stagecoach driver, pioneer.
- Diana Fletcher (circa 1830's) - Daughter of a former slave father and Kiowa mother, activist, taught in black Cherokee school.
- Dorothy Fuldheim (1893-1989) - Jewish-American news journalist and television broadcaster; developed format for television news programming.
- Lucretia Rudolph Garfield (1832-1918) - Wife of James Garfield, 20th President of the United States was First Lady for six months when her husband was assassinated. "Crete" returned home to Lawnfield in Mentor where her life continued in a non-traditional way.
- Zelma Watson George (1903-1994) - African-American delegate to the U.N., opera singer, speaker and educator.
- Emma Goldman (1869-1940) - Vilified in her day as the "most dangerous woman in America," this Russian emigrant earned her title, "Queen of the Anarchists" as labor leader, lecturer, writer, women's rights activist and free love advocate.
- Julia Boggs Dent Grant (1826-1902) - Wife of Ulysses S. Grant, 18th President of the United States, was a determined woman who despite family objections married the man she loved. Outspoken, she also created her own plans for ending the Civil War and holding a secret Presidential Inauguration.
- Charlotte Forten Grimke (1837-1890) - African-American writer, abolitionist and educator.
- Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977) - African-American sharecropper turned civil rights worker and founder of the MS Freedom Democratic Party.
- Florence Harding (1860-1924) - Wife of Warren Harding, 29th President of the United States, the first presidential wife able to vote for her husband. Scandal plagued this First Lady throughout her life.
- Caroline Lavinia Scott Harrison (1832-1892) - Wife of Benjamin Harrison, 23rd President of the United States, was the first president-general of the newly formed DAR. An accomplished watercolorist, she designed and painted the Harrison state china and organized the White House china collection.
- Lucy Ware Webb Hayes (1831-1889) - Wife of Rutherford B. Hayes, 19th President of the United States, was the first presidential wife to have a college degree. She originated the annual Easter Egg Roll on the White House lawn.
- Sally Hemings (1773-1835) - African American who sacrificed her freedom from slavery for the love of President Thomas Jefferson.
- Rear Admiral Grace Hopper, USNR (1906-1992) - Computer pioneer and the oldest officer in active duty when she retired in 1986.
- Hedda Hopper (1890-1966) - In the golden age of Hollywood, Hedda could make or break careers. Gossip was her business and J. Edgar Hoover was her penpal.
- Adella Prentiss Hughes (1869-1950) - Founder of the Cleveland Orchestra and Cleveland Music Settlement House.
- Jane Edna Hunter (1882-1971) - African-American social worker, attorney, founder of Phyllis Wheatley Association of Cleveland.
- Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960) - African-American writer from The Harlem Group, influenced Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.
- Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) - A Puritan woman who defied the male-dominated Massachusetts Bay Colony and after banishment helped settle Rhode Island and New York.
- Mahalia Jackson (1912-1972) - Extraordinary gospel singer and the first African-American woman to gain national acclaim for gospel music.
- Rebecca Jackson (1795-1871) - African-American eldress of the Shaker sect.
- Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) - African-American escaped slave, author and abolitionist.
- "Mother" Mary Harris Jones (1837-1930) - Irish immigrant who lost her family to yellow fever and became the self-proclaimed mother and "hell-raiser" for the downtrodden American laborer, especially children.
- Sissieretta Jones (1869-1933) - African-American international vocal prima donna of late 19th

century, favorite of George Bernard Shaw and several presidents.

- Barbara Jordan (1936-1996) - African-American orator and Congresswoman.
- Elizabeth Keckley (1820-?) Personal maid, best friend and confidant to Mary Todd Lincoln. Wrote tell-all book after leaving Mrs. Lincoln's employ.
- Marie LaVeau (1796?-1863?) - African-American Voodoo Queen of New Orleans and famous herbalist.
- Edmonia Lewis (1843-?) - First successful African-American sculptor.
- Ida Lewis (1842-1913) - Heroic lighthouse keeper of Rhode Island, commissioned by U.S. Coast Guard.
- Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882) - Wife of President Abraham Lincoln, misrepresented by popular history and maligned by her peers.
- Jenny Lind (1820-1887) - Swedish international opera star, brought to U.S. by P.T. Barnum in the 1850s.
- Juliette Gordon Low (1860-1927) - Founder of the American Girl Scouts.
- Clare Boothe Luce (1903-1987) - Playwright, U.S. Congresswoman and ambassador to Italy.
- Barbara Mabrity (1782-1867) - Lighthouse keeper in Key West, Florida, commissioned by U.S. Coast Guard.
- Dolley Madison (1768-1849) - First Lady and doyen of Washington society
- Biddy Mason (1818-1891) - Entrepreneur, one of first African-American women to own land in California.
- Rachel Agnes Mason (1867-1903) An Irish immigrant whose family came to America in 1788 because of religious conflict.
- Flora Stone Mather (1852-1910) - Cleveland philanthropist, founder of Flora Stone Mather college at Western Reserve University for women. Sponsored Goodrich House for urban children.
- Ida Saxton McKinley (1847-1907) - Wife of William McKinley, 25th President of the United States, developed a unique way of coping with her epileptic seizures during her public appearances as First Lady.
- Maria Mitchell (1818-1889) - Astronomer and professor at Vassar College. First female member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) - Russian born New York sculptor famous for her shadow box, wall sculptures and her flamboyant personality.
- Annie Oakley (1860-1926) - World famous markswoman from Ohio.
- Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) - Famed American artist who defied convention in both her art and her private life.
- Louella Parsons (1893-1965) - Hollywood gossip columnist, who dominated Hollywood's Golden Era. Louella's relationship with William Randolph Hearst and her own three marriages made her life as stormy as any Hollywood movie.
- Alice Paul (1885-1977) - The woman who rescued the woman suffrage movement (1910) and made sure women got the vote.
- Mrs. George (Hannah?) Peake (1755-18??) - First African-American settler of Cleveland.
- Molly Pitcher (Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley) (1754-1832) - Born Mary Ludwig, this revolutionary heroine followed the Continental Army for more than 3 years, doing what was needed to free the colonies from the tyranny of England.
- Eleanor Anna Roosevelt (1884-1962) - Wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, first activist First Lady
- Rebecca Rouse (1799-1887) - Cleveland humanitarian, temperance advocate, abolitionist, founder of Beech Brook.
- Wilma Rudolph (1940-1994) - African-American Olympic Gold Medalist.
- Rose Bianco Salvatore (1900-1993) - Italian immigrant during the "Great Wave" coming to America.
- Belle Sherwin (1868-1955) - Cleveland suffragist, President of League of Women Voters, social reformer.

- [Margaret Skapes](#) (1892-1968) - Immigrant from Greece, suffragette.
- [Bessie Smith](#) (1894-1937) - African-American blues singer.
- [Valaida Snow](#) (190?-1956) - African-American band leader and trumpet player.
- [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) (1815-1902) First president of the National Woman's Suffrage Association.
- [Belle Starr](#) (1848-1889) - Confederate sympathizer and western frontierswoman and outlaw.
- [Susan McKinney Steward](#) (1848-1918) - First female African-American doctor in New York State.
- [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#) (1811-1896) - Author of Uncle Tom's Cabin.
- [Annie Sullivan](#) (1866-1936) - Helen Keller's teacher.
- [Helen Herron Taft](#) (1861-1943) - Wife of William H. Taft, 27th President of the United States, always longed to live in the White House. Known for planting Washington D.C.'s legendary cherry trees.
- [Susie King Taylor](#) (1848-1912) - First African-American U.S. Army nurse during the Civil War.
- [Mary Church Terrell](#) (1863-1954) - African-American lecturer, suffragette, civil rights leader.
- [Sojourner Truth \(Isabella Baumfree\)](#) (1797-1883) - African-American abolitionist, Civil War nurse, suffragette.
- [Harriet Tubman](#) (1820?-1913) - Underground Railroad conductor, Army scout, African-American suffragette.
- [Elizabeth Van Lew](#) (1818-1900) - Crazy Bet, an abolitionist in the South during the Civil War, who feigned insanity to help free slaves and help the Union Army.
- [Rosetta Wakeman](#) (1843-1864) - Posed as a male to serve in Union Army during Civil War.
- [Madame C.J. Walker](#) (1867-1919) - African-American entrepreneur, millionaire and philanthropist.
- [Hazel Mountain Walker](#) (1900-1980) - African-American attorney, school principal, actress at Karamu
- [Katherine Walker](#) (1846-1931) - Lighthouse keeper at Robin's Reef, New York, commissioned by U.S. Coast Guard.
- [Mary Edwards Walker](#) (1832-1919) - Prisoner of war during the Civil War, writer, doctor, fashion trend-setter and the only female to receive the Medal of Honor.
- [Mae West](#) (1892-1980) First to earn a million dollars in the movie business.
- [Phillis Wheatley](#) (175?-1784) - First noted African-American woman poet.
- [Laura Ingalls Wilder](#) (1867-1957) - Famed children's author and "storyteller of the prairie."
- [Victoria Woodhull](#) (1838-1927) - First woman to run for President, center of a scandal that rocked the nation.

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS. Throughout most of history women generally have had fewer legal rights and career opportunities than men. Wifehood and motherhood were regarded as women's most significant professions. In the 20th century, however, women in most nations won the right to vote and increased their educational and job opportunities. Perhaps most important, they fought for and to a large degree accomplished a reevaluation of traditional views of their role in society.

Early Attitudes Toward Women

Since early times women have been uniquely viewed as a creative source of human life. Historically, however, they have been considered not only intellectually inferior to men but also a major source of temptation and evil. In Greek mythology, for example, it was a woman, Pandora, who opened the forbidden box and brought plagues and unhappiness to mankind. Early Roman law described women as children, forever inferior to men.

Early Christian theology perpetuated these views. St. Jerome, a 4th-century Latin father of the Christian church, said: "Woman is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word a perilous object." Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century Christian theologian, said that woman was "created to be man's helpmeet, but her unique role is in conception . . . since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men."

The attitude toward women in the East was at first more favorable. In ancient India, for example, women were not deprived of property rights or individual freedoms by marriage. But Hinduism, which evolved in India after about 500 BC, required obedience of women toward men. Women had to walk behind their husbands. Women could not own property, and widows could not remarry. In both East and West, male children were preferred over female children.

Nevertheless, when they were allowed personal and intellectual freedom, women made significant achievements. During the Middle Ages nuns played a key role in the religious life of Europe. Aristocratic women enjoyed power and prestige. Whole eras were influenced by women rulers for instance, Queen Elizabeth of England in the 16th century, Catherine the Great of Russia in the 18th century, and Queen Victoria of England in the 19th century.

The Weaker Sex?

Women were long considered naturally weaker than men, squeamish, and unable to perform work requiring muscular or intellectual development. In most preindustrial societies, for example, domestic chores were relegated to women, leaving "heavier" labor such as hunting and plowing to men. This ignored the fact that caring for children and doing such tasks as milking cows and washing clothes also required heavy, sustained labor. But physiological tests now suggest that women have a greater tolerance for pain, and statistics reveal that women live longer and are more resistant to many diseases.

Maternity, the natural biological role of women, has traditionally been regarded as their major social role as well. The resulting stereotype that "a woman's place is in the home" has largely determined the ways in which women have expressed themselves. Today, contraception and, in some areas, legalized abortion have given women greater control over the number of children they will bear. Although these developments have freed women for roles other than motherhood, the cultural pressure for women to become wives and mothers still prevents many talented women from finishing college or pursuing careers.

Traditionally a middle-class girl in Western culture tended to learn from her mother's example that cooking, cleaning, and caring for children was the behavior expected of her when she grew up. Tests made in the 1960s showed that the scholastic achievement of girls was higher in the early grades than in high school. The major reason given was that the girls' own expectations declined because neither their families nor their teachers expected them to prepare for a future other than that of marriage and motherhood. This trend has been changing in recent decades.

Formal education for girls historically has been secondary to that for boys. In colonial America girls learned to read and write at dame schools. They could attend the master's schools for boys when there was room, usually during the summer when most of the boys were working. By the end of the 19th century, however, the number of women students had increased greatly. Higher education particularly was broadened by the rise of women's colleges and the admission of women to regular colleges and universities. In 1870 an estimated one fifth of resident college and university students were women. By 1900 the proportion had increased to more than one third.

Women obtained 19 percent of all undergraduate college degrees around the beginning of the 20th century. By 1984 the figure had sharply increased to 49 percent. Women also increased their numbers in graduate study. By the mid-1980s women were earning 49 percent of all master's degrees and about 33 percent of all doctoral degrees. In 1985 about 53 percent of all college students were women, more than one quarter of whom were above age 29.

The Legal Status of Women

The myth of the natural inferiority of women greatly influenced the status of women in law. Under the common law of England, an unmarried woman could own property, make a contract, or sue and be sued. But a married woman, defined as being one with her husband, gave up her name, and virtually all her property came under her husband's control.

During the early history of the United States, a man virtually owned his wife and children as he did his material possessions. If a poor man chose to send his children to the poorhouse, the mother was legally defenseless to object. Some communities, however, modified the common law to allow women to act as lawyers in the courts, to sue for property, and to own property in their own names if their husbands agreed.

Equity law, which developed in England, emphasized the principle of equal rights rather than tradition. Equity law had a liberalizing effect upon the legal rights of women in the United States. For instance, a woman could sue her husband. Mississippi in 1839, followed by New York in 1848 and Massachusetts in 1854, passed laws allowing married women to own property separate from their husbands. In divorce law, however, generally the divorced husband kept legal control of both children and property.

In the 19th century, women began working outside their homes in large numbers, notably in textile mills and garment shops. In poorly ventilated, crowded rooms women (and children) worked for as long as 12 hours a day. Great Britain passed a ten-hour-day law for women and children in 1847, but in the United States it was not until the 1910s that the states began to pass legislation limiting working hours and improving working conditions of women and children.

Eventually, however, some of these labor laws were seen as restricting the rights of working women. For instance, laws prohibiting women from working more than an eight-hour day or from working at night effectively prevented women from holding many jobs, particularly supervisory positions, that might require overtime work. Laws in some states prohibited women from lifting weights above a certain amount varying from as little as 15 pounds (7 kilograms) again barring women from many jobs.

During the 1960s several federal laws improving the economic status of women were passed. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 required equal wages for men and women doing equal work. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination against women by any company with 25 or more employees. A Presidential Executive Order in 1967 prohibited bias against women in hiring by federal government contractors.

But discrimination in other fields persisted. Many retail stores would not issue independent credit cards to married women. Divorced or single women often found it difficult to obtain credit to purchase a house or a car. Laws concerned with welfare, crime, prostitution, and abortion also displayed a bias against women. In possible violation of a woman's right to privacy, for example, a mother receiving government welfare payments was subject to frequent investigations in order to verify her welfare claim. Sex discrimination in the definition of crimes existed in some areas of the United States. A woman who shot and killed her husband would be accused of homicide, but the shooting of a wife by her husband could be termed a "passion shooting." Only in 1968, for another example, did the Pennsylvania courts void a state law which required that any woman convicted of a felony be sentenced to the maximum punishment prescribed by law. Often women prostitutes were prosecuted although their male customers were allowed to go free. In most states abortion was legal only if the mother's life was judged to be physically endangered. In 1973, however, the United States Supreme Court ruled that states could not restrict a woman's right to an abortion in her first three months of pregnancy.

Until well into the 20th century, women in Western European countries lived under many of the same legal disabilities as women in the United States. For example, until 1935, married women in England did not have the full right to own property and to enter into contracts on a par with unmarried women. Only after 1920 was legislation passed to provide working women with employment opportunities and pay equal to men. Not until the early 1960s was a law passed that equalized pay scales for men and women in the British civil service.

Women at Work

In colonial America, women who earned their own living usually became seamstresses or kept boardinghouses. But some women worked in professions and jobs available mostly to men. There were women doctors, lawyers, preachers, teachers, writers, and singers. By the early 19th century, however, acceptable occupations for working women were limited to factory labor or domestic work. Women were excluded from the professions, except for writing and teaching.

The medical profession is an example of changed attitudes in the 19th and 20th centuries about what was regarded as suitable work for women. Prior to the 1800s there were almost no medical schools, and virtually any enterprising person could practice medicine. Indeed, obstetrics was the domain of women.

Beginning in the 19th century, the required educational preparation, particularly for the practice of medicine, increased. This tended to prevent many young women, who married early and bore many children, from entering professional careers. Although home nursing was considered a proper female occupation, nursing in hospitals was done almost exclusively by men. Specific discrimination against women also began to appear. For example, the American Medical Association, founded in 1846, barred women from membership. Barred also from attending "men's" medical colleges, women enrolled in their own for instance, the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, which was established in 1850. By the 1910s, however, women were attending many leading medical schools, and in 1915 the American Medical Association began to admit women members.

In 1890, women constituted about 5 percent of the total doctors in the United States. During the 1980s the proportion was about 17 percent. At the same time the percentage of women doctors was about 19 percent in West Germany and 20 percent in France. In Israel, however, about 32 percent of the total number of doctors and dentists were women.

Women also had not greatly improved their status in other professions. In 1930 about 2 percent of all American lawyers and judges were women in 1989, about 22 percent. In 1930 there were almost no women engineers in the United States. In 1989 the proportion of women engineers was only 7.5 percent.

In contrast, the teaching profession was a large field of employment for women. In the late 1980s more than twice as many women as men taught in elementary and high schools. In higher education, however, women held only about one third of the teaching positions, concentrated in such fields as education, social service, home economics, nursing, and library science. A small proportion of women college and university teachers were in the physical sciences, engineering, agriculture, and law.

The great majority of women who work are still employed in clerical positions, factory work, retail sales, and service jobs. Secretaries, bookkeepers, and typists account for a large portion of women clerical workers. Women in factories often work as machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors. Many women in service jobs work as waitresses, cooks, hospital attendants, cleaning women, and hairdressers.

During wartime women have served in the armed forces. In the United States during World War II almost 300,000 women served in the Army and Navy, performing such noncombatant jobs as secretaries, typists, and nurses. Many European women fought in the underground resistance movements during World War II. In Israel women are drafted into the armed forces along with men and receive combat training.

Women constituted more than 45 percent of employed persons in the United States in 1989, but they had only a small share of the decision-making jobs. Although the number of women working as managers, officials, and other administrators has been increasing, in 1989 they were outnumbered about 1.5 to 1 by men. Despite the Equal Pay Act of 1963, women in 1970 were paid about 45 percent less than men for the same jobs; in 1988, about 32 percent less. Professional women did not get the important assignments and promotions given to their male colleagues. Many cases before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1970 were registered by women charging sex discrimination in jobs.

Working women often faced discrimination on the mistaken belief that, because they were married or would most likely get married, they would not be permanent workers. But married women generally continued on their jobs for many years and were not a transient, temporary, or undependable work force. From 1960 to the early 1970s the influx of married women workers accounted for almost half of the increase in the total labor force, and working wives were staying on their jobs longer before starting families. The number of elderly working also increased markedly.

Since 1960 more and more women with children have been in the work force. This change is especially dramatic for married women with children under age 6: 12 percent worked in 1950, 45 percent in 1980, and 57 percent in 1987. Just over half the mothers with children under age 3 were in the labor force in 1987. Black women with children are more likely to work than are white or Hispanic women who have children. Over half of all black families with children are maintained by the mother only, compared with 18 percent of white families with children.

Despite their increased presence in the work force, most women still have primary responsibility for housework and family care. In the late 1970s men with an employed wife spent only about 1.4 hours a week more on household tasks than those whose wife was a full-time homemaker.

A crucial issue for many women is maternity leave, or time off from their jobs after giving birth. By federal law a full-time worker is entitled to time off and a job when she returns, but few states by the early 1990s required that the leave be paid. Many countries, including Mexico, India, Germany, Brazil, and Australia require companies to grant 12-week maternity leaves at full pay.

Women in Politics

American women have had the right to vote since 1920, but their political roles have been minimal. Not until 1984 did a major party choose a woman Geraldine Ferraro of New York to run for vice-president (see Ferraro).

Jeanette Rankin of Montana, elected in 1917, was the first woman member of the United States House of Representatives. In 1968 Shirley Chisholm of New York was the first black woman elected to the House of Representatives (see Chisholm). Hattie Caraway of Arkansas first appointed in 1932 was, in 1933, the first woman elected to the United States Senate. Senator Margaret Chase Smith served Maine for 24 years (1949-73). Others were Maurine Neuberger of Oregon, Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas, Paula Hawkins of Florida, and Barbara Mikulski of Maryland.

Wives of former governors became the first women governors Miriam A. Ferguson of Texas (1925-27 and 1933-35) and Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming (1925-27) (see Ross, Nellie Tayloe). In 1974 Ella T. Grasso of Connecticut won a governorship on her own merits.

In 1971 Patience Sewell Latting was elected mayor of Oklahoma City, at that time the largest city in the nation with a woman mayor. By 1979 two major cities were headed by women: Chicago, by Jane Byrne, and San Francisco, by Dianne Feinstein. Sharon Pratt Dixon was elected mayor of Washington, D.C., in 1990.

Frances Perkins was the first woman Cabinet member as secretary of labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Oveta Culp Hobby was secretary of health, education, and welfare in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Cabinet. Carla A. Hills was secretary of housing and urban development in Gerald R. Ford's Cabinet. Jimmy Carter chose two women for his original Cabinet Juanita M. Kreps as secretary of commerce and Patricia Roberts Harris as secretary of housing and urban development. Harris was the first African American woman in a presidential Cabinet. When the separate Department of Education was created, Carter named Shirley Mount Hufstедler to head it. Ronald Reagan's Cabinet included Margaret Heckler, secretary of health and human services, and Elizabeth Dole, secretary of transportation. Under George Bush, Dole became secretary of labor; she was succeeded by Representative Lynn Martin. Bush chose Antonia Novello, a Hispanic, for surgeon general in 1990.

Reagan set a precedent with his appointment in 1981 of Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman on the United States Supreme Court (see O'Connor). The next year Bertha Wilson was named to the Canadian Supreme Court. In 1984 Jeanne Sauve became Canada's first female governor-general (see Sauve).

In international affairs, Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed to the United Nations in 1945 and served as chairman of its Commission on Human Rights (see Roosevelt, Eleanor). Eugenie Anderson was sent to Denmark in 1949 as the first woman ambassador from the United States. Jeane Kirkpatrick was named ambassador to the United Nations in 1981.

Three women held their countries' highest elective offices by 1970. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was prime minister of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) from 1960 to 1965 and from 1970 to 1977 (see Bandaranaike). Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 until her assassination in 1984 (see Gandhi, Indira). Golda Meir was prime minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974 (see Meir). The first woman head of state in the Americas was Juan Peron's widow, Isabel, president of Argentina in 1974-76 (see Peron). Elisabeth Domitien was premier of the Central African Republic in 1975-76. Margaret Thatcher, who first became prime minister of Great Britain in 1979, was the only person in the 20th century to be reelected to that office for a third consecutive term (see Thatcher). Also in 1979, Simone Weil of France became the first president of the European Parliament.

In the early 1980s Vigdis Finnbogadóttir was elected president of Iceland; Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway; and Milka Planinc, premier of Yugoslavia. In 1986 Corazon Aquino became president of the Philippines (see Aquino). From 1988 to 1990 Benazir Bhutto was prime minister of Pakistan the first woman to head a Muslim nation (see Bhutto).

In 1990 Mary Robinson was elected president of Ireland and Violeta Chamorro, of Nicaragua. Australia's first female premier was Carmen Lawrence of Western Australia (1990), and Canada's was Rita Johnston of British Columbia (1991). In 1991 Khaleda Zia became the prime minister of Bangladesh and Socialist Edith Cresson was named France's first female premier. Poland's first female prime minister, Hanna Suchocka, was elected in 1992.

Feminist Philosophies

At the end of the 18th century, individual liberty was being hotly debated. In 1789, during the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges published a 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman' to protest the revolutionists' failure to mention women in their 'Declaration of the Rights of Man'. In 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft called for enlightenment of the female mind.

Margaret Fuller, one of the earliest female reporters, wrote 'Woman in the Nineteenth Century' in 1845. She argued that individuals had unlimited capacities and that when people's roles were defined according to their sex, human development was severely limited.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a leading theoretician of the women's rights movement. Her 'Woman's Bible', published in parts in 1895 and 1898, attacked what she called the male bias of the Bible. Contrary to most of her religious female colleagues, she believed further that organized religion would have to be abolished before true emancipation for women could be achieved. (See also Stanton, Elizabeth Cady.)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman characterized the home as inefficient compared with the mass-production techniques of the modern factory. She contended, in books like 'Women and Economics' (1898), that women should share the tasks of homemaking, with the women best suited to cook, to clean, and to care for young children doing each respective task.

Politically, many feminists believed that a cooperative society based on socialist economic principles would respect the rights of women. The Socialist Labor party, in 1892, was one of the first national political parties in the United States to include woman suffrage as a plank in its platform.

During the early 20th century the term new woman came to be used in the popular press. More young women than ever were going to school, working both in blue- and white-collar jobs, and living by themselves in city apartments. Some social critics feared that feminism, which they interpreted to mean the end of the home and family, was triumphing. Actually, the customary habits of American women were changing little. Although young people dated more than their parents did and used the automobile to escape parental supervision, most young women still married and became the traditional housewives and mothers.

Women in Reform Movements

Women in the United States during the 19th century organized and participated in a great variety of reform movements to improve education, to initiate prison reform, to ban alcoholic drinks, and, during the pre-Civil War period, to free the slaves.

At a time when it was not considered respectable for women to speak before mixed audiences of men and women, the abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke of South Carolina boldly spoke out against slavery at public meetings (see Grimke Sisters). Some male abolitionists including William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass supported the right of women to speak and participate equally with men in antislavery activities. In one instance, women delegates to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 were denied their places. Garrison thereupon refused his own seat and joined the women in the balcony as a spectator.

Some women saw parallels between the position of women and that of the slaves. In their view, both were expected to be passive, cooperative, and obedient to their master-husbands. Women such as Stanton, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth were feminists and abolitionists, believing in both the rights of women and the rights of blacks. (See also individual biographies.)

Many women supported the temperance movement in the belief that drunken husbands pulled their families into poverty. In 1872 the Prohibition party became the first national political party to recognize the right of suffrage for women in its platform. Frances Willard helped found the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (see Willard, Frances).

During the mid-1800s Dorothea Dix was a leader in the movements for prison reform and for providing mental-hospital care for the needy. The settlement-house movement was inspired by Jane Addams, who founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889, and by Lillian Wald, who founded the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City in 1895. Both women helped immigrants adjust to city life. (See also Addams; Dix.)

Women were also active in movements for agrarian and labor reforms and for birth control. Mary Elizabeth Lease, a leading Populist spokeswoman in the 1880s and 1890s in Kansas, immortalized the cry, "What the farmers need to do is raise less corn and more hell." Margaret Robins led the National Women's Trade Union League in the early 1900s. In the 1910s Margaret Sanger crusaded to have birth-control information available for all women (see Sanger).

Fighting for the Vote

The first women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in July 1848. The declaration that emerged was modeled after the Declaration of Independence. Written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it claimed that "all men and women are created equal" and that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman." Following a long list of grievances were resolutions for equitable laws, equal educational and job opportunities, and the right to vote.

With the Union victory in the Civil War, women abolitionists hoped their hard work would result in suffrage for women as well as for blacks. But the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, adopted in 1868 and 1870 respectively, granted citizenship and suffrage to blacks but not to women.

Disagreement over the next steps to take led to a split in the women's rights movement in 1869. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a temperance and antislavery advocate, formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in New York. Lucy Stone organized the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in Boston. The NWSA agitated for a woman-suffrage amendment to the Federal Constitution, while the AWSA worked for suffrage amendments to each state constitution. Eventually, in 1890, the two groups united as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Lucy Stone became chairman of the executive committee and Elizabeth Cady Stanton served as the first president. Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Dr. Anna Howard Shaw served as later presidents.

The struggle to win the vote was slow and frustrating. Wyoming Territory in 1869, Utah Territory in 1870, and the states of Colorado in 1893 and Idaho in 1896 granted women the vote but the Eastern states resisted. A woman-suffrage amendment to the Federal Constitution, presented to every Congress since 1878, repeatedly failed to pass.

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