



AASLH 19th Amendment Centennial Value Statement

“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.”

ABOUT

This Value Statement provides Guiding Principles and Starting Points as best practices and encouragement to AASLH members and the field for interpreting the Centennial Anniversary of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment. This statement also is intended to inspire innovative methods for interpretation that can be shared, improved upon, and disseminated to the field.

AASLH serves a diverse audience. There are institutions whose mission it is to interpret the Civil Rights movement and others dedicated to highlighting the life and work of women, which will be able to address an extensive range of themes and perhaps even comment on public policy issues. There are also organizations on the other end of the spectrum, such as small museums, those not named for a woman, or those that fall outside of the time period which will not have as much leeway in their exhibits and programmatic offerings. As such, this Value Statement contains a range of methodologies to serve a diverse membership and to provide value to a variety of historic sites, museums, archives, and libraries.

VALUE STATEMENT

In 2020, the nation will mark the 100th Anniversary of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment. Women and men of all races, ethnicities, and identities fought for—and against—women’s right to vote. It was a national movement carried out on the local level by tens of thousands of people across the country. It is one part a story about women’s rights, but it is also equal parts an American story of race, class, citizenship, gender, immigration, political identity, and values, and the intersections where those meet in America’s collective narrative and history.

The history of the 19th Amendment is a complex narrative that encompasses multiple perspectives and points in time. It can be found in the days of the nation’s founding and with the inspiration of Native American women on early feminist thought. It can be found in the racial schisms between universal suffrage and African American male suffrage following the Civil War. It can be found in local women’s clubs and churches where women gathered in



spaces that offered them leadership opportunities. And it can be found in its influence on historic events that came after it including voting rights, civil rights, and women’s rights. It is a testament to, and a product of, America’s founding ideals: the never-ending, quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and how our country adapts with each generation to address, define, and meet those inalienable rights.

The 100th Anniversary of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment presents an opportunity to expand the narrative of women’s suffrage; challenge preconceptions and definitions about history; and engage with the proud, conflicted, and complex realities of our shared history.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Women’s Suffrage vs. the Realities of the 19th Amendment

The quest for universal enfranchisement and increased rights for women expands beyond a series of campaigns, a geographic region, or a single economic class or political identity. Quite simply it was as diverse and varied as the American population. The final version of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was far more limited in scope and reach than the various campaigns had intended. Making comparisons between the fullness of women’s demands and the brevity of the 19th Amendment reveals a gap in our historical narrative and provides us the opportunities to delve into and share a myriad of unique and nuanced stories with visitors and to provide new ways to connect to this historical content.

Acknowledging Divisions and Historical Reality

The need to acknowledge in authentic ways the racial, economic, religious, and political divisions of the suffrage movement is critical to our understanding of this narrative of American history. To delve into the total arc of the women’s suffrage movement we must include the complexities of generations of women and a political climate that spans the Early Republic to the Civil War, from Reconstruction to the Progressive Era and beyond. While discussing racial, economic, religious, and political intolerance is complicated, when done in an open and transparent manner, it can result in a more powerful experience and deeper understanding for the visitor, practitioner, and stakeholder.

Elevating Multiple Perspectives

The history of women’s suffrage is nuanced, complex, diverse, and often includes conflicting storylines, depending on the author or timeframe. The experiences and histories of the thousands of women who fought for suffrage on the regional, state, and local levels are equally as important as the work of the national suffrage leaders. The different perspectives and reasons people fought for or against suffrage should be considered and presented in



interpretation. Accordingly, AASLH members should continue to examine their interpretation process and ask “Who is not included in our commemoration programming?” This will allow us to achieve an inclusive, diverse, and comprehensive commemoration of the 19th Amendment.

Recognizing Today’s Intersectional Audience

The upcoming Centennial of the 19th Amendment offers exciting opportunities and dynamic challenges for viewing the past. It invites important questions about how we interpret historic events and how to connect those events with modern audiences. Much of today’s audience views the past through the lens of the great civil and social justice movements of the late 1900s. Visitors expect exhibits to reflect an understanding of these movements in their historical interpretation. To create context for today’s 21st-Century intersectional audience, interpretation should highlight the work of all the women who advocated for suffrage, and at the same time, recognize the limitations and imperfections of the movement, and by extension, the American democratic process, and individual Americans.

Expanding Time and Place

The 19th Amendment’s passage is a culmination of diverse and complex events and experiences that unfolded years, decades, even centuries before 1920. Practitioners at sites that interpret earlier periods of American history have the opportunity to share the lives and experiences of all the women associated with the site and explore ways those particular conditions created a cumulative effect on views of women’s roles, participation, and rights in American society. Organizations that offer historical content after 1920 can examine the ways and degrees in which those conditions and experiences changed, were successful, or were unsuccessful.

Preserving New Histories

There is still a critical lack of primary sources and histories about women available for interpretation and public programming. As a field and individual practitioners of history we can use the Centennial of the 19th Amendment as a chance to collect and document previously untold histories as part of commemoration events. Leave time for the exploration of unprocessed collections, or reach out to your community for help in finding documentation that may still reside in private hands. Concerted efforts to work with local communities to find and preserve these important histories, through physical documentation and oral histories, will expand our understanding of the time period and serve our communities well in to the future.

Looking Beyond the Iconic Story



The Centennial provides an entry point into expanding the arc of the suffrage story by taking a fresh look at the past. Particularly for sites named for women, or that have suffrage collections, challenge your interpretation by using new material and primary sources. Go beyond your most recognized suffrage objects and dig into your collection and community to seek a different story to tell. Do not be afraid to give a higher priority, or start with, a lesser-known story from your collection or community.

STARTING POINTS

The following is a preliminary list of broad questions to consider that can aid with developing programming. They offer a chance to reframe, broaden, and create a more authentic interpretation. Considering these as starting points for interpretation, and applying diverse, inclusive, and intersectional approaches, organizations are encouraged to thoroughly consult their mission, audience, and community for themes and areas to address that are not included here. **This list should not be considered final by any definition.**

1. How did women build up their political power before 1920?
2. How did clubs, churches, and academic centers serve as sources of strength and places for African American women to express political and civic agendas?
3. How did the work of women writers in publications, journals, and the press advance civic and community issues?
4. What effect did the Civil War and WWI have on women and the movement?
5. What were the connections between the Abolition and Temperance movements?
6. How did society's views on race, gender roles, and idealized womanhood affect the "Public Face" of Woman Suffrage?
7. How did different regions of the country address women's suffrage? What comparisons can be made between different regions, such as African American communities in Chicago versus the South or progressive areas in the West versus elite communities in the Northeast?
8. How were the Suffrage Movement and women's community causes funded? Where did women find the money, from black-owned community businesses to wealthy patrons, etc.?
9. How did gender identity, sexual orientation, and women who challenged gender norms of the time period shape and advance the movement?
10. How did the suffrage campaign play out in the media, through editorials, cartoons, magazine, posters, postcards, etc.?
11. Who were the female and male suffrage leaders in your city, county, state?
12. Who were the women and men opposed to extending voting rights to women, and why, particularly across issues of race, ethnicity, and gender?
13. How did your city or state contribute to the struggle for Women's Suffrage? Were they supportive of local suffrage (voting on issues of schools and family), state suffrage, or enfranchisement at the federal level?



14. How did religious intolerance impact the campaigns for suffrage? Were members of some faith-based groups viewed differently, such as Catholics, Protestants, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) in the western states, Quaker Communities in the east, Jewish Communities, etc.?
15. How did citizenship status impact the voting rights of Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Chinese immigrants in the western states?
16. How did women influence 20th century politics as candidates, public officials, advisors, and community leaders?
17. How did tactics such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and racial terror continue to repress votes, particularly for African Americans?
18. What are connections between the 19th Amendment and the Civil Rights Movements?
19. What are ways that the 19th Amendment, and the politicizing of women's issues, have affected women's relationship with each other?
20. After the 19th Amendment, how did women stay involved in politics, activism, and public life? How did their roles change, or not change, in public life and leadership?
21. How is the history of the vote connected to contemporary movements for women's rights and women's political representation?
22. How has the definition of citizenship changed over time? How can the 19th Amendment offer a larger reflection on the narrative of American citizenship, the incremental nature of American citizenship, and how Americans have successfully and unsuccessfully fought for citizenship and rights?
23. If the 19th Amendment addresses one form of voter disenfranchisement, what are ways that political disenfranchisement exists today, and why?
24. What lessons can today's society learn from this political campaign?



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