



**Amy
Miller**
VIEWPOINT

Patience, persistence keys to win equality

On a street corner in Seneca Falls, New York, in March 1851, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, credited as the “mothers” of the women’s suffrage movement in the U.S., met for the first time.

In March 1869 the first federal women’s suffrage amendment was introduced as a joint resolution of both houses of Congress by Rep. George W. Julian of Indiana.

What is striking about these dates is the distance between them, 18 years. From the day the two women met to the day the notion of women’s suffrage was first formally introduced in both houses of Congress, nearly two decades passed. It would be another nine years before women’s suffrage was introduced as the proposed 19th Amendment to the Constitution and 42 years more before it was at last ratified and women were given full voting rights.

What lessons does that 18-year span hold? That patience and persistence will triumph.

Great things happened in those 18 years. Sojourner Truth delivered her powerful “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech. The first feminist newspaper of the women’s rights movement was published. The American Equal Rights Association was formed with the pledge of achieving suffrage for both women and black Americans. And women slowly began winning the right to vote in local and state elections in places like Kansas and Wyoming.

During those years Anthony and Stanton would also have met with countless state and federal legislators trying to get one, just one, to officially introduce the notion of women’s suffrage.

There were no women Senators, no Congresswomen. To advance their cause Anthony and Stanton had to rely on men. They had to meet with men. They had to convince men, men who made what were at the time popular arguments against suffrage: women were too fragile to be exposed to the tawdriness of polling stations, some states might fall under “petticoat rule” if more women voted than men, and so on.

In spite of the obstacles, Anthony and Stanton persisted. They continued their march toward equality. Over these 18 years they built a network of suffragettes and supporters, publications and papers. They bided their time as their murmur became a swell became a roar.

Neither Anthony nor Stanton lived to see the full enfranchisement of women in the United States. In fact, neither was ever able to vote in their home state of New York.

We face a similar struggle today. Nearly a century after the 19th Amendment was signed into law, women still do not enjoy equity in the halls of government whether local, state or federal. Although women make up nearly 51 percent of the U.S. population, just 19 percent of members of Congress and 25 percent of Florida state legislators are women. There are no women on either the Escambia or Santa Rosa County Board of County Commissioners. Of the twelve total seats on the two major city councils (Pensacola and Gulf Breeze) women hold just four. The bright spot is the Milton City Council where women hold five of nine seats.

The Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida, along with similar organizations across the country, is making great effort to encourage women to seek elected and appointed posts at all levels of government and to prepare them to be successful in doing so. Like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, those of us who march toward today's objective know we may not live to see the fruits of our labor, but we labor nonetheless because we believe in the lessons of those 18 years: patience and persistence will eventually be rewarded.

Amy Miller is president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and offers this Viewpoint on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, send an email to contact@iwppflorida.org.