

# THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/equal.htm>

## Becoming Equal

Although Queen Victoria did not reign over Virginia, Victorian values did. It is ironic that, although a woman ruled over a quarter of the globe, Victorian values excluded women from the public sphere and from politics through the second half of the 1800s.

## Women's Rights

While men continued their monopoly of politics and near monopoly of business, women were able to carve out a sphere of action in social work. Indeed, before 1930, to the extent that there was any social safety net, women mostly made and mended it. But women's agitation for social change was still within a conservative framework. Seldom did reformers speak of gender equality. Rather, they spoke of women's special obligations as society's designated caregivers and childraisers to protect the weak and downtrodden by fighting for health and education reforms. These arguments were respectable enough to persuade Virginia politicians, yet bold enough to effect real improvements.

Another area to which women born after the [Civil War](#) contributed was the arts. Although women generally were discouraged from having careers, the arts were thought suitable for women because of their presumed greater sensitivity. Many women combined an interest in the arts with concerns for social justice. Among them were Richmond's Nora Houston, and Adèle Clark, who said "I've always tried to combine my interest in art with my interest in government." Not surprisingly, therefore, both women were members of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia.

## Equal Suffrage

Orra Gray Langhorne of Lynchburg organized a Virginia Suffrage Association in 1893, but the serious push for votes for women came from the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia from 1909 to 1920. It was unsuccessful. Men feared that politics would degrade women more than their participation would elevate politics. They preferred to keep women on a pedestal. Virginia women, too, were divided over the issue, and politicians never were convinced that most women really wanted the vote. There also were fears that woman suffrage meant enfranchising black women, perhaps endangering white supremacy. By 1912 there was a Virginia Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.

Women's contributions to the victory in World War I got them the vote in August 1920, when Tennessee's ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment put it into the Constitution. But Virginia did not ratify it until 1952, when its action was purely symbolic. The Equal Suffrage League became the League of Women Voters. Sarah Lee Fain and Helen Timmons Henderson became the first women members of the General Assembly in 1924. There would be no congresswoman

until Leslie Byrne was elected in 1992. Mary Sue Terry of Patrick County became the first woman to win statewide office, becoming attorney general in 1986. She also was the first and only woman nominated for governor, but she lost.

Some former suffragists shifted to other battles. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and the College of William and Mary admitted women as undergraduates in 1918, but the [University of Virginia](#) did not until 1970. In fact, those suffragists who supposed that the enfranchisement of women would substantially change the political culture of Virginia were disappointed. Women voted very much like men until the 1980s, when a gender gap appeared, women being more liberal, and men more conservative, than the electorate as a whole.

The suffrage movement, social work, and the arts, were prerogatives of middle- and upper-class women. Ordinary Virginia women still labored hard on farms, or in mills, factories, and offices. Ironically, 1920—the year of enfranchisement—marked the recurrence of pressure for women to stay at home. But many could not afford to do so. Despite such pressures, 42 percent of Virginia women in 1970 held jobs, although most were low paying. After 1970, the number of working women grew rapidly, and the gender gap in earnings began to close.

## Struggle for Civil Rights

Just as World War I spurred the women's suffrage movement, so World War II gave strength to the civil rights movement. A world war fought in defense of democratic values naturally drew attention to the anomaly of inequality at home. The New South doctrine of "separate but equal" facilities for whites and blacks had been upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1896 and its sanction led to a host of state "Jim Crow" laws that segregated other aspects of everyday life. The civil rights movement that gained impetus from World War II aimed, first of all, at reversing the 1896 decision in regard to schools. As 1954 dawned, it was not apparent that change was in the air. P. B. Young, Sr., publisher of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, wrote that "A hundred years after the Emancipation, Negroes in Virginia have no more reason to hope for freedom and first-class citizenship, plus their acceptance as persons created by God with certain inalienable rights, than they had in 1865."

A resounding victory, however, came in May 1954, when the Supreme Court forbade governments from operating schools segregated by law. The so-called *Brown v. Board of Education* decision consolidated four lawsuits, including one in which black students in Prince Edward County, Virginia, having first gone on strike, sued to protest unequal education.

Virginia's governor, Thomas B. Stanley, responded to the desegregation decision by declaring that "I shall use every legal means at my command to continue segregated schools." Thus began "Massive Resistance" under the overall leadership of U.S. Senator [Harry F. Byrd, Sr.](#) In 1958 Governor J. Lindsay Almond closed schools in Norfolk, Charlottesville, and Warren County rather than integrate them. When "Massive Resistance" ended in 1959 (except for Prince Edward County), after all attempts to continue formal segregation had failed, "passive resistance" began, including white flight to private schools and to suburbs.

## Ending Segregation

In 1971 federal judge Robert Merhige, Jr., ordered quotas and citywide busing in Richmond. But the U.S. Circuit Court overturned his attempt to force Henrico and Chesterfield counties to

consolidate with Richmond into one school district with massive busing. It ruled that centuries-old county lines not drawn to promote segregation should not be destroyed to facilitate judicial social engineering. The U.S. Supreme Court let the reversal stand. Had Merhige been upheld, his approach would have been forced on communities nationwide.

Busing was highly divisive and hastened “white flight” to suburbs which, combined with housing patterns, prevented much integration from occurring. Nonetheless, *Brown v. Board of Education* was no mere pyrrhic victory. As black leaders had hoped, the repudiation of the principle of “separate but equal” sounded the death knell for the whole system of second-class citizenship for African Americans.

The second chapter in the civil rights struggle was for equal access to public accommodations such as theaters, hotels, and restaurants. Progress was made even before 1954. In 1946 the United States Supreme Court overturned a 1930 Virginia law requiring segregation by rows on bus travel between states. In 1949 President Harry S Truman desegregated the armed forces by executive order. It took the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, however, to end segregated facilities such as water fountains, bathrooms, hotels, restaurants, and theaters, and public parks. Student sit-ins at restaurants that would not serve them had brought the issue to the fore in 1960. The students’ motto was “sit until served.”

## **Voting Rights and Political Victories**

It was clear, however, that African Americans never could approach equality without the vote that most southern states had denied them since at least 1900. In 1964 the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution banned the poll tax in federal elections. In 1966 the Supreme Court struck down the Virginia poll tax that since 1902 had been used to disenfranchise blacks and poor whites. The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests and provided federal registrars to enroll black voters in southern states. As a result, in 1969 [L. Douglas Wilder](#) became the first black state senator of the twentieth century. Twenty years later he became the first black elected governor of any state. Richmond came under black political control in 1977. Many Virginia municipalities elected their first black mayors. In 1992 Robert C. Scott of Newport News became the first Virginian of African descent elected to Congress since John Mercer Langston in 1890.

Blacks largely voted as a block for Democratic candidates and thus became an important voice in the Democratic Party. This had the effect of moving the Democratic Party well to the left of where it had been under the Byrd Organization, turning many white Democrats to the Republican Party, which became competitive for the first time in the twentieth century. A. Linwood Holton, elected in 1969, was the first of three consecutive Republican governors in the 1970s. The Democrats then won the governorship three times in the 1980s. Then, the Republicans won again in 1993 and 1997. Such alternation now seems likely to continue indefinitely.