From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

Chapter One: One Piece of a Bigger Story

This serial is called "From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth," but the story of how American women earned the right to vote did not begin with that famous 1848 meeting at Seneca Falls.

And their work to become full citizens did not end in 1920, when they were finally able to vote throughout our nation.

Only novels and fairy tales have exact beginnings and endings, and this story is history. Real life doesn't start and stop the way fiction does.

For instance, Columbus wasn't the first European to visit America, but 1492 was when the most frequent and important explorations began, so it makes sense to use that date when you study the history of how people from the other hemisphere came to this one.

And, just as people knew the world was round before Columbus sailed to America in 1492, women knew they wanted more rights before they came together in Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848.

But the Women's Rights Convention was very important, and it makes sense to use it as a starting point when you talk about how American women won the right to vote.

The history of women in politics didn't end in 1920, either, but when women won the right to vote, it was a very important moment in American history, and the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution marked the end of the struggle to gain the vote for women.

There is much, much more to learn, however.

Let's start by talking about why voting matters.

If four friends get together, they don't need to vote to decide what to do. With only four people, you can talk about it until you all agree. But if your whole class is trying to make a decision, there are so many people that not everyone is going to get exactly what they want.

So perhaps you talk about it as a group for a while, and then vote.

Or maybe you don't vote at all. Maybe your teacher just makes the decision for you.

Kids don't always get to vote, because they're kids, and adults have to make some decisions. If there are 25 kids on the bus and only one grown-up, you don't vote to see who gets to drive.

But, in a democracy, adults are supposed to have a voice in decisions.

And there was a time in America when all the adults got to help decide what was going to happen, and the women were often the ones who were in charge.

There were many nations living here before Columbus, and they were just as different as the nations of Europe. Italians are not exactly like Swedes and Swedes are not exactly like Hungarians and Navajo are not exactly like Lakota and Lakota are not exactly like Iroquois.

But women were very important in nearly all our native nations, while in some, like the Iroquois, they were the ones who made most of the important decisions.

In most European nations, however, that was not the case, and the women who helped form the colonies that would become the United States had very little power at all.

They almost never went beyond the eighth grade in school, and, until 1833, there were no colleges that let women attend.

In most American colonies, for a married couple, the husband owned the house and everything in it, even things the wife had owned before they got married. If she made money by working or selling things like eggs or vegetables, the money belonged to her husband. She couldn't open a bank account without his permission or start her own business or even testify in court.

Divorce was very uncommon, but, if a couple did divorce, the man could keep everything, even the children.

Women could be teachers of small children, and a woman whose husband had died might run a restaurant or a small store, but most jobs were considered to be for men only, and, since women could not go to college, they could never be doctors or lawyers.

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that women also were not allowed to vote.

In 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was being written, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, saying "(I)n the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands."

But letting women have the same rights and powers as men was such a strange idea that John Adams thought his wife was joking, and so he wrote back a humorous answer.

She replied that it seemed unfair to be talking about freedom for men, while the patriot leaders insisted on keeping their own power over women.

That kind of power seemed hard, she wrote, and "like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken."

And indeed, it would be broken. But it would take many years and a lot of work.

While Abigail Adams and most women of colonial America might accept not having power, their daughters and granddaughters would not.

Once the United States had shown the world that freedom was possible, American women would begin to work for their own rights as citizens of that free nation.

NEXT: Speaking for Herself

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NIE New York News Publishers Association Newspaper In Education Program

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"From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth" is a Newspaper in Education program made possible through a partnership with local schools and the *Catskill Mountain News*. The New York State United Teachers and New York Newspapers Foundation are funding this serial story (which begins today and runs for 8 weeks) in papers and classrooms across New York State. Students will be learning about the women's suffrage movement and also about other changes in society — the abolitionists, the labor movement, and social activism — that influenced those who sought the vote for women.

The author has provided a monitored discussion blog to allow students to comment or ask questions as they read the story. It's available at www.weeklystorybook.com/suffrage. Students can also participate in a poster contest.

We hope you and your family find "From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth" an enriching and engaging adventure in the tradition of "serial" journalism.

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