“Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” Discussion Guide

Women began their battle for the vote in Central and Western New York in the mid-1800s, most notably at the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls in July of 1848. The upstate region was an epicenter of reform, tackling societal issues of abolition, religion, and temperance. Activism around these issues laid the groundwork for women and men to take on women’s rights, including the right to vote.

“Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” explores the lives of four women who played a role in the Women’s Suffrage Movement, but are not as well-known as others. Matilda Joslyn Gage worked alongside Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, drawing from the inspiration of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women. Paulina Wright Davis used her experience in the anti-slavery movement to organize women’s rights conventions. She owned, edited, and published “The Una,” a periodical solely dedicated to the elevation of women. This revolutionary use of the media gave suffragists a platform to spread their message. Later in the movement, Hester Jeffrey, from Rochester, NY, led Black women’s clubs and regularly crossed racial lines to work alongside white women for the vote. Mary Talbert, from Buffalo, NY, elevated the issue of suffrage among Black women around the country, encouraging them to take on the issue of suffrage in their communities. Sharing their journeys provides a more complete history of suffrage, which demanded the right to equal citizenship in America through the vote.

“I went down first and offered my vote. I was refused on the grounds that I was a married woman. Then I took down two single women who supported themselves and owned their own home... their votes were refused also... and so on through the whole nine. With each one, I made appropriate arguments, and had a big and attentive crowd to hear me. ... It created a great stir.” - Matilda Joslyn Gage
Introduction
A full century separates us from the ratification of the 19th Amendment. There were 70 years of sacrifice before that, and countless unsung heroes of the movement like the four women featured in “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories.” As we learn about women in New York who fought for the vote, you can’t ignore their larger goal for equality in all areas of life. What can we learn from them? What of their work remains for us to do?

The program and this discussion guide can be valuable tools to educate the community as well as students about the importance of every player in the Women’s Suffrage Movement - large and small.

In addition to this discussion guide, accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on PBS LearningMedia and the project website at wned.org/suffrage. On the website you can find the program in its entirety, bonus videos, commissioned short films by women filmmakers, classroom materials, essays, and other related resources.

Discussion questions and video play a supporting role in understanding what roles Matilda Joslyn Gage, Paulina Wright Davis, Hester Jeffrey, and Mary Talbert played in the Women’s Suffrage Movement. All, with their own stories to tell and additional causes to fight for, contributed to the larger movement for equality. The impact that these women had on the Women’s Suffrage Movement can be examined by using the “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” program and having follow up discussions. The program may be shown in its entirety or in segments.

There are many themes featured in “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” that can be used to initiate meaningful discussions about this important aspect of U.S. history. Some of the themes that can be explored are advocacy and activism, perseverance, gender equity, racism, enacting change, and Native American influence on American women.

“The reform which we propose. . . is radical and universal. . .
The emancipation of a class, the reform of half the world.” - Paulina Wright Davis
Screenings and Discussions

Viewing “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” can be a great tool to raise awareness and get people to recognize some of the lesser-known players in the Women’s Suffrage Movement. Their stories emphasize the dedication that so many women had to improve the way that future women could have a voice and a vote.

Whatever the setting or audience, using any of the following suggestions can lead to an engaging and powerful event.

- Find a location where “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” can be screened – access to the internet if the video on the website will be used, access to a DVD player if playing from a DVD.
- Have a virtual screening - internet access will still be needed to access the video.
- When planning a community discussion around “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories,” inviting related speakers to be a part of it is encouraged.
- Follow the screening of “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” with a discussion.

Guest speakers or a panel of experts can be very useful for discussions. Some guests to consider are local or national gender equity advocates, historians, or other representatives from powerful movements such as Black Lives Matter to draw comparisons. There are many local and national organizations that can be used as a resource for partnering with or securing guest speakers. Reach out to members of your own community who may be able to help out locally.

“Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” may be shown in its entirety or, if time is limited, a selected chapter or two may be screened. Below is the list of chapters with approximate run time.

- Introduction (approximately 4 ½ minutes)
- Matilda Joslyn Gage (approximately 5 ½ minutes)
- Paulina Wright Davis (approximately 4 minutes)
- Hester Jeffrey (approximately 5 minutes)
- Mary Talbert (approximately 4 minutes)
- Conclusion (approximately 4 minutes)

After watching “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories,” invite your guests to share their thoughts on the program and how it relates to their own work or experiences, allowing time for questions and answers from participants. To continue the discussion, whether with panelists or participants, the following suggested questions can be used.
Suggested Discussion Questions:

• What lessons about perseverance can be learned from the stories of Matilda Joslyn Gage, Paulina Wright Davis, Hester Jeffrey, and Mary Talbert?
• Why do you suppose Black women were so motivated to join the suffrage movement?
• How would Black women benefit if they were able to vote?
• What influence did the Erie Canal have on the suffrage movement?
• Why was Matilda Joslyn Gage so drawn to the Haudenosaunee?
• Why did Paulina Wright Davis find it so important to pass the Married Women's Property Act? What did she hope this would lead to?
• What benefits did Paulina Wright Davis' “The Una” publication have for the suffrage movement?
• How did the Civil War cause fractures in the suffrage movement?
• Why did Susan B. Anthony not want to include Black women in the suffrage movement?
• Why did Hester Jeffrey continue to support Susan B. Anthony despite her racist behavior?
• Why do you suppose so many voices, especially those of Black women, go unheard when learning about the Women's Suffrage Movement?
• How can advocates of today create their own tools for empowerment?

“It should not be necessary to struggle forever against popular prejudice, and with us as colored women, this struggle becomes two-fold, first because we are women and second, because we are colored women. Although some resistance is experienced in portions of our country against the ballot for women, I firmly believe that enlightened men, are now numerous enough everywhere to encourage this just privilege of the ballot for women, ignoring prejudice of all kinds... by her peculiar position the colored woman has gained clear powers of observation and judgment – exactly the sort of powers which are today peculiarly necessary to the building of an ideal country.” - Mary Talbert
Classroom Resources
“Discovering New York Suffrage Stories” would be a great addition to any unit teaching the Women’s Suffrage Movement, activism activities, or contemporary connections like the Black Lives Matter Movement. The program could be screened in a classroom or school in its entirety or in segments and followed up by asking students the same guiding questions as above.

Classroom curriculum, to be used with the television program “Discovering New York Suffrage Stories,” has been developed. The lesson plans were created to be used with middle and high school students. Lesson content is based on the documentary as well as its important themes. Lessons are aligned to New York Social Studies Education Standards, but meet many national standards as well.

The full accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on the project website at wned.org/suffrage as well as on PBS LearningMedia.

“There is a word sweeter than mother, home or heaven. That word is liberty.” - Matilda Joslyn Gage

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