

new jersey 350

innovation • diversity • liberty

The Petticoat Politicians of 1776: New Jersey's First Female Voters

Target Age: Elementary and Middle School
Time Period: 18th Century
Featured County: Essex
NJ 350th Theme: Liberty

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.1: Read closely to determine what a text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

R.CCR.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR. 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.3.4.A.1, 6.1.8.A.3.a, 6.1.8.B.3.d

FOCUS QUESTION: How did women's suffrage in New Jersey between 1776 and 1807 challenge or expand the notion that "all men are created equal"?

BACKGROUND:

In May of 1776, anticipating independence, the Constitutional Convention sent out instructions that each state devise a new governmental structure. In response, New Jersey's legislature broke new ground when it drafted a state constitution that not only gave the vote to men who met certain property requirements, but also gave it to some women, blacks, and aliens. Specifically, the clause read:

[A]ll inhabitants of this Colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds proclamation money, clear estate in the same, and have resided within the county in which they claim a vote for twelve months immediately preceding the election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council and Assembly; and also for all other public officers, that shall be elected by the people of the county at large.

New Jersey State Constitution, 1776, paragraph IV



Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly, February 1877.

This statute did not mean that all women could vote; married women rarely held property in their own names and so failed to meet the £50 requirement. But even so this decision was unprecedented. While other state constitutions drafted that year differed in terms of whether they thought it important to emphasize freedom, race, or residence—such as “freeman” (Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina), “man” (Vermont), “white male inhabitants” (Georgia), or “free white man” (South Carolina)—all of them excluded women.

This piece of early American political, legal, and gender history was so exceptional that for many years historians wrote it off as an oversight or accident of wording. But subsequent laws indicate otherwise. Although in 1777 and 1783 the state legislature passed laws regarding election procedures that used only male pronouns, beginning in 1790 the assembly passed an election statute explicitly stating that “no person shall be entitled to vote in any Township or precinct, that that in which he or she does actually reside at the time of the election.” Likewise, a 1797 law stated that voters should “openly and in full view deliver his or her ballot.”

In 1807, however, the state’s legislature chose to restrict suffrage to white male citizens who paid taxes. Following Republican Thomas Jefferson’s victory over Federalist John Adams in the 1800 presidential elections, Federalists came to believe female voters benefitted the Republican cause. More Republicans lived in towns, and as it was easier to engage voters in urban areas, Federalists thought female disenfranchisement would limit the number of votes Republican candidates received, without hurting their own party. And so in 1807—less to limit the rights of women and more to try to control party politics—New Jersey’s Constitution was “reinterpreted” to define voters as adult white male taxpayers.

ACTIVITY:

Arguments that women were poorly suited for political participation by nature furthered the Federalist cause. “Until the rights of electors” were narrowed “the citizens of New Jersey will continue to hold suffrage, in common with aliens and foreigners; with people perhaps attached to no government,” wrote one detractor.” Not all newspaper and pamphlet writers, however, thought women’s suffrage was a bad idea. Have students read the article published as “Extract of a Letter from a Member of the Legislature of This State to the Editors,” which appeared in the New Jersey newspaper *Centinel of Freedom* on November 11, 1800.

If possible, project an image of the newspaper article on a screen or white board and have students take turns first reading the article, and then identifying key passages that pertain to women and their right to vote. What justifications does the author offer in defense of his or her viewpoint?

Extract of a letter from a Member of the Legislature of this State to the Editors, dated Trenton, November 7, 1800.

The bill for a General Election of Members of Congress for the State of New-Jersey, has this day passed into a law. The Candidates will be nominated in the usual way, at the respective Court Houses of the several Counties of this State, on the fourth Monday of November instant, and the election will be opened on the fourth Tuesday of December next, at those places where the last Election was opened, and will be conducted in the same manner. While the aforesaid bill was pending before the House of Assembly a motion was made to amend the bill by adding the following section thereto, viz.
“ That it is the true intent and meaning of this
“ act, that the inspectors of election in the several
“ Townships of this State, shall not refuse the
“ vote of any widow or unmarried woman of full
“ age, nor any person of colour of full age, provided each of the said persons shall make it
“ appear on oath or otherwise, to the satisfaction
“ of the said inspectors, that he or she is worth
“ £-50 clear estate, proclamation money of this
“ State.”

The house almost unanimously agreed that this section would be clearly within the meaning of the Constitution, and as the constitution is the guide of the inspectors, it would be entirely useless to insert it in the law. The motion was consequently negatived.

Our Constitution gives this right to maids or widows black or white.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places to Visit

New Jersey League of Women Voters: <http://www.lwvnj.org/>

More Classroom Activities

“Women’s Suffrage and the Nineteenth Amendment,” National Archives Teaching with Historic Documents Program (designed for middle and high school learners; includes documents that explore women’s opinions about voting from 1800 through 1930):

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage/activities.html>

“Women’s Suffrage Teacher’s Guide,” Scholastic (includes a series of a lesson plans geared towards Grades 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, as well as an excellent list of published and online resources about women’s history and voting): <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/womens-suffrage-teachers-guide>

“Women’s History: Their Rights and Nothing Less,” Library of Congress (also intended for older learners with a heavy emphasis on primary document analysis; provide a excellent overview of changing views about women’s voting from 1840 through 1930, including private letters, newspaper articles, songs, and broadsides): <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/women-rights/procedure.html>

For More Information

Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis, “The Petticoat Electors’: Women’s Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776-1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12:2 (Summer 1992): 159-193.

Irwin N. Gertzog, “Female Suffrage in New Jersey, 1790-1807,” *Women and Politics* 10 (1990): 47-58.

Jan Ellen Lewis, “Rethinking Women’s Suffrage: 1776-1807,” *Rutgers Law Review* 63:3 (August 2011): 1017-1035.

Rosemary Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

Rosemary Zagari, “Women’s Rights before Seneca Falls,” in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott (London: Palgrave Press, 2005), 667-704.

Rosemary Zagari, “On Voter Fraud and the Petticoat Electors of New Jersey,” *Common-place: The Interactive Journal of Early American Life* (Oct. 2008): <http://www.common-place.org/pasley/?p=792#more-792>

CREDIT INFORMATION:

p. 1: *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, February 1877, 244.

p. 3: "Extract of a Letter from a Member of the Legislature of This State to the Editors, Dated Trenton, November 7, 1800" *Centinel of Freedom* on November 11, 1800, America's Historical Newspapers Database, Newsbank.

It Happened Here: New Jersey is a program of the New Jersey Historical Commission made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. To access more teaching resources created for this program visit www.officialnj350.com.

