

TEACHER RESOURCE

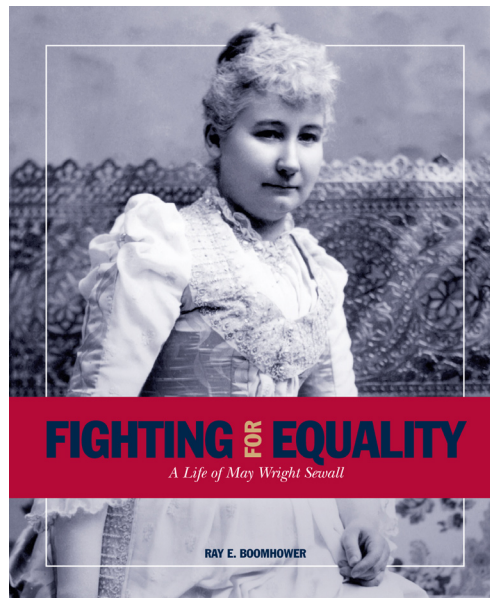
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for the Indiana Historical Society Press publication:

Fighting for Equality

A Life of May Wright Sewall

by Ray E. Boomhower



INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Overview/Description

May Wright Sewall (1844–1920) was a feminist, educator, and lecturer. She was one of the key leaders in the women’s suffrage movement in Indiana, nationally, and even abroad during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the early 1900s, according to *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine, Sewall had attracted five million women to her cause in eleven countries. Viewed as a natural leader, she was a prominent ally of other suffrage notables including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In the introduction to Sewall’s 1920 book *Neither Dead nor Sleeping*, author Booth Tarkington wrote that the “three most prominent citizens” of Indianapolis in their day were Benjamin Harrison, James Whitcomb Riley, and Sewall. With her second husband, Theodore Sewall, she founded and then headed the Girls’ Classical School, for years one of the leading girls’ schools in Indianapolis. She was elected president of the National Congress of Women in 1891 and of the International Congress of Women in 1899. She also became involved in peace campaigns and in 1904 became chairman of the ICW standing committee on peace and arbitration. In 1915 Sewall chaired an Organized Conference of Women Workers to Promote Peace. As a member of Henry Ford’s Peace Expedition, she sailed on the *Oscar II* in an effort to stop the bloodshed of World War I. One of the organizations Sewall helped found, the Indianapolis Propylaeum, continues to this day to honor her memory.

Sewall also wrote *The Higher Education of Women*, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Indiana*, and *Women, World War and Permanent Peace*. In this lesson students will read Sewall’s biography *Fighting for Equality: A Life of May Wright Sewall* by Ray E. Boomhower (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007), discuss and evaluate her role in the women’s suffrage movement, and complete multidisciplinary activities that provide cross-curricular connections in history, government, and sociology.

Academic Standards for Social Studies

- **Indiana Standards:** USH.3.8, USH.9.1, USH.9.2, S.6.1, S.6.3, S.8.6, USG.5.2, USG.5.4, and USG.5.7
- **National Standards (National Council for Social Studies):** I Culture, II Time, Continuity, and Change, V Individuals, Groups, and Institutions, X Civic Ideals and Practices

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

change, culture, freedom, democracy, constitutional rights, equality, civic responsibility, and women’s rights

Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will:

- read the book *Fighting for Equality: A Life of May Wright Sewall*
- discuss and evaluate Sewall’s role in Indiana and American history, including her contributions to the women’s rights movement that led to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment
- understand how women’s social and political activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to an expansion of their roles and rights
- debate and support their point of view in arguments for and against voting rights for women
- create a bio-historical poem using information interpreted from their reading
- complete a political cartoon analysis group activity involving cartoons commenting on the women’s movement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century
- create a chronological time line of important events in the women’s rights movement between 1848 and 1920
- make a connection between the Fifteenth and the Nineteenth amendments

- write a biographical account about Sewall through the creation of an obituary
- locate and analyze primary and secondary sources presenting differing perspectives of events and issues of the past
- locate and utilize sources found at archival collections and electronic sites

Time Required

Multiple class periods depending on the classroom needs and the activities selected. Teachers may select from one or more of the following activities described below.

Materials Required

- Copies of *Fighting for Equality: A Life of May Wright*
- Student handouts: instructions for writing a bio-historical poem (attached), graphic organizer for debate notes (attached), and an example of an obituary
- Whiteboard or projector
- Paper and pencils or pens for taking notes
- 8.5 x 14 inch white paper for creating time lines; markers or colored pencils
- 8.5 x 11 inch card stock for mounting political cartoons
- Internet access
- Ballots for voting activity

Background/Historical Context

May Wright Sewall was born in 1844. Raised in Wisconsin, her family encouraged her to better herself through education. Sewall said she inherited from her family a “passion for human liberty in all its phases,” as well as the knowledge that men and women were not treated equally in America. Her father raised her with the belief that she had the right to receive a quality education and the ability to find work in a position for which her talents were suited. However, there

were limited opportunities for women in higher education in the nineteenth century. Sewall moved to attend college at the Northwestern Female College in Evanston, Illinois. (It later merged with Northwestern University.) In 1866, along with six other women, Sewall graduated from Northwestern. She moved to Indianapolis to accept a high school teaching job in 1874 and quickly won the loyalty of her Indianapolis students. In Indianapolis most opposed any changes to a woman’s role as a homemaker. “The air was thick with prejudice against a woman escaping from her sphere,” stated Martha Nicholson McKay, an early organizer of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club.

With her second husband, Theodore Sewall, May founded the influential Girls’ Classical School, where hundreds of young women received the advanced education they needed to go on to earn college degrees. One of May’s students, Charlotte Cathcart, noted that she and others may have forgotten what they learned in the classroom, but they never forgot Sewall. She also improved the city through her efforts to form such organizations as the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, the Art Association of Indianapolis, and the Indianapolis Propylaeum.

On July 11, 1848, the first women’s rights convention was staged in Seneca Falls, New York. Organized by such women’s rights activists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, the convention attracted three hundred attendees who gathered to vote on a “Declaration of Sentiments” based on America’s Declaration of Independence. The convention also approved a controversial resolution that it was “the duty of the women of the country to secure to themselves their sacred rights to the elective franchise,” a right held at that time by no woman in the world. Many of the suffrage supporters were also abolitionist sympathizers. These abolitionists believed that granting voting rights to women was a natural connection to granting voting rights to African American men. Frederick Douglass, the great African American abolitionist leader,

attended the convention. Douglass wrote that he saw absolutely “no reason” to withhold the right to vote from women. These convention attendees were the frontline soldiers in the movement that sought to change the way women were treated in the United States.

At that time, women were treated as second-class citizens whose role was to be in the home obeying their husbands and taking care of their children. Life as a housewife in 1840 included hauling water from a well for household use; ironing clothes with heavy, metal irons; and washing dirty clothes on a washboard with lye soap. Additionally, every meal had to be made from scratch as there were no prepackaged meals that one could pick up at the grocery. “The power of a husband legally extended even to the right to prescribe the medicine his family must take and the amount and kind of food they ate,” stated women’s historian Aileen S. Kraditor.

In the spring of 1878 Sewall attended a meeting in Indianapolis with other women who had advanced ideas at that time about a woman’s role in society. These women formed the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society that included women “willing to labor for the attainment of equal rights at the ballot box for all citizens on the same conditions.” Sewall’s work with this local association led to her involvement with such national women’s suffrage groups as Susan B. Anthony and Stanton’s National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Sewall and Anthony became close friends while fighting together for women’s rights.

Sewall’s efforts to improve life reached throughout the world. She traveled outside the United States to speak on behalf of suffrage for women. Besides lecturing across the country on behalf of women’s rights, she also lobbied for world peace. “My country is the world, my countrymen are all mankind,” Sewall stated. She promoted the cause of peace through membership in the American Peace Society and through her work with the National Council of Women and the International Council of

Women. When World War I began in Europe in 1914, Sewall contacted textbook publishers and requested that they eliminate patriotic language and to replace it with calls for brotherhood. She also asked mothers to remove toys from their children’s rooms that might promote warfare. A reporter commented that Sewall had a unique ability to get people to work together for a common cause. The reporter described her as a “sort of social clockmaker who gets human machinery into shape, winds it up and sets it to running.” Her friend and fellow women’s rights activist Grace Julian Clarke paid tribute to Sewall when she said, “I never left Mrs. Sewall’s presence without resolving to be more outspoken in good causes, more constant in their service, without a fresh resolve to let trivial concerns go and emphasize only really vital interests.”

Sadly, on July 22, 1920, a month before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave women the right to vote, Sewall died. Upon her death, the *Indianapolis News* said on its editorial page that the “world lost a citizen.” Amending the U.S. Constitution to provide suffrage for women proved to be a challenging task. The amendment needed to be passed by two-thirds of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives as well as three-quarters of the states. On August 20, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified by the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 304 to 90: “The right of citizens of the United States shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment was the result of decades of hard work by activists such as Sewall.

Sewall’s main goal in her life was to make herself useful to the entire world. “What she wrought,” Clarke said of Sewall, “will endure and generations yet unborn will find life a fuller and richer experience because she joined in the effort to make it so instead of accepting conditions as they were.”

Source: *Fighting for Equality: A Life of May Wright Sewall* by Ray E. Boomhower (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007).

Procedure for all activities

Teacher preparation prior to class: Before class, prepare paper ballots for students to vote on a school-related issue for a voting simulation activity that can be used as the introduction to this lesson.

Classroom student activity: Introduce students to May Wright Sewall, the women's suffrage movement, and the Nineteenth Amendment through the following simulation. Begin by telling students that they will have the opportunity to vote on a classroom-related issue (teachers can choose something relevant to their classrooms). Explain that they will vote using the paper ballots. Ask for a volunteer to distribute the ballots and select a male student only. Explain to the class that female students are not allowed to vote in this "election." After the male students vote, collect and tally the ballots.

- Discuss as a class how the female students felt about not voting.
- Ask the class if they think the female students have to go along with the male students' vote since the females did not have a say?
- Is this discrimination? Why or why not?
- Ask students if they think there was ever a time in the history of the United States when women could not vote, or have women always had the right to vote in the United States? This will provide teachers an opportunity to casually survey students' prior knowledge.

Introduce Sewall and explain that she was an important figure in the women's suffrage movement that led to women gaining the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

ACTIVITY 1: Women's Rights Debate

Question: Should women be given the right to vote in 1920? (three class periods)

- Divide the class into groups—those who will argue for expanding women's rights and giving women the right to vote and those who will argue against giving women the right to vote.
- Provide each student with a debate notes worksheet so they can graphically organize their arguments (attached).
- Explain the rules for the debate. Each group will give an opening statement and have time for a rebuttal and closing argument. The teacher will serve as the moderator. Give students two class periods for organizing their debate and researching any information they need on the Internet, and one class period for presenting the actual debate.

ACTIVITY 2: Carousel—Political Cartoon Analysis Using Women's Rights Cartoons

 (two class periods)

Teacher preparation prior to class:

- Using the political cartoons obtained from the link listed below, mount the cartoons on card stock. Cartoons may be found on the Web at www.nmwh.org/RightsforWomen/cartoons.html (as of 5/15/2008).
- Next, go to the National Archives and Records Administration's Web site to print a copy of the Cartoon Analysis Worksheet. The cartoon analysis worksheet is available at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon_analysis_worksheet.pdf (as of 5/15/2008).
- Before class begins, place one cartoon and one cartoon analysis worksheet at each workstation. Divide the class into groups of four and set up workstations for each group.

Student activity:

- Each workstation will feature one of the political cartoons along with a political cartoon analysis worksheet. Have student groups complete one worksheet for each cartoon.
- Allow students about 10 minutes at each workstation to answer questions about the cartoons using the analysis worksheets.
- Then, signal students to move clockwise to the next workstation where they will view different pictures and complete another cartoon analysis worksheet.
- Continue rotation until the end of the class period.
- The next day, discuss results of the political cartoon analysis.

ACTIVITY 3:

Essay—How do the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments affect our lives today?

(homework assignment)

- Provide each student with copies of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments from the National Archives and Records Administration's Web site at www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/charters.html (as of 5/15/2008) and select the Bill of Rights icon, then click on "More Constitutional Amendments."
- On the whiteboard or projector write the following two questions dealing with the Fifteenth and Nineteenth amendments:

"How did the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment giving African American men the right to vote affect the women's rights movement?"

"Why do you think women won the right to vote in 1920 after failing for more than 70 years?"
- Explain to students that they may choose one of these two questions to answer in the form of an essay of one or two pages. Students may

use the Sewall book, any class history textbooks, notes, and the Internet for research.

ACTIVITY 4:

Bio-historical poem (one class period)

Students will create a bio-historical poem about May Wright Sewall. (See handout for instructions and an example.) If time permits, have students present their poems to the class.

ACTIVITY 5:

Poster (homework assignment)

Students will create a poster about Sewall including information about the main events in her life, her contributions to education, society, the women's suffrage movement, etc. Have students draw illustrations or find pictures on the Internet. Alternatively, students may create a poster about the Nineteenth Amendment with information and illustrations including major events in the suffrage movement between 1848 (Seneca Falls Convention) through the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Students can utilize the Sewall book, class history textbook, notes, and the Internet to obtain information.

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES

May Wright Sewall obituary

(two class periods or one class period and homework)

Have students write a one-page obituary about Sewall using important facts they learned about her from reading the book. Students can work on these individually or with a partner. Provide students with a few examples of obituaries from a local newspaper and discuss the following:

- What type of facts are usually included in obituaries?
- How is the information in an obituary usually arranged?
- What purpose does an obituary serve?
- What contributions did this person make to our society?

Women's rights time line

(homework assignment)

Have students create a time line of major events in the women's right movement that led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Suggest students begin with the first major women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 and conclude with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Students may work individually or with a partner.

To learn more about Sewall, refer to pages 118–123 of *Fighting for Equality: A Life of May Wright Sewall* by Ray E. Boomhower (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007).

ACTIVITY 1:

Student Handout

Pro- and Anti-Suffrage Argument Notes

Notes on the Argument for Suffrage	Notes on the Argument against Suffrage

ACTIVITY 4:

Student Handout

Bio-Historical Poem Instructions

- Title:** First and last name of historical figure
- Line 1:** First name
- Line 2:** Four traits that describe this person (e.g., occupation)
- Line 3:** Brother/sister of ... or son/daughter of ...
- Line 4:** Lover of ... (names of three ideas or people)
- Line 5:** Who feels ... (three feelings)
- Line 6:** Who fears ... (three items)
- Line 7:** Who would like to see ... (three items)
- Line 8:** Resident of ... (city and state)
- Line 9:** Last name

Example:

Ben Franklin

Ben

Inventor, politician, ambassador, founding father

Son of Josiah and Abiah Franklin

Lover of liberty, education, and his country

Who feels curious, inventive, and determined

Who fears failure, boredom, and British tyranny

Who would like to see freedom, justice, and America succeed

Resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Franklin