

Susan B. Anthony and the Right to Vote

by Susan B. Anthony

On November 1872, women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony and almost 50 other women voted in Rochester, New York in the election for U.S. president. At the time, only men were allowed to vote in New York. Anthony was arrested for illegally voting.

Before her case came to trial, she traveled around the Rochester area giving speeches about her right to vote. Below is part of one of her speeches.

On Women's Rights to Vote

I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that me thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any state to deny.

The preamble of the Federal Constitution says: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people - women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government - the ballot.

Webster, Worcester, and Bouvier all define a citizen to be a person in the United States, entitled to vote and hold office.

The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons, then, women are citizens; and no state has a right to make any law, or to enforce any old law, that shall abridge their privileges or immunities. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws of the several states is today null and void, precisely as is every one against Negroes.

Questions

1. Explain the following quotation from the speech: “nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union.”

2. Anthony states that women are citizens and should vote. What is her logic in making this statement? Be sure and use quotations from the speech to support your answer.

3. Anthony says, “...it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government - the ballot.” Why do you think it was so important to her to be able to vote?