

High School Lesson on Indigenous and Women of Color Suffrage Activism by Sohyun An

GA Social Studies Standards

SSUSH7: c. Explain the influence of the Second Great Awakening on social reform movements, including temperance, public education, and women’s efforts to gain suffrage.

SSUSH16: b. Describe the effects of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments

SSCG7: d. Identify how amendments extend the right to vote.

Background Information

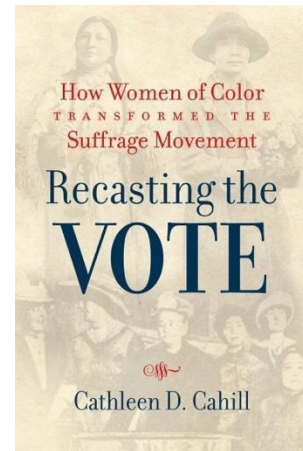
A traditional narrative of women’s suffrage tends to begin with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and other activists gathered to discuss women’s rights. From there, the story goes, Susan B. Anthony and many other white women waged a decades-long campaign until, finally, the 19th Amendment gave all women the right to vote. But that feel-good story is a vast oversimplification.

First, what is often missing in telling the Seneca Falls Convention story is the influence of Indigenous women. Living near the Haudenosaunee, a confederacy of six Indigenous nations near Seneca Falls, some white suffragists were inspired by the Haudenosaunee women who selected the chiefs, owned property, and held elevated roles in spirituality. The white suffragists referenced the equal and even superior positioning of women in the Haudenosaunee in their writings, including the Declaration of Sentiments.

Second, the 19th Amendment was not the end of the story for most nonwhite women. In fact, the 19th Amendment did not affirmatively grant the right to vote to all women—or to any women. All the amendment says is this: *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.* That simply meant that states could no longer keep people from the polls just because they were women. Indeed, there were plenty of other ways for states to block women from voting. For example, poll taxes, literacy tests, or other voter suppression tactics were used to keep Black and Mexican American women from voting. In addition, many Asian and Indigenous women could not vote even after the 19th Amendment passage because the amendment only applies to US citizens. Until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act and the 1952 Walter–McCarran Act, many Indigenous and Asian women could not become US citizens.

Third, for nonwhite women suffragists, winning the right to the vote wasn’t an endpoint. Rather, it was an instrument to achieve broader civil and human rights, and each group’s struggles differed, partly because they had different relationships with US citizenship. For example, Mexican citizens living in the Southwest were granted US citizenship by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. But they were not treated equally; instead, they faced segregation, violence, and voter suppression tactics. Thus, Mexican American women’s suffrage activism was part of a larger struggle against anti-Mexican discrimination.

Meanwhile, African American men achieved citizenship and voting rights through the 14th and 15th amendments, but voter suppression and violent intimidation kept them from the polls. Thus, Black women waged suffrage campaigns not solely for the right to vote; those campaigns also were waged to oppose injustice and violence against Black communities. For Indigenous women, suffrage activism grew out of the struggle for tribal sovereignty. For Chinese immigrants, participation in the suffrage movement was aimed at fighting anti-Asian immigration and citizenship laws and practices.



Fourth, the full suffrage story is far from a feel-good story of unity and inclusion. The Seneca Falls Convention did not have a single Black woman in attendance. Three years later, at a women’s rights conference in Ohio, white women in attendance urged organizers to silence Sojourner Truth for fear that her comments would divert attention from women’s suffrage to emancipation. During the debate on the 15th Amendment, Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed the amendment because it would give Black men and other men of color the vote before white women. Susan B. Anthony also believed that if only one group were to be given the vote, it should be white women. As such, by separating women and African Americans into two groups, white suffragists—including Stanton and Anthony—overlooked Black women and their struggles at the intersection of gender and race. Against that backdrop, Black women organized among themselves to advance suffrage rights and broader civil rights for Black Americans.

Meanwhile, white suffragists were more willing to include Indigenous and Chinese women in their events and parades. Such inclusion was not because they viewed these nonwhite women equal to them. Rather, they saw the Indigenous and Chinese women less threatening and more exotic and used them to build interest in their movement.

Fifth, there were divergent voices within groups. For example, not all Indigenous people supported Indigenous campaigns for citizenship and suffrage. Many tribal leaders believed that if they agreed to US citizenship and participated in elections, they would give up their rights to tribal land. Some members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy rejected US citizenship and emphasized that they belonged to their own nations that predated the United States. In addition, many Indigenous women chose to work within their communities rather than engage in the struggle alongside white women.



Instructional Suggestion

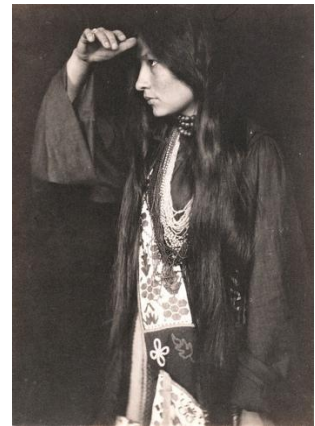
The story of women’s suffrage is more complex, richer, and longer than the traditional narrative that runs from the Seneca Falls Convention to the 19th Amendment and focuses on a few famous white women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Of course, they were some of the first to call for women’s right to vote and among the most important leaders of the movement. But there are many nonwhite women beyond the famous white suffragists who helped make the right to vote a reality for *all* women.

Students can learn about these nonwhite women suffragists and their activism through individual or group inquiry projects. They can write a research report, create a PPT, podcast, poster, portrait, or work together to draw a mural. Suggested books, websites, and other resources are listed below. Followed are four women—Zitkála-Šá, Ida B. Wells, Jovita Idár, and Mable Ping-Hua Lee. They are Indigenous, Black, Chinese, and Mexican American women who fought for women’s suffrage yet whose stories are largely missing in our traditional curriculum. The one page of each woman activist includes resources too.

- [Suffragist Biographies from National Women’s History Museum](#)
- [20 Suffragists to Know from National Park Services](#)
- [Who Was Left Out of the Story? From National Museum of American History](#)
- [Finish the Fight! The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote](#)
- [Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement](#)

Zitkála-Šá: Indigenous Activist of Women's Suffrage and More

Zitkála-Šá (1876–1938) was born on the Dakota Sioux Reservation. Like many Indigenous children at the time, she was separated from her family and forced to attend an Indian boarding school. Later, she attended college and became a music teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. While teaching at Carlisle she began writing autobiographical stories, and her criticism of the Indian boarding school system resulted in her being fired. She then returned home to take care of her mother and to work as a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). After marriage, she and her husband moved to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah. There, she joined the Society of American Indians and served as its secretary. Her criticism of the BIA's assimilationist policies led to her husband being fired from the BIA. They then moved to Washington, DC.



While being critical of assimilation, Zitkála-Šá firmly believed that Indigenous people should be American citizens, and the right to vote was key to tribal sovereignty. She was invited to speak about the matriarchal traditions of Indigenous peoples at white women's suffrage meetings. Taking advantage of the interest from white women, she called on them to support citizenship and enfranchisement of Native Americans and, when the 19th Amendment was ratified, she traveled across the country to urge newly enfranchised white women to support citizenship and voting rights for Indigenous peoples.



Thanks to her and other Indigenous suffragists' activism, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, granting citizenship to all Native Americans. But several states used a variety of strategies, including literacy tests and poll taxes, to disenfranchise Native Americans anyway. She and her husband founded the National Council of American Indians to fight such practices and advocate for self-determination and the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. She continued to work for her community until she passed away in 1938.



More about Zitkála-Šá

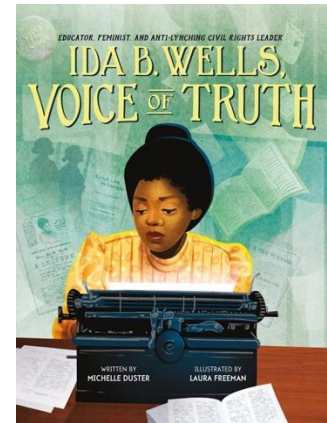
- [Her story from Unladylike2020](#)
- [Her story from National Park Service](#)
- [Her story from National Women's History Museum](#)

Ida B. Wells: African American Activist of Women's Suffrage and More

Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, during the Civil War. She lost her parents and infant brother to yellow fever when she was sixteen and became a teacher so she could afford to take care of her siblings. After moving to Memphis, Tennessee, she continued to work as a teacher. One day in 1884, while riding a train from Memphis to Nashville, a conductor ordered her to sit in the colored section with men even though she had purchased a first-class ticket in the ladies' car. When she refused, the crew forcibly removed her from the train. She sued the train company and won the case but lost on appeal. She then turned to writing, becoming the editor of various newspapers where she wrote criticisms of the unequal education provided to Black students. In retaliation, her teaching contract was not renewed.



In 1892 three Black men, one of whom was Ida B. Wells' close friend, were violently attacked and killed by a white mob. Wells launched an investigation and found lynching was a form of economic retaliation whites took against successful Black men. When she published her findings, angry whites destroyed her newspaper office. But she did not stop investigating lynching. Instead, she embarked on speaking tours abroad to create international pressure on the US government to address lynching.



Ida B. Wells believed enfranchisement was a key to ending lynching and expanding civil rights, so she founded the Alpha Suffrage Club. She also was among many Illinois women who traveled to Washington, DC, to march at the women's suffrage parade in 1913. The parade's white leadership told Black women to march at the back as a separate section so as not to upset Southern white suffragists and voters. Ida B. Wells refused and marched along with her state delegates. Wells spent the rest of her life fighting injustices and working for African American communities.



More about Ida B. Wells

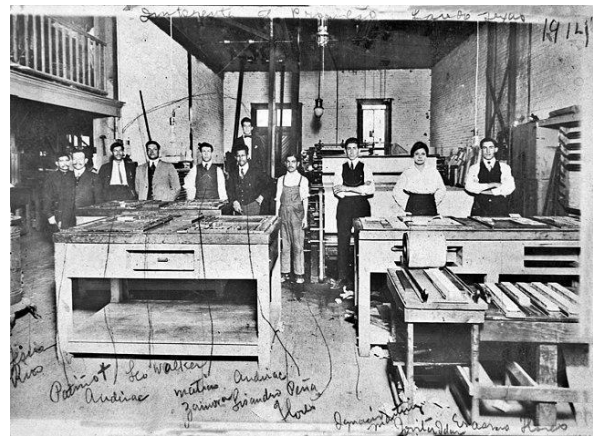
- [Her story from National Park Service](#)
- [Her story from National Women's History Museum](#)
- [Untold stories of Black women in the suffrage movement](#)
- [Picture book Ida B. Wells, Voice of Truth: Educator, Feminist, and Anti-Lynching Civil Rights Leader](#)

Jovita Idár: Mexican American Activist of Women's Suffrage and More

Jovita Idár (1885-1946) was born in Laredo, Texas. She started her career as a teacher, but she became frustrated with the segregated and unequal schools provided for Mexican American students as well as the curriculum that demonized Mexican culture. So, she decided to become a journalist and report on anti-Mexican racism. In Texas, signs refusing service to “Mexicans and dogs” often were hung in storefronts, and voter intimidation—frequently through violence and hate crime—was common.



In 1911 Idár and her family organized the First Mexican Congress to dismantle discrimination against Mexican American communities. As part of the Congress, she helped found the League of Mexican Women to demand women’s suffrage and equal education for Mexican American children. When she wrote an editorial criticizing President Wilson for intervening militarily in the Mexican Revolution, Texas Rangers arrived to shut down the newspaper. But Idár stood boldly in the doorway until the Rangers left. But they came back the next day and destroyed the press. Undaunted, she started her own newspaper and continued to expose anti-Mexican discrimination.



When she moved to San Antonio, she and her husband founded the Democrat Club and became community leaders. She served as a precinct judge for several years and promoted equal rights for women. Until she passed away in 1946, she continued to work for her community by founding a free kindergarten and assisting undocumented workers in acquiring their naturalization papers.



More about Jovita Idár

- [Her story from Unladylike2020](#)
- [Her story from National Park Service](#)
- [Her story from National Women's History Museum](#)

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee: Chinese Immigrant Activist of Women's Suffrage and More

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (1896-1966) was born in China. Her father was a Chinese missionary who moved his family to New York to lead a Baptist church for Chinese immigrants in 1905. During that time Chinese immigrants were barred from naturalized citizenship, so they were unable to vote. But that did not stop Lee from fighting for suffrage. On horseback, she helped lead over 10,000 people in the 1912 New York suffrage parade.



But Mabel Ping-Hua Lee was not the only Chinese immigrant woman invited to suffrage meetings and parades. Such inclusion was largely due to white suffragists' interest in the enfranchisement of women in China. In 1911 Chinese revolutionaries overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China. Leaders of the revolution advocated women's rights, and the provisional republican government of China enfranchised women. White suffragists were curious about Chinese women's role in the revolution and enfranchisement. Lee and other Chinese American women used the invitation as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes about the Chinese people and to inform white suffragists about anti-Chinese discrimination in the United States.

While in college Mabel Ping-Hua Lee published many articles about women's suffrage, and she led another New York suffrage parade in 1917. When women won the right to vote in New York in 1917 and nationwide in 1920, Lee was still unable to vote because Chinese immigrants were not allowed to become US citizens until 1943. So even though she had no hope of directly benefiting from the women's suffrage movement, Lee persisted in the fight. Until her last days in 1966, she devoted her life to serving the Chinese American community in New York.

More about Mabel Ping-Hua Lee

- [Her story from National Park Service](#)
- [Her story from National Women's History Museum](#)
- [Her story from Smithsonian](#)

