

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: The Alabama Constitution of 1901 Unit

This lesson was created by educators working with the Alabama Department of Archives as part of the "[Using Primary Sources in the Classroom](#)" project in 1996.

Lesson 2: Petticoat Power!

Background information for teachers:

While the Constitutional Convention of 1901 debated how best to restrict suffrage among adult males, a group of Alabama women in the Huntsville area petitioned the delegates to grant adult females the right to vote. Although largely a national movement, a state women's suffrage club had been increasingly active since its 1892 formation. Supported by literature and a petition from Elizabeth Cady Stanton's and Susan B. Anthony's National American Woman Suffrage Association, the president of the Alabama auxiliary was allowed to address the 1901 Convention.

A subsequent vote on including a women's suffrage provision failed passage by a four-to-one margin. The fact that four states in the U.S. allowed women equal voting rights as men swayed few delegates, most of whom accepted the prevailing notion about politics being unsuited for women. Not a few probably agreed with the sentiments of delegate (and future U.S. Senator) Tom Heflin that the whole idea was the work of "a few cranks strolling over the state."

With the defeat of their suffrage proposal in 1901, the women's suffrage club died. It would be reborn in 1910, but with little success over the next decade. Alabama women gained the right to vote only in 1920 when the [19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#) was ratified by the requisite three-fourths of the states (not including Alabama).

Content Standards:

Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies (2010)

- 4th Grade
 - 10. Analyze social and educational changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for their impact on Alabama.
 - Examples: social—implementation of the *Plessey versus Ferguson* “separate but not equal” court decision, birth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
educational—establishment of normal schools and land- grant colleges such as Huntsville Normal School (Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical [A&M] University), Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama (Auburn University), Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (Tuskegee University), Lincoln Normal School (Alabama State University)
 - Identifying Alabamians who made contributions in the fields of science, education, the arts, politics, and business during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- 7th Grade Civics:

- 11. Compare changes in social and economic conditions in the United States during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
- 10th Grade:
 - 15. Compare congressional and presidential reconstruction plans, including African-American political participation.
 - Analyzing political and social motives that shaped the Constitution of Alabama of 1901 to determine their long-term effect on politics and economics in Alabama
- 12th Grade Government
 - 5. Compare specific functions, organizations, and purposes of local and state governments, including implementing fiscal and monetary policies, ensuring personal security, and regulating transportation.
 - Analyzing the Constitution of Alabama of 1901 to determine its impact on local funding and campaign funding
 - Describing the influence of special interest groups on state government
 - 6. Analyze the expansion of suffrage for its effect on the political system of the United States, including suffrage for non-property owners, women, African Americans, and persons eighteen years of age.
 - Describing implications of participation of large numbers of minorities and women in parties and campaigns
 - Analyzing the black codes, the Jim Crow laws, and the Selma-to-Montgomery March for their impact on the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

National Standards for History

- Era 7 The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)
 - Standard 1: How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Standard 2 – Time, Continuity, and Change
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy
- Standard 5 – Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions
- Standard 6 – Power, Authority, and Governance
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.
- Standard 10 – Civic Ideals and Practices

- Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Identify some of the women who were prominent in the women's suffrage movement.
2. Define an editorial and discuss its purpose.
3. Synthesize a letter of response using historical background.

Suggested Activities:

1. Provide a copy of Document 1, the letter from Carrie Chapman Catt, and Document 2, the editorial comments from *The Woman's Journal* publication to each student.
2. Ask the students to use the [general suggestions for analyzing a written document](#) while studying the letter.
3. Ask students the following questions:
 - a. Do you recognize any of the names on the letterhead of the letter?
 - b. Describe the roles of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Carrie Chapman Catt in the national women's suffrage movement.
 - c. Read the editorial column found in "The Woman's Journal" publication. What is the purpose of an editorial? Do you agree or disagree with the points that the editor made? Why?
 - d. The property of a wife could be used to determine a man's eligibility to vote in the Alabama Constitution of 1901. Do you believe this to be fair? Why or why not?
4. Ask the students to write a letter of response to Carrie Chapman Catt's letter as if they were the governor.

Primary Sources:

[Document 1](#): "Letter from Carrie Chapman Catt to Hon. Chas. H. Miller, 14 June 1901," Alabama Secretary of State Constitutional Convention Proceedings, SG17778, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 2](#): "Editorial Notes from *The Woman's Journal*," Alabama Secretary of State Constitutional Convention Proceedings, SG17778, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.