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When the Equal Rights Amendment Came to Utah

By JENNIFER PEMBERTON • AUG 25, 2016

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Women are only mentioned in the Constitution once: in the Nineteenth Amendment which grants women the right to vote. In 1923, suffragists proposed an amendment that would protect women’s rights across the board, but when the vote came to Utah, it was blocked by the Mormon Church.

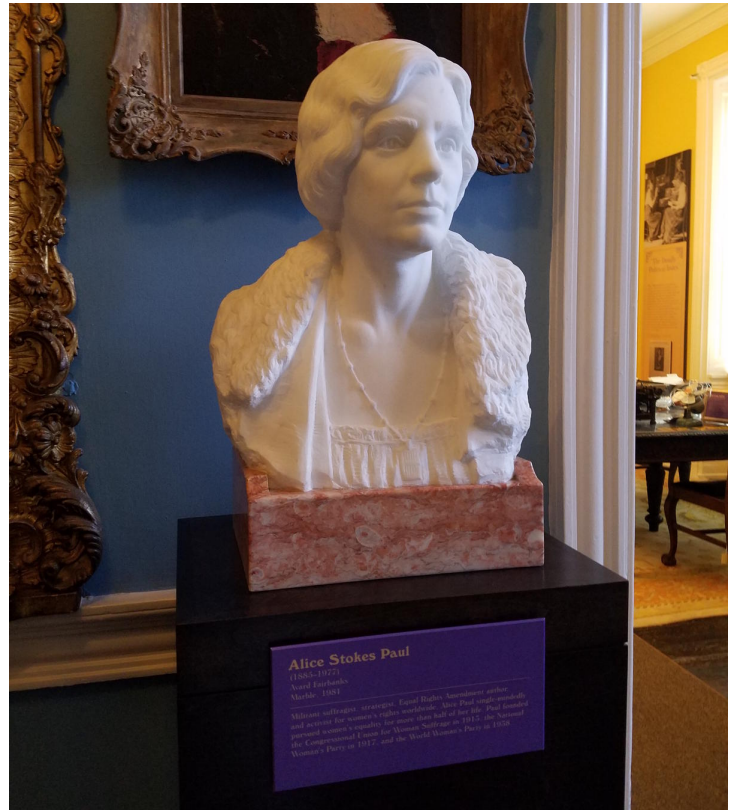
August 26th is Women’s Equality Day in the United States. It’s the anniversary of the day in 1920 that the Constitution was changed to give women the right to vote. It was a big victory for the National Woman’s Party, but their work didn’t stop there. They wanted universal equal rights and

they wanted them in the Constitution, so leader Alice Paul immediately started drafting the Equal Rights Amendment.

The whole text of the ERA is written on the wall. It takes all of 8 seconds to read:

“Equality of the Rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.”

“It was introduced in 1923 in Congress. It took all the way until 1971 and 1972 for the House and Senate to think it was a good idea,” says Eli Webster, a museum assistant with the National Woman's Party at the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument in Washington, DC. “It’s now 2016, not quite a hundred years from when it was first introduced, and it’s still not approved. It has still not passed Congress and then the ratification process.”



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As soon as the 19th Amendment passed, giving women the right to vote, National Women's Party leader Alice Paul started drafting the Equal Rights Amendment.

CREDIT CAROLINE BALLARD

Once it got through Congress, the Equal Rights Amendment was sailing through the state ratification process. When the vote came to Utah in the mid-1970s, it was just five states short of the 38 it needed to become part of the Constitution.

“Early on in '73, things seemed pretty positive. States were rapidly ratifying the ERA. Utah seemed like a definite possibility. A couple years later, you started getting church authorities specifically coming out against the ERA.”

Mark Barnes is on the board of a group called Mormons for ERA (<http://mormonsforera.nationbuilder.com/>), who advocates for the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment. His mother and grandmother were both involved in the fight for the ERA in the 70s and 80s.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or the Mormon Church, wasn't the only organization – secular or religious – to oppose the ERA, but it changed the tide dramatically, not just in Utah, but nationwide.

“If it hadn’t been for the Mormon Church,” says Barnes, “the ERA would be in the constitution right now.”

The Mormon Church considered the ERA a moral issue (<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/the-church-and-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-moral-issue?lang=eng>), not just a political one. Church officials were worried that the gender roles set by God would be degraded and the ERA would contribute to general societal breakdown. They went so far as to say that its passage would affect their standards of right and wrong.

Mormon bishops called on specific women in their wards to advocate against the Equal Rights Amendment. The message came both from on high from Church officials and also from among the ranks of everyday Mormon women.

When the International Women’s Year convention came to Utah (<http://upr.org/post/utah-named-worst-state-womens-equality>) in 1977, the Church mobilized more than 10,000 Mormon women to crash the event and vote against the resolution for the ERA.

By 1982, when time was up to pass the ERA, fifteen states had voted it down, including Utah. It was three states short of passing.

“Most Americans think we have an ERA. But we don’t have an ERA. Women don’t have protection in the constitution,” says Mormon feminist and human rights attorney Kate Kelly.

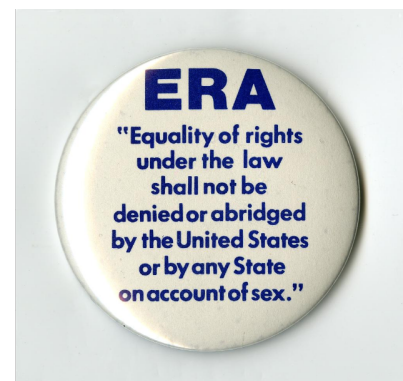
There were LDS women who supported the



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A suffragist banner hangs in the main stairway of the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument in Washington, DC.

CREDIT CAROLINE BALLARD



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This button urging support for the Equal Rights Amendment

ERA despite the Church's official opposition to it, including the most famous Mormon supporter from that time period: Sonia Johnson, founder of Mormons for ERA. She was a housewife in Virginia who was thrown into the spotlight when she testified her support for the ERA as a Mormon woman.

(ERA) was collected at the National Conference for International Women's Year in 1977.

CREDIT SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

"She had a face-off with Orrin Hatch that kind of catapulted her into the national spotlight," says Kelly. "She became the counter voice which said there are Mormons who want justice, who want our human rights to be respected and enshrined in the Constitution."

Johnson was ex-communicated from the LDS Church in 1979 for her feminist views and her support of the Equal Rights Amendment.

"As a Mormon girl, I heard of Sonia Johnson but I was like 'she's one of those scary excommunicated people!' It wasn't until I got excommunicated myself for fighting for gender justice that I read her book, and I was floored at how nothing had changed."

Kelly started the group Ordain Women (<http://ordainwomen.org/>) to fight for gender equality within the Church. She was excommunicated in 2014.





The Equal Rights Amendment would put women's equality up there with freedom of speech and religion. It's been reintroduced in Congress every year since ratification failed in 1982, and it never seems to go anywhere, but Mark Barnes thinks that this election year might be different:

"I hope that having a woman president will elevate women's rights and be an opening to get some movement."

We'll find out in November.

Women Run the West is a public radio collaboration looking at the role of women in Western politics. Hear more stories at womenrunthewest.org (<http://womenrunthewest.org>). #WomenRuntheWest

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mamiejane • 2 years ago

It's kind of sad that this piece didn't include interviews with any of the living women who participated in this fight. How about Karen Shepard? I see that we have bright young faces who are now the only acceptable spokespeople for feminism in Salt Lake and Utah. Hey, the original fighters are still alive and working hard. Let's not let ageism push them into silence and the sidelines.

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Gentry Johnson • 2 years ago

Maybe present more than one side to the story here—that's Journalism 101.

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Korihor The Blessed → **Gentry Johnson** • 2 years ago

Yes, we would like to hear the other side of the story too, In particular I'd like to hear some of the quotes and talks the brethren from the Q12 used to scare Mormon women into mobilizing and working against their own civil rights and their own self interest!
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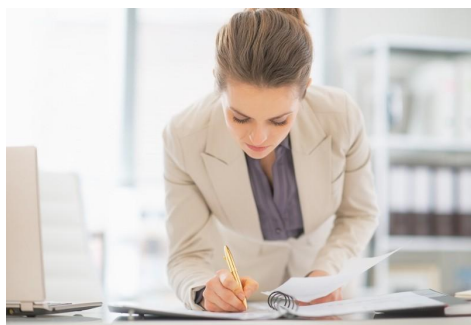
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