

Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947)

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Key coordinator of the suffrage movement and skillful political strategist, Carrie (Lane) Chapman Catt revitalized the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and played a leading role in its successful campaign to win voting rights for women.

Carrie Lane was born in Wisconsin in 1859. At the age of seven, her family moved to Iowa, where Lane began preparatory schooling. In 1880, she graduated from Iowa State College at the top of her class, having worked her way through school by washing dishes, working in the school library, and teaching. After college, she worked as a law clerk, a school teacher, and a principal in Mason City, Iowa. In 1883, at the age of twenty-four, she became one of the first women to be appointed superintendent of schools.

In February 1885, Lane married Leo Chapman, editor and publisher of the Mason City Republican, who died of typhoid fever the following year in San Francisco, California, where he had gone seeking new employment. Arriving a few days after her husband's death, the young widow decided to remain in San Francisco, where she eked out a living as the city's first female newspaper reporter. In 1887, Chapman returned to Charles City, Iowa, and joined the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association for whom she worked as a professional writer and lecturer. After a short period of time, she became the group's recording secretary. From 1890 to 1892, she served as the Iowa association's state organizer.

In June 1890, Chapman married George Catt, a fellow Iowa State alumnus she had met during her stay in San Francisco who encouraged her suffrage activity. During this time, Catt also began work nationally for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, speaking in 1890 at its Washington, D.C., convention. In the following months, Catt's work, and her writing and speaking engagements established her reputation as a leading suffragist. In 1892, she was asked by Susan B. Anthony to address Congress on the proposed suffrage amendment. In 1900, she succeeded Anthony as NAWSA president. From then on, her time was spent primarily in speechmaking, planning campaigns, organizing women, and gaining political experience.

In 1902, Catt helped to organize the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), which eventually incorporated sympathetic associations in thirty-two nations. In 1904, she resigned her NAWSA presidency in order to care for her ailing husband. Grief-stricken over the dual deaths of George Catt (October 1905) and Susan B. Anthony (February 1906), Catt was encouraged by her doctor and her friends to travel abroad. As a result, she spent much of the following nine years as IWSA president promoting equal-suffrage rights worldwide.

In 1915, Catt returned to the United States to resume the leadership of NAWSA, which had become badly divided under the leadership of Anna Howard Shaw. In 1916, at a NAWSA convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Catt unveiled her "Winning Plan" to campaign simultaneously for suffrage on both the state and federal levels, and to compromise for partial suffrage in the states resisting change. Under Catt's dynamic leadership, NAWSA won the backing of the House and Senate, as well as state support for the amendment's ratification. In 1917, New York passed a state woman suffrage referendum, and by 1918, President Woodrow Wilson was finally converted to the cause. On August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment officially became part of the United States Constitution.

Stepping down from the presidency of NAWSA after its victory, Catt continued her work for equal suffrage, founding the new League of Women Voters, and serving as its honorary president for the rest of her life. In 1923, she published *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*. In her later years, Catt's interests broadened to include the causes of world peace and child labor. She founded the National Committee on the Cause and Cure of War, serving as its chairperson until 1932, and honorary chair thereafter. She also actively supported the League of Nations. Honored and praised by countless institutions for her half-century of public service, Carrie Chapman Catt died of heart failure in New Rochelle, New York, on March 9, 1947.