

Unsung Heroes of Women's Suffrage

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Body

Through articles, a book, a play and more, a Times special project commemorating the ratification of the 19th Amendment focuses on lesser-known women who were crucial to the fight.

Times Insider explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

This summer, The New York Times is commemorating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. But Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are not the focus.

Although their pioneering reform efforts in the 1800s helped women gain the right to vote when the 19th Amendment became part of the Constitution on Aug. 26, 1920, the goal of the project is to introduce readers to some of the many other women who were pivotal to the cause, Veronica Chambers, the project's lead editor, said.

"This is in no way a definitive history of the suffrage movement," she said. "It's an alternative look at that history that spotlights overlooked people."

The project encompasses a 44-page print special section in this weekend's paper; a nonfiction book for young adult readers ("Finish the Fight!: The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote") that will be available Aug. 18, the 100th anniversary of the amendment's ratification; a series of online discussions on the continuing battle for women's rights; a virtual play adapted from the book that premieres on Aug. 18; numerous articles by Times reporters and historians; and additions to The Times's Overlooked obituary series.

Dozens of editors, writers, designers and photographers from inside and outside The Times spent the past year researching women of diverse backgrounds who were largely unknown but whose achievements deserved to be emphasized along with Anthony's and Stanton's.

Among them is Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, a Chinese-American woman who as a teenager helped the women's movement in New York City coordinate one of the biggest suffrage parades in U.S. history. And Mary Church Terrell, a founder of the National Association of Colored Women. The notables also included Maria W. Stewart, who in 1832 was one of the first American women to speak publicly about politics to audiences of mixed races and genders, and Jovita Idár, a teacher and writer who promoted the rights of Mexican-Americans.

"There are so many names we don't know that we should," Ms. Chambers said.

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The project, conceived last fall as a way to call attention to some of the lesser-known crusaders, draws on the expertise of about 15 historians and writers who were asked to make suggestions. Seven of the women convened last December for a round table led by Ms. Chambers and Jessica Bennett, The Times's gender editor at large, to discuss, among other topics, the biggest misconceptions about the suffrage movement and the women who were often left out of coverage.

Jennifer Schuessler, a Culture writer and an author of "Finish the Fight!" with Ms. Chambers and their fellow Times journalists Jennifer Harlan, Sandra E. Garcia, Amisha Padnani and Vivian Wang, said she jumped at the chance to participate in a discussion with women she calls living legends. "The heroes of the suffrage story aren't just the women who fought for the right to vote," Ms. Schuessler said. "They're also the historians who have busted their butts to get this history told."

Ms. Schuessler said even progressive Americans still have trouble seeing the suffragists as great Americans on the level of Abraham Lincoln or Frederick Douglass. "There's still this 'How cute!' conception of them as fighting for their rights in fluffy dresses and petticoats," she said. "But these were badass political geniuses."

For Ms. Garcia -- a breaking news reporter for The Times who wrote a chapter in "Finish the Fight!" on Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, an African-American journalist and civil rights leader -- working on the project introduced her to stories she had never learned in high school. "Sixty to 90 percent of the women included in the book were new to me," she said.

This weekend's special print section will include articles by historians and Times reporters on subjects like L.G.B.T.Q. participants in the movement, Native American suffragists, female political cartoonists and the women who campaigned against suffrage. The section's designer, Tala Safié, said the big-type, all-black-and-white layout was inspired by historical suffrage posters. "The urgent, assertive tone of the design attempts to reflect the fact that the fight isn't over yet," Ms. Safié said.

Many of the writers, Ms. Garcia included, finished their chapters late last fall. When the coronavirus hit the United States this spring, Ms. Chambers recalled, they wondered if the project would still be relevant come July and August. But in light of the racial justice protests after the killing of George Floyd in May, the project is more timely than ever, she said. "No matter what you feel politically, this is a bipartisan history of American women that's incredibly rich and inspiring."

One of the biggest challenges, Ms. Chambers added, wasn't that it was difficult to unearth the stories of historically marginalized women who were integral to the movement's success: The problem was that there were so many. "Every time we chose to focus on one woman, we had to leave another five out," she said.

To that end, she hopes the many offerings and formats, including the play and the collection of archival photos, will make the project accessible to people. "I know not everyone will read 5,000 words," she said. "But I hope everyone can find at least one woman they're super excited about."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/insider/suffrage-anniversary.html>

Graphic

PHOTO: Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who helped coordinate one of the biggest suffrage parades in U.S. history. (PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE GRANTHAM BAIN COLLECTION/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

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