

## **Driving Through the Finish Line: The Fight For Suffrage on Wheels**

The fight to secure the vote for women had been ongoing about ninety years in the United States when, on April 6, 1916, two women climbed into a Saxon Roadster named "The Golden Flier" in an effort to push the movement to the finish line.<sup>1</sup> Armed with a typewriter, a fireless cooker, a hand sewing machine, and a black cat named Saxon, they gave speeches and debated suffrage skeptics in cities over the course of five months.<sup>2</sup> This effort pushed automobiles to the spotlight of the suffrage movement. Serving as a mobile platform for speeches and a symbol for women's strength and intelligence, automobiles helped the suffrage movement to achieve its goal by providing efficient campaigns to gather national attention.

The beginning of the suffrage movement can never be exactly pinpointed as it was a continuous effort by countless suffragists for decades.<sup>3</sup> Yet this sentiment can be traced all the way back to the establishment of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. That same year, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams, to "Remember the Ladies". She wanted women to have more rights under the new American government, yet her husband responded "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems." His belief, which was very popular during that time period, was that women were to benefit society by morally influencing their husbands and raising virtuous sons, not to participate in politics.<sup>4</sup>

The first major event in the history of the suffrage movement was the Women's Rights Convention which took place in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York.<sup>5</sup> When Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an active participant in the fight for women's rights, went to the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, she met Lucretia Mott, a founder of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Yet during the first few days of this convention, men debated whether or not women should be allowed to participate and finally concluded that women were to be excluded. Mott and Stanton then planned to hold a convention about women's rights upon their return home, thus creating the first-ever convention for women's rights.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Traveling for Suffrage Part 1: Two Women, a Cat, a Car, and a Mission." O'Gan Patri, National Museum of American History, published 5 Mar. 2014, [americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2014/03/traveling-for-suffrage-part-1-two-women-a-cat-a-car-and-a-mission.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2014/03/traveling-for-suffrage-part-1-two-women-a-cat-a-car-and-a-mission.html).

<sup>2</sup> "Golden Flyer Suffragettes: Topics in Chronicling America: Introduction." Library of Congress, Accessed on 5/28/21 [guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-golden-flyer-suffragettes](https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-golden-flyer-suffragettes).

<sup>3</sup> History.com Editors. "Women's Suffrage." History.com, A&E Television Networks, Last Updated February 23 2021, [www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage).

<sup>4</sup> "Woman's Suffrage Timeline." National Women's History Museum, Accessed on 5/28/21 [www.womenshistory.org/resources/timeline/womans-suffrage-timeline](http://www.womenshistory.org/resources/timeline/womans-suffrage-timeline).

<sup>5</sup> History.com Editors. "Seneca Falls Convention." History.com, A&E Television Networks, Last Updated November 20 2019, [www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention).

<sup>6</sup> "Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Underground Railroad." National Parks Service, U.S.

The Declaration of Sentiments was established at this convention which outlined the expected rights of American Women and women's equality in politics, family, education, jobs, religion, and morals. This grand gesture helped the women's rights movement gain more supporters and momentum.<sup>7</sup> When the 14th Amendment, which granted citizenship to slaves, and the 15th Amendment, which granted voting rights to African Americans, were added to the Constitution, the fight for suffrage was again ignited.<sup>8</sup> In 1869, the National Woman Suffrage Association was founded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.<sup>9</sup>

And it was not until 1890 when the suffrage movement really gained momentum. It was the beginning of the Progressive Era and women's roles gradually expanded as a result of the increasing politicization of women. During these years suffragists continuously fought for suffrage by presenting signatures to Conventions, campaigning, and forming organizations. Their efforts paid off in the end when the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote was ratified on August 18, 1920.<sup>10</sup>

At this time, there was a deeply rooted cultural belief that men were superior to women. People believed that giving women the right to vote posed a threat to male powers and overthrowing the domestic role of a woman will disrupt societal order.<sup>11</sup> One anti-suffrage pamphlet said that "it is a fatal mistake that these excellent women make when they conceive that the functions of men are superior to theirs and seek to usurp them." In fact, many women joined the argument against suffrage stating that women were still illiterate and ignorant. Many anti-suffrage groups in the U.S. were mainly led by women themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Women were not perceived to be capable of driving cars. Many men viewed women as unsuited to driving cars because they are delicate and thought they should be restricted to cleaner and slower electric cars, which were capable of traveling only 50 miles.<sup>13</sup> Many

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[www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/elizabeth-cady-stanton-and-the-underground-railroad](http://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/elizabeth-cady-stanton-and-the-underground-railroad).

<sup>7</sup> "Driving the Disenfranchised: The Automobile's Role in Women's Suffrage." The Frick Pittsburgh, The Eden Hall Foundation, Accessed on May 28 2021,  
[www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-Driving-the-Disenfranchised-The-Automobiles-Rolein-Womens-Suffrage](http://www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-Driving-the-Disenfranchised-The-Automobiles-Rolein-Womens-Suffrage)

<sup>8</sup> History.com Editors. "Women's Suffrage." History.com, A&E Television Networks, Last Updated February 23 2021, [www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage).

<sup>9</sup> History.com Editors. "Seneca Falls Convention." History.com, A&E Television Networks, Last Updated November 20 2019, [www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention).

<sup>10</sup> "Woman's Suffrage Timeline." National Women's History Museum, Accessed on 5/28/21  
[www.womenshistory.org/resources/timeline/womans-suffrage-timeline](http://www.womenshistory.org/resources/timeline/womans-suffrage-timeline).

<sup>11</sup> "Obstacles to Overcome." Obstacles to Overcome - (Women in World History Curriculum), Accessed on 5/29/21

[womeninworldhistory.com/essay-06-04.html](http://womeninworldhistory.com/essay-06-04.html).

<sup>12</sup> Fung, Philippa. "Challenges Women Faced in Gaining Voting Rights and Obstacles Potential Voters Have Today, by Philippa Fung." Accessed on May 29 2021,  
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<sup>13</sup> Walsh, Margaret. Gender and the Automobile in the United States, Accessed on May 29 2021,  
[www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Gender/Walsh/G\\_Overview.htm](http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Gender/Walsh/G_Overview.htm).

suffragists did not support the idea of female drivers going out to campaign either- it was too unseemly and unusual.<sup>14</sup>

Yet women still competed in organized races, volunteered for motor service during World War I, and drove cars in order to rally support for women's suffrage.<sup>15</sup> For these women, cars were not only a mode of transportation but also were a means to change their identity. It granted them physical freedom in driving themselves to wherever they wanted while also pushing against negative stereotypes.<sup>16</sup>

The spectacle of women traveling on their own inspired The National Woman's Suffrage Association to use automobiles as the central symbol of the movement. Suffragists drove across their state collecting signatures and photographs of women changing tires made their way into newspapers.<sup>17</sup> Until finally when one of the most renowned events in the suffrage movement occurred and solidated the automobile's important position in the movement.

In the article "The Suffragist Saffron Saxon," Jeryl Schriever describes the start of Alice Snitjer Burke and Nell Richardson's trip. "Car packed, the women were ready. On Thursday, April 6, 1916, in New York City, their Saxon was christened "Golden Flyer" by Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National Suffrage Association."<sup>18</sup> They were given a black kitten which they named "Saxon." At this time, women were often associated with cats, who were perceived as passive and delicate.<sup>19</sup> By bringing the black cat with them, Alice and Nell embraced this lash back gracefully and fought back with even more determination.

During their journey, they stopped to give speeches, attend gatherings and recruited supporters for their cause. It was an impressive feat considering that the roads were barely paved and were graded with gravel. The Golden Flier had often broken down because of these rough conditions.<sup>20</sup>

This country-wide journey was frequently reported in news. On April 7, 1916. New-York Tribune published a newspaper with a photograph of Alice Burke and Nell

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<sup>14</sup> "Obstacles to Overcome." Obstacles to Overcome - (Women in World History Curriculum), Accessed on May 28 2021, [womeninworldhistory.com/essay-06-04.html](http://womeninworldhistory.com/essay-06-04.html).

<sup>15</sup> Jedgele, Saige. "The Automobile and Women's Suffrage - Blog." The Henry Ford, Last Updated 25 Aug.

2020, [www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/the-automobile-and-women-s-suffrage](http://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/the-automobile-and-women-s-suffrage)

<sup>16</sup> "Driving the Disenfranchised: The Automobile's Role in Women's Suffrage." The Frick Pittsburgh, The Eden Hall Foundation, Accessed on May 28 2021, [www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-Driving-the-Disenfranchised-The-Automobiles-Rolein-Womens-Suffrage](http://www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-Driving-the-Disenfranchised-The-Automobiles-Rolein-Womens-Suffrage)

<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith, Elizabeth. "The Freedom to Travel & the Right to Vote: August 18, 1920."

Wonders & Marvels, Accessed on May 29 2021, [www.wondersandmarvels.com/2014/08/the-freedom-to-travel-the-right-to-vote-august-18-1920.html](http://www.wondersandmarvels.com/2014/08/the-freedom-to-travel-the-right-to-vote-august-18-1920.html).

<sup>18</sup> Schriever, Jeryl. THE SUFFRAGIST SAFFRON SAXON

<sup>19</sup> "Symbols of the Women's Suffrage Movement (U.S. National Park Service)." National Parks

<sup>20</sup> O'Gan, Patri. "Traveling for Suffrage

Richardson with the title “Leaving to circle the country for suffrage”. In this article, it also discusses how Alice Burke and Nell Richardson will publish their diary which will provide the first complete picture of the suffrage situation.

When questioned about a woman's ability to manage a car, Alice answered, “Yes, I can run this machine without any help and without getting all messy. “I’ve brought one of those clown bag suits which just let my feet and hands through. This is my working suit. It’s of deep pink linen. You can see it a mile, particularly when I stand up beside the car.” And when the audiences questioned her about the strange choice of bringing a sewing machine and typewriter with them, she said “If any anti-suffragist down in Texas makes remarks about suffrage destroying women’s feminine talents it will be Miss Richardson’s cue to get out the sewing machine and run off an apron while the crowd waits. If, on the other hand, he says women have no brains, she will pull out the typewriter and write him a poem.”<sup>21</sup>

Richardson and Burke’s odyssey lasted for 178 days through over 10,000 miles with stops in 125 cities including New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, and other small towns.<sup>22</sup> One of their original goals was to recruit supporters in order to add a suffrage plank to the party platforms in the 1916 presidential election.<sup>23</sup> Although ultimately, they were not able to achieve this goal, their journey attracted national attention to the suffrage movement and helped it to reach its ultimate goal.

Even as Alice and Nell’s travel was one of the most well-known, there was an earlier effort to campaign with automobiles as well. It was a series of statewide automobile tours organized by the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association in the summer of 1910. During this campaign suffragists formed fifteen different auto parties that spread out across the state, distributing literature and gave speeches. Some automobiles were decorated with flowers, flags, and banners in order to grab the audience’s attention and amplify their message. When women in Illinois gained suffrage in 1913, many credited automobiles for this victory.<sup>24</sup>

Another significant automobile journey in the history of suffragists was the journey in the summer of 1913. Delegates from NAWSA from all 48 states drove across the country collecting signatures on petitions calling for the addition of a suffrage amendment. On July 31, about 80 brightly decorated cars drove en masse to Washington D.C. to present the petitions to Congress. This event altogether was successful as they had collected 75,000 signatures and 23 U.S. Senators voiced their support for a suffrage amendment immediately following the car parade the next day.<sup>25</sup>

Automobiles provided quick and efficient travel for cross-country campaigning and became mobile podiums for the cause. The convenience of automobiles quickly became a

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<sup>21</sup> Schriever, Jeryl. THE SUFFRAGIST SAFFRON SAXON

<sup>22</sup> Schriever, Jeryl. THE SUFFRAGIST SAFFRON SAXON, 2014

<sup>23</sup> O’Gan, Patri. “Traveling for Suffrage

<sup>24</sup> Jedele, Saige. “The Automobile and Women's Suffrage - Blog.”

<sup>25</sup> O’Gan, Patri. “Traveling for Suffrage

national symbol for the suffrage movement. “Female drivers challenged the notion that women ought to remain sequestered in the home. By the 1920s automobiles were a dominant cultural emblem of women’s modernity, independence, and mobility. ” 26

The suffragists’ efforts all paid off in 1920 when the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was approved and women were finally granted voting rights. Automobiles served an important role in this movement as both a national symbol and an efficient way to reach more audiences.

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