



Civil Liberties in Ohio

Learn about the role of Ohioans in refining democracy, testing its limits and working toward a more perfect union, including the struggles for rights and reform.

Women's Rights

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Ohio women fought to improve their legal and political status. Some women wanted the right to vote, although most women's rights reformers were more concerned with basic liberties. At the time, wives had few rights. Husbands were the sole guardians of children and could even give them away without their mother's consent. A husband controlled all of his wife's personal property, and a widow could inherit only one third of her late husband's property unless she had minor children to support.

In 1850, the second national women's rights convention was held in Salem, Ohio. Organizers hoped to include female suffrage in the Ohio Constitution of 1851, but to no avail. The following year, former slave Sojourner Truth (c. 1792-1883) made her famous speech during a meeting in Akron when, reacting to several arguments made by men against women's rights, Truth contradicted prevailing notions of womanhood and reiterated her question, "Ain't I a Woman?" In 1852, the Ohio Women's Rights Association was formed in Massillon.

After the passage of the 15th Amendment (1870), which gave African American men the right to vote, women's rights advocates placed greater emphasis on gaining the vote. Women known as suffragists or suffragettes organized to advocate for suffrage, and by 1870, Ohio had thirty-one suffrage organizations, including the Ohio Woman's Suffrage Organization (OWSA), established in 1885. On the national level, many similar groups began to form, such as the College Equal Suffrage League (CESL), which was established in Boston in 1900, and the Woman's Suffrage Party, founded in New York City in 1910. Many Ohio women joined these organizations, as chapters of the CESL formed at Oberlin College, Western Reserve University, the University of Cincinnati, and Ohio State University.

Several attempts were made in Ohio to initiate woman's suffrage. In 1874, suffragists nearly succeeded in gaining passage of an amendment to the Ohio Constitution. In 1912, the Equal Suffrage and Elective Franchise Committee put the question to voters whether to remove the phrase "white male" from Section 1, Article V, of the 1850 Ohio Constitution, which refers to voting rights. The amendment failed by popular vote, however. Despite defeat, support for woman's suffrage remained strong; new publications and groups sprang up across the state. For example, a weekly Columbus publication called *Everywoman* focused on suffrage, and the OWSA declared May 2, 1914, as "Woman's Suffrage Day." In 1917, the Reynolds Bill was proposed, which would have allowed women to vote in presidential elections. The bill was signed by Ohio Governor James Cox and passed by the Ohio Senate, but a ruling by the Ohio attorney general stated that the issue must be submitted to voters by an initiative petition, and in late 1917, voters defeated the issue.

Although women's suffrage was an increasingly popular cause in the early 1900s, many groups still lobbied against it. One of the main opponents was the United States Brewers'



Association. Members of the association stood to lose a great deal of money if the state were to go dry, and because prohibitionists had been long linked to woman's suffrage, the association did not support the woman's suffrage movement.

Despite such opposition, Congress called a special session to consider the suffrage issue in 1919. The result was the 19th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, which affirmed that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Ohio became the fifth state to ratify the amendment, and also passed the Reynolds-Fouts Presidential Suffrage Bill along with it. This bill guaranteed women the right to vote in the 1920 election even if the other thirty-six states had not ratified the amendment. The amendment succeeded in increasing the voice and role of women in politics, and by 1922, the first women were elected to the Ohio general assembly. Two had been elected to the Ohio Senate, and four elected to the Ohio House.

Women's suffrage did not, however, guarantee women equal treatment. In fact, discrimination in employment against women persisted even after they gained a voice in government. The issue was addressed in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to confront job discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and gender. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded; the organization sought to move toward equality for women.

In Ohio, Governor James Rhodes created a commission to examine the status of women in the state; the Ohio Governor's Committee on the Status of Women was created in 1966. In 1973, the Ohio General Assembly passed House Bill 610, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender in employment, public accommodations, and housing. Shortly after House Bill 610 was passed, the Equal Rights Amendment was proposed before Congress. The amendment would attempt to end widespread discrimination against women. Ohio ratified the amendment in 1974, but by 1979 the required number of states had not ratified it, and the amendment was never enacted.

Abolition and the Underground Railroad

Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawed slavery, African Americans were relegated to an inferior position in 19th century Ohio. By the 1820s, only a few thousand blacks lived in the state. Fearing a black influx, some Ohioans hoped that colonization would solve their problem. The goal of the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816, was to "return" former slaves and free blacks to Africa. Most of its advocates did not believe in racial equality, but rather considered the mere presence of blacks a blight on the nation and encouraged their total removal. They established the nation of Liberia on the West African coast for their purpose. Quakers were among the first to question colonization. Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker from St. Clairsville, formed an anti-slavery society in 1815 and later published a small antislavery paper called the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Colonization never gained widespread support.

Although abolition sentiments were not universally popular, 19^h century Ohioans spoke out against slavery and risked their own lives to help slaves escape to freedom through the Underground Railroad, an organization surrounded by legend due to its covert nature.



Underground Railroad activity was most active in communities along the Ohio River and in the Western Reserve.

Many Ohioans supported abolition in the political arena. Joshua Giddings of Ashtabula County attempted to end a gag rule in the House of Representatives that caused anti-slavery resolutions to be tabled without a reading. Attorney (and future Ohio Governor) Salmon P. Chase of Cincinnati defended several fugitive slaves, taking cases as far as the Supreme Court. Chase served as secretary of the treasury during the Lincoln administration. The two men clashed, however, because Lincoln's anti-slavery views were too moderate for Chase, who eventually resigned.

Two other Ohioans, John Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe, brought national attention to slavery in very different ways. Brown believed he was God's chosen instrument in the fight against slavery. In 1855 he moved from Hudson, Ohio, to the Kansas Territory, where he led violent attacks on pro-slavery settlers. His guerilla band led slave revolts throughout the South. Brown's crusade came to an end in 1859, when he raided the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Tried for treason, he was found guilty and hanged. Stowe became aware of the evils of slavery while living in Cincinnati, which borders Kentucky, a slave state. Her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tells the story of a slave who died at the hands of his master rather than reveal the whereabouts of escaped slaves. The book captured the sympathies of Northern readers, many of whom had previously not been supporters of abolition.

Temperance and Prohibition

Early Ohioans relied on alcohol as a beverage due to a lack of suitable drinking water. Farmers often distilled their crops into alcohol, as this was an economical way to ship it to market. Since alcohol was so widely used, many 19th century Americans fell prey to the evil effects of the "Demon Rum," as temperance advocates called it. The term temperance encompassed a number of viewpoints; moderate advocates called for a more "temperate" use of alcohol, while the most extreme faction wished to completely prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol. Countless temperance societies were formed around the state in the 19th century. Women were particularly active in the temperance movement. Because their legal status made them completely dependent on the men around them, an alcoholic father or husband could make a woman's life miserable.

In December 1873, Dr. Dio Lewis spoke on the evils of liquor in Hillsboro and Washington Court House. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded as a result, and soon, typically quiet women in those towns began protesting outside of saloons by praying and singing hymns in hopes of making saloonkeepers see the evil of their ways. Eventually, the crusade spread to all parts of the state. In some areas the women were successful in closing saloons, but they faced mobs and arrest in others. In November 1874, the national WCTU was formed in Cleveland.

Temperance was also an important issue in 19th century politics. Nativists—those who favored native-born citizens over foreign-born immigrants—frequently cited immigrants' fondness for alcohol as a justification for limiting their political privileges. During the 1850s,



German immigrants and the anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party clashed over Sunday closing laws that prevented the Germans from continuing the tradition they had enjoyed in their homeland of visiting beer gardens on the Sabbath.

Whether to be wet or dry (to allow sale and consumption of liquor or to ban it) was a major political issue which carried over from the 19th into the 20th century. When Ohioans had a chance to vote on the question in 1918, Prohibitionists won by a margin of almost 26,000 votes. In 1919 the Crabbe Act was passed, providing the means to enforce prohibition in Ohio, but it was overturned in a referendum vote. In 1920, a second Crabbe Act was passed that defined how prohibition would be enforced in Ohio; a state agency was established in 1921 to do so.

In 1919, the National Prohibition Enforcement Act was passed. It imposed penalties for the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol. The act went into effect as the 18th Amendment in 1920. The passage of this bill may have been influenced by the aggressive lobbying efforts of the Anti-Saloon League, which was founded in Oberlin in 1893. In fact, in 1924, nineteen of twenty-two Ohio congressmen considered themselves "drys."

Not all Ohioans obeyed Prohibition laws, however. Many people began to produce their own alcohol in bathtubs or consumed alcoholic drinks in speakeasies (illegal alcohol distributors). Authorities were unable to control illegal production and sales, and often bribes were made to law enforcement officers to reduce the number of raids.

The problems of enforcement, along with the specter of the Great Depression, began to overshadow the prohibition issue, and by 1933, a federal law was enacted that allowed for the sale of 3.2 %-alcohol beer. In December 1933, the 21st Amendment was declared ratified, overturning the 18th Amendment. Also in 1933, the State Liquor Control Act was passed by the Ohio General Assembly; it established the Department of Liquor Control to manage the state monopoly on liquor sales in state-run stores.

Progressive Movement

At the end of the 19th century, a new wave of reform began to gain strength. Unlike earlier reformers, who attempted to change the morals of their fellow citizens, the Progressives worked to solve social problems brought about by industrialization. Poor families lived in filthy, unsafe tenement houses. Political bosses controlled cities, which were often corrupt. Monopolies on utilities and streetcars forced residents to pay high rates for these services. Progressive reformers worked to wipe out these problems and create a decent standard of living in the cities.

Tom Johnson (1854-1911) was elected to his first term as mayor of Cleveland in 1901. During his four terms in office, he fought political bosses, improved sanitation, and established institutions to help the poor. Washington Gladden (1836-1918) was the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Columbus. He was a vigorous supporter of the "Social Gospel" which applied Christian principles to social problems. Samuel M. "Golden Rule" Jones (1846-1904) served as mayor of Toledo until his death. His legacy includes establishing free parks and playgrounds, and encouraging a standard three-cent fare for streetcars.



Civil Rights Movement

Despite the passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments in the 19th century, African Americans continued to receive unequal and often unfair treatment. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education in Topeka*, ruled "separate but equal" facilities unconstitutional. Following this landmark decision, African Americans began to enter all-white schools and brought the segregation issue to the public eye.

The social inequalities prevalent in the South could also be found in the North. Although the Ohio Accommodations Law of 1884 banned discrimination on the basis of race, segregation was still practiced in Ohio through the 1950s in skating rinks, pools, hotels, and restaurants. Ohio sought to remove such segregations through the 1959 creation of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, the purpose of which was to monitor and enforce the law preventing discrimination in employment.

Another major source of dissent to racial equality was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan had spread north from the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and aimed to preserve American culture as the group believed it should be. The Klan enjoyed some success in Ohio, especially during the 1920s, in areas such as Dayton, Columbus, Springfield, and Akron. In fact, Akron voters even elected Klan members to serve as mayor, sheriff, county commissioners, and school board members.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to combat discrimination in employment by race, religion, national origin, and gender. The act also established a national policy prohibiting racial segregation and discrimination. In the years that followed the act, violence erupted across the country. On the east side of Cleveland in 1966, four African Americans were killed and many others were injured during several days of rioting. Entire blocks of houses and commercial buildings were leveled by fires. A board created to investigate the cause of the rioting argued that the riots occurred because of the poor social conditions found to be present in the neighborhood. Despite such violence, the 1964 Civil Rights Act made much progress. In 1967, Carl B. Stokes became the first African American to preside over a major city in the United States when he was elected mayor of Cleveland. Other African Americans were also elected to political positions; Louis Stokes, Carl's brother, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Anti-War Movement

Around the same time as the Civil Rights Movement, college students began gathering together in opposition to United States military involvement in Southeast Asia. Following the approval of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent than 500,000 U.S. troops, together with air support, to countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia to fight Communism.

As U.S. involvement in Vietnam continued to escalate, campuses and large cities in Ohio became gathering places for protestors, who believed they were taking a stand against an



immoral war and a corrupt government. Protests occurred on almost all campuses in Ohio, from colleges as small as Wilmington College to major universities such as Ohio State.

In 1968, incumbent President Johnson decided not to seek reelection, and Richard Nixon was elected to succeed him. As president, Nixon continued to increase U.S. involvement in Vietnam, rousing anti-war sentiments nationwide. In 1970, Nixon ordered troops into Cambodia to halt Vietnamese supply routes. Many saw this movement as an escalation toward war and major demonstrations and protests erupted on college campuses across the country. In Ohio, the National Guard shut down Ohio State University in response to student violence.

The worst, however, was yet to come. During the first three days of May 1970 at Kent State University, a ROTC building on campus was burned, and students rioted in the streets of downtown Kent, yelling insults and curses at police officers and firemen trying to restore order. Some students threw large rocks and hunks of concrete at police and fire officials trying to combat the blaze that had engulfed the ROTC building. Governor James Rhodes ordered the Ohio National Guard to Kent's campus on May 2. The guardsmen, who had been policing a truck strike in Akron the week before, were forced to confront insulting and often violent students and sleep deprivation, as many guardsmen reported receiving less than three hours of sleep during the nights they spent at Kent.

On May 4, 1970, the National Guard confronted a large gathering of students on Kent's campus. Since such large gatherings had been declared illegal due to the three previous days of rioting, the students were ordered to disperse. As the Guard tried to push the students back, they were met with a barrage of rocks and insults, although the majority of students were reported to have been peaceful. Shots rang out, and when the firing was over, four students were dead and nine others were wounded.

In response to the events at Kent, campuses across the country shut down, some for a few days, others for the remainder of the school year. Three years after the shootings, United States troops were officially withdrawn from Vietnam. Ohio lost almost three thousand soldiers in the conflict, and more than twenty thousand Ohioans were wounded in combat.

Other Causes

Since the middle of the 20th century, African Americans and women have been the focus of the most visible civil rights struggles. Other minority groups, such as American Indians, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, homosexuals, and the disabled, have also pursued equal opportunities under the law and in society.



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