

## Elections History

On Tuesday, November 4, 2008, millions of American citizens will cast votes to decide who will be the next President of the United States. Voters will also decide all 435 members of the United States House of Representatives and about 35 of the U.S. Senators. New York State voters will elect all members of the NYS Assembly and Senate.

Exercising your right to vote is a very important part of the democratic process in this country. I was a high school American history and government teacher for many years and in my classes I would state that I thought an eligible voter ought to be fined if that person did not vote. Of course, that is not true in this country, but we do have the problem that less than half of the eligible voters typically vote in a presidential election.

You all know that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, amendments to the United States Constitution gave women the right to vote and another amendment lowered the voting age to 18. It was the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920 that gave women the right to vote. But several states, including New York, had given women the right to vote prior to 1920. New York State women voted for the first time in 1918. Betty Auten, former Seneca County Historian, in a newsletter in September 1985, had this to say about women securing the right to vote:

“Everyone, especially in this area, knows about the first Women’s Rights Convention but New York State is also the first state to present a petition to the legislature to submit an amendment to the voters. This was in 1854 and it was turned down.

“Petitions were resubmitted but were always rejected until 1915. By this time women were so strongly organized, the legislature could not reject the issue but the amendment was defeated by the voters.

“The women did not hesitate. They renewed their effort and with greater force. In 1917 they circulated a petition for the vote which was signed by 1,015,000 women in the state.

“On Election Day, Nov. 7, 1917, the amendment was approved. The men of New York State finally gave their OK. There were 675,389 yes votes and 600,776 no. Not a very large margin but the absentee votes of the soldiers really saved the day. They voted two to one in favor of the amendment, and it received a total of 703,129 affirmative votes.

“It would be another two years before women could vote in a National election, but they did have the opportunity for the next two years to use their “right” at local and state elections.

“Many books and papers have been written regarding Women Suffrage and many more will be published in years to come. There is no need to add to these, except there is one area that can only be covered on a local basis.

“Here, from Seneca Falls where it all started, are the women who voted in 1918. There are 913 names. There were also 263 more who voted in 1919.”

In subsequent issues of her newsletter, Betty Auten printed the names of all Seneca County women who voted in 1918. You may well recognize many of those

names—very possibly some of your mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc. So I have copies of those lists for you to look at. These lists are organized the towns of the county.

The struggle for women to secure the right to vote in this country was a long struggle. Securing the right of women to vote was one of the resolutions adopted at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in July 1848. I have brought with me today several pictures of that women's suffrage struggle, as I thought you would enjoy seeing some of those pictures.

I have also brought with me today, voter registration forms and requests for absentee ballots. Your vote is important. I am holding up a brochure that the Board of Elections gave me about voting. One part of this brochure points out that one single vote decided some very important things: One vote--

- Decided that Americans speak English rather than German (1776)
- Kept Aaron Burr, who would later be charged with treason, from becoming President (1800)
- Made Texas part of the United States (1845)
- Saved President Andrew Johnson from removal from office (1868)
- Admitted California (1850), Oregon (1859), Washington (1889) and Idaho (1890) to the Union
- Elected Rutherford B. Hayes President, and, the man in the Electoral College who cast that vote was an Indiana Congressman elected by one vote (1876).

The Seneca County Board of Elections staff also wanted me to emphasize that if you vote by absentee ballot, your vote will be counted. Absentee ballots are always counted, as long as they have been properly completed and returned to the County Board of Elections. This is true even if the regular votes cast on election day result in a margin of victory that can't possibly be changed by counting the absentee ballots.

You know, you are never too old to vote. Here is picture I took of an 82-year-old WW2 veteran who was registering to vote in 2004. Imagine, he had never voted before, but he was going to vote for the first time at the age of 82!