

A Centennial Birthday Gift: Resources for Teaching and Celebrating Women’s Right to Vote

NCSS Editorial Staff

In 2020, the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission (WSCC) strove “to educate the American people about the efforts and undertakings of the women’s suffrage movement in the United States in a nonpartisan fashion.”¹ The occasion was the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment—Women’s Suffrage Rights to the U.S. Constitution, which reads in full,

Section 1. The right of the 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.

Section 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

The amendment was passed by Congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified (approved by the required three-fourths of the states) on August 18, 1920.

Valuable resources for elementary teachers, posted by the Commission last year, add to the growing universe of free, online materials provided by federal, state, and local governments, as well as universities and nonprofit institutions. Examples of such resources, on the topic of women’s suffrage, have been highlighted in NCSS publications over the decades. To find them, just search on key phrases at www.socialstudies.org. In this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, we are happy to invite our readers to check out the educational resources at WSCC, as well as other resources recommended there.

Resources from the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission

One strength of the teaching resources posted by the Commission at www.womensvote100.org is their readi-

ness for classroom use. Scroll down at this webpage, www.womensvote100.org/learn, to see the collection of teacher-friendly resources (presented here in the order in which they appear on that webpage):

- The Stuff Buffs: Your Not-So-Average History Series. This is a collection of short essays, written by historians and other scholars, that help tell the “extraordinary, dramatic, inspiring, complex, and too-little-known stories” of the women’s suffrage movement. These essays are written at a high-school level, and are available as an ebook.
- Kids’ Corner: “Educate young learners about this critical movement for change, inspire America’s youngest generation towards leadership and civic engagement, and bring the story of women’s fight for the vote to the children in your life with these fun and innovative resources, brought to you by the WSCC and our partners!” The resources here are “Suffrage History Activities (with the National Park Service),” “Flat Friends” (decorate and take photos in honor of the Centennial), “Suffrage History Reading List” (biographies and movement histories), and “Herstory Time” (a storytelling series that brings history “to families and little learners across the country.”) Featured narrators, who read aloud children’s suffrage history books in the videos, are WSCC Commissioners, Members of Congress, American Library Association librarians, and suffrage history leaders. “Herstory Time is a moment for the whole family to enjoy the stories of the 19th Amendment and the battle for the ballot.”
- Educate & Activate: Engage grade 5-12 students “with suffrage history through these great resources below, includ-



(The People's Picture, Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission, and Purpose Entertainment - ourstory100.com)

A student poses with thousands of suffragist portraits at Union Station, Washington, DC, in August 2020.

ing puzzles, quizzes, and book recommendations from the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission. Learn to play suffrage songs using sheet music from the Library of Congress." Students can also help the Library of Congress with "By The People," a crowdsourced transcription campaign!"

- Take a Virtual Tour of exhibits at the National Archives and the National Portrait Gallery led by scholar-curators. Good for grade 5–12 students, but teachers should, of course, preview any video before using it in a classroom.
- Featured Partner Resources. WSCC partners include the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the National Park Service, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and the Smithsonian Institution!
- Additional Resources provide links to a related database, collection, resources center, and learning center.

One navigational feature about the Commission's website was confusing when we first visited there. A block of text, at the top and center of the home page, reads,

LEARN about the commission

If you click on the word "LEARN," you arrive at the resources listed above in this SSYL article. But if your mouse (cursor) happens to touch the phrase "about the commission," then you will arrive at a webpage that tells about the Commission itself. That may be puzzling, but not for everybody. Even young students may know how to "click around" casually at a website to learn both what is there and how the website is organized. If you follow that method at the WSCC website, you will eventually find all the good stuff listed above, but you may encounter them one item at a time. So, in summary, you can find teaching resources by scrolling down the list (at LEARN), or by exploring the "logical web" by just clicking around and scrolling up and down at each landing page to discover what awaits you there, and to see how it's linked to other webpages.

Portraits and Biographies from OUR STORY: 100 Years of Women's Right to Vote

WSCC commissioned a monumental work of art for the Nineteenth Amendment Centennial celebrations. During Women's Suffrage Month (August 2020), a giant mosaic of the iconic suffragist and Black civil rights leader Ida B. Wells



Pedestrians are invited to walk over and examine the photos in the 1,000-square-foot mosaic on display at Union Station, Washington, DC, in August 2020.

was exhibited in the Main Hall of Union Station in Washington, DC.² The 1,000-square-foot mosaic, “Our Story: Portraits of Change,” was assembled from thousands of historical photos of suffragists and displayed on the marble floor.

Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that few people visited the Union Station exhibit in 2020. The good news is that the giant mosaic is stored as a “digital ready-to-reproduce kit,” and it is available to be displayed again at any public venue with sufficient floor, wall, or projection and screen space (such as at a college, university, or shopping mall) once the pandemic subsides.³ Very good news for teachers is that an interactive, online version of the mosaic is available now at www.ourstory100.com. Students can see the whole mosaic, then zoom in on individual photos to see each one in more detail. They can read brief biographies of 20 women who are among the thousands of suffragists depicted in the mosaic. Students will also enjoy watching the time-lapse video of workers assembling the mosaic in Union Station

The project was created by British visual artist Helen Marshall, whose studio is The People’s Picture, and produced by American Christina Korp of Purpose Entertainment. Helen Marshall kindly provided images to *SSYL* for this article and its handout, and excerpts from an interview with her follow.



Two students use the mosaic map to find the featured suffragists and their stories hidden in the artwork at Union Station, Washington, DC, in August 2020.



The giant portrait of suffragist Ida B. Wells commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and women's right to vote. It was on display at Union Station, Washington, DC, in August 2020.

An Interview with Helen Marshall

The People's Picture is my photography and design studio (thepeoplespicture.com). As an artist-led studio practice, we create innovative photo mosaic artworks and installations at the leading edge of design and technology. Pictures are powerful. People connect with pictures. People share their memories and dreams and celebrate through pictures. Our hope is to bring communities together to create, celebrate, and own their unique legacy.

Artists throughout history used the tools of their time. Long before photography was invented, artists would create portraits in their studios with clay, or with paint on a canvas. I work in my studio with computers and algorithms to create giant photo mosaics. I purposefully chose each image, and make many revisions until I'm happy with the final project. There is trial and error. I'm making a digital painting, and you cannot always predict the outcome.

The mosaic portrait of Ida B. Wells, seen at www.ourstory100.com, is made up of thousands of photos. Every single one suggests that there is a fascinating story to be told. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment was not really a one-day

event. As we remember the personal stories that are known, and discover others through historical research, we see that each is a narrative of civic involvement and steadfastness over decades, of individual women struggling for their civil rights.

The mosaic floor-based exhibit at Union Station in Washington, DC, "Our Story: Portraits of Change," was actually our second art installation on the topic of women's suffrage. Back in 1918, Great Britain recognized women's right to vote, two years before the United States passed its national suffrage law. For the 2018 commemoration, I came up with the idea to create "The Face of Suffrage," a floor-based, 200-meter-square photo mosaic made up of more than 3,700 photos of women and girls from the West Midlands and beyond. When viewed from above, the small images coalesce into a portrait of Hilda Burkitt, a leading face from the suffrage movement in the West Midlands. The installation was funded by Arts Council England and was on display at Birmingham New Street Station. Students in America, especially those who want to learn about the struggle for suffrage internationally, would certainly enjoy visiting the webpage for that work (thepeoplespicture.com/thefaceofsuffrage), and may then wish to learn more about the Women's suffrage movement in Britain and elsewhere.

To build these mosaics, I had a small team of researchers who spent many days finding and downloading photographs, etchings, and other portrait images that were originally taken more than a century ago. We had to establish the provenance of each image, and assemble them all into a working database. With the help of software, we then assembled the images in a way that—when seen from a distance—presents a portrait of a single human face, that of a woman suffragist.

I'm lucky to come from a family of strong women. I raised a daughter as a single parent. So I feel a strong connection to women today, and in the past, who have acted assertively and independently as agents of change. As the 2018 centennial of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom approached on the calendar, I was empowered to help tell British women's stories of struggle from long ago. It was a natural next step to then collaborate on the 2020 American celebration.

We have come a long way, but too many women all over the world still have to fight for their basic human and civil rights. We can help in that struggle by learning about it, studying the lessons of the past, and celebrating and exercising our rights—like the right to vote. 🌍

Notes

1. From the mission statement of the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission, www.womensvote100.org/about.
2. News article about the mosaic, dcist.com/story/20/08/19/union-station-women-suffrage-centennial-ida-b-wells-mosaic.
3. Queries for artist Helen Marshall about the mosaic floor installation can be made at www.ourstory100.com/contact. Her studio website, where she is busy working on future projects and proposals, is thepeoplespicture.com.