

The Pandemic That Almost Changed Women's History

This year we celebrate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote in the U.S. But did you know it almost didn't happen because of the Spanish flu? Even our own Carrie Chapman Catt, who called for the formation of the League of Women Voters in St. Louis in 1919, was stricken with a very serious case.

In the fall of 1918, the Nineteenth Amendment was languishing in the Senate, who feared what a national amendment that gave black women the right to vote might do to their power, especially in the South. Many lawmakers were suffering from the flu, which meant legislative activity was pretty much at a standstill.

When rallies for the November election were canceled, suffragists turned to letter writing, advertising and telephone calls to try to keep the women's enfranchisement momentum going. Instead of trying to convince people on a mass level, many suffragists started with their friends and family, others braving the flu by going door-to-door with pamphlets, and many signing petitions in Oklahoma, South Dakota, Louisiana and Michigan urging men to vote for local referendums that would give women the right to vote in those states.

Their efforts paid off. In November, the referendums in Oklahoma, South Dakota and Michigan passed and the Senate turned Republican, ushering several suffrage supporters into office. Seven months later, in June 1919, the bill finally passed the Senate. The rest, as they say, is history.