

## Carrie Chapman Catt

### “Suffragist, peace activist and founder of The League of Women Voters”

January 9, 1859 – March 9, 1947



Carrie Chapman Catt was born in Ripon, Wisconsin on January 9, 1859. Seven years later, her family relocated to Iowa, where Catt graduated from Charles City High School and then enrolled in Iowa State College in 1877. Catt's father was reluctant to allow his daughter to attend college, so he only paid for part of her expenses, forcing Catt to take up other jobs such as washing dishes, working in the school library, and teaching at a rural school.

In college, Catt was already an activist, creating an all girls' debate club and advocating for women to be able to participate in military drills. Catt graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree on November 10, 1880 as the only woman in her graduating class.

After her graduation, Catt worked as a law clerk and teacher, advancing to superintendent of schools in Mason City, Iowa. In 1885, Catt married a newspaper editor named Leo Chapman who died a year later of typhoid

fever. Five years later, Catt married a successful engineer named George Catt, who made an agreement with Catt that she would spend four months of every year working on women's suffrage efforts.

Catt's involvement with the suffrage movement dates back to the late 1880s when she joined the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association and became involved with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Catt was recognized as an outstanding speaker and soon began to be selected to give nationwide speeches and aid in organizing local suffrage chapters.

In 1900, NAWSA elected Catt their new president to fill the seat vacated by Susan B. Anthony, a position which Catt held until 1904 when she resigned to take care of her seriously ill husband. Following her husband's death in 1905 and Susan B. Anthony's in 1906, Catt renewed her involvement and was again elected president of NAWSA in 1915. In her second term, Catt created the "Winning Plan," which was a campaign that encouraged each state to give women the vote and to urge Congress to pass an amendment guaranteeing this same right. With this plan, NAWSA membership grew to over two million by 1917.

In 1915, Catt formed the Woman's Peace Party with Jane Addams, but devoted herself wholeheartedly to support organizations supporting the war effort in 1917 after the United States joined World War I. Catt was one of the prominent suffragists who did not necessarily believe in universal civil rights, warning in 1894 that the country was "menaced with great danger... in the votes possessed by the males in the slums of the cities and the ignorant foreign vote," proposing to "cut off the vote of the slums and give it to woman." Additionally, in 1919, Catt made statements in Mississippi and South Carolina that "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women's suffrage." At the same time, though, Catt also made incredibly inclusive statements about the vote, saying that everyone no matter their race, sex, ethnicity, or beliefs should be prevented from voting, creating a rather complicated legacy.

Just after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment began its ratification process in 1919, Catt moved to New Castle, New York, where she began to work on an idea for an organization called the League of Women Voters with her partner of several years, Mary Garrett Hay. Catt was also active in supporting the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, touring thirteen states in 1919 to speak for its ratification. After Congress passed the amendment in May 1920, President Woodrow Wilson sent Catt a cablegram that congratulated her, saying "Glory Hallelujah!"

Even after the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Catt continued working, from 1920 to 1922 to help secure women's suffrage in Europe and South America. Catt formed the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1923, meeting Mussolini in Rome and making a fierce, challenging statement on suffrage directly to him.

In 1925, Catt returned her focus to her pre-war interests in peace, founding the Committee for the Cause and Cure of War. In 1928, Catt and partner Mary Garrett Hay moved to New Rochelle, New York, with Hay dying shortly afterward. Catt continued her activist work, organizing the Protest Committee of Non-Jewish Women Against the Persecution of Jews in Germany, sending a 9,000-signature petition to Hitler that condemned the violence and restrictive laws against German Jews. Catt alongside this organization additionally petitioned the federal government to ease immigration laws to make it simpler for Jewish refugees to find safety in the United States. Catt died of a heart attack on March 8, 1947, and per her request was buried alongside Mary Hay in New York.

#### Sources

<https://www.nps.gov/people/carrie-chapman-catt.htm>

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/carrie-chapman-catt>