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NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY ALLIANCE



Image: (left to right): Barbara Gittings, Gertrude Stein, Sally Ride, Billie Jean King, Audre Lorde

In Honor of LGBTQIA+ History and Pride Month: BOSTON MARRIAGES AND THE EXPANSION OF WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE

For much of early American history, women were expected to marry and become mothers. Those who did not marry were often labeled “spinsters” or “old maids” - terms burdened with assumptions that unmarried women were lonely, incomplete, economically vulnerable, or even morally suspect.

Yet during the 19th century, profound social changes opened new possibilities for women. Colleges such as Wellesley College, Vassar College, Smith College, and Bryn Mawr College expanded women’s educational opportunities. Careers in teaching, nursing, settlement work, and reform movements gave women greater economic and personal independence. Suffrage, abolition, temperance, and labor activism also offered women a powerful sense of purpose beyond traditional domestic life.

Out of this changing world emerged what became known as the “Boston Marriage” - long-term domestic and emotional partnerships between women, many lasting decades or even a lifetime. Society often tolerated these relationships because women were viewed as “passionless” and morally upright, unlike male same-sex relationships, which were far more feared and criminalized. In many cases, these women were also seen as providing valuable service to their communities. As a result, women could openly travel together, live together, exchange deeply affectionate letters, and build lives centered on companionship and shared work.

Whether romantic or sexual, Boston Marriages created enduring partnerships rooted in devotion, support, and intellectual companionship. Writer Sarah Orne

Jewett wrote lovingly to her partner, Annie Adams Fields, in 1902: “We are closer than ever in love and friendship and belongingness.” However, one of America’s greatest novelists, Willa Cather, and her partner, Edith Lewis, burned their 40-year correspondence to keep their secret love from the public. What a loss to both art and history!

These partnerships helped reshape public life for women. Women in Boston Marriages built colleges (M. Carey Thomas and Mary Garrett at Bryn Mawr), advanced suffrage campaigns, led settlement houses, expanded educational opportunities, and transformed social reform movements. Figures such as Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith devoted themselves to social reform and settlement houses; Florence Kelley and Josephine Goldmark fought for labor protections; and countless unmarried women became leaders in the movement for women’s suffrage, including Carrie Chapman Catt and Mary Garrett Hay.

Boston Marriages demonstrated that women could live independently, pursue careers, support one another, and participate fully in public life without relying on husbands. In many ways, these partnerships helped expand the social and political freedom of all women.

By the early 20th century, however, changing attitudes toward sexuality brought growing hostility. Psychologists and conservative voices increasingly portrayed independent women and same-sex partnerships as socially threatening. What had once been accepted as “romantic friendship” became stigmatized under the label of lesbianism, and Boston Marriages gradually lost public acceptance.

Yet their legacy endures. The women of Boston Marriages helped lay the groundwork for modern ideas of female independence, professional opportunity, feminist community, and LGBTQIA+ rights. Their influence can still be seen in women’s leadership, higher education, public service, and modern movements for equality.

That legacy reached a milestone in 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Edith Windsor and her 40-year partnership with Thea Spyer, helping pave the way for nationwide marriage equality in 2015.

In many ways, the women of Boston Marriages quietly expanded the possibilities of women’s lives long before modern feminism and LGBTQIA+ movements emerged. Their partnerships helped open social space for generations of women to live more freely, fully, and independently. As Louisa May Alcott famously wrote: “Liberty: A Better Husband.”

For more great history, see Lillian Faderman’s *To Believe in Women* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) and Wendy Rouse’s *Public Faces, Secret Lives: A Queer History of the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (NYU Press, 2022).

Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon:

FROM BOSTON MARRIAGE TO MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Del Martin (1921-2008) and Phyllis Lyon (1924-2020) represented a modern form of the “Boston Marriage” - two educated, independent women building a lifelong partnership outside traditional expectations of marriage. Unlike many earlier couples, however, they chose to live openly as lesbians and became pioneers of LGBTQ equality.

After meeting in Seattle in 1950 and settling in San Francisco, they co-founded the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, the first lesbian civil rights organization in the United States, and helped publish *The Ladder*, the nation’s first widely distributed lesbian magazine. Together, they challenged the silence and stigma surrounding lesbian life.



Their activism also shaped the feminist movement. Del Martin became the first openly lesbian woman elected to the national board of the National Organization for Women (NOW), while both women argued that lesbian rights were central to women's equality.

Through their writing, organizing, and more than fifty years together, Martin and Lyon helped redefine love, visibility, and equality in modern America. In 2004, they became the first same-sex couple legally married in San Francisco.

Honoring Juneteenth:

FREEDOM DELAYED, FREEDOM CELEBRATED

On June 19, 1865, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced that enslaved African Americans were free. This day, now known as Juneteenth, commemorates the end of slavery in the United States and stands as a powerful reminder that freedom and equality are rights that must be continually protected and expanded.

Juneteenth is not only a celebration of emancipation; it is also a time to reflect on the ongoing struggle for justice, citizenship, voting rights, and equal opportunity. The story of Juneteenth reminds us that progress is often hard-won and that meaningful change requires courage, persistence, and collective action.

Women played critical roles in this history. Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and countless others fought for abolition, civil rights, education, suffrage, and economic opportunity. Their leadership helped shape a more inclusive democracy and continues to inspire movements for equality today.

As we commemorate Juneteenth and prepare to celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary, let us honor those who expanded the promise of freedom and remember that the work of building a more just and equitable society belongs to every generation.

Freedom is not simply inherited, it is strengthened when we learn, remember, and act.



CONGRESS NEEDS TO ACT



Inspired by a 1916 suffrage road trip that helped win women the vote, activists behind Driving the Vote for Equality are traveling across the country in a restored 1916 car called the Golden Flyer II to build support for recognizing the Equal Rights Amendment as the 28th Amendment.

Equal Rights Amendment

- ***Section 1. Equality of Rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.***
- ***Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.***

In January 2025, President Biden issued a strong statement declaring that the

Equal Rights Amendment has been ratified and is the law of the land, having met both requirements of Article V with the vote of 2/3 of Congress and ratification by 3/4 of the state legislatures.

Now is the time for Congress to officially affirm ratification and put aside any questions about an arbitrary timeline as states continue to enforce the ERA and as judges interpret it.

Equal rights protections under the Constitution are needed now more than ever.

Will you sign this petition [HERE](#) and then send a message to just five of your friends asking them to sign the Sign4ERA Petition? It's amazing how quickly the snowball of demand for the ERA grows when each of us does this.

2027 NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH THEME

Financial Literacy, Liberation & Leadership: Women in Business

The nationwide educational initiative will include a commemorative print magazine, a yearlong social media campaign, and a growing coalition expected to include more than 500 K–12 schools, universities, banks, professional associations, nonprofit organizations, and corporate sponsors.

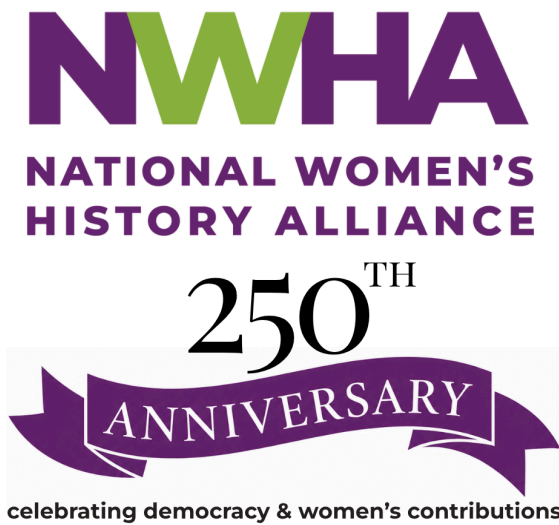
Read more about partnership with NWA [HERE](#).

2027 NWA Theme

Women and the 250th Anniversary Celebration

The importance of women in creating, sustaining, and expanding our democracy has been largely overlooked in many of the federal government's 250th Anniversary initiatives.

Fortunately - and true to their history - women's organizations across the country are planning meaningful ways to commemorate the nation's semiquincentennial



and highlight women's vital contributions to our shared history.

Across the country, women's contributions - and the histories of people of color and other marginalized communities - are disappearing from classrooms, museum exhibits, military histories, federal archives, public websites, educational materials, and scientific discoveries. Since January 2025, historians and journalists have documented a growing pattern of removal, suppression, and rewriting of women's history

within public institutions.

In response, we encourage women's organizations at the local, state, and national levels to join in a collaborative effort by creating celebrations on August 26, Women's Equality Day, or throughout Women's Equality Week. Consider partnering with organizations that represent the broad spectrum of women's and American history. We also encourage libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and educational institutions to host special exhibits, programs, and community events.

The National Women's History Alliance encourages you to wear a **Votes for Women sash** or carry a **Votes for Women parasol** in Fourth of July parades and other events celebrating the semiquincentennial. Many of our 250th Anniversary commemorative items are currently available at half price in the 250th Anniversary Sale section of our **ONLINE STORE**.

As a reminder of how difficult, challenging, and inspiring the journey to secure women's right to vote truly was - and as a testament to the power of persistence and determination - we also offer **Winning the Vote: The Triumph of the Woman Suffrage Movement**, widely praised as "the Bible of the suffrage movement," at half price. This beautiful and inspiring tribute provides a powerful reminder of the women who fought to expand democracy and continues to educate and inspire readers today. Learn more **HERE** and order through our online store.

We love celebrating women's achievements throughout the year. Join us!

FEMINIST 250: FOUNDING FEMINISTS

Reflecting on the Nation's Semiquincentennial



Don't miss the special coverage from Ms. Magazine on the Feminist 250 initiative.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, a nation was born. As we commemorate this milestone, will we also remember the women who helped shape its democratic ideals - the "founding feminists" whose vision, courage, and activism planted the seeds for generations to come?

Explore the series and join the conversation.

[Visit Website](#)

Interested in Becoming a Partner?

Partnering with the National Women's History Alliance (NWHHA) is an essential way to support and promote women's history. By partnering, your organization joins a network that celebrates and preserves women's contributions for future generations.

[Join Here.](#)

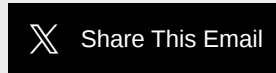
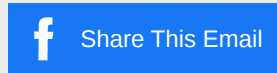


Interested in Becoming a Member?

Membership in the National Women's History Alliance (NWHHA) is an investment in preserving and advancing women's history. By joining NWHHA, you become part of a national community committed to honoring the achievements of women past and present, amplifying their stories, and inspiring future generations to

learn from their legacy. Together, we ensure that women's history remains an essential part of our collective story.

Join Here.



National Women's History Alliance is a non-partisan, non-profit registered 501(c)(3) whose mission is dedicated to advancing women's history in education, fostering empowerment, championing equality, and promoting inclusion.

1855 Cooper Drive, Santa Rosa, CA 95404* | Phone: (707) 636-2888

*Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok land

We acknowledge that the land in Santa Rosa, CA, is the traditional, ancestral territory of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok peoples, who have stewarded it for thousands of years.

www.nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org

National Women's History Alliance | PO Box 469 | Santa Rosa, CA 95402 US

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