CHAPTER 2:
Right to Vote
Demands Patience: Determination Leads to Victory

Mary Olney Brown of White River, Washington, was the first woman in Washington to attempt to vote. Mary Olney Brown (ca. 1821–1884) Photo courtesy of Washington State Historical Society.

Became the first woman in Washington to cast her vote as a U.S. citizen. However, her ballot was rejected by election judges who felt it might affect the integrity of the rest of the precinct's votes. Three years later, it was Brown again who led a small group of women to cast their ballots at Grand Mound in southern Thurston County — and this time, their votes were counted.

Setbacks for Suffrage
Permanent suffrage for Washington women, however, was short-lived. Suffrage laws were approved and repealed several times throughout the next few decades. The U.S. Constitution did not provide for equal voting rights and even though Washington was a territory with its own legislation until 1889, this loophole influenced many votes. In 1883, the Washington Territorial Women's Suffrage Act passed both houses of the legislature. This act allowed women to serve as jurors — but it was again repealed. And so it went: Women won and lost the right to vote several times over the next 40 years. Through it all, however, the suffragists remained determined.

Right to Vote Passed
In 1910, the Fifth Amendment to the Washington State Constitution made Washington women the first in the 20th century to have the right to vote in all local and state elections. Official voting records reveal that the movement met with statewide approval — every county in the state voted affirmatively for woman suffrage. As only the fifth state to pass this kind of law, Washington served as a working example for other Western states to award women the right to vote. Even though it would be 10 more years until the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gave women nationwide the right to vote, Washington suffragists continued to champion the national movement.

It is important to understand that although women gained the right to vote, they were not automatically treated as equals in all aspects of life. Women have worked steadfastly for the past 100 years to ensure that their voices in government — earned through the right to vote — continue to implement change and promote opportunities for their peers and for future generations.