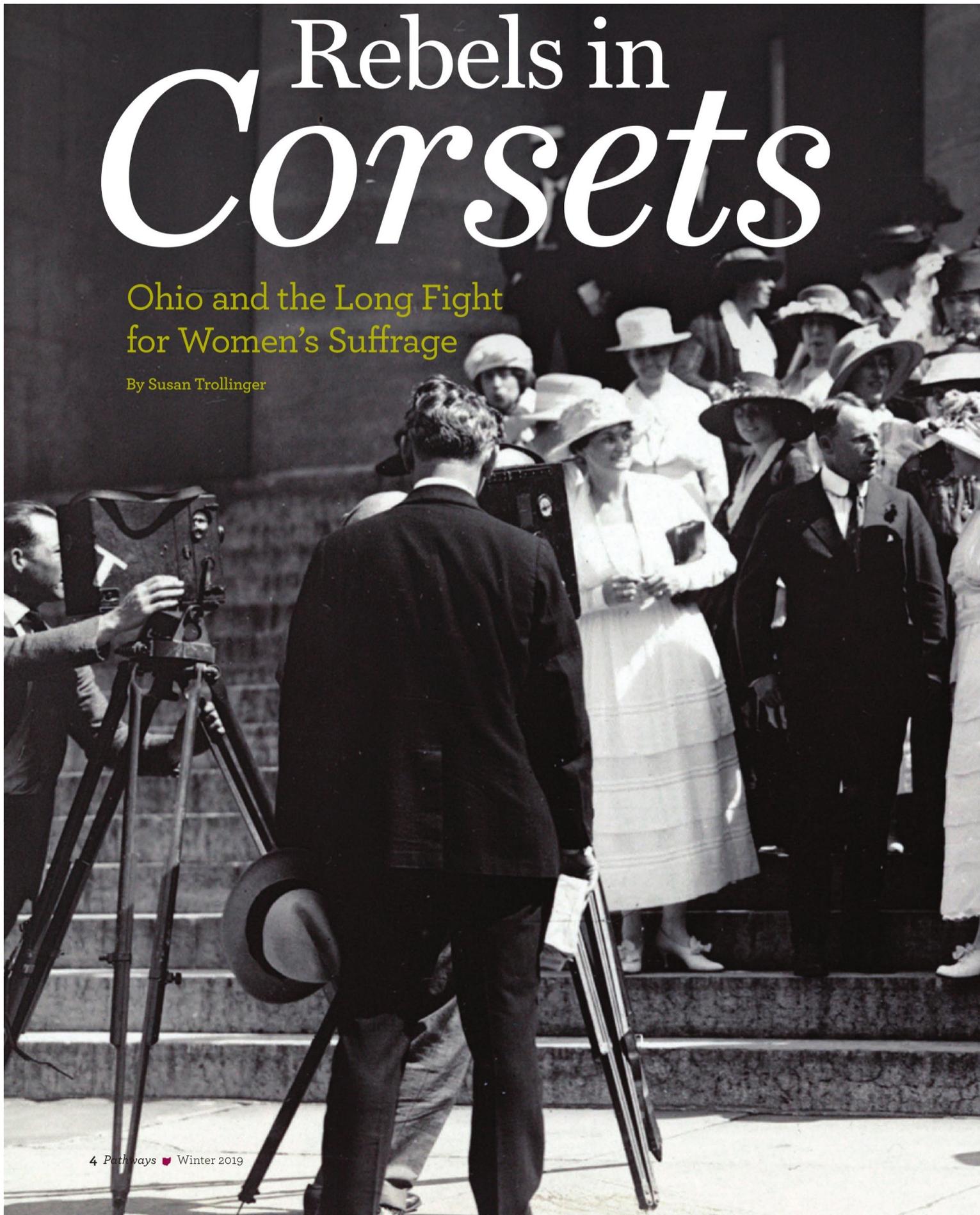


# Rebels in *Corsets*

Ohio and the Long Fight  
for Women's Suffrage

By Susan Trollinger





National Woman's Party members, led by Alice Paul, with Governor Cox on steps of the Ohio Statehouse, 1920.

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By the time women won the right to vote in the United States on August 26, 1920, they and the men who struggled alongside them had been fighting for 72 years—a lifetime. Many who were there at the beginning did not live to celebrate the victory. The struggle was not only long but arduous. It took the relentless efforts of women and men across the country in local battles, state conventions, and federal campaigns to pull it off. Importantly, many women and men in Ohio played crucial roles in this long struggle.

The fight for women's suffrage began amidst the effort to rid the country of the scourge of slavery. Women of faith were pulled into that movement by a progressive Christianity that taught that women—who were the moral force of society insofar as they were understood to be pious and pure—should play a pivotal role in reforming American society in an effort to hasten the Second Coming of Jesus. In response to this call, women dared to enter the public sphere of abolitionist meetings and conventions.

The more convicted women became, the more they wanted to raise their voices in public. But because women were expected to remain in the private sphere, their attempts to make their voices heard were rejected, often vehemently. So things were in 1840 when Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended the meeting of the World Anti-slavery Society and were prohibited from speaking or voting. In response, they became certain that a movement for women's rights was needed. In 1848 they organized the first Women's



The sky is now her limit, 1920.

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Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The convention drew many participants and culminated in the adoption of a series of resolutions that insisted, mimicking the language of the Declaration of Independence, that (just like men) women were endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them the right to vote.

### OHIO CONVENTIONS: SALEM AND AKRON

Just two years later, a convention was held in Salem, Ohio, that named women's dire situation, which, according to Ohioan Mariana Johnson, "tend[ed] to reduce her to a level with the slave, depriving her of political existence," and adopted 20 resolutions addressing a broad range of women's issues, including suffrage.

The Salem convention spawned others in the state. One of them, convened a year later in Akron's Stone Church, drew many more participants than had Salem and was presided over by reformer, abolitionist, and women's right activist Frances Dana Gage, who was born and raised near Marietta. Gage gave a rousing introduction to Sojourner Truth, the former slave and abolitionist, who at that convention delivered her famous speech that

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decimated the argument that it was women's weaker constitution that barred them from public life and the right to vote. Truth proclaimed, "I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?" She concluded her brief remarks by suggesting that history was on the side of the suffragettes and abolitionists: "Man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard."

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### THE LONG MARCH

With the Civil War and Reconstruction, the movement for women's suffrage slowed, but by the turn of the century women all over the nation—and certainly in Ohio—were on the march. Literally. Spearheaded by the Ohio Woman Suffrage Association (OWSA), supporters of women's suffrage launched three statewide campaigns in 1912, 1914, and 1917. In the 1912 effort, which grew out of an Ohio constitutional convention wherein delegates agreed to put before voters a provision for women's suffrage, suffragettes put their bodies on the line by giving open-air speeches while standing on a chair or soap box on a street corner, or by marching 4,000-strong in their white dresses down the streets of Columbus. These brave women were sometimes met with support but more often endured the ire of anti-suffrage protestors, who hurled jeers (and sometimes food), trying to get them to shut up and go home. The suffragettes did neither.

When that effort failed, Ohio women organized

again, launching a campaign in 1914 to get a statewide referendum on women's suffrage. This time, women successfully canvassed the state for the 130,000 signatures needed to get the referendum on the ballot. They took to the streets again, with parades all over the state. The largest was in Cleveland with 5,000 marchers, including 400 men. This effort also failed, largely because the liquor lobby aggressively argued that if women won the right to vote, prohibition would soon follow. But OWSA was back at it again in 1917, the goal being a limited form of women's suffrage—the right to vote in presidential elections. While they succeeded in lobbying the state legislature for an amendment to give women that right, anti-suffrage forces managed (with the help of Ohio's attorney general and Supreme Court) to place this amendment before the state's voters, who voted no.

### THE 19TH AMENDMENT

While these failures must have been heartbreaking, change was coming. Seeing a Constitutional amendment on the horizon, the OWSA worked mightily to elect state legislators who would support it when the time came. And so it did. On June 4, 1919, Congress approved the proposed amendment and sent it to the states. Thanks to OWSA's work to elect supportive legislators, thanks to the three important campaigns that kept women's suffrage in front of voters, and thanks to the legacy of voices who first made the case for women's rights in Ohio before the Civil War, the amendment was ratified by the Ohio legislature just 12 days after Congress approved it.

As the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment approaches, we can be proud of the thousands of Ohio women and men who made our state the fifth in the nation to insist that the United States make good on its founding promises that all are equal and, thus, that all should have an equal share in determining our common future. ♥