

Ada James's Fight For Women's Rights

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**Thesis:**

On June 10, 1919, Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution due to Ada James's persistence, leading the way for women's right to vote and equal rights.

**Introduction:**

Most people know that Wisconsin women did not always have the right to vote, but not many people know how their ability to vote came to be. The key to their success was Ada James. Ada James was a lifelong women's suffrage supporter and advocate. Then on June 10, 1919, she led Wisconsin women to victory with Wisconsin's ratification of the nineteenth amendment. Ada James's life was influenced by her parents, multiple failures, hard work that led to her success, reactions at the current time, her life after the ratification, and the legacy she left for every Wisconsin citizen. Ada James led an honorable life helping women gain the right to vote.

**Starting Early:**

Ada James's mom, Laura James, was a strong advocate for women's suffrage. She inspired Ada to be a women's suffragist from a young age. In 1882, Laura James was one of the founders of the Women's Club in Richland Center, Wisconsin. This club was actually a women's suffrage club disguised as a harmless club for women to share their ideas. For instance, one of the founders of the Women's Club, Julia Bowen, was quoted in a newspaper article. She said, "Remember, we must be as wise as serpents

and as harmless as doves.”<sup>1</sup> Thus we can say that the founders of this club were very intelligent and knew it was not their time to unleash their ideas to the world. The founders did not want any people to become angry with them or their ideas. This club also discussed different issues that women had in the community. These issues included women’s higher education and marriage. Ada’s father, David James was also active in politics.<sup>2</sup> David James was a powerful Wisconsin senator who was also a powerful advocate for women’s suffrage. Both of Ada’s parents influenced her to vocalize her own beliefs to the world.

### **The Problem:**

Wisconsin has a long history. Surprisingly, for most of it women couldn’t vote. Although from 1884 through 1888, women were allowed to vote on matters that pertained to schools. In 1869 a bill passed through the Wisconsin Legislature letting women run in public school elections because they helped improve the public schools. Then in 1884 women in Wisconsin were allowed to vote in school elections. Unfortunately, in Racine, Olympia Brown’s (Wisconsin Women’s Suffrage Association leader) ballot was refused because she had voted for community offices along with school offices.<sup>3</sup> She believed that because city politicians affected schools, it was fair for her to vote for city politicians. In 1881, Olympia Brown sued the local officials for not

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<sup>1</sup> Hussong, Mary Elizabeth. “How Earliest Enthusiasts Led Sisters.” *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 Dec. 1924, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12117](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12117). This newspaper article shows that Ada James’s mom Laura James was also part of Wisconsin Suffrage.

<sup>2</sup> “James, Ada Lois 1876 - 1952.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, 8 Aug. 2017, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9082](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9082).

<sup>3</sup> “The Woman’s Suffrage Movement.” *The Woman’s Suffrage Movement | Turning Points in Wisconsin History* | *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-032/?action=more\\_essay](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-032/?action=more_essay).

accepting her ballot. The circuit judge agreed with Olympia but in the State Supreme Court the ruling of the circuit court was reversed. The court decided that they would not be able to verify if women were only voting on school issues with the secret ballot system. As stated in the Sturgeon Bay Independent, “The court says that the language of the constitution is not that the legislature may at any time extend the right of suffrage to other (than) male persons.”<sup>4</sup> This means that the Supreme Court did not think it was right for women to have the full right to vote. Therefore, the Supreme Court realized that they would have to have women vote on a ballot with only school candidates on it. This act counteracted the bill of 1869 which gave women the right to run for school offices. Instead of moving forward in the fight for women’s rights the suffragists moved backwards.

### **Hard Work:**

Ada James worked hard to find a solution to the women’s suffrage issue. She knew that she would need to work with a lot of effort to make people believe that women were mature and responsible voters. She was part of the Political Equality League which wanted to give women the right to vote.



One strategy she used in 1912 was to help individual counties organize their own suffrage clubs. She wrote to suffrage leaders: “Is

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<sup>4</sup> “Women Can Not Vote.” Sturgeon Bay Independent, 3 Feb. 1888, pp. 4–4. Badger Link, [access.newspaperarchive.com/us/wisconsin/sturgeon-bay/sturgeon-bay-independent/1888/02-03/page-4?tag=Olympia+Brown+vote+school&rtserp=tags/vote-school?pf=olympia&pl=brown&psb=relevance&pci=7&ndt=by&py=1880&pey=1889&psi=1](https://access.newspaperarchive.com/us/wisconsin/sturgeon-bay/sturgeon-bay-independent/1888/02-03/page-4?tag=Olympia+Brown+vote+school&rtserp=tags/vote-school?pf=olympia&pl=brown&psb=relevance&pci=7&ndt=by&py=1880&pey=1889&psi=1)

there a suffrage club in your county? If not can we help you form one?"<sup>5</sup> This proves that she wanted women to have the right to vote, and that she helped individual counties start up their own suffrage clubs. She spent significant allotments of time working in her office to encourage others to give Wisconsin women the right to vote. Pamphlets against women's suffrage were published. One of these pamphlets published by the National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage<sup>6</sup> read, "Because the woman suffrage movement is a backward step in the progress of civilization—"<sup>7</sup>. She worked diligently to help publicize the fact that women should have the right to vote. Taken as a whole, you can infer that Ada James led an inspiring life filled with



persistence and hard work. Ada James wasn't the only women's suffragist in Wisconsin.

There were many others that organized events to promote women's suffrage. Women suffragists rode the Mary E. down Wolf River

in Wisconsin. The boat wore a banner that read "Votes for Women" as seen above.

### Failures:

In 1911 a bill was proposed to give women the right to vote in Wisconsin. Ada attempted to gather enough support for the bill, but it was defeated by an astounding

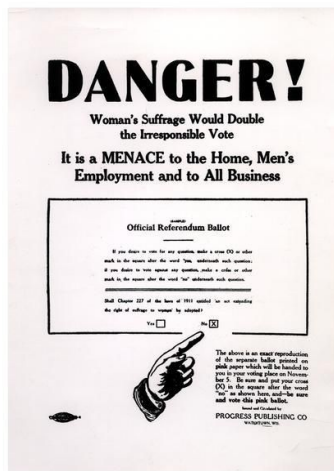
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<sup>5</sup> James, Ada L. "University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries." Received by Suffragists in various Wisconsin Counties, *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, Unpublished, Nov. 1912. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, [digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3](https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3).

<sup>6</sup> "National Anti-Suffrage Association." *Crusade for the Vote*, National Women's History Museum, [www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition/](http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition/).

<sup>7</sup> *Some Reasons Why We Oppose Votes for Women. Some Reasons Why We Oppose Votes for Women*, National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, 1894.

two to one loss. Many places during this time had anti-suffrage posters<sup>8</sup> which told



voters not to give women the right to vote. These posters were significant because some male voters were swayed by them. Many men thought that women would be irresponsible voters. Men were nervous that women would end up taking over their jobs, destroying their businesses, and ruining their homes. If Ada James was to get a bill passed for women's suffrage, then she would

need to prove that women were just as smart and responsible as men. Still not discouraged, by 1913, Ada James had already helped propose another bill.

Unfortunately, this bill was turned down by Governor Francis McGovern. During the years of 1911 through 1913, Ada James held office as the president of the newly formed Political Equality League which was an organization devoted to giving women a voice in the government and politics. She lost her position in 1913 when the Political Equality League merged with the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association. Even though Ada James lost her position as president of The Political Equality League, she still worked persistently to help further the advancement of the women's rights movement. She continued to be active in the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association.

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<sup>8</sup> "Anti-Woman Suffrage Poster." *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, 1912, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1932](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1932).

## Helping the Country:

Ada James wanted all of the United States of America's women to have the right to vote. She contacted congressmen to see if they were for or against the women's suffrage bill. For example, in a telegram she wrote to James Thompson, a political leader in Wisconsin, asking James if he was for or against the bill. She wrote, "Will you please state whether or not you are in favor of the federal suffrage amendment now pending in the US senate?"<sup>9</sup> This is significant because it shows that Ada was a passionate believer in the women's rights movement and that she wanted to help the whole country become a women's suffrage zone, not just Wisconsin. She wanted to help however she could.

## World War One:

During World War One women began to hold jobs that had previously been reserved for men. These jobs included work in transportation, construction, and war products. Needless to say, the employment rate of women increased significantly.

Women also helped organizations that benefited soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Women also began to work as nurses overseas for the war, healing injured soldiers. Surprisingly, 13,000 women were allowed into the Navy and Marines to fight side-by-side with male



<sup>9</sup> James, Ada L. "Copy of Western Union Telegraph." Received by James Thompson, pp. 161–161. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, [digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?type=turn&entity=WI.JamesB20F1.p0161&id=WI.JamesB20F1&isize=M](http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?type=turn&entity=WI.JamesB20F1.p0161&id=WI.JamesB20F1&isize=M).

<sup>10</sup> "Salvation Army Canteen." *Drawing America to Victory*, Drawing America to Victory, [history.delaware.gov/exhibits/online/WWI/Women-roles-ww1.shtml](http://history.delaware.gov/exhibits/online/WWI/Women-roles-ww1.shtml). This photo shows women at work for the Salvation Army with men who are in the army near them.

soldiers. Women even received the same benefits and rank as male soldiers. Both male and female soldiers received a salary of \$28.75 per month. As women were filling previously male-only jobs, it shined a new light on the fact that women were just as capable as men in the workforce. This increase in female workers proved that women were just as capable as men.<sup>11</sup>

### **Success:**

On June 4, 1919, the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States received the needed amount of votes in the House of Representatives.<sup>12</sup> The next step was to have individual states ratify the nineteenth amendment. Wisconsin immediately voted on the ratification. Fortunately, the bill passed. As soon as David James possessed the ratification document from the state, Ada sent her father out to bring it to Washington DC. David James<sup>13</sup>

hurried across the country in a hair-raising race against many other states so Wisconsin could be the first state to formally ratify the nineteenth amendment. Then on June 10, 1919,



Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the

nineteenth amendment. As David was leaving the State Department of Washington he

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<sup>11</sup> "Women During World War I." *Drawing America to Victory*, Drawing America to Victory, [history.delaware.gov/exhibits/online/WWI/Women-roles-ww1.shtml](http://history.delaware.gov/exhibits/online/WWI/Women-roles-ww1.shtml). This website provides information on how women received jobs that were usually reserved for men.

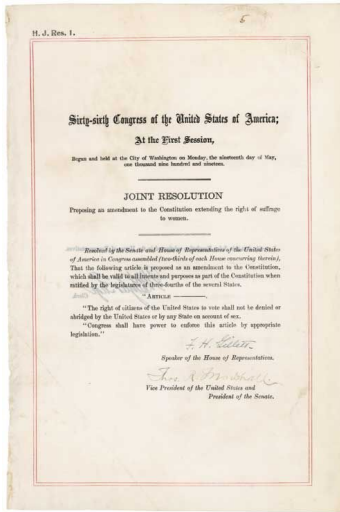
<sup>12</sup> GWLI Staff. "Woodrow Wilson and the Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reflection." *Wilson Center*, Wilson Center, 4 June 2013, [www.wilsoncenter.org/article/woodrow-wilson-and-the-womens-suffrage-movement-reflection](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/woodrow-wilson-and-the-womens-suffrage-movement-reflection).

<sup>13</sup> David James Holding the Ratification Document." *UW Digital Collections*, University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, Madison, Wisconsin,



saw Illinois's messenger with their ratification.<sup>14</sup> Wisconsin was very close to not becoming the first state with the ratification. As David James left the White House he had the ratification clutched in his hands. Illinois's special messenger came in with Illinois's ratification of the amendment while Wisconsin's messenger was leaving.

The nineteenth amendment states, "The right of the citizens of the United States



to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”<sup>15</sup> In translation,

this means that women and men alike can vote in political elections and every vote cast by a male or a female is of equal

weight to the other gender's vote. Congress is allowed to enforce this by whatever means possible. This is significant

because after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment

women could vote on any ballot. No one was allowed to be discriminatory towards women voting. The first election women voted in took place on November 4, 1920.

### Positive Reactions:

Most Wisconsinites were pleased with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment. After all, a minimum of a two-thirds vote is required for the ratification of an amendment to pass. After the ratification passed "The Eau Claire Leader" posted an article on the passing of the amendment. This article included a quote from Ada James.

<sup>14</sup> "Claim Wisconsin First to Okay Suffrage." *Milwaukee Journal*, 2 Nov. 1919, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA7478](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA7478).

<sup>15</sup> United States, Congress, Cong., "Nineteenth Amendment." *Nineteenth Amendment*, 66 ADAD. 66th Congress, 1st session, bill, [www.archives.gov/historical-docs/19th-amendment](http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/19th-amendment).

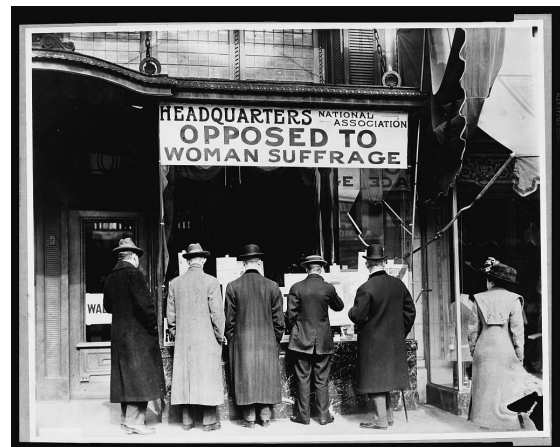
Miss James said “This is the end of a long, hard fight. Now we feel ready to take an active part in constructive legislation.”<sup>16</sup> This means that Ada James believed that after all of the hard work she put forward it was time for her and other women to use the votes that they worked so hard to earn. This same newspaper called The State Suffrage Party “overjoyed”. This shows that many women were excited with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment and the ability to vote. Ada James and other women’s suffragists were very excited that their hard work was finally rewarded. They were now ready to utilize their rights to participate in future legislation.

### **Negative Reactions:**

During the women’s suffrage era there was an association devoted to educating people that women shouldn’t have the right to vote. They were called the “National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage”.

They published pamphlets which advocated

that women would be irresponsible voters. One pamphlet even went as far as to say that women didn’t even want the right to vote. Needless to say, they were not excited when women were granted the right to vote.



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<sup>16</sup> “State Suffrage Party Overjoyed.” *Eau Claire Leader*, 13 June 1919, p. 4. *Badger Link*, [access.newspaperarchive.com/us/wisconsin/eau-claire/eau-claire-leader/1919/06-13/page-4?tag=Ada+James&rtserp=tags/?pf=ada&pl=james&psb=relevance&pci=7&ndt=by&py=1910&pey=1919&psi=103&ndt=ex&py=1919&search=y](https://access.newspaperarchive.com/us/wisconsin/eau-claire/eau-claire-leader/1919/06-13/page-4?tag=Ada+James&rtserp=tags/?pf=ada&pl=james&psb=relevance&pci=7&ndt=by&py=1910&pey=1919&psi=103&ndt=ex&py=1919&search=y).

## Ada James's Life After the Ratification:

Ada James's political career did not end after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment. Afterwards she tackled issues which included prohibition, pacifism, and birth control advocacy.<sup>17</sup> She also helped her hometown, Richland Center, create a county museum. According to a newspaper article covering a county meeting in which the museum was proposed, "Miss James pointed out the fact that the economic and health problems of the community are closely related."



<sup>18</sup> This shows that Ada was active in the meetings where they proposed the museum. She was extremely active in the politics in her city. She believed that underprivileged families should have the same services as more privileged families.

## The Impact:

Wisconsin's ratification of the nineteenth amendment with Ada James's help in 1919 still impacts us today. This conflict and compromise directly impacts the lives of all women voters in Wisconsin. If Ada James had not stood up for what she believed in, Wisconsin women might not have the privilege to vote in present-day elections. This victory for Wisconsin impacted the entire state. Ada James led us to victory and gave

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<sup>17</sup> "James, Ada Lois 1876-1952." *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, 3 Aug. 2012, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1634](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1634).

<sup>18</sup> "Richland Club Women Planning County Museum." *Wisconsin State Journal*, 21 Sept. 1930. *Wisconsin Historical Society*, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12126](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12126).

Wisconsin women the right to vote. She did this because it was what she believed was fair to women.

### **Conclusion:**

In summation, Ada James led an important life that benefitted many women. Her life was influenced by her parents' positive support, a problem she wanted to overcome, hard work, multiple failures, eventual success, reactions to the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, and her life after the ratification. The legacy she left is still felt now and will be felt long into the future. Ada James impacted the whole United States of America. Without Ada James, the life we take for granted could be completely different. Women may not be going to cast their vote on a ballot like a normal citizen. Ada James led women to victory by abolishing the unfair women's rights laws. This led to women doing more in the community and getting jobs that were historically reserved just for men. For instance Ada James's efforts led to the first women being elected to the Wisconsin state Assembly in 1925. The women elected were Mildred Barber, Helen Brooks, and Helen Thompson.<sup>19</sup> After women got the right to vote it also led to the first female Wisconsin Treasurer, female in a Governor's Cabinet post, and many more firsts.

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<sup>19</sup> "Wisconsin Women's Political Firsts." Women's Council Wisconsin, Wisconsin Women's Council, [womenscouncil.wi.gov/docview.asp?docid=26846](http://womenscouncil.wi.gov/docview.asp?docid=26846). This website gives information about Wisconsin's Women's political firsts.

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“Ada James at Her Desk.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM115805](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM115805). This photo shows Ada James working diligently at her desk.

“Ada James (Center).” *UW Digital Collections*, University Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, Madison, Wisconsin, [digicoll.library.wisc.edu/WIReader/Images/WER0239.html](http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/WIReader/Images/WER0239.html). This photo shows Ada James working hard with others.

“Anti-Woman Suffrage Poster.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, 1912, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1932](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1932). This picture shows an anti-woman suffrage poster. This shows that this was not an easy vote for Wisconsin Women to win.

Benedict, Crystal Eastman. “Suggestions for County Organizations.” Unpublished. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, [digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3](http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3). This letter suggests ways that the county suffrage units can run their meetings.

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Hunt, C. L. “University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries.” Received by Ada James, *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, Unpublished, 19 Nov. 1912. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3>. This letter from C. L. Hunt apologizes to Ada about Wisconsin losing the vote.

Hussong, Mary Elizabeth. "How Earliest Enthusiasts Led Sisters." *Wisconsin Historical Society*, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12117](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12117). This newspaper article shows that Ada James's mom Laura James was also part of Wisconsin Suffrage.

J. A. "UW Digital Collections." Received by Ada James, *UW Digital Collections*, UW Library, 13 June 1919, [digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB20F1](http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB20F1). This letter demonstrates that her dad was part of the suffrage movement and that the bill passed, giving Wisconsin Women the right to vote.

James, Ada L. "Copy of Western Union Telegraph." Received by James Thompson, pp. 161–161. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, [digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?type=turn&entity=WI.JamesB20F1.p0161&id=WI.JamesB20F1&isize=M](http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?type=turn&entity=WI.JamesB20F1.p0161&id=WI.JamesB20F1&isize=M). This letter shows that Ada James was trying to help the whole country with their suffrage issues.

James, Ada L. "University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries." Received by Suffragists in various Wisconsin Counties, *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, Unpublished, Nov. 1912. *University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*, [digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3](http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3). This letter from Ada James asks for counties to organize suffrage clubs and continue to help so women can vote in Wisconsin.

"Letter from Anna E. Blount to Miss Ada James: Chicago, November 11, 1912." Received by Ada James, *Digital Collections: University Wisconsin Madison-Libraries*, University Wisconsin Madison Libraries, 11 Nov. 1912, [digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3](http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.JamesB17F3). This letter shows that she made a difference in Wisconsin and helped make Wisconsin a suffrage free state.

"Library of Congress." *Library of Congress*, Library of Congress, National Woman's Party Records, 1914, [www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000409/](http://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000409/). This photo depicts Ada James in 1914 posing for a photo.

"National Anti-Suffrage Association." *Crusade for the Vote*, National Women's History Museum, [www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition/](http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition/). This picture shows men looking at the information at the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.

"Richland Club Women Planning County Museum." *Wisconsin State Journal*, 21 Sept. 1930. *Wisconsin Historical Society*,

[www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12126](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA12126). This newspaper article gives an example of a time Ada James was involved in her county's politics.

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United States, Congress, Cong., “Nineteenth Amendment.” *Nineteenth Amendment*, 66ADAD. 66th Congress, 1st session, bill, [www.archives.gov/historical-docs/19th-amendment](http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/19th-amendment). This amendment gives women the right to vote.

“Up the Wolf River for Votes for Women.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, 1912, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM7667](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM7667). This photo shows women suffragists riding the Mary E. on the wolf river with a “Votes for Women” flag on it.

“Wisconsin Historical Society.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, 1 Dec. 2003, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1991](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM1991). This photo is of Ada James and other Wisconsin women suffragists.

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