Sixty-two years passed between 1848, when an 18-year-old Catharine Paine Blaine (1829-1908) signed the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Fall, N.Y., and 1910 when Washington State ratified women’s voting rights.

What took so long?

Life got in the way. In the late 19th century, the rugged Northwest frontier was untamed and women were in short supply, compared to the East Coast. Life was grueling, too. Catharine and her husband, David, a Methodist missionary, arrived in 1853 and had to work hard just to support themselves, raising their own food, hand-building their home and, surviving on little or no church-provided income. Catharine also taught and had three children.

The suffrage movement didn’t gain momentum until the 1870s. Even so, a permanent amendment to the state constitution wasn’t passed until 1910—two years after Blaine’s death.
“This morning it was 10 (degrees) above. I have told you what sort of houses the people here occupy, a mere frame enclosed. Yesterday the family that had been living in the back room of this house moved out taking their windows with them. They were only factory cloth nailed to the window frames but they served to keep out some of the cold and their stove helped to warm the house. The two rooms are not wholly separated and the cold wind comes in, making itself disagreeable. It freezes not six feet from the little stove when we have as much fire as we can get into it. It is near midnight. I am sitting up to bake my bread. The yeast became chilled so that my bread was slow in rising and this detained me.

“It is past 12 A.M. My bread is done. Good night.”

Catharine Paine Blaine
letter home, Jan. 17, 1854
Wash Day was Monday, rain or shine
Iron on Tuesday

“What I do every day. Monday I wash; Tuesday, iron and mend. I shall tomorrow use the last of that brown soap that came from home and it is so good, the very best I have ever used, and I wish I had some more. We are deprived of all conveniences. I have today been reforming some half barrels for wash tubs. There are not more than three or four wash tubs in the whole town.”

Kate, letter home, Dec. 19, 1854
Laundry on the frontier

*Fast Fact:* Modern clothes irons weigh approximately 2 pounds each and feature a variety of heat and steam options. This please-touch, cast-iron clothes iron weighs about 9 pounds and had to be repeatedly heated on the stove top before use.

**How to do laundry by hand:**
Soak the clothing in the washtub with soap. Add hot water, heated on the wood stove. Agitate with the wooden plunger. Wring by hand. Empty tub, refill with buckets of clean water and agitate again. Wring by hand and hang on laundry line until dry.

**Ironing:** Heat the iron on the woodstove, then smooth the clothes until the iron becomes cool. The work went faster if there were two irons: one on the stove and one in hand.
Work never ends

“You do not know how smart I have grown since we came here. When it was proposed that I should take charge of the school I thought I could not possibly keep house, but I saw no other way, and thought I would try what I could do at the two branches. I have succeeded admirably, not only doing all my housework, washing and all, but I have managed to keep my sewing done up, and in addition to all this I am helping take care of a sick neighbor. Sister Morse, the wife of the minister from Whidby Island was confined last week. Another woman and I (assisted with the birth). I stayed with her the first night. I have washed and ironed and baked some for them and wash the baby. I closed school for two or three days on her account, which with the trip to Steilacoom, puts me back nearly two weeks in my school.”

Kate, letter home, March 2, 1855
Frontier flexibility

The simple washtub also served another use:

makeshift bathtub

“I washed this morning before school, standing over the tub with a shawl on and my teeth chattered with the cold.”

Kate, letter home, winter, 1854
Women of the West were hard working — even if they weren’t married. Catholic nun Mother Joseph arrived in Vancouver in 1856 and built the Academy, a school and orphanage, in 1873. (Its majestic tower is visible on I-5 near exit 1.) This chair is said to have been made at the Academy woodshop during her administration.
Thirteen-year-old Sarah Jane Sturgess married 29-year-old Reese Anderson in 1851 and were some of the first permanent settlers in Hazel Dell. She was fluent in Native American dialects. Sarah Jane had 14 children. Perhaps it is appropriate that the couple donated land for the first school in Hazel Dell. The Sarah J. Anderson School, Vancouver, is named for her.
Esther and Amos Short arrived at Hudson Bay Company’s (HBC) Fort Vancouver in 1845. Esther was part Algonquin Indian. The family became the first permanent American settlers to locate in today’s Clark County, Wa. This created tension with the British HBC. Today, a portion of her land is Esther Short Park at Columbia and Eighth streets.
In 1848 Richard and Ann Covington entered a “donation claim” of 640 acres and built their cabin home on, what is today, Fourth Plain Boulevard. The couple came to Fort Vancouver to teach children of the Hudson’s Bay Co. employees. Richard was elected school superintendent in 1862 and 1863. The Covington House was known as a center of hospitality and musical entertainment. They brought the first piano to the Pacific Northwest from England and taught music to many of the area’s children. The home has been relocated to 4201 Main St., Vancouver, but, unfortunately, not open to the public.