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New York Marks Suffrage History in Shadow of Vote

By Melissa B. Elian
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New York lawmakers just blocked Gov. Cuomo's efforts to make the state a beacon of women's equality. But they did agree to recognize the historic importance of the suffrage wagon, which started rolling 100 years ago today.

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"Spirit of 1776" suffrage campaign wagon in 1913. L to R: Edna Kearns, Serena Kearns, Irene Davison.

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NEW YORK (WOMENSENEWS)--New York State legislators ended the 2013 legislative session by blocking Gov. Andrew Cuomo's pioneering 10-point plan for women's equality, which sought, among other things, to defend against abortion restrictions, human trafficking, sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination and domestic violence.

But legislators did approve a special resolution sponsored by the bipartisan Women's Caucus that designated today, July 1, 2013, as "Spirit of 1776" Wagon Day.

One hundred years ago, on July 1, 1913, Edna Kearns, her daughter Serena Kearns and Irene Davison began what was to become a historic journey in a wagon called the "Spirit of 1776," according to a press statement

issued by supporters of the historic designation. Dressed in colonial garb, the three traveled from Queens to Long Island to organize women in the fight for suffrage in New York, spreading the message of equality and fair representation for taxation.

The wagon became a fixture of parades, pageants and rallies until women in the state won the right to vote in 1917, three years before passage of the 19th Amendment, which says the rights of U.S. citizenship cannot be denied or abridged by any states on account of sex.

"Many people today believe that we are addressing the unfinished American Revolution as it pertains to women," Marguerite Kearns, granddaughter of Edna Kearns, one of the original riders for equality, said in a phone interview. "They did it then and we're doing it today."

Equality Legislation Defeated

In that spirit, on June 4 Cuomo, along with members of the Women's Equality Coalition, [introduced legislation](#) to boost women's rights.

"In 1848, the women's suffrage movement began in America at the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York," Cuomo said in a press statement. "Over the years, however, New York has fallen behind in its role as a progressive leader on women's rights. The Women's Equality Act, which I introduced today, is designed to address gender inequality in our communities, and to restore New York as a leader in women's rights."

The plan passed the Democratic Assembly, but the GOP-dominated state Senate blocked the provision on securing abortion rights, designed as a safeguard against the possible fall of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision protecting abortion as part of women's right to privacy.

From there, senators [chopped the bill](#) in to 10 small bills, the 10th of which, on abortion, was never brought to a vote. When the nine bills returned to the assembly, legislators chose not to bring the separated measures to a vote.

"In 2013, passing nine points of equality is an affront to the assembly's dedicated fight for full women's equality," said Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver in a [statement](#).

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