

Olivia Twine: Suffrage and Global Citizenship

By [Olivia Twine](#) on June 20, 2013



The sturdy wooden wagon on display in the New York State capital last summer was the centerpiece of [an exhibit](#) called "From Seneca Falls to the Supreme Court; New York's Women Leading the Way." Unheard of in 1776 and unsecured until 1920, the women's vote has become critical to candidates' success.

The suffrage movement of the early 20th century evokes the stamina and discernment needed to address the overwhelming values crisis that's challenging the American spirit now.

During the second decade of the 20th century, the indefatigable Edna Kearns led the way in New York City and on Long Island, where she promoted voting rights for women wherever an audience could be found. The wagon, called "Spirit of 1776," was her speaker's platform. Seeing the horse-drawn vehicle this week in a place of honor among images of the women it served was a reminder of the determination it took to effectuate a right we now take for granted. Voting is a hard-won civil right, not a "privilege" like driving a car or traveling on an airplane, as some politicians would have us believe.

Suffragists addressed the injustice of being denied the equality touted in the Declaration of Independence. Today's crisis is the polite but tacit denial of Americans' desire for fairness, equality and ecological sensibility by the profit-based values underlying the dominant global corporate system. It's a series of issues that snag us in the weeds and distract us from the overriding problem: how to regain control of our government and save the planet from destruction by inexorable exploitation and neglect.

Audience response was unpredictable when the "Spirit of 1776" hit the road. Crowds threw flowers at the women or tossed insults such as, "Why aren't you at home taking care of your husband and children?" In Edna's case, her daughter Serena was often with her in the wagon, and her husband Wilmer marched in the men's division of suffrage parades. Edna and Wilmer exemplified partnership at a time when it was cutting edge. When Edna went off to conferences and suffrage organizing events, Wilmer answered the phone and suffrage correspondence.

Former *Woodstock Times* editor Marguerite Culp-Kearns, Edna's granddaughter, donated the wagon to the State of New York ten years ago. In the exhibit, the "Spirit of 1776" and photographs of Edna and the activists with whom she marched were surrounded by panels of accomplished New York State women who forged a path from the Declaration of Sentiments presented at Seneca Falls in 1848 to the diverse Supreme Court of today. The [Suffrage Wagon News Channel](#) has been created by Culp-Kearns to build leadership through news and stories of the suffrage movement.

On July 2, 1913 *The New York Times* reported that the wagon, which came from the family of "an old-time Long Islander" known as Uncle Dan Hewlett, had been presented the day before to the State Woman Suffrage Association for campaign purposes. After the ceremony, the *Times* stated:

"Mrs. Wilmer Kearns and Miss Irene Davidson, dressed as minute men, and little Miss Serena Kearns, in the back seat as a little Liberty, carrying the stars and stripes, drove to Jamaica, where a meeting was held. The wagon was covered with painted inscriptions, placards and waving banners. The words "spirit of '76" was fastened to the back, and beneath it another placard read: "If taxation without representation was tyranny in 1776, why not in 1913?"

In 1911, renowned activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman spent the summer at Lark's Nest in Woodstock's Byrdcliffe community. Historian Alf Evers states in *Woodstock, History of an American Town*. Gilman is credited with authorship of the moving "Appeal for Liberty," which was read by Edna Kearns at Long Island events, and her suffrage journalism. In a suffrage newspaper special Kearns edited for the *Brooklyn Times* of June 7, 1915, she reported on the suffrage movement's demonstration of large numbers of women who visited the Statue of Liberty in New York and read the "Appeal to Liberty."

Edna Kearns worked on the two New York State suffrage elections in 1915 and 1917. She picketed the White House with the National Women's Party, served as congressional chair for suffrage leader Alice Paul on Long Island, and supported the civil disobedience of the National Women's Party in its attempt to keep the issue of freedom and democracy alive, even when the issue became controversial after the outbreak of World War I. Suffragists boldly confronted U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and insisted that the U.S. couldn't claim to fight for democracy abroad when democracy wasn't assured for its own citizens at home.

Edna's wagon reminds us that American government requires participation by the people it represents to maintain freedom. One non-violent battlefield this year is in the realm of public education. The contents of the State's core curriculum is undergoing major revision for the first time since 1996, and the potential results of this process—including the removal of social studies as a subject—are being discussed behind closed doors.

On the second floor of the capitol building is the Hall of Governors, a display of portraits of 56 of the all male former governors of New York State. Governor Andrew Cuomo has invested time and money in the reopening of the Hall and expanded historic displays throughout the state capitol building. "From Seneca Falls to the Supreme Court..." was up through the summer of 2012. The primary interpretative panel notes:

From education to healthcare to civil equality, women have been the driving force behind almost every reform movement in our state. While they many not have always been the individuals passing the laws, women were writing the policies, organizing campaigns and generating public awareness. For too long, these efforts have been minimized, omitted from the history books or forgotten completely."

The prevailing national trend in education, however, is to lurch backwards. The New York State Department of Education adopted the new National Core Curriculum that focuses on improving test scores in English and math at the expense of social studies, history and citizenship. Peter Feinman, founder and president of the non-profit Institute of History, Archaeology and Education, deplors this possibility and advocates for a much broader curriculum to be adopted in New York State. After attending the March conference of the New York State Council for Social Studies, Feinman [wrote here in New York History](#):

"The common core curriculum which should include citizenship as a goal and which should tell the story of how the people of the world created the greatest country in the world will be a battlefield where we determine the direction of America in the 21st century."

"The Education Department hired several people who are working on it in private," Feinman said in a telephone interview. "We don't know much about it. They are 'general' discussions," he said. The current standards were established prior to 911 and prior to the election of Barack Obama. adding, "Will the curriculum continue to include global studies? Will we just be handed a document? We don't know, and there is a lot of concern about it," Feinman said.

While solutions proposed by the N.Y.S. Council for the Social Studies may or may not prevail at the political level, grass roots community activism is on the rise. This is how the suffrage movement began. Now, instantaneous global communication is fueling organizations like Occupy Wall Street. Women in Black have been protesting war for years in Woodstock and around the country. The Martin Luther King Day celebration in Woodstock in January, with its stories, life size puppets, music and performance art is an exciting example of creative citizenship. Local residents recently marched from Woodstock to Catskill carrying signs calling for freedom of expression and for the reinforcement of civil liberties. Communication is key to sharing the heart's desire to live our lives in accord with our deeply held values.

Spirit of 1776, currently in storage at the New York State Museum, was honored this week with a resolution declaring July 1, 2013- the centennial of the suffrage wagon's maiden voyage- as "Spirit of 1776 Wagon Day in N.Y.

Photo courtesy "[From Seneca Falls to the Supreme Court; New York's Women Leading the Way](#)" exhibit webpage.



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About Olivia Twine

Olivia Twine is a freelance writer specializing in cultural issues whose work appears in regional and local publications in the Hudson Valley. She also edits the website WomensSuffrage.org. She has an M.A. in Theatre Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and lives in Woodstock.

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2 thoughts on “Olivia Twine: Suffrage and Global Citizenship”



Peter Feinman

June 21, 2013 at 11:58 AM

Olivia,

Thank you for revisiting the issue of the common core curriculum for social studies. Since I made those commons following the 2012 New York State Social Studies conference there have been changes and ongoing work in creating the curriculum. Guidelines have now been issued to teacher for comment and hopefully they address the concerns raised in 2012.

Peter

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