

ACT ONE

by Lois W. Banner

On July 19, 1848, in the village of Seneca Falls, New York, some 300 people crowded into a small Methodist chapel, drawn by an announcement in the daily *Seneca County Courier*. The notice proclaimed something unheard of—a two-day “Woman’s Rights Convention.” Despite a request that men stay away until the second day, about 40 curious males showed up at the start.

The organizers of the convention—Lucretia Mott, a 55-year-old Quaker activist from Philadelphia, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 32, the wife of a local lawyer-politician—would be remembered later as the founders of the American women’s rights movement. But on that day in 1848, they lacked the temerity to preside over their own meeting and instead persuaded Mott’s husband, James, a merchant, to serve as chairman. Not until Stanton rose to speak did anyone get a sense of what was to come.

“I should feel exceedingly diffident . . . having never before spoken in public,” she told the audience, “. . . did I not feel that the time had come for the question of woman’s wrongs to be laid before the public, did I not believe that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of her degradation.”

Stanton went on to read aloud the “Declaration of Rights and Sentiments” that she and several fellow organizers had drafted for the convention. A clever rewording of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, its title borrowed from the 1833 covenant of William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society, the broadside provoked 18 straight hours of debate among those present—farmers, local merchants, housewives, mill workers, abolitionists and sundry other reformers.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Stanton said, “that all men and women are created equal.” Thus, Stanton positioned her declaration squarely within the American political tradition. But she underscored the radical roots of that tradition: “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let the facts be submitted to a candid world.”

The facts Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented that day in Seneca Falls illustrated the social and legal liabilities attached to being a woman during the first 60 years of the republic.



Left to right: Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906), and Lucy Stone (1818–1893). Their experiences in the antislavery movement led them to form the first political organizations for women's rights.

As she pointed out, the status of the majority of American women at midcentury was vividly characterized by the common-law term “civil death.” A throwback to British Colonial days (indeed to the Norman Conquest), civil death made married women, in effect, private property. Legally, they could not sign contracts, keep earnings, or control property.* Divorces were granted only in cases of nonsupport, desertion, or adultery; even then, fathers retained child custody. Single women had legal status, for they were expected to pay property taxes. But without the right to vote they incurred the very injury that provoked the American Revolution: taxation without representation.

Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments also deplored women's “social and religious degradation.” Man, Stanton charged, had “deprived woman of a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.”† He “monopolized nearly all the profitable employments” and held women to a moral code by which *his* “delinquencies” were “deemed of little account.” He “usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself” and made women “willing to lead a dependent . . . life.”

*In 1848, New York had passed the Married Woman's Property Act, the nation's first reform of civil death. It gave certain real estate and personal property rights to wives.

†Oberlin College (Ohio), founded in 1833 to train missionaries, was coeducational; Mount Holyoke (Massachusetts), founded for women in 1837, received collegiate status in 1883.

In its demand for suffrage—women's "inalienable right to the elective franchise"—the declaration must have appeared almost as revolutionary as another social tract of 1848, the *Communist Manifesto*. To the Seneca Falls group, this demand for the vote seemed so excessive that only the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass would take the floor in Stanton's support. Lucretia Mott warned her friend not to make their movement appear "ridiculous." Stanton's father, a New York State Supreme Court judge, was reportedly outraged. Her husband, Henry, ever the politician, quietly left town.

Home Rule

After two days of impassioned rhetoric, only one-third of Seneca Falls' conferees were persuaded to sign the declaration. Some later retracted their signatures. An editorial in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* plainly showed what fears Stanton had aroused: "A woman is nobody. A wife is everything. A pretty girl is equal to ten thousand men, and a mother is, next to God, all powerful. . . . The ladies of Philadelphia . . . are resolved to maintain their rights as Wives, Belles, Virgins, and Mothers, and not as Women." Was not protection preferable to the risks inherent in equality? It was a question that would surface repeatedly for over a century.

Other American women had spoken out before Seneca Falls—the essays of Judith Sargent Murray, daughter of a Massachusetts sea captain, argued for equal rights 10 years before Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* appeared in England. By 1848, literate Americans of both sexes had pondered the "Woman Question," most of them apparently concluding, along with Thomas Jefferson, that "the tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion." But the Seneca Falls meeting became a mid-19th-century media event; the nation's newspapers, newly linked by telegraph, gave it plenty of play. Stanton saw that bad publicity ("the most shocking and unnatural incident ever recorded in the history of womanity," pronounced a typical newspaper editorial) was better than no publicity. "There is no danger of the Woman Question dying for want of notice," she wrote.

It was an era of national expansion, radical hopes, and conservative fears. Sutter's Creek in California yielded gold, President James K. Polk's generals won the Mexican War, and a new antislavery

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political party was formed—the Free-Soilers—all in 1848. Mid-century America abounded with middle-class reformers, usually led by clergymen, variously upset by urban dislocation in the industrializing North, slavery in the South, and immorality out West.

In upstate New York, where Stanton was raised, the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 brought thousands of settlers and entrepreneurs. After them came Evangelical Protestant revivalists, with so many hellfire sermons that the area became known as “the burned-over district.” Preachers set up tents to warn against money-grubbing, declaring that “all men may be saved if they will” and taking public confessions from largely female audiences. While at Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary, the young Stanton went to hear the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney, a tall, charismatic ex-lawyer who claimed to have seen Christ in Rochester, New York. She became ill from all the emotional intensity, and thereafter distrusted religion.

As Stanton learned early, American middle-class society was organized around the popular notion of “separate spheres” for men and women. “Everything I liked and enjoyed,” she wrote of her childhood, “was messy and injurious; . . . and . . . everything I disliked was just the thing.” According to Sarah Hale—editor of the widely read *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and a kind of 19th-century Emily Post—“ladies” kept to “the chaste, disinterested circle of the fireside,” where “purer, more excellent, more spiritual values” than “the contagion of moneymaking” prevailed. How much Stanton enjoyed such advice may be surmised by her depiction of home life in Seneca Falls: “How rebellious it makes me feel when I see Henry going about where and how he pleases,” she wrote to a friend, while “I have been compelled . . . to be . . . a household drudge.”

Sexual Politics

This was not quite the whole picture. Even household drudges could get out of the kitchen for a good cause—and there were plenty of those in the Northern states, from helping unwed mothers to hiding fugitive slaves. Indeed, social uplift became the main outlet for the talents of educated women such as Stanton. Inadvertently, reform organizations became a training ground for future women’s rights leaders. Despite Stanton’s contempt for the *spheres* (“A man has quite enough to do,” she replied to one critic, “without being taxed to find out also where every woman belongs”), the custom of creating separate male and female groups within these organizations had a polarizing effect that led many women to seek greater equality.

The first social reform groups—“benevolence societies” such as the American Bible Society and the Home Missionary Society—bloomed in the early 1800s, and they tended to be highly conservative. Women raised money for missionaries laboring in the unruly

West. They visited the poor, cared for orphans and widows, established schools, asylums, and workshops.

Over time, social reform took on a distinct coloration, the first sign of what Kate Millet would call "sexual politics." Uplift groups, such as the social purity and temperance movements, which campaigned against male carnality and drunkenness, signaled a widening rift between men and women over the state of the nation's manners and morals. By 1840, the American Female Moral Reform Society had over 500 auxiliaries and a weekly journal read by 20,000 subscribers. Its members battled prostitution by spying on prominent clients of brothels. In Utica, New York, "visiting committees" went into poor sections of town to solicit tales of men's sexual abuses at home. Meanwhile, temperance workers went on tour with stories of wife beating, child molesting, gambling, and other incarnations of "Demon Rum." Later in the century, it was common for temperance women to invade saloons in large "praying bands."

Most important to feminists were the antislavery organizations. In 1840, just before the convention at Seneca Falls, abolitionists split into factions, partly over whether women should speak out in "promiscuous" (mixed) company. The "political" wing, headed by several New Yorkers, among them Henry Stanton, favored gradual abolition and a no-talking policy for women. The radicals, led by William Lloyd



"Bloomers" were the feminists' Edsel. They invented them in 1850 to replace the painful corsets and 12-pound skirts of the day with something more comfortable. Hooted off the streets, they finally gave them up.

Garrison, wanted an immediate end to slavery and had no qualms about letting women say so, giving many future feminists their first taste of political agitation.

It has been said that women abolitionists became feminists when they perceived the analogy between slavery and the plight of woman-kind. But Stanton and Mott became feminists when they saw how women were treated by certain male abolitionists. They met in 1840, at the first international antislavery convention in London. Mott had been dispatched by the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society; Stanton was simply accompanying her new husband. Forced, despite the objections of Garrison and Wendell Phillips, to keep silent in a curtained-off section of the hall, the two women vowed to retaliate when they returned to the United States.

National Strides

They envisioned the meeting at Seneca Falls as the first in a series of public forums on women's rights. Until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, conventions did take place almost every year. But the women's movement never attracted much of a popular following among women compared to temperance, abolition, and moral uplift. Its ideas were both too radical and too bourgeois, the product of upper-middle-class experience. Though they spoke of self-reliance, feminist leaders did not form their own independent organization for nearly two decades. And by relying on women in temperance and abolitionist groups to publicize their activities and provide a grass-roots structure, the feminists antagonized conservative reformers and may have discouraged would-be supporters. Moreover, by focusing on property rights, marriage reform, and suffrage, they failed to arouse much support from one of their natural constituencies, a fast-growing group of women workers with grievances of their own.

By 1850, women—often unmarried, first generation teen-agers or farmers' daughters—constituted nearly 25 percent of the country's expanding manufacturing work force. Even in the textile mills around Lowell, Massachusetts (touted for model industrial conditions), women worked 13-hour shifts in overcrowded rooms. Many got sick from the fumes of kerosene lamps. They sometimes slept six to a room, two to a bed, in nearby boarding houses. Theirs was a separate sphere in one sense: women's pay, less than one-half that of male workers, ranged from \$1 to \$3 per week; much of it went for room and board.

Some of these women staged strikes and made sporadic attempts to form labor organizations during the 1830s and '40s. Sarah Bagley, one of the nation's first trade unionists, founded the Female Labor Reform Association in New England. But such efforts eventually foundered for lack of funds, time, and support from men's labor

organizations. Only after the Civil War would women's rights leaders take up the factory workers' cause.

In 1850, feminists from seven states met in Worcester, Massachusetts. Some were already prominent among social reformers: Mott, Lucy Stone, and Angelina Grimké, who left her Southern plantation to work against slavery; Paulina Wright Davis, a wealthy one-time moral reformer; Ernestine Rose, a Polish Jew active in the early temperance movement; Antoinette Brown, the first female Protestant minister. The leaders of this unusually large meeting—about 1,000 people came—set the agenda for subsequent conventions. They initiated petition campaigns in eight states for women's suffrage and established committees to report on women's educational, legal, and professional status.

Then as later, the press approached the Woman Question with hostility or scorn: "What do women want?" ran an editorial in the *New York Herald*. "They want . . . to be lawyers, doctors . . . generals in the field. How funny it would sound . . . that Lucy Stone, pleading a cause . . . gave birth to a fine bouncing boy in court!" Other editors wrote of "petticoat rebellions" or "hen conventions" arranged by "love-starved spinsters."

Stanton stayed in Seneca Falls until the last of her seven children reached adolescence—surrounded, as she wrote to Wendell Phillips, "by small craft which I am struggling to tug up life's stream." Even so, her exceptional eloquence guaranteed her a central role during the early years of the movement; she wrote impassioned letters that were read aloud at each feminist convention. She was further encouraged when, through Amelia Bloomer, a neighbor who published *The Lily*, a monthly temperance newspaper, she met Susan B. Anthony, a Quaker temperance activist. In contrast to the high-spirited, talkative Stanton, Anthony was sober and introspective, yet the two became lifelong friends.

Choosing Sides

This alliance proved essential to the women's movement. With Anthony's coaching, Stanton's ideas developed into powerful speeches and essays. Whereas all of the other feminist leaders had husbands and children to worry about, Anthony, unwed, could give all of her time to promoting the cause. Stanton fondly recalled how her friend would turn up with a briefcase full of slanderous diatribes by male politicians against women. "Whenever I saw that stately Quaker girl coming across my lawn," she wrote, "I knew that some happy convocation of the sons of Adam was to be set by the ears. She supplied the facts . . . I the philosophy."

In 1852, the New York State Men's Temperance Society invited women's groups to attend their annual meeting. However, they

forbade the women to speak. Anthony, Mott, and other outraged delegates formed a rival New York State Women's Temperance Society, electing Stanton president. But Stanton's radical ideas—especially her insistence that women be permitted to divorce drunken husbands—dismayed conservatives. Even Bloomer took sides against Stanton. She was not re-elected.

Anthony quit the temperance group out of loyalty to her friend. It was the beginning of both women's commitment to direct political agitation. Stanton outlined their goals: the full rewards of citizenship, including the right to vote; property and marriage reforms for wives—especially the right to dissolve unhappy marriages in divorce. (All were controversial, yet suffrage proved hardest to attain.)

Anthony organized a plan of action. She enlisted 60 women, one from every county in New York State, to be "captains" of a petition campaign. In six weeks she had signatures from over 10,000 women—5,931 for married women's rights; 4,164 for woman suffrage. But it was grueling work. Often women slammed their doors against the canvassers, Anthony reported, saying they had husbands, thank God, to look after their interests.

A Slave's Appeal

The petition campaign culminated in the Albany women's rights convention of 1854, timed by Anthony to take place while the New York legislature was in session. As she had hoped, the legislature allowed Stanton to present the petitions to the Joint Judiciary Committee. But the response to her plea came in a committee report asserting that since "the ladies always have the best place and choicest titbit at the table . . . the warmest place in the winter and the coolest place in the summer . . . if there is any inequity or oppression in the case, the gentlemen are the sufferers."

On Christmas Day 1854, Anthony set out alone to bring back more petition signatures, with \$50 loaned by Wendell Phillips. During one of the coldest winters in New York's history, she traveled by train, sleigh, and often on foot, carrying a carpetbag full of tracts by Stanton. Often hungry and exhausted, she stayed in unheated hotels and passed the hat to cover her expenses. By May, she had canvassed 54 of New York's 60 counties.

This effort, and repeated efforts over the next five years, failed to stir Albany's male politicians. Not until 1860, when Stanton reappeared before the Judiciary Committee with a speech entitled "A Slave's Appeal," would legislators finally listen, though not to pleas for suffrage or changes in divorce law. They amended the existing Married Women's Property Act to include child custody, control over earnings, and property rights for widows.*

*Fourteen other states passed bills from 1848 to 1860 giving women limited property rights.

However, marriage reform was not the most pressing issue in America by that time—not even to Stanton and Anthony. The country was on the verge of civil war over questions of slavery and states' rights, and these life-or-death issues consumed the attention of the reformers from whom feminists drew their support. Stanton and other leaders identified their aims with those of the abolitionists. At rallies sponsored by William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, women speakers argued that suffrage was a "natural right" both of white females and of the oppressed black race.

In 1857, the year the Supreme Court declared slavery permissible in the Dred Scott decision, Anthony started working as a paid organizer for Garrison. Stanton, whose husband allied himself with the conservative abolitionists, earlier had shared his fear that demanding an immediate end to slavery would provoke an unnecessary war. But by 1857 she had gone over to the radicals' cause, and in early 1861 she left home to join Anthony for a series of antislavery rallies in western New York. For suggesting that the newly elected president, Abraham Lincoln, commit himself to ending slavery, the two women often faced mobs throwing eggs and stones.

When the Civil War erupted in April 1861, all talk of women's rights abruptly stopped. Over Anthony's objections, Stanton and other feminists decided to devote themselves to supporting the war effort. They reasoned that a grateful government in Washington would reward their wartime loyalty with the right to vote. As Stanton later wrote, "It was a blunder." While she and others knitted socks and cared for the wounded, the New York legislature gutted its own 1860 marriage reform bill, banning joint child custody and revoking widows' property rights. Stanton and Anthony's wartime petition drive for universal enfranchisement would be seen by Congress as evidence of national support for black male suffrage only. The politics of postwar Reconstruction would divide the feminist movement over questions unrelated to women's rights. In the war's aftermath, feminists would have to start from scratch in many areas. But at least in a perverse way, the long, bloody conflict had advanced their cause: It showed how important civil rights could be.
