
The Road to the Seneca Falls Convention

Morgan Bailey

Morgan Bailey is a junior History major from Patoka, Indiana. She wrote this paper for Dr. Hubbard's Early Republic Class. She plans to graduate with her BA in 2019 and go on to a graduate program.

America in the 1800's was a thriving place and time for women's activism. Antebellum women began to speak up about what they felt they deserved. Women intensely debated issues such as slavery, rights, education, and equality. Many women abolitionists believed they should be entitled to the same rights as men. As the abolitionist and the women's rights movements began to progress in the 1820-1830's, women realized they were under a form of discrimination based on sex, and they mobilized to challenge this system. The main goal of women activists was to have their voice heard, to be taken seriously. They increasingly demanded to be seen as equals. The women's suffrage movement was a fight to publicly educate people about the inequality of women. During the nineteenth century, women were unable to vote. They found this unfair since they were important citizens who made contributions. Activists fought vigorously for their rights for years, determined to become equal parts of society. Through inspirational women, hope and protests, women managed to make a statement in America for their rights.

The Challenge: Home, Work, and Education

Irritated and tired of being the "weaker" gender, women learned to start standing up for themselves. Society expected women to be delicate, full of poise, and devoted as wives/mothers. From a legal standpoint, women in antebellum America were the property of their fathers and then husbands. People used the word "protected" when explaining a husband's power over his wife, even though, most women would be described as submissive to their spouse. Women did not legally exist outside of their marriage. They faced significant discrimination due to their sex, and they were considered frail, not meant to work other than hold down the house. Often during this time in America, women were only seen as important for doing work around the home.¹ Women learned the hard way that when the United States Constitution said, "All men are created equal," the founding fathers meant males. In 1764, American revolutionary James Otis questioned a women's standing by asking, "Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature?"² Change came only slowly. The biggest obstacles that women began to challenge were the right to vote, equal wages, and limitations on education.

Women's roles in antebellum America were radically changing. Their roles in society were changing, along with what they were expected to do for the family. Women started to take more control of the household. Some women were single, which meant they alone took care of the house, the business, and the money. In 1836, New York Judge Thomas Hertell proposed to allow women the right to claim property.³ Few supported the bill, but Ernestine Potoski Rose, a Jewish immigrant, launched a petition drive to gain support for the bill. After defeat of the originally proposed bill, Hertell tried again in 1840 after the support of signatures from Rose's petition. The goal would allow

¹ Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press), 24.

² McMillen 13.

³ McMillen 29.

wives to control property; a controversial move because it questioned the meaning of their citizenship. To the government, those who were competent to own property should be given the right to vote. This caused a fuss because according to property rights, under the new law, women would be able to vote and be active members of society. Women believed that if they were capable of owning property and paying taxes to support the government, then they should be able to vote as well. Men began to worry, thinking that they might lose control if their wives were given too much power.

Controversy also swelled around gender and the workforce. Women were not allowed to hold the same jobs as men, yet they still did intense labor. As economic opportunities increased, women left their homes to join the labor pool, this was particularly the case in the Northeast.⁴ Most women worked in the emerging textile industry. Even as workers, women were still treated in a different manner than men. Many women were part of all-female factories that had strict rules governing conduct and work. They were to maintain disciplined behavior and act properly. Factories thought they were “protecting” women this way. Many factory girls loved the opportunity to earn money on their own. Girls felt a sense of pride by being able to help support their families.⁵ Women transitioned back and forth between the two worlds of being a housewife and being a working woman. Even though women worked long hours over machines, they were not paid as much as their male superiors. Many women joined groups to protest the injustice of not being paid enough.

Another widely focused matter was the growing interest in education for women. Since colonial times, education was very limited for women. It was believed that women would not have need for an education since they would be spending all of their time in the house and raising their kids.⁶ The few girls who did receive an education were taught to read and write from home. After the American Revolution, the public began to promote female education. They believed that in order to have their responsibilities and raise their children, women should have a basic education. It was said that if a woman had a higher education then they would be better companions for their husbands.⁷ During the antebellum period in America, schools were separated by sex. Girls were allowed to attend school, but their education was rarely as rigorous as that in male schools. Women were taught female etiquette. They protested that they should receive equal education compared to men. Many believed that it was biologically impossible for women to retain the same knowledge as men. Supposedly a women’s brain could not handle higher education, but that was obviously a misconception as many women were very intelligent. Going into the nineteenth century, women started to have the opportunity to get a higher education. Once women were exposed to being equal to men in education, they pursued equality in other areas.

Stanton’s Stand

An influential abolition woman who did not believe in the separation of spheres was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She challenged the orthodox views of women as homebodies. She and other strong, brave women began the long journey to the most influential convention in the Women’s Rights Movement in Seneca Falls. Stanton was born November 12, 1815, to Margaret Livingston and Daniel Cady. She grew up in Johnstown, New York. Elizabeth was raised in an old-fashioned home. All young Elizabeth grew up knowing was church, school, and family. Her sister Margaret helped bring out the disobedience in Elizabeth. Elizabeth was always watching her every move. She believed that, “everything we do is sin, and... everything we dislike is commanded by

⁴ McMillen, 30.

⁵ McMillen, 31.

⁶ McMillen, 31.

⁷ McMillen, 32.

God or someone on earth.”⁸ Once she learned that she could have a little fun and not live in constant fear, she rebelled enthusiastically. “Elizabeth believed that the laws, norms, and values that structured men’s and women’s lives in her childhood were unchanging and unchallenged,” noted a biographer. Luckily, she grew up in a bustling town of transition. Johnstown was very industrious and progressive. Manufacturing was the heart of Johnstown. In 1808, the first glove and mitten factory was founded.⁹ With the end of the War of 1812, a new American era was born.

At this time, change was occurring in religion, law, transportation, and structures all throughout bigger states and cities. Although there were physical and idealistic changes to the country, women still faced the usual changes. In 1830, Elizabeth was just fifteen. The common law was still in effect and marriage women were *femme covert*s. The problem Stanton saw was that the non-married women still did not receive many key rights. Women who were not married paid their own taxes and owned their own land, but could not do other things, like vote or serve on a jury. Women were also still restricted from “men’s colleges.”

One day, Stanton’s brother, Eleazar, died suddenly. Elizabeth distinctly remembers her father saying to her, “Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!”¹⁰ After this, she was determined to keep her father happy. The social outcome from this was that she saw how boy’s lives limited the opportunities for girls.

Even as a young girl, Elizabeth began noticing the oppressions of women and believing in the need for social change. Young Elizabeth was very conscious of injustice. With her father serving as a judge, she stayed well aware of matters of the law. Even as a girl, she found marriage restrictions insulting. She was interested in public gatherings and current events. Although she did not agree with marriage constraints and limitations on women, she did not despise men. She envied them. Elizabeth had men as role models. They were strong and independent. She tried to prove to her father (and to herself) that she was, “as good as a boy.”¹¹ She was the top of her class and the only girl in advanced mathematics and languages. One of the big controversies including men and women was the separation of education. Men and women often went to separate schools designated by sex. They were also taught differently, women focusing on what would be helpful around the house, and men learning important tools of the real world. Stanton sought to break that stereotype by learning all that she could. She especially loved debating with men about subjects. Elizabeth started breaking stereotypes as a young woman.

Although Stanton apposed gender norms and separation of sex’s opportunities, she led a fairly “normal” life for a woman in the nineteenth century. She grew up, became a teacher and married. She never planned to teach, but she loved being an instructor. She met her husband, Henry Stanton, through visits to her cousin Gerrit Smith. One thing Elizabeth deemed important was that her maiden name was also kept visible. Henry was also a fellow abolitionist. The two travelled together, attending conferences and engaging in debates. In fact, right after their wedding, the two left for London to attend an Anti-Slavery Conference.¹² They lived comfortably with their three children in Massachusetts. Henry practiced law in Boston which helped them maintain a slightly privileged lifestyle. Sadly, Henry’s health declined in 1847 which led the family to move to Seneca Falls.¹³ Elizabeth saw the change in environment when she moved. She noticed her social decline

⁸ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang), 21.

⁹ Ginzberg, 25.

¹⁰ Ginzberg, 18.

¹¹ Ginzberg, 24.

¹² James Newman, *Becoming the Birthplace of Women’s Rights: The Transformation of Seneca Falls* (New York: Business Source Elite, 1992), 1.

¹³ Newman, 1.

and how she fell back into the restrictions of sexes. She knew a change needed to happen, and she wanted Seneca Falls to host a convention to bring that change.

Mott's Lot

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the driving force of the women's rights movement in Seneca Falls. She spearheaded the Seneca Falls Convention. Although the head woman at the convention, she was not the sole important figure. Three other essential women were Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony. Mott, the eldest organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention, was a Quaker minister who believed in women's equality. She was very confident and determined to improve the lives of women in America. While growing up, Lucretia's mother was the head of the household, as she made all the decisions relating to their house and business.

From her background, Lucretia knew women were powerful and this inspired her path. She believed more and more women would eventually understand their inequality, and she wanted to lead them to justice. She said, "And although woman may not yet be so awakened to the consideration of the subjects as to be sensible of the blessing of entire freedom, she will, I doubt not, as she comes to reflect on the subject more and more, see herself in her true light."¹⁴ Lucy Stone did not attend the convention, but she was still a leading figure of women's rights. Like Lucretia, Lucy grew up watching her mother put in hard work on the family's farm. She saw how much her mother put in labor, yet she did not receive any benefits or rights. Lucy would grow up to earn a college degree and emerge one of the most "spellbinding lecturers of the mid-nineteenth century."¹⁵ Susan B. Anthony was a close friend of Stanton. The two influenced each other greatly. Susan grew up in a family where both parents believed that women were capable of more. Ever since she was a little girl, Susan knew her purpose. Her work began after she noticed she received lower wages than men. One of Lucy Stone's pieces influenced her, and she vowed to never become a piece of property.¹⁶ These four women worked for years to advance women's rights. They made huge impacts on American women in the nineteenth century.

Seneca Falls: Unlikely Place for a Revolution

Seneca Falls, New York was a remote place that had rolling farmland and beautiful sights. It was an unexpected city for such a huge convention. It is located near the Genesee Canal just a few miles from the present-day New York State Thruway.¹⁷ Seneca Falls sits in what we call today the Finger Lakes District of New York. In the nineteenth century, Seneca turned into a booming city once it used the power from waterfalls of the Seneca River. This industrial city was nicknamed "Pumptown" for its manufacturing of water pumps and fire engines.¹⁸ It was not home to colleges nor great writers, but it was full of activity. In the mid-nineteenth century, Seneca began to develop industrially. In 1828, the village was connected to the Erie River with the rising canal system that began with the completion of the Erie Canal. In 1841, the passenger rail service arrived in Seneca Falls. In 1843, a new chapel was built, and it encouraged controversial speakers and gatherings.¹⁹ Unless interested in American History, most people have never heard of Seneca Falls or the intense

¹⁴ Lucretia Mott, *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 227, 232.

¹⁵ McMillen, 40.

¹⁶ McMillen, 47.

¹⁷ McMillen, 35.

¹⁸ Newman, 1.

¹⁹ Newman, 1.

event that was held there. The convention that was held at Seneca Falls changed the ways America viewed and treated women in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1848, Seneca Falls was going through rapid social and economic changes.²⁰ The small farming center was now becoming technologically advanced. Instead of the old, slow moving canal system, a new railroad system emerged. This made transportation throughout the city and the rest of the state easy and more accessible. New transportation opportunities brought in new kinds of people. Businessmen began settling in Seneca Falls, replacing farmers. They introduced a market economy and began producing and transporting goods. As a result, Seneca Falls began modernizing.²¹ Around the time of the Women's Rights Convention, Seneca Falls was transitioning from being a rural village to a prosperous industrial city. This made Seneca Falls the perfect place to host the convention.

Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann McClintock, Jane Hunt, Martha C. Wright, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the chief movers and managers of the Seneca Falls Convention.²² They met together and wrote up a schedule with speeches and resolutions to be discussed. The Women's Rights Convention was planned for July 19th and 20th, 1848.²³ The convention was to be held in the new Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. When the 19th of July came, the weather was a hot ninety degrees and the atmosphere was full of pride. The convention was originally exclusive to females, but to their surprise, several men attended. As the crowds gathered to enter the chapel, they found the doors were locked! No one present had a key or knew a way to get in. All the doors were locked and the windows were too high. Thankfully, males present managed to lift someone up to a window so they could get inside and unlock the doors. Now the Women's Rights Convention could commence. Roughly 300 people attended the convention. At the Women's Rights Convention, it was resolved "that all men and *women* are created equal."²⁴

Revolutionary Document

During the convention, the attendees were presented with a declaration proposing rights that should be granted to women. It was titled the "Declaration of Sentiments." It proclaimed the equality of men and women as both deserving the same basic rights. Among those rights were, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."²⁵ The Declaration aimed to improve upon the original Declaration of Independence. Women spoke up about the oversights in the original document and insisted that they should no longer have to suffer from the government's mistakes. The Declaration stated as their "duty" to ask for a new set of regulations for women. Then, the writers raised numerous issues regarding the different ways women were unequally treated compared to men. The Declaration of Sentiment also included resolutions. Not only did these women address obstacles in the way of women, they also proposed specific ways to resolve said matters. There were over a hundred signatures on the declaration, females and males.

At the time of the Women's Rights Convention, no one ever figured it would become such an historic piece of America's puzzle. Although the Seneca Falls Convention was not highly known at the time, it later became a staple in women's rights history. Sadly, there were no immediate changes to the equality of women in America after the convention. In fact, there were only slight

²⁰ Sandra Weber, *Women's Right National Historical Park, Seneca Falls, New York* (Washington, DC: U.S Department of Interior: National Park Service, 1985), 3.

²¹ Weber, 4.

²² Kathryn Cullen-DuPont, *American Women Activists' Writings* (New York: First Cooper Square Press Edition, 2002), 82.

²³ Noelle Baker, *Stanton in Her Own Time: A biographical chronicle of her life, drawn from recollections, interviews, and memoirs by family, friends, and associates* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 84.

²⁴ "Declaration of Sentiments," 29 July 1848, *OA H Magazine of History* 3, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall, 1988): 54.

²⁵ "Declaration of Sentiments."

changes for years. The first big advancement was when Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. The amendment granted citizenship to anyone born in the United States. It also dictated that no state could deprive a citizen of the right to life, liberty and property. Further it mandated that states could not deny a citizen equal protection of the laws. The biggest reward did not happen until 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed. Over 70 years after the convention, women were finally allowed to vote. Sadly, many women, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others present during the women's convention, were not alive to see all their hard work pay off. Eventually, women's rights would begin to catch up to those of men. "Beginning in 1848, it was possible for women who rebelled against the circumstances of their lives to know that they were not alone..."²⁶

²⁶ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movements in the United States* (Harvard University Press, England, 1959), 72.