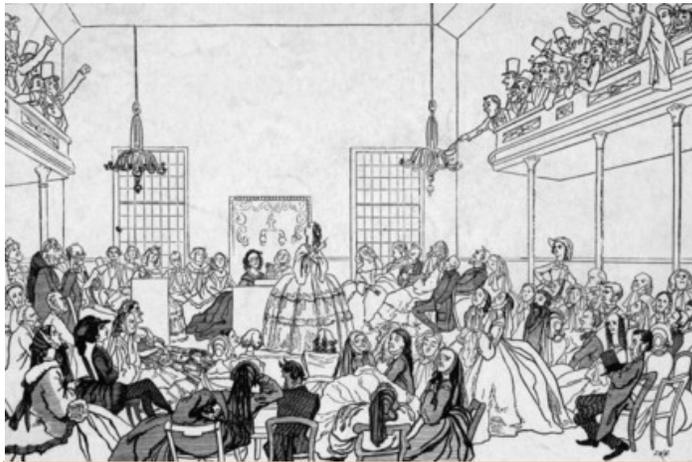


Humiliation Leads to Action

Elizabeth Cady was 25 years old and on her honeymoon in London. Her new husband, Henry Stanton, was a lawyer. He also spent a good bit of time as an antislavery activist, which is why he and Elizabeth attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention while in London. Well, actually, Henry attended. Elizabeth, along with all the other women who had traveled to London to attend the meeting, could hear the proceedings but not see them.

When the convention began, the men spent an entire day in heated argument over whether women should be included. Henry Stanton stood and spoke persuasively in favor of allowing the women to participate. His efforts were in vain. The women were left listening to the meeting from behind a curtain, “like a church choir.”

Elizabeth found it outrageous that a group of men committed to ending the cruel treatment of African Americans should be so blind to the wrongs they themselves were committing against women. She later wrote, “It struck me as very remarkable that abolitionists, who felt so keenly the wrongs of the slave, should be so oblivious to the equal wrongs of their own mothers, wives, and sisters.”



The Seneca Falls Convention took place on July 19 and 20, 1848, in the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls, New York.

William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent American anti-abolitionist, chose to sit with the women behind the curtain. Elizabeth was full of admiration for his noble action:

‘After battling so many long years,’ said Garrison, ‘for the liberties of African slaves, I can take no part in a convention that strikes down the most sacred rights of all women.’ After coming three thousand miles to speak on the subject nearest his heart, he nobly shared the enforced silence of the rejected delegates. It was a great act of self-sacrifice. . . .

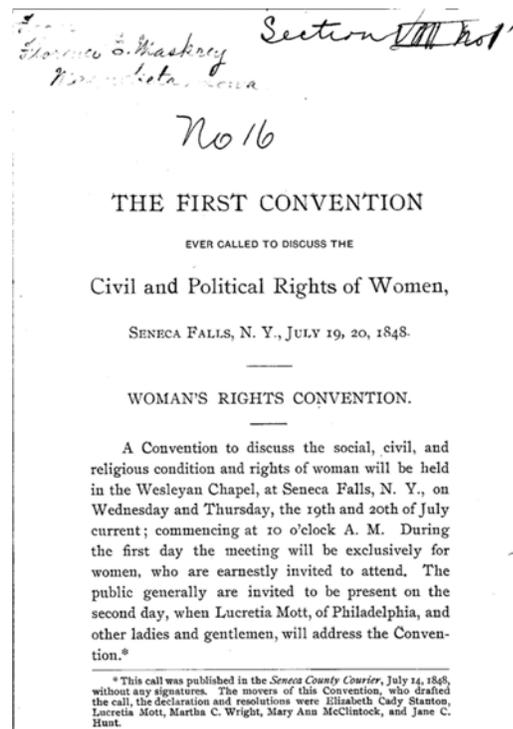
As the women left the convention that day, they expressed their humiliation at the treatment they had received. Talk of the need for “new liberties for women” was on many lips. Stanton walked to her boarding house with Lucretia Mott, a Quaker and abolitionist. As they walked, they decided to have their own convention when they returned home. They decided it was high time to talk about the wrongs that women suffered on a daily basis.

At the time of the World Anti-Slavery Convention, the plight of women was indeed shocking. Any property a woman owned before she was married automatically became her husband’s upon their marriage. The same was true of any wages a woman earned. They, too, belonged to her husband. The vast majority of colleges were closed to women, and speaking in a public meeting was forbidden. Women who did the same work as men, such as teachers, were paid less. Although subject to the laws of the land, women had no voice in the making of those laws. They could not vote or hold public office.

“Thee Will Make Us Ridiculous”

The years passed. Mott’s and Stanton’s days were filled with caring for their growing families. In 1847 Stanton left the stimulating city of Boston for the quiet town of Seneca Falls, New York. She found the change difficult. In Boston, she had a lively circle of friends who discussed the issues of the day and exchanged ideas. She also enjoyed a wide variety of cultural pursuits. In Seneca, she found herself often alone, overwhelmed with caring for her three young children, with little to break the monotony of household work. She began to feel the wrongs inflicted on women even more keenly in this isolated environment. Stanton, it is safe to say, was becoming restless.

Imagine how delighted she was, then, to receive an invitation from her old friend, Lucretia Mott. Stanton traveled to nearby Waterloo to spend a lovely day in the company of her friend and several other Quaker families. During the course of the visit, the women again hit upon the idea of holding a women’s



This is the notice that appeared in the *Seneca County Courier* on July 14, 1848, announcing a convention to discuss the rights of women.

rights convention. This time, they were determined not to let eight years pass before they acted! In fact, they did not let even a week pass. The women drafted a notice which was placed in a local Seneca newspaper the very next day. The first women's rights convention would be held in only five days' time. The women were suddenly filled with purpose. There was so much to do to prepare!

Stanton drew up a Declaration of Sentiments to explain why a women's rights convention was necessary. She also drafted a list of resolutions for the convention to discuss. When Mott and Stanton met beforehand, Stanton showed her friend what she had written. When Mott came to the ninth resolution, she raised wide eyes from her reading to Stanton's face. "Why, Lizzie," she said, "thee will make us ridiculous." What do you think the ninth resolution addressed? It demanded that women be given the right to vote. The idea was so far-fetched in 1848 that even a staunch supporter of women's rights such as Mott thought it too bold.

Despite Mott's concern, Stanton insisted that the voting provision remain. "I saw clearly," she later wrote, "that the power to make the laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured."

What a Difference Two Days Makes

Despite the fact that the meeting had only been announced five days before, and with only a small notice in a local paper, three hundred people turned out. Forty of them were men. Imagine how thrilled Mott and Stanton must have been to see the meeting room at the Wesleyan Methodist Church filling up. Many of those in attendance were Quakers from the surrounding area.

Only women were allowed to attend the convention's first day. Mott spoke on the subject of women's rights. Stanton read her Declaration of Sentiments and the list of resolutions. The Declaration of Sentiments echoed the words of the Declaration of Independence. It began with "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal." It sounded strange to people who were not used to thinking about women in terms of equality. However, the more the participants considered the idea, the more it began to seem strange that the original wording had left out half the population!

Of the 12 resolutions that Stanton had proposed, only one was not unanimously adopted by the convention. You guessed it—it was the resolution on allowing women the right to vote. The others at the meeting also thought it went too far.

It took the forceful eloquence of a former slave to get it passed. Frederick Douglass rose and spoke in favor of the resolution, which helped it to get passed. The final document created by the convention was called the Seneca Falls Declaration. It was signed by 68 women and 32 men.

The two July days of the Seneca Falls Convention were pivotal in the history of the United States. Although not much changed for women in the months and even years after the meeting, it was the first step toward the changes that would eventually come. The Seneca Falls Convention helped identify the problem, which then inspired people to work harder to solve the problem. The convention pointed out a problem in American society and prompted intelligent discussion among men and women about how to solve that problem.

A Key Player

Reaction to the Seneca Falls Convention was swift and overwhelmingly negative. “Excessively silly,” scoffed a Syracuse newspaper writer. “Shocking and unnatural,” said another. “Unwomanly,” commented a third. Throughout the state of New York, the response was largely the same.

The influential *New York Herald* did the women a favor by printing the entire Declaration of Sentiments. True, the paper’s purpose was to ridicule the document, but the fact remained that because of the *Herald*, the declaration reached a much wider audience than it otherwise might have. Although somewhat shocked by the cruel attacks on the convention, Mott and Stanton were also pleased that their meeting had attracted so much attention. Others, however, were less able to see the benefits that came with this type of notoriety, or publicity. A few even removed their names from the declaration.

Mott, Stanton, and the other men and women who attended the Seneca Falls Convention created a turning point in history. The convention caused the nation to pay attention to the issue of women’s rights. It inspired women to work hard until all people were treated equally. This push for women’s rights continued through the Civil War and World War I. More than 70 years passed between the Seneca Falls Convention and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. This amendment gave women the right to vote. Only one woman who signed the Seneca Falls Declaration in 1848 lived to cast a ballot in the first national election following the amendment’s passage. Every woman who has done so since owes a deep debt of gratitude to the women and men of Seneca Falls.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What was the general reaction in New York newspapers to the Seneca Falls Convention?
 - A.** admiring
 - B.** disapproving
 - C.** supportive
 - D.** ungrateful

- 2.** Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were pleased with the press reaction to the convention because it
 - A.** drew attention to the issue of women's rights.
 - B.** was overwhelmingly positive.
 - C.** led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.
 - D.** convinced many people that equality was impossible.

- 3.** The Seneca Falls Convention is important in American history because it
 - A.** caused immediate improvement in women's plight.
 - B.** led to the end of slavery.
 - C.** was the first step toward greater equality for women.
 - D.** showed that no one is above the law.

- 4.** In her autobiography, Elizabeth Cady Stanton quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson as saying, "A healthy discontent is the first step to progress." How does this quotation reflect motivations for holding the first women's rights convention in the United States? Provide details and evidence to support your answer.