

The Myth of Seneca Falls

Memory and the Women's
Suffrage Movement,
1848–1898



LISA TETRAULT

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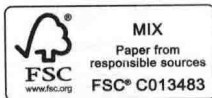
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✦ *For Jeanne Boydston*
with love and profound gratitude

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I count this one among the most fortunate of my life. Eventually, I began graduate work, with Jeanne as my advisor. I had a long way to go, but she never doubted I could do it. That faith meant more than she could have ever known. I am deeply grateful to have found my way into her orbit, and eventually to myself. Her generous, compassionate blend of creativity, brilliance, and humility amaze me still. Over time, we became family, and then one day, quite suddenly, cancer took her life. Although she did not live to see it, she is present in every page of this book. I miss you, Jeanne.

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Prologue

❖ Getting Acquainted with History

The problem of a beginning is the beginning of a problem.

—UNKNOWN

The Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention came to order on 10 May 1866. The guns of the Civil War had quieted a year before, and many felt the time had come to revisit unfinished business. The woman's rights movement, which had suspended activity during the bloodiest war in American history, held its first postwar convention in New York City's Church of the Puritans. Lucretia Mott, aged seventy-three and an elder stateswoman of the movement, looked out over the enormous crowd and saw the cause passing into new hands. "It is no loss," she explained to those assembled, "but the proper order of things, that the mothers should depart and give place to the children." The fact that Mott appeared battle scarred, with hoarse voice from a head cold and bruised face from a recent streetcar accident, added poignancy to her remarks. She recalled the long history of women's rights activism that had led to this day. "Young women of America," she urged, "I want you to make yourselves acquainted with the history of the Woman's Rights movement."¹

Mott highlighted the importance of collective historical memory to the operation of social movements—the central preoccupation of this book. Mott was not alone in urging women to learn their history. After the Civil War, women's rights activists with similar concerns held commemorative conventions, gave speeches on women's rights history, celebrated the accomplishments of pioneering women, held birthday celebrations, observed anniversaries, wrote historical accounts, and more. All of it was instructive. Indeed, activists rebuilt a movement after the disruptions of the Civil War, in no small part, by getting acquainted with history—that is by consciously and unconsciously creating collective memories for the movement. Remem-

bering played a critical role in providing a foundation, justification, and rallying point for rebuilding. Remembering also sustained movement activists over the second half of the nineteenth century, as it became clear that women's rights would not be won anytime soon.

Remembering was a fiercely contentious process, however. It would take the remainder of the century for most white women's rights activists to agree upon a shared history. A shared history they recognized as best representing their collective past—a past used to chart their future. The eventual triumph of one particular story, over any other number of possible stories, was the product of a long-lived contest within and outside the movement. That story was no more “true” than any other. But as a few activists pushed it to the fore, and growing numbers took it to heart, it took on the veneer of truth. As this mythological tale took shape, it did more than simply reflect activists' understanding of the past. It would fundamentally reshape the movement over the second half of the nineteenth century. Put another way, the myth itself became an important actor in the development of nineteenth-century feminism.

That eventually triumphant mythology went something like this: In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott convened the first women's rights meeting the world had ever known, the historic Seneca Falls convention in upstate New York. Here, Stanton famously made the first public demand for women's voting rights. A demand enshrined in that convention's manifesto, the “Declaration of Sentiments.” That demand, along with the convention itself, marked the beginning of a women's rights movement. According to this telling, the idea for the convention had arisen far away and years earlier, at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. British abolitionists had denied seats to U.S. women delegates. Incensed, Mott and Stanton (who first met in London) agreed to hold a protest convention upon their return to the United States. Pulling it off took eight years, when the women finally implemented their long-delayed convention plans. In many accounts, Susan B. Anthony also entered the story, even though she had not been present at the creation associated with 1848. By the turn of the century, this founding myth had become all anyone needed to know about “the history of the Women's Rights movement.”²

Curiously, when Mott urged young women to learn their history, she did not tell the story we all know, because that story—as a foundational story—did not yet exist in 1866. It was not that Mott favored some other memory. Her historical remarks were notable for the absence of any familiar or co-

gent story. Mott's movement remained merely a loose collection of events. She made vague allusion to women's rights having begun "more than twenty years since," putting the origin in the early 1840s, or perhaps the 1830s. But then Mott reached back further still. She urged young women to learn their history "from the days of Mary Wollstoncraft [sic]," British woman of letters, who published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, the first extended Enlightenment treatise on women's rights. Having gone back to the previous century, Mott treated the 1848 meeting as mere footnote. Surveying the large audience before her in 1866, she could not help but compare it to the relative "handful who met . . . in the first Convention . . . at Seneca Falls." The comparison underscored how the movement had matured, but it hardly cast the 1848 convention as a central event, much less the birthplace of a movement. Later, after praising women literary figures and God's moving grace, Mott recalled women's exclusion from the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention, but she drew no causal connection between it and plans for the 1848 convention. These two events, which would eventually become tightly linked in feminist lore, had no connection at all in Mott's remarks. "I like to allude to these things," she explained by way of closing, "to show what progress we are making." Beyond assessing progress—from small to large numbers, from exclusion to inclusion, from condemnation to acceptance—Mott's remarks followed no particular sequence. Although she urged those assembled to learn their history, she offered them no memorable stories to hold onto—no story at all, in the sense of a linear, unified narrative. Mott's "history" was literally incoherent: without causality or even chronology and without any overarching sense of design. It simply did not cohere into what scholars would call a "master narrative."³

Stories are made, not found, and in 1866, the story of Seneca Falls had yet to be made. Even those activists who considered Seneca Falls to be the first U.S. women's rights meeting did not give it the seminal status it would later occupy. Someone, or some collection of people, at some time had to put the story together. And they had to persuade others to accept that story as their own. When, then, did Seneca Falls emerge as a familiar pattern of details, as a recognizable tale, and as nineteenth-century feminism's watershed event? This book locates the origins of the Seneca Falls story in the post-Civil War years, some twenty to thirty years after the actual meeting, arising from the messy, contentious world of post-Civil War politics. It interrogates how the *meeting* at Seneca Falls became the *myth* of Seneca Falls. And it examines the consequences of this development for the women's rights movement.

By tracing that history and its implications, this book tackles one of the still-intractable mythologies of U.S. history and, in the process, offers a new genealogy of American feminism.

Seneca Falls is perhaps the most enduring and long-standing myth ever produced by a U.S. social movement. If schoolchildren learn anything about U.S. women's history, they learn the story of Seneca Falls. The location of the convention is today the site of a national park, the only such park dedicated to women's rights.⁴ Given the stature of this story, it is surprising that we do not yet have a history of it. We have many good histories of the meeting, but none of the story.⁵ This gap in our knowledge is perhaps less surprising when we consider the internal logic of origins tales themselves. Origins myths work to legitimate and unify the messy contingencies of political struggle, making both the outcome and the story of that struggle seem unmanipulated, if not inevitable. At the same time, an origins story, once dominant, promotes the forgetting of struggles within the struggle, the debates and rivalries within the movement itself. Eventually, several competing narratives give way to a dominant collective memory, and having won, that story appears to tell itself, being self-evidently true. So it has been for over a century with the story of Seneca Falls. That tale has so successfully erased its own contested origins that it has become sacrosanct. It has become "a kind of natural fact, as if it had always been meant to be."⁶

Precisely because of its revered status, questioning this founding myth of feminism—indeed, even to call it a myth—may, at first glance, smack of disrespect. But we might just as easily conclude that querying this story is to finally grant it the respect it deserves. Scholars have taken nearly all the great "myths" of American history seriously enough to investigate and decipher them. In the process, they have given us a much deeper appreciation for such tales and an ability to effectively grapple with and analyze the power dynamics within them. We know, for example, that the civil rights movement did not really begin when Rosa Parks, tired and fed up, spontaneously refused to give up her seat at the front of the bus—a story that obscures the planned and calculated nature of black protest, the scope of white supremacy's operations, and the complexity of Parks herself.⁷ And we know that Betty Friedan's 1963 groundbreaking work, *The Feminine Mystique*, did not emerge solely from her discontent as an isolated middle-class housewife—a myth that overlooks Friedan's and other postwar feminists' deep roots in the radical labor movement and the devastating effect of McCarthyism on feminist politics.⁸ We tell these canonical stories of American history for the lessons they possess (about the possibilities and limits of the