



# THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN FEMINISM

The Seneca Falls Woman's Convention of 1848

Edited by Virginia Bernhard and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

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Woman's Convention of 1848**

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**Virginia Bernhard  
and  
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**Blackwell  
Publishing**

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 1995 by Brandywine Press

First reprinted 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

2 2008

ISBN 978-188-1089-34-6

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom  
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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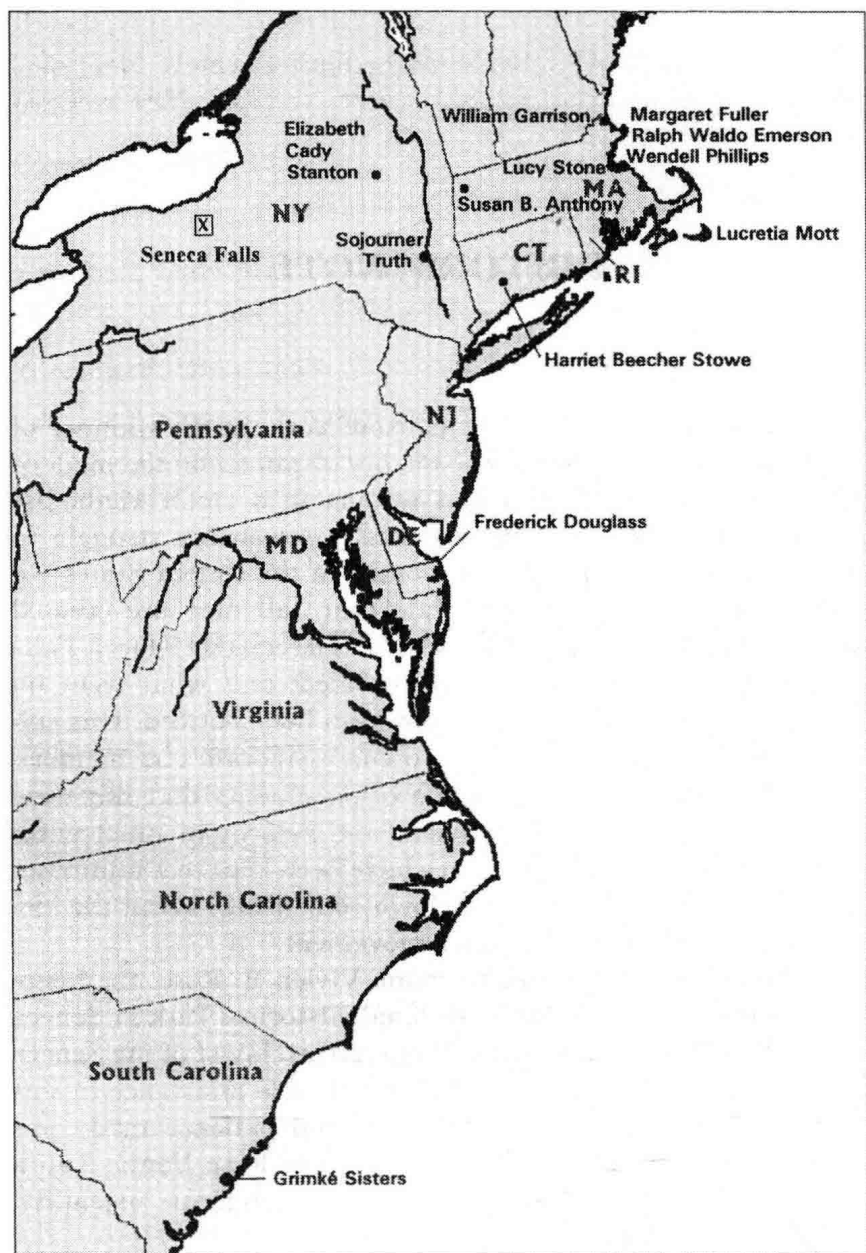
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## EDITORS' NOTE

What happened at Seneca Falls, New York, in the summer of 1848 was a pivotal point in the history of women in the modern world. A meeting of men and women in a small Methodist chapel began the long and eventually rewarding struggle to win a measure of equality for women in the United States—a nation dedicated to the principle that “all men are created equal.” Yet for much of this nation’s history the Seneca Falls convention has been largely unheralded, and what went on during two fateful days in July has been little noticed. This collection of readings is designed to commemorate and memorialize that event with a selection of documents that illustrate women’s awakenings to activism and reform in nineteenth-century America. Editorial notes have been kept to a minimum so that readers may draw their own conclusions about the ideology and goals of the women’s movement.

The editors would like to thank Vivien E. Rose, the historian at the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York, and Douglas Vigneron, archivist of the Seneca Falls Historical Society, for their invaluable assistance in this project. Others whose clerical skills and patience made this task easier were Mark Chance and Mary Rose Vento. Laura Crawley and Stacey Horstmann, with wonderful ingenuity, helped to identify and collect sources.

In some cases, paragraphing and punctuation have been altered for clarity.



This map shows the birthplaces of some of the people who figured prominently in the movement that began at Seneca Falls in 1848.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1776, when John Adams was attending the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, his wife Abigail wrote to him from their farm at Braintree, Massachusetts, to “remember the ladies” when the time came to make laws for the new nation. “If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies,” she said, “we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound to obey the laws in which we have no voice or representation.” But more than fifty years after the founding of the republic, the women of the United States still had no voice. They were, as some of the first women’s rights advocates eloquently expressed it, “civilly dead.” The Declaration of Independence had promised equality for all, and the Constitution purported to be for “the people of the United States,” yet for more than half of those people—all the white women and all the African American women and men who were slaves—the “Blessings of Liberty” were far from secure.

Women made up approximately half the population of the new nation, but they could not vote, or hold public office, or attend college, or study for any of the learned professions. Most African American women, like most African American men, were bound by an institution that denied them that most elemental of human rights, personal freedom. Native American women and men, though free, were not even entitled to citizenship. In white society, marriage promised a woman the pleasures of home and family but placed her under the complete domination of her husband. A married woman had little or no control over her property or income, and unless a prenuptial

## 2 Introduction

agreement existed, what was his was his, and what was hers was also his. Divorce in some states required an action by the legislature, and a failed marriage was usually thought to be the fault of the wife. (In almost every state, wife-beating "with a reasonable instrument" was legal as late as 1850.) If a divorcing couple had children, the husband almost always received custody.

As the new nation began, what one historian has called the "contagion of liberty" seemed to spread from state to state, transforming both law and society, but women's rights—or rather, the lack of them—remained unchanged. For middle- and upper-class white women, however, there was a new role: that of the "republican mother." While a woman could not have a voice in the making of laws in the young republic, she could at least have an influence by instilling "republican virtues" in her sons. But to do that properly she needed an education. As the political life of the new nation developed, so did a number of "female academies." In fact, the same year that saw the writing of the Constitution in Philadelphia saw the founding of the Young Ladies' Academy in that city. One of the Academy's trustees exulted that its students would be prepared to teach their sons "the principles of liberty and government." In Massachusetts Judith Sargent Murray in a 1790 essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes," wrote, "I expect to see our young women forming a new era in female history." But by the time of her death in 1820, Murray's expectations had not been realized.

Despite a flurry of interest in women's education in the late eighteenth century, the vast majority of women in the early republic, like their grandmothers and great-grandmothers in colonial America, did not receive much schooling. Reading and writing were rare accomplishments for a woman. In New England, for example, where there were more schools than in the middle and southern colonies at the end of the colonial period, fewer than half the women involved in the making of wills could sign their names. Literacy is difficult to measure, but it is safe to say that in 1800 a majority of women in the new nation could not write, and a significant number could not

read. That is not quite so shocking as it seems, considering the nature of American society at a time when most families lived on farms or plantations, and nine out of ten people made their living from the soil. For ordinary folk, book learning was not essential, and for females, churning butter and weaving cloth were far more valuable skills than conjugating verbs or writing essays. For the majority of Americans of both sexes, schooling was difficult to come by until well into the nineteenth century.

The new country's population grew from nearly four million people in 1790 to over seventeen million by 1840, and in that fifty years—less than the space of two generations—technology, industry, and ideology wrought profound changes in American life. A textile mill in Lowell, Massachusetts, began to employ women workers. Towns and cities, nourished by a growing network of canals, rivers, and roads, bustled with new markets and new ideas. Religious revivals swept over the land, stirring rural communities, invigorating urban congregations. In the 1830s a wave of evangelical fervor known as the Second Great Awakening spread across New York, with so many hellfire sermons that part of the state was waggishly called the “burned-over district.” Public schools increased in number, seminaries and academies flourished, and many new colleges were founded.

Numbers of better-educated, reform-minded men and women turned their attention to prisons and asylums, to the sorrows of brothels and saloons, and created new societies dedicated to social change: the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (1826), the American Peace Society (1828), the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833), and the American Female Reform Society (1834) were only a few of the associations that emerged in an age of reform. This activism was not limited to the middle classes. In the 1830s working men in New York organized a political party, and in Massachusetts the young women workers in Lowell's textile mill formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. The French writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed in *Democracy in America* (1835) that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and

manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive."

While reforming drunkards and rescuing prostitutes were certainly admirable activities, the cause that generated the most moral fervor in the 1830s was the issue that would sunder the republic in another generation: slavery. As slavery spread westward in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with the admission of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Missouri to the Union, and as a Virginia slave named Nat Turner horrified the nation with a rebellion that killed over sixty whites in 1831, the "peculiar institution" fastened itself upon consciences North and South with very different results. The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833, soon had chapters scattered everywhere except in the South. In New England, New York, and the newer states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, abolition societies multiplied; while in Virginia, the Carolinas, and the rest of the South, postmasters refused to handle anti-slavery literature and slave owners staunchly defended their right to own human property.

In a republic founded on the ideals of liberty and equality, it is no wonder that abolition drew the most dedicated individuals to its cause. Women as well as men could deplore the paradox of slavery in the land of freedom and could feel the moral outrage against the holding of human beings in bondage. But, ironically, in the age of reform, women reformers themselves were held in another kind of bondage, that imposed upon their sex by custom and convention, a set of gender prescriptions that, among other things, decreed that a woman's place was in the home, and that speaking in public before an audience of men would "unsex" her.

This view of women as delicate creatures, confined to private spaces and excluded from public discourse, developed as the nation's first industrial and urban growth began. As towns and cities grew, and commerce enlarged beyond the bounds of shop and local market, a quiet revolution transformed the lives of the nation's families: home and workplace, for hundreds of years under the same roof, began to separate. Woman's proper

"sphere" was the home; man's, the public spaces of business and politics. The ideal woman was a creature of hearth and home: pious, virginal until marriage, skilled in all the domestic arts, and above all, submissive to her husband. The male author of a book entitled *The Sphere and Duties of Woman* wrote that marriage was "that sphere for which woman was originally intended, and to which she is so exactly fitted to adorn and bless, as the wife, the mistress of a home, the solace, the aid and the counselor of that ONE, for whose sake alone the world is of any consequence to her."

How could such a sequestered individual take part in public life? She might be, and in fact was encouraged to be, active in societies composed of other women and devoted to various charitable causes, but she was not to soil herself in the public arena, elbow to elbow, as it were, with men. In 1834, for example, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society allowed women to speak out—but only to each other. Nevertheless, similar societies soon appeared in other cities. As time passed, some women, employing abolitionist rhetoric, became conscious of their own subordinate position in a society that confined them to "woman's sphere"—home and family—while giving to men the opportunities for public action. One such woman was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) who was to devote most of her long and productive life to the cause of women's rights.

Born in Johnstown, New York, a small industrial community overlooking the Mohawk River Valley, Elizabeth grew up surrounded by wealth, privilege, a houseful of servants, and the painful knowledge that her father wished she had been a boy. Of the eleven children born to the Cadys, only Elizabeth and three of her sisters lived past twenty. Judge Daniel Cady mourned the deaths of five sons, and nothing the young Elizabeth could do to please him made up for that. She studied Greek; she learned to ride; she read her father's law books; but the highest praise she could win from him was "Ah, you should have been a boy." She longed to go to college, but no college in that day admitted women, and so she was educated at the Troy Female Seminary. In 1840, against her parents' wishes, twenty-

five-year-old Elizabeth married an abolitionist and journalist, Henry Stanton. She met him at the home of her cousin, Gerrit Smith, who was himself devoted to the antislavery cause. Elizabeth shared Henry Stanton's passion for reform (they agreed to omit the word "obey" from their marriage ceremony), and their honeymoon was a trip to London to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. A number of other American abolitionists, men and women, were also in attendance, and it was there that Elizabeth met the woman who would become her lifelong friend and collaborator in the cause of women's rights, Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793–1880).

A Nantucket sea captain's daughter, brought up as a devout Quaker, Lucretia Coffin saw women taking part as equals in the Society of Friends, and in a community where most of the men spent much of their time at sea, she also saw women managing households and businesses without a male presence. Educated in Boston, and then at a Quaker boarding school near Poughkeepsie, New York, she was made assistant teacher at that school at age fifteen. In 1811, eighteen-year-old Lucretia married a former fellow teacher, James Mott. Their marriage would last fifty-seven years.

Between 1812 and 1828 she bore him six children, four daughters and two sons, one of whom died in infancy. Religious concerns after her son's death deepened her faith, and in 1821 Lucretia Mott became a Quaker minister. Following Quaker teachings on the evil of slavery, she soon gave up using cotton cloth and cane sugar—the products of slave labor. In 1834 she helped found the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1838 she was one of the organizers of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. She calmly braved the wrath of anti-abolitionist mobs who set fire to a building in which she spoke, threatened her house, and tarred and feathered a fellow abolitionist. In that instance she demanded that the mob take her instead of her male colleague, declaring, "I ask no courtesy at your hands on account of my sex."

Lucretia Mott met Elizabeth Cady Stanton in London at the Anti-Slavery Convention in the summer of 1840, when Mott was forty-seven and Stanton twenty-five. When they, along



with all the other women present, were denied seats on the convention floor and relegated to the gallery, the two shared their indignation at this demeaning treatment and agreed that something ought to be done about women's rights. Age was no barrier to their friendship. Both were intellectually gifted, strong-willed, energetic women, and both had experienced firsthand the discrimination against their sex. Arm in arm, they walked about London together, the one diminutive, intense-looking, with dark eyes and graying hair; the other a slender young woman whose cherubic face and ringlets belied her feminist convictions. They vowed to keep in touch, but the Motts lived in Philadelphia, and the Stantons, after two years in Johnstown and five years in Boston, settled in Seneca Falls, in upstate New York. After Boston—where the Stantons had numbered among their friends the ex-slave-turned-abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the poets John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell, the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Transcendentalists Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—young Mrs. Stanton found life in Seneca Falls very dull indeed. She found no one among its 4,000 people who shared her interests, and the incessant, repetitive demands of running a household weighed heavily upon her. She now had three small boys, born in 1842, 1844, and 1845. She wrote letters to friends and tried to find solace in religion, but longed for intellectual stimulation. Once she managed to spend a day in Boston with Lucretia Mott, and again the two talked of women's rights. They even considered holding a women's rights meeting in Boston. Stanton also discussed women's rights with Frederick Douglass, but nothing came of the plan for a convention. At the time, Lucretia Mott was deeply involved in Quaker religious controversies and was not in good health. She may have declined to take an active role, and Stanton may have felt unequal to acting alone. The two continued to correspond, but it was not until 1848, when the Motts paid a visit to Waterloo, New York, three miles from Seneca Falls, that the two women met again. On a July afternoon, these two and three of their friends decided to take a bold step: they resolved to hold a women's rights convention at