

# FIGHTING CHANGE



THE STRUGGLE OVER  
WOMAN SUFFRAGE  
AND BLACK SUFFRAGE  
IN RECONSTRUCTION  
AMERICA

FAYE E. DUDDEN

# Fighting Chance

*The Struggle over Woman Suffrage and  
Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America*

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# Fighting Chance





# Introduction

She dipped her pen into a tincture of white racism and sketched a reference to a nightmarish figure, the black rapist. If the nation gives the vote to black men but not to women, she wrote, it will encourage “fearful outrages on womanhood, especially in the southern states.” If the Fifteenth Amendment is passed, she warned, woman’s “degradation” will be complete and “persecutions, insults, horrors” will descend upon her.<sup>1</sup> It was February 1869 and the Ku Klux Klan was terrorizing the South, but the author of these words was no female Klan member. She was feminist pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton editorializing in the *Revolution*, the newspaper she and Susan B. Anthony had been publishing for over a year. Stanton and Anthony repeatedly predicted rape—“fearful outrages”—and insisted that black men were their enemies, “more hostile to woman than any class of men in the country.”<sup>2</sup>

A long-standing alliance, marked by incompatibility but durable nonetheless, was breaking up. How did the advocates of woman suffrage come to this? How did black rights and women’s rights, causes that had formerly collaborated, come to such a rupture? At the same time she laced her editorials with racist resentments, Elizabeth Cady Stanton also wrote openly of her regret at “this antagonism with [black] men whom we respect, whose wrongs we pity, and whose hopes we would fain help them realize.”<sup>3</sup> This falling-out, this “antagonism,” has been called “one of the saddest divorces in American history.”<sup>4</sup> In the upshot, black men would get the vote in 1870 and women would have to wait for suffrage until fifty years later.

Looking at the question largely as a matter of personalities, or assuming that, as a practical matter, woman suffrage lay far in the future, historians have concluded that Stanton and Anthony’s racist outburst reflected their individual biases and/or political naïveté. How could they have believed they had a chance to win the vote when they had no mass movement and it would take decades more to build one? And if they had no chance to win the vote themselves, why should they have so meanly opposed black men’s voting rights, except out of

bigotry? Yet the race-gender split of 1869 cannot simply be explained as a product of racism among white feminists, although racism there was, and plenty of it. A fuller explanation demands reexamining the assumption that woman suffrage was “ahead of its time” in the Reconstruction era.

In theory, the 1860s should have been a propitious time for the women's movement. By the late 1850s, activists had developed a set of arguments that appealed to American society “from every standpoint of justice, religion and logic” and as Stanton said, men had yet to make “a fair, logical argument on the other side.”<sup>8</sup> The women's movement also had part of the resources they needed, because they were rich in human assets. A group of remarkably talented individuals had assembled around the annual woman's rights conventions, radical women and men who tried, by their limited lights, to “seize the time” in this rare and roiling moment of American history.

Their movement began in the 1830s, springing up within the ranks of activists who demanded both the immediate emancipation of the slaves and equal rights for free people of color—proposals so radical most Americans regarded them as sheer fanaticism. Abolitionists coalesced in the American Anti-Slavery Society under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison, whose bright-eyed intensity spurred others to question conventional wisdom and follow abstract principles—principles like “all men are created equal”—*wherever* they led. “Do right, though the heavens fall,” abolitionists told each other, refusing all compromise or concern about practical policy. When Garrison brought two southern white women, Sarah and Angelina Grimké of South Carolina, into the public spotlight to testify against slavery, he set in motion a new dynamic. The Grimkés soon found themselves condemned as women for having spoken publicly, drew obvious parallels between the bondage of slaves and the subordination of women, and then began to speak and write on *women's* rights. Meanwhile slavery's defenders and apologists reacted to the American Anti-Slavery Society with unanticipated ferocity. Southern slaveholders put a price on Garrison's head, northern bigots stoned abolitionist speakers and burned their meeting halls, and a split developed in the American Anti-Slavery Society over how to respond. In 1840, practical-minded incrementalists peeled off to take the fight against slavery into the political realm, while Garrisonians disavowed politics, famously condemning the Constitution as a “covenant with death and a pact with hell” for condoning human bondage.

Many women stayed with Garrison because he insisted women's rights could not be separated from those of black people and of all humanity, while political abolitionists tended to see women's rights as a distraction. A women's movement was being born, and Lucretia Mott, a composed, determined, and eloquent Philadelphia Quaker, led the way by advocating women's full participation in biracial antislavery activism and embodying its principles in her daily life. Mott

was a revelation to a new generation of abolitionist women including Lucy Stone, an Oberlin graduate with a gift for antislavery oratory. Like other Garrisonians, Stone moved outside the established churches and political organizations to pursue a vision of a radical equality of souls in which race and sex were both just “accidents of the body.”<sup>6</sup> Wendell Phillips, perhaps the most prominent, eloquent Garrisonian, became the women’s most important male ally. Phillips defended the women delegates’ right to be seated at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 and subsequently crusaded for both abolition and women’s rights. In an age of great orators, Wendell Phillips stood preeminent: he made thousands as a paid lyceum speaker but delivered his spell-binding speeches for free on behalf of the slave or the woman.

The women’s movement crystallized in 1848, in the small upstate New York town of Seneca Falls, where a young mother named Elizabeth Cady Stanton found the words for her discontent by reworking the most famous phrasing in the American political creed: “We hold these truths to be self evident. That all men *and women* are created equal.” And she proposed the most radical of all the various resolutions at the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention, one that claimed the right to vote. Lucretia Mott feared that Stanton would make the cause “ridiculous” by demanding suffrage, but Frederick Douglass, the famous fugitive slave who was publishing his own newspaper in Rochester, had come down to Seneca Falls for the occasion and he stepped forward. The ballot was the guarantor of all other rights, Douglass argued, and women must be bold. Together he and Stanton persuaded the members of the convention to approve the demand. It was the beginning of a long relationship between Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the cause of woman suffrage.

As the women’s movement gathered momentum in the 1850s, meeting annually in woman’s rights conventions, a schoolteacher named Susan B. Anthony joined the cause and by the eve of the Civil War three vigorous, veteran activists—Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—emerged in leadership roles.<sup>7</sup> They first met in 1851 or 1852, and in the intervening years they had convened meetings, written, petitioned, lectured—had even worn the bloomer costume until ridicule wore them down. Each labored for other causes, especially abolition, which left them hardened to social ostracism, accustomed to being “warned at the dinner table, avoided in the street.”<sup>8</sup> But the “W.R. work,” as Anthony called it, had increasingly emerged as their common compass point—their “true North.”

Lucy Stone, who was employed as an agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society before she became a woman’s rights orator, blazed a trail ahead of both Stanton and Anthony. A “tiny creature” with a sweet, girlish manner and a “musical and delicious” voice, Stone argued that gaining rights would make women *more* useful and “womanly” not less, and she became so popular with

general audiences that at one point the impresario P. T. Barnum tried to hire her for a series of lectures.<sup>9</sup> Although she vowed to remain single, Lucy Stone finally succumbed in 1855 to a determined campaign of wooing by Henry Blackwell, an entrepreneurial go-getter from a large reform-oriented family.<sup>10</sup>

Stone kept her own name and their marriage became a highly publicized experiment in the new, more equal marital relationship that the women's movement promoted. In private, the marriage was difficult. While Blackwell went on the road pursuing business opportunities, few of his investments turned a profit, and after their daughter was born, Blackwell pressed Stone to stay home and care for the child, even though her speaking engagements generated their only steady income. Stone's self-confidence wavered, and her letters revealed signs of anxiety or depression. Cut off from her work, worried about money, and suffering from migraine headaches, Lucy Stone became absorbed in family responsibilities and marital problems in the late 1850s just as the women's rights movement was picking up speed.

Stone's absence left a gap in women's rights leadership, and in stepped Susan B. Anthony, a relentless fighter with big ideas. One of her fellow activists had dubbed her "Napoleon," and the nickname stuck. Her family was immersed in the reform movements that flourished in the antebellum years in upstate New York: Susan's parents and her sister actually attended a women's rights convention *before* she did. Anthony was a working woman with a slender purse. She wanted to attend the Second National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1851 but could not afford to make the trip. Appalled that women teachers like herself were paid less than half of men's wages, she went to teacher's conventions to protest but found that the women were expected to remain silent while the "old fogies" droned on.<sup>11</sup>

As a "strong-minded" single woman, Anthony was mocked in the press as an unattractive reject, and she developed a thick skin. Colleagues in the movement knew her as reliable, good-hearted, and high-minded, but she was also inclined to be bull-headed and blunt. Anthony was often tongue-tied in front of audiences and suffered through scores of embarrassing failures, so she could neither support herself as an orator, as Stone had done, nor hope to replace Stone as the voice of the woman's rights movement. Ultimately she was hired as the New York State agent for William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society and thus found paid work as an activist. Anthony finished out the 1850s juggling women's rights, abolition, and a need to support herself.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born to a prominent family in upstate New York's Mohawk Valley, where her father had a distinguished legal career for over fifty years. Daniel Cady was legendary in the art of cross-examination and famous for pithy, compelling summations. Elizabeth had her father's brains and talents but as a woman she could not follow him into the law, though she picked up an

informal legal education from a succession of her father's law students who boarded in their home. Her cousin Gerrit Smith introduced Elizabeth Cady to an expanded family circle and a commitment to radical causes. Smith inherited wealth from his father, a partner of John Jacob Astor, and gave generously to support a host of reforms, from temperance and pacifism to women's rights, but he was most devoted to abolition and was a determined advocate of using political means to get it. His home in rural Madison County was a stopover on the Underground Railroad, and there in the fall of 1839 Elizabeth Cady spent bright autumn days riding the countryside and starlit evenings at antislavery meetings full of "thrilling oratory."<sup>12</sup> One of the thrilling orators was Henry B. Stanton, and she accepted his proposal of marriage despite her father's disapproval.

The Stantons apparently had a complicated marriage, though most of the details have been lost in the destruction of family papers carried out by them or their children. Henry Stanton was intelligent, witty, and loving, but also impractical and self-absorbed. In his absent-minded way he could tolerate his wife's activism when other men might have tried to stop her. Among other things, the couple shared a love of oratory and an interest in "all political questions."<sup>13</sup> She was smart and sunny-tempered, and their marriage never dented her self-regard. But when Henry's work in politics, law, and journalism took him away from their home in Seneca Falls nearly ten months a year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's exasperation with the isolation and boredom of housewifery famously spurred her determination to call the very first women's rights convention in American history in 1848. In subsequent years, feeling "like a caged lioness," she relied on her friend Susan B. Anthony to help her work for reform at a distance.<sup>14</sup> She continued to read voraciously in law, history, and political economy even while tied down by her growing family, and by 1859 Elizabeth Cady Stanton had become through her writings a major theoretician of the women's rights cause. But as the mother of seven children, the eldest seventeen and the youngest a newborn, she was at that point the least active of the three women's rights leaders.

The end of the 1850s found these women and their male allies at the center of the action, possessed of strong arguments and serious talent but still in need of money for the practical work of their movement—money to support activists, pay speakers' expenses, publish newspapers, and print petitions. Almost all social movements are underfunded, but women's rights particularly so because the laws prevented married women from owning property. The early women's movement faced a "catch-22" of rights and resources: to campaign for their rights, women needed resources, yet in the absence of those rights, women could not acquire many resources from their most ardent supporters—other women. Then in 1858 and 1859, the women's movement became the beneficiary of handsome bequests from two Boston abolitionists, Francis Jackson and Charles Hovey.

Finally they had some money—what Anthony called “the vital power of all movements—the wood and water of the engine.”<sup>15</sup> They had just begun to use it to campaign when the Civil War broke out. Though the war disrupted their plans, as they shifted gears to campaign for abolition, it also precipitated the end of slavery and thus brought about a moment of extraordinary political realignment—the chaotic, desperate years historians call Reconstruction. Now at last these activist women had arguments, resources, *and* political opportunity.<sup>16</sup> It seemed that history had dealt them all the cards they needed.

But in 1865 their longtime ally Wendell Phillips insisted that it was “the Negro’s Hour.” Phillips told woman suffrage advocates they should defer to black (male) suffrage, because simultaneous agitation for woman suffrage would harm black men’s chances. Stanton and Anthony thought that simultaneous agitation for woman suffrage would not harm and might even help prospects for black (male) suffrage, and they had a right to try. At first Stanton and Anthony tried to pursue the traditional abolitionist goal of human rights for all—votes for both black men *and* all women—through a new organization called the American Equal Rights Association. But their AERA came to grief in 1867 in Kansas, where referenda on black suffrage and woman suffrage were both defeated. After Kansas, Stanton and Anthony embraced racist Democrats and narrowed their focus to woman suffrage only as they desperately sought some way to win the vote. By 1869 they had run out of options but could not bring themselves to accept the Fifteenth Amendment, which protected black men’s right to vote but left women behind. With Stanton’s ugly rhetoric about black-on-white rape, the AERA’s coalition across race and gender lines was shattered. The women’s movement split into two rival organizations, Stanton and Anthony’s National Woman Suffrage Association, which opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, and Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell’s American Woman Suffrage Association, which supported it. Thus in four short years, woman suffrage had been defeated, the old alliance between black rights and women’s rights advocates had fallen apart, and a schism had split the women’s movement. Who or what was to blame?

Stanton and Anthony themselves offered the first explanation in the 1880s in their monumental *History of Woman Suffrage*, where they retold the story to justify themselves by omitting information and reorganizing events. They argued that woman suffrage might have been won in Kansas if only more abolitionists had been true to both causes, but they also commented bitterly on the retrograde attitudes of black men.<sup>17</sup> Mostly, however, Stanton and Anthony bracketed the entire episode by insisting that its real importance lay in its sequel: having been deserted by their old allies, women had been forced to form their own independent women’s movement, which was the historic achievement essential to women’s emancipation. “Standing alone we learned our power,” they wrote.<sup>18</sup>

When Eleanor Flexner published her *Century of Struggle* in 1959, the events of the late 1860s were finally analyzed by a historian working at arm's length. Flexner built her analysis on the assumption that woman suffrage had been "ahead of its time" in the 1860s. She implicitly affirmed that black male suffrage *was* timely, and Anthony and Stanton's position therefore reflected political naïveté as well as racial bias. They "failed to see that such a step [woman suffrage] was still far ahead of practical political possibilities," she wrote.<sup>19</sup> Since failure was inevitable, Flexner did not sort out events or adjudicate blame, and she devoted fewer than ten pages to the densely packed, pivotal years between 1865 and 1869.

Beginning in the 1970s, "second wave" feminists rediscovered the early women's movement and found much to admire in its founding mothers, including Stanton and Anthony's fiery radicalism on issues that ranged from sex to suffrage.<sup>20</sup> The second wave also fostered a new generation of professionally trained historians who studied women's history, though they mostly ignored suffrage in favor of topics like women's work or education. They imposed chronological coherence on women's rights historiography with the metaphor of waves, the "first wave" of feminism ending when the vote was won, and though it proved useful in other ways, the wave metaphor downgraded the events of the 1860s into a mid-wave hiccup rather than a full-scale turning point. But one second wave scholar explored this vexing episode and insisted on its importance. In her *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (1978) Ellen DuBois concluded that the outcome—a truly independent women's movement—was indeed most important, just as Stanton and Anthony had said.<sup>21</sup> DuBois portrayed them as politically aware and engaged, battling the Republican Party and turning to labor and working women because they recognized that economic and political power were related. In her view, Reconstruction politics gave these women an opening, but eventually it defeated them: the failure to win woman suffrage was "far less a result of hostilities within the movement than it was an aspect of the defeat of Reconstruction radicalism in general."<sup>22</sup> DuBois did not hesitate to label Stanton and Anthony's alliances and arguments "racist," but ultimately she reached a conclusion that emphasized their achievement, not their shortcomings.

In the 1980s, scholars of African American history began to point out that there was little to celebrate in the emergence of a women's movement that was nearly all white and deeply tinged with racism.<sup>23</sup> They challenged the long tradition of viewing the history of the women's movement through white eyes, insisted that black experience and perspective were important, and offered a strong critique of Anthony and Stanton's racist words and deeds.<sup>24</sup> A new generation treated the founding mothers of feminism to critical, iconoclastic debunking. Some "Stanton skeptics" even asserted that racism had always been fundamental not only to Stanton's beliefs but to feminism itself.<sup>25</sup> This argument



was, however, typically based on events of the late nineteenth century rather than the 1860s.<sup>26</sup> Just as Flexner assumed that the bitter and contentious breakup in 1869 was inevitable because woman suffrage was ahead of its time, the Stanton skeptics perhaps assumed it was inevitable because of white racism.

The key to a new and deeper understanding of this crucial episode in women's history lies in Stanton and Anthony's belief that they actually had a "fighting chance" to win woman suffrage. Within the political disorder unleashed by the Civil War and its aftermath, that belief was *not* naïve—instead, it was rooted in considerable political savvy and a strong sense of history. And it explains Stanton and Anthony's actions and attitudes: they aimed for a limited breakthrough in a bellwether state, they came close to it in Kansas, and after that their sense that a historic window of opportunity was closing led them to compromise and finally to abandon their egalitarian commitments. Stanton and Anthony came to a sorry pass by pursuing fleeting and finite political opportunities—opportunities they believed, quite rightly, would never recur in their lifetime. Political opportunism, not naïveté, drove them onward: had they not believed they had a fighting chance, they would not have reached so far or stooped so low.

The conviction that they had a fighting chance meant that they needed funding urgently, and historians have not realized how a hidden conflict about money exacerbated their slide into overt racism. Wendell Phillips used his power as trustee over the Hovey bequest to deny Stanton and Anthony money to which they were entitled, money they desperately needed to campaign, and eventually their resentments about money spilled over from Phillips himself to the African American men he championed.<sup>27</sup> The perception of their odds also led them to argue instrumentally, and Stanton's lawyerly habit of arguing "in the alternative" as she sought to persuade white male legislators and voters resulted in a combination of both egalitarian claims and appeals to racism—a combination that set up a slippery slope down which she eventually moved to racist arguments alone. As the Stanton skeptics insist, racism is terribly important, but it should be accounted for as well as identified, explained and not explained away.

Primary sources not available decades ago confirm that Reconstruction era politics were crucial, but they also deepen our understanding of those politics.<sup>28</sup> Stanton and Anthony did not agree with Phillips that fighting for woman suffrage would harm black men's chance to win voting rights, and at first their experience in the American Equal Rights Association bore this out. In the AERA's campaign in New York in 1866–67, they cooperated with Frederick Douglass and other black activists who opposed the Fourteenth Amendment. This cooperation has been downplayed because Stanton and Anthony gave a confusing and inaccurate account of their relationship to the Fourteenth Amendment in the *History of Woman Suffrage*. Although the AERA campaign was brief, while it lasted, joint work did not damage black men's chances, and conflicts between woman suffrage