

# THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

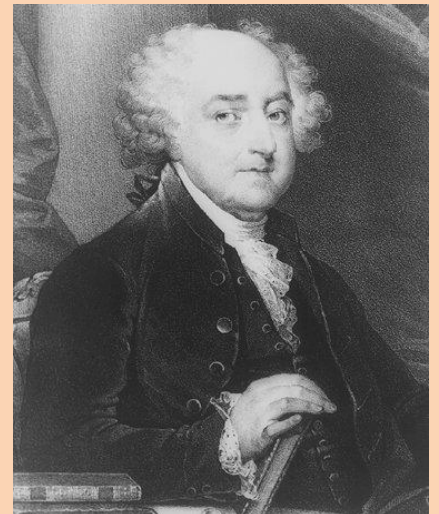
After the writing of the Declaration of Independence, Abigail Adams implored the following her husband, John, and the Second Continental Congress ...



... In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bounds by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

**John Adams replied** ... because their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience, in the great business of life, and the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares.

Some love note, huh?



# WOMEN DURING THE REVOLUTION

Women had been forgotten by the men of society in the early history of the United States. The legal status of women in the United States during the Revolution was dependent upon English common law and the local laws of each colony. Such laws were very restrictive of the rights of women, especially those among married women.



The English common law right to “coverture” gave husbands legal rights to all of the property of marriage, including anything a woman brought into the marriage and the wages she may earn if (and that was a big if) she worked outside the home. Divorce was rare at the time, but if a woman chose to divorce her husband, the man would receive custody of the children because he controlled the means of support.

**The** husband had all of the power in the marriage. Some law actually stated that “the very being of legal existence of the woman is suspended during the course of marriage, or at least incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything.” In other words, when married, women were civilly “dead”. Even so, 90 percent of women chose to get married, because the alternative was being called a spinster (an old maid, an outcast).

Women were active in the revolution, however. They spun and weaved for troops, and female associations raised funds, provided clothing and food for the army, cared for the sick and wounded, managed farms and businesses while husbands and family were away, and even defended their homes at times our homes. They began to challenge the common belief that women should stay in the home and stay out of the public eye. They saw it as part of their “republican motherhood”. Women felt they had a patriotic duty to raise their sons to be virtuous citizens, and they wanted to must be active in the moral improvement of their communities. Of course, they could not forget their domestic duty in their own homes!



**Social, political, and economic equality were far off, however ...**

# THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY

As the century turned, women continued to play a small yet active role in their communities. However, they were still relegated to a separate status in society, as expectations for women and men remained different and distinct. Women were expected to stay in the woman's sphere, or the so called "cult of domesticity". Women were supposed to do, for lack of a better, un-politically correct term, "women's work". They were expected to be tender and submissive, self-sacrificing, deeply religious, and untouched by sexual desire.

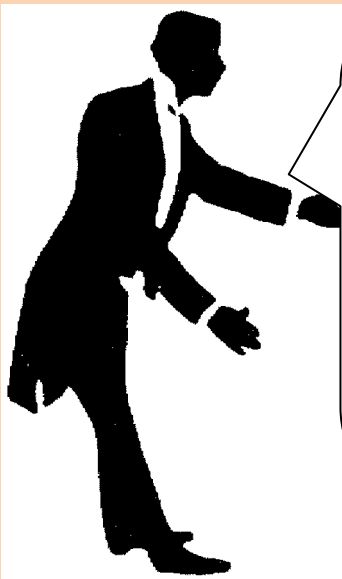
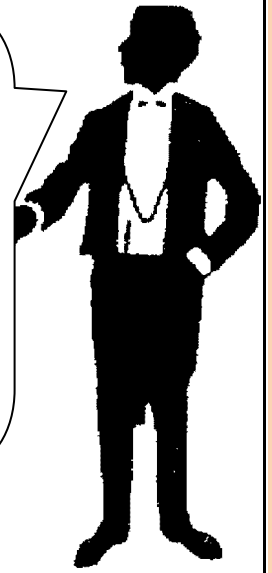
***And why should women be stuck in this so called "role"? We can do anything that men can do!***



*You need to stay at home, devote yourself to your husband and children, and avoid productive labor and the political arena. That's your role!*



*Look at you. You are a delicate flower that may break upon falling! Doctors have said that the only physical exercise that you women should do is housework. So get cleaning, lady!*



*In addition, as the good book says, "wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands". The bible tells us that women must be silent and submissive. That's why women have no public roles or leadership in the church – except for those peculiar Quakers.*

*And, may I add, that those doctors have also warned about the small size of a woman's brain. Extensive education in difficult subjects like mathematics may lead to brain fever. You do not have the capacity to vote. That's why you follow the lead of men – you have inferior minds.*



These thoughts only applied to the women of the middle class. Women that were forced to work due to their unfortunate social status - African Americans, poverty stricken women, and immigrant women, compelled by poverty to work, could not be "True Women".

# GETTING INVOLVED IN REFORM

While the “cult of domesticity” remained part of popular culture, society was changing – and the role of women was changing as well. As industry grew, so did cities, and so did the issues that women faced. Women became more involved in society, and females were able to go to school in New England. Not too far down the road, women would be attending college.

Still, most women had little to no access to any schools that could help us become anything but a housewife or mother. Some could become teachers, midwives, or textile workers, or maybe make a few pennies taking in laundry or boarders. Even if women found work, their wages were much lower than men’s wages. Women had no way to change their economic or social status because of their lack of political status. Women couldn’t vote, hold public office, serve on juries, or even sue someone.

By the 1830s and 1840s, however, women became more active in church. The Second Great Awakening, a broad religious revival that swept across the western frontier and northeastern United States in between the 1790s and 1830s, allowed women to have more of a public voice, since they were seen as having moral superiority over men. Women became more involved in many of the moral crusades in our nation. They pushed for temperance (against alcohol), crusaded against child labor and for better working conditions for men and women, and tried to help those in need, stricken by poverty. Their largest and most active area of reform was the abolition of slavery.



**Methodist camp meeting of the Second Great Awakening, 1839**  
(Source: Wikimedia Commons--public domain)

# THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

As the abolition movement spread throughout the north, the power of women increased within the movement. While the group of women involved in the movement remained small, they developed the skills – speaking, petitioning, fundraising, and organizing meetings – that would help them in the future as they pushed for rights for women. Feminist leaders made strides as the movement started to take shape.



*I, Angelina Grimke, was a leader in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. At the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, I made a controversial resolution that it was “the duty of woman ... to plead the cause of the oppressed in our land, and to do all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse, and the influence of her example, to overthrow the horrible system of slavery”. Many women thought this idea of becoming active in politics would hurt our movement, but I wouldn’t back down.*

*I, Lucretia Mott, helped my friend’s resolution pass – although it was far from unanimous. Still, we began to use our pen to send the message to Congress about slavery, and by 1838, our society sent over 400,000 signatures to Congress – and 70 percent of them were from the hands of women. And to those that feel that speaking out is “unwomanly” and against the ideals of the church, they must understand that speaking is a must for us to reach our goal of being seen as equal to men.*



*Along with my sister, I, Sarah Grimke, continued to fight for the abolition of slavery. As we did, we linked the oppression of slaves to the oppression of women, since we “ought to feel a peculiar sympathy in the colored man’s wrong, for like him, [she has] been accused of mental inferiority ...Men and women were created equal; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for a man to do, is right for a woman to do.”*

*I, William Lloyd Garrison, welcomed women into the abolition crusade, as did many other abolitionist leaders. While some felt that women should be on the sidelines in the movement, I hoped that they could become an active part of the crusade against slavery. When organizers of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London refused to seat female delegates at the convention, I gave up my voice and vote on the floor and joined the women in the balcony.*



*When I, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, saw this public display of second class citizenship for women, I knew something must be done. I felt that we could never get freedom for slaves until we gain our own freedom. I spoke with my friend Lucretia, and we agreed that the time had come when a women’s rights organization should be formed.*

# ON THE EVE OF SENECA FALLS

It took eight years between the World Anti-Slavery Convention and the first women's rights convention in the United States. During that time, the movement grew rather slowly as many active women continued to oppose slavery by boycotting slave-produced products and opposing the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico. More women were entering the working class, facing additional challenges of earning wages and also raising families. As the challenges grew, women finally met to air their views and grievances in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Imagine this dialogue between three citizens on the street ...



**CITIZEN #1** - Do you really think we need to have a women's rights convention? I have heard that many states are increasing the legal and economic rights for women. Here in New York, married women now have control over the property they bring into a marriage.

**CITIZEN #2** - Sure - but what about the wages they earn while they are married? That money still belongs to their husband.

**CITIZEN #3** - And, women can not sue without their husband's permission, so why would any man allow such a lawsuit to happen and possibly lose something?

**CITIZEN #1** - You're absolutely right. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were all too correct in calling for this convention. Didn't you see the advertisement in the local paper? It called for a meeting to "discuss the social, legal, and civil rights of woman" - here in Seneca Falls.

**CITIZEN #3** - Unfortunately, participants have only been given a few days notice for the convention. Still, it is estimated that over 200 women will be in attendance - as well as 40 men! The great Frederick Douglass will be in attendance - he has always been a supporter of the equality of women.

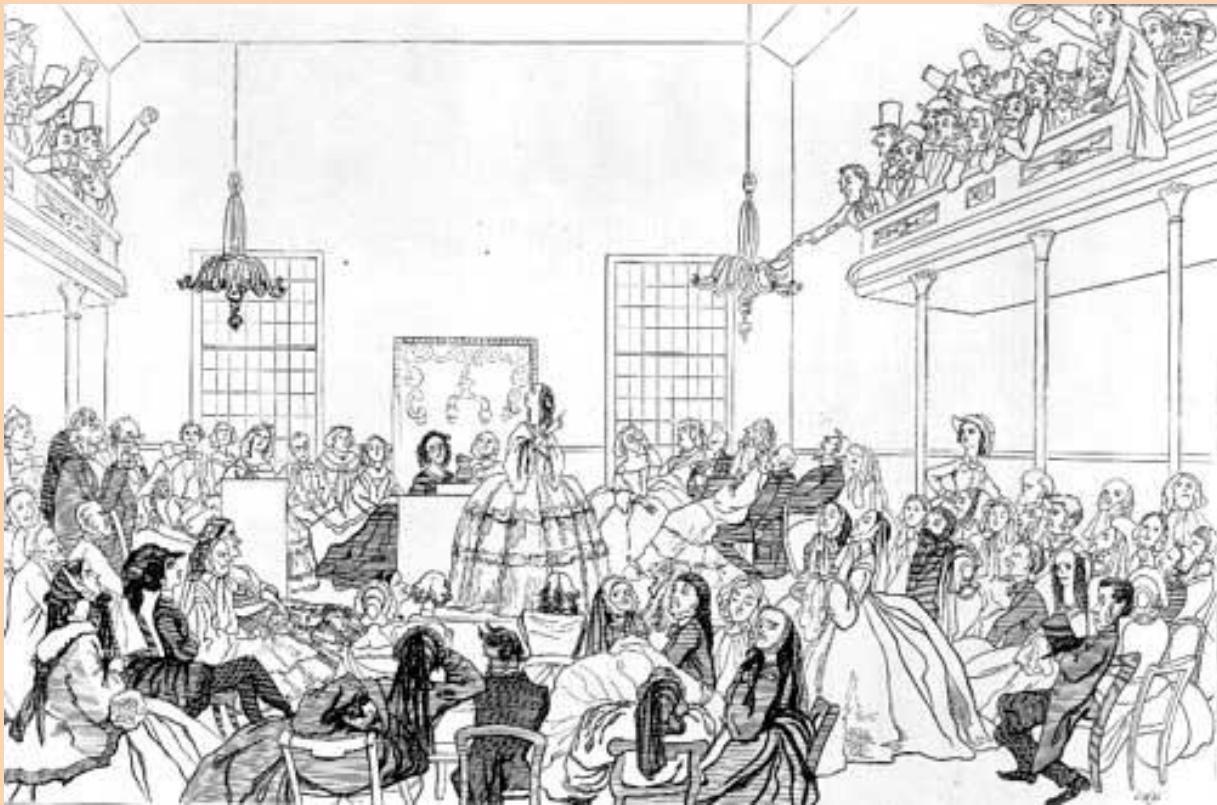
**CITIZEN #2** - I understand that Ms. Stanton has a list of resolutions to present at the convention, including demanding the right to equality in education and the workplace, to speak in public, and equality in the church.

**CITIZEN #1** - I hope that one of the resolutions will be the call for suffrage. Nothing is more important in my mind than the elective franchise - in other words, the right to vote.

**CITIZEN #3** - It will be the essential weapon that we can use to secure all of our other rights. Frederick Douglass agrees!

**CITIZEN #1** - That's still a controversial topic. Even most women in society do not approve of such a right.

**CITIZEN #2** - We will see!



"Seneca Falls Convention." Image. Library of Congress. *American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 18 Nov. 2010.

The Seneca Falls Convention in July of 1848 was the opening moment of the first American Women's Rights Movement. The two day convention publicized the issues important to women, and a Declaration of Sentiments was written to state the opinions and grievances of women. About 300 men and women attended, and Lucretia Mott's husband chaired the proceedings. The group passed a controversial Declaration of Sentiments, including 18 grievances against the male dominated society. After the declaration, 12 resolutions were passed, including a very controversial call for women's suffrage. After the convention, women faced a huge amount of criticism for stepping "out of their sphere". Still, the Seneca Falls Convention helped lead to other similar conventions in the North and Midwest. Many states began to pass additional laws protecting the rights of women. While the movement would take a back seat as the nation split in two, the battle for women's rights had begun.

Your task now is to read the actual text of the Declaration of Sentiments, paraphrase the selected sections, and respond to the short questions at the end of the document. This will prepare you for our first activity when we return from Thanksgiving, when we ask the questions "How far have we come since Seneca Falls?"

**Want to learn more about Seneca Falls and the Declaration of Sentiments? Try the following resources:**

**Not For Ourselves Alone** (<http://www.pbs.org/stantonanthony/>) is the PBS companion site to their documentary on EC Stanton and SB Anthony - a great site!

**NA Woman Suffrage Association Collection** (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/naw/nawshome.html>) is a Library of Congress site with countless primary sources that document the suffrage campaign from 1848-1921.

**Living the Legacy: The Women's Rights Movement 1848 – 1998** (<http://www.legacy98.org/>) is sponsored by the [National Women's History Project](#), this site was developed in honor of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention. The site contains history, a timeline, current issues, curriculum ideas, and a student essay contest, among other topics.