

## Chapter Two

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# “Let Facts Be Submitted to a Candid World”: 1840 to 1848

At the end of the long debate that banned them from the Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton “wended their way arm in arm down Great Queen Street.” During the next nine days, they “kept up a brisk fire” of words aimed at “the unfortunate gentlemen” who shared their hotel, one of whom packed his luggage and “withdrew after the first encounter.” Not eager to return to the convention and sit behind a humiliating curtain, Mott and Stanton spent much of their time walking in the June splendor of London’s parks, where they “agreed to hold a woman’s rights convention on their return to America.”

But life got in the way. Lucretia Mott was one of the busiest women of her era, for there was little of Philadelphia civic life in which she was not involved.



Lucretia Mott (Library of Congress)

By the time of the World Anti-Slavery Convention, she and merchant James Mott had been married for 29 years. He was highly supportive of his unusual wife; she was not only the mother of six, but also had been an ordained Quaker minister for almost two decades. An ardent abolitionist, she spoke in black churches as early as 1829. Moreover, she took it upon herself to boycott

everything produced with slave labor, which meant finding substitutes for such staples as cotton, sugar, coffee, and rice.

When they met in England, Lucretia Mott had been married for longer than 25-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton had been alive. Stanton graduated from Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary, and then became involved in abolitionist activity, where she met journalist Henry Stanton. He was so impressed with her that he agreed to omit the bride’s traditional vow of obedience from their May wedding—and they immediately sailed for London.

After losing the debate, the Motts and Stantons adopted the utilitarian view that it was better if one partner of their marriages was represented at the

convention than none, and the women thus had plenty of time to spend together. Lucretia Mott became a true inspiration for Elizabeth Cady Stanton: “I felt at once a new-born sense of dignity and freedom,” Stanton would write later, for Mott “seemed like a being from some larger planet.” James Mott similarly provided a model for Henry Stanton.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton and one of her children, 1876.  
(From the archives of the Seneca Falls Historical Society)

The Stantons traveled in Europe until November, and then Henry studied law with Elizabeth’s father, a judge in Johnstown, New York.

While she bore the first three of their seven children, he passed the bar and they moved to Boston. During four wonderful years there, she met many inspirational women, including abolitionists Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, and Abbey Kelly Foster—whose husband was so feminist that he cared for their child when she went on lecture tours. In 1847, however, the Stantons again moved to a town where Henry would have fewer attorney competitors: Seneca Falls, New York.

It happened that Lucretia Coffin Mott had relatives nearby. Her youngest sibling, Martha Coffin Wright, lived in Auburn, New York. Mott was much more religious than Wright—who had been expelled from the Society of Friends for her first marriage to a non-Quaker who died young—but the sisters

shared a commitment to liberal ideas. Like most women of their era, their lives were dominated by their anatomy: in July 1848, Martha Wright was pregnant with her seventh child. Her attitudes were unconventional enough that she taught her sons needle skills. One of them, she said, “had knit a bag to put his marbles in.”

Mott stayed with Wright when she came to western New York for the annual meeting of the Society of Friends, and Stanton met them for a tea party at the home of Jane Hunt, who, with her husband Richard, was considered “a prominent Friend near Waterloo,” New York. They were joined by Mary Ann M’Clintock, also a Quaker and a mother; her husband, Thomas, would later assist the women with their activism.

Desperately unhappy in Seneca Falls after the excitement of life in activist Boston, Stanton poured out her woes to her old soulmate Lucretia Mott, and, as Stanton would later write, they “at once returned to the topic they had so often discussed...the propriety of holding a woman’s convention.” With encouragement from the other women, they “decided to put their long-talked-of resolution into action, and before twilight deepened into night, the call was written, and sent to the *Seneca County Courier*.” When it appeared in the paper a few days later, it read:

WOMAN’S RIGHTS CONVENTION—A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women, will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, New York, on Wednesday and Thursday, the 19th and 20th of July, current; commencing at 10 o’clock A.M. During the first day the meeting will be exclusively for women, who are earnestly invited to attend. The public generally are invited to be present on the second day, when Lucretia Mott, of Philadelphia, and other ladies and gentlemen, will address the convention.

The women gathered on Sunday morning at Mary M’Clintock’s home (minus Jane Hunt) to write the documents that would form the agenda for discussion at the meeting—and, as it turned out, set the agenda for American women for more than seven decades. Had they known the gravity of the cause upon which they embarked, it is possible that they would not have undertaken

it: none of the women who met around the parlor table lived to see the achievement of their goals.

At the end of her life, M'Clintock regretted that she was unable to have done more for the cause, but Stanton pointed out the importance of M'Clintock's influence within her own family: her son-in-law, Dr. James Truman of the Pennsylvania School of Dental Surgery, led the fight for the admission of women to dentistry in the 1870s.

According to Stanton, the women were "quite innocent of the herculean labors they proposed," and they systematically set about the task of preparation for the gathering. Joined by Amy Post, Catherine A.F. Stebbins, and others—including husbands and children—they first perused documents from meetings they had attended for the causes of temperance, abolition, and even peace. All, however, "seemed too tame and pacific for the inauguration of a rebellion such as the world had never before seen." Indeed, there was no precedent. From family roles (and unspoken family violence) to the dearth of educational and employment opportunities to the almost complete lack of legal rights and much more, women had problems that no male agenda had ever begun to envision, let alone address.

Finally they hit upon the right format: the nation's Declaration of Independence, which was then 72 years old. Ironically, it would turn out to be exactly another 72 years later, in 1920, when women finally received full enfranchisement. The women's Declaration of Independence thus fell at a precise midpoint of a female version of American history. Of course, those who wrote the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments had no way of foreseeing this long future. Instead, they set about their task with inspiration and even the good humor that comes with the excitement of doing something that will surprise and possibly shock. Stanton wrote later:

It was at once decided to adopt the historic document, with some slight changes such as substituting "all men" for "King George." Knowing that women must have more to complain of than men under any circumstances possibly could, and seeing the Fathers had eighteen grievances, a protracted search was made through statute books, church usages, and the customs of society to find that exact number. Several well-disposed men assisted in collecting the grievances, until,

with the announcement of the eighteenth, the women felt they had enough to go before the world with a good case. One youthful lord remarked, "Your grievances must be grievous indeed, when you are obliged to go to books in order to find them out."

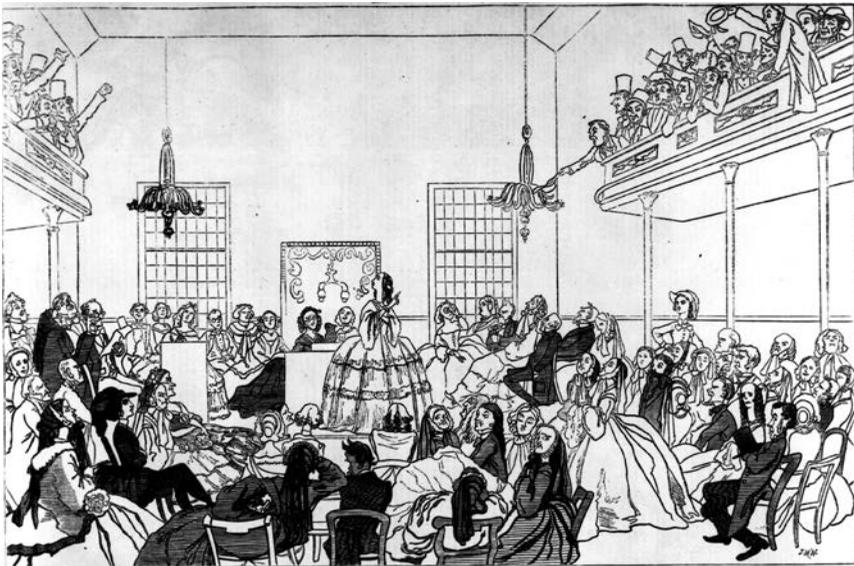
In just three days, these remarkable women had decided to hold a "convention"—without the delegate selection process that precedes most such gatherings—and made all the arrangements for planning it, publicizing it, and preparing an agenda for it. Their declaration was as dramatic as the more famous one Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues had prepared. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was analogous to Jefferson as the document's chief author. With no resources beyond paper, pencil, pens dipped in inkwells, and their powerful intelligence, they framed their thoughts as eternal truths.

**The declaration was ready for** discussion when "the eventful day dawned at last," but those in charge on the morning of July 19, 1848, felt a last-minute panic: the doors of the Wesleyan Methodist church in Seneca Falls, where the meeting was to be held, were firmly locked. One of Stanton's nephews—the son of her sister Harriet Cady Eaton and "an embryo Professor of Yale College"—was boosted through a window and opened the chapel from the inside.

Meanwhile, crowds headed through the town. On a Wednesday morning in July, when they could have been cultivating or mowing or doing any number of the tasks that had to be packed into summer weekdays, some 300 people (of an approximate 8,000 living in Seneca Falls) chose instead to participate in this wildly unusual meeting. Women walked or, in many cases, persuaded their husbands to hitch up the horses to take them to town. The latter was so often true that dozens of men were present, and the leaders decided to ignore their own newspaper announcement that said the first day's discussion would be limited to women. Because so many men were at the church, the women quickly decided that they could remain. In this reversal of their original plans, the women's rights movement accepted an important principle from the beginning: feminism is not necessarily defined by gender.

Confronted by an unexpectedly large crowd, most of the women rapidly felt the inadequacy of their leadership training. Because of the taboo against public speaking by women and because, outside of the Quaker meeting

house, and a handful of female anti-slavery societies, there were no women's organizations, none had experience in parliamentary procedure or the fundamentals of running a meeting. They "shrank from the responsibility of organizing the meeting and leading the discussions," Stanton said, and held "a hasty council around the altar." Because experienced men were "already on the spot," they decided that "this was an occasion when men might make themselves pre-eminently useful." Men could "take the laboring oar through the Convention."



This engraving from *Harper's Weekly* parodies the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. (Library of Congress)

Lucretia Mott, who was "accustomed to public speaking in the Society of Friends, stated the objects of the Convention," while her husband James, as Stanton later described him, stood "tall and dignified, in Quaker costume" as he presided. Frederick Douglass, a decade out of slavery and a recent resident of Rochester, joined in leading the discussion. Mary M'Clintock was appointed secretary—but she did not limit herself to secretarial duty; both she and her sister Elizabeth M'Clintock read "well-written" speeches. Stanton displayed her early talent in doing the same, while Martha Wright "read some satirical articles she had published in the daily papers answering the diatribes on women's sphere." Among the male presenters was Ansel Bascom, a recent delegate