

Chapter Three

“The Spirit of a Snake” and the Spirit of Success, 1848 to 1860

After the excitement of 1848, the women’s movement drew a collective breath and allowed 1849 to pass quietly. In 1850 came a second explosion of women’s rights conventions, and from that year, the revolution would be permanent. That year the movement went national, expanding out of New York with conventions in Ohio and Massachusetts.

Frontier Ohio may seem an odd place to follow the Rochester meeting, but several factors made it logical. It was a haven for young people dissatisfied with life in the staid East, making a new start in what was still considered the West. Second, because only the Ohio River separated it from slave territory on its southern border, the state became an early refuge for escaped slaves—and thus for abolitionists. Finally, Oberlin College, a hotbed of radical ideas, had operated there for almost two decades. The nation’s first college to admit women and blacks when it began in 1833, Oberlin graduated abolitionist lecturer Lucy Stone in 1847, and more shockingly, had yielded to the persistent pleas of Stone’s roommate, Antoinette Brown, to be admitted to its theology department. Both women, while still students, had “lectured at different places in the State” in 1849.

Just as Seneca Falls hosted its famous convention because Elizabeth Cady Stanton lived there, the site of Ohio’s 1850 convention was chosen largely because it was home to Josephine Griffing and other abolitionists. Salem, in eastern Ohio between Akron and Pittsburgh, was known as an “underground railroad” town, welcoming to escaped slaves. It was also the base of the *Anti-*

Slavery Bugle. Griffing frequently wrote for this widely circulated paper; its owners, Oliver and Mariana Johnson, were committed to women's rights as well as to abolition. When the abolitionist and women's rights causes began to diverge in the Civil War era, Griffing would concentrate on the first cause; the postwar Freedman's Bureau was largely her brainchild.

The year was as meaningful as the site, for 1850 saw the adoption of the Fugitive Slave Act, which demanded the return of all escaped slaves to their previous owners. One of the cruelest pieces of legislation Congress ever passed, the act forced people of conscience to choose between what was legal and what was morally right. Because geography made Ohio a likely route to freedom, it had enacted similar laws earlier, which Salem abolitionists defiantly violated. They were encouraged by Abby Kelly, who was one of the first to travel through the state denouncing "the black laws of Ohio"; indeed, one feminist pioneer dated "the agitation of Woman's Rights" in Ohio from Kelly's lectures in 1843. Finally, the state planned a constitutional convention for 1850. Ohio women who had learned through the national press of the 1848 meetings in New York decided, in the words of their report for the first volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, "if the fundamental laws of the State were to be revised and amended, it was a fitting time for them to ask to be recognized."

The women's convention was planned for April 19 and 20, 1850, in Salem's Second Baptist Church. At 10 a.m. Emily Robinson gavelled it to order and



Abby Kelly (Library of Congress)

turned the podium over to Mariana W. Johnson, who read "the call" that stated their aims. They were there "to concert measures to secure to all persons the recognition of equal rights...without distinction of sex or color." Participants were invited "to inquire if the position you now occupy is one appointed by wisdom, and designed to secure the best interests of the human race."

Although these women had no parliamentary experience, they showed none of the timorousness of Seneca Falls and filled organizational

positions with women. They created a business committee of six, chose three secretaries, and named three vice presidents to assist the president, Betsey M. Cowles. Ohio women felt fortunate to have Cowles as their leader: she was establishing a reputation as one of the state's outstanding educators. A teacher since 1825, she had remained single, and, in 1834, organized a Young Ladies Society for Intellectual Improvement. She helped introduce the new concepts of kindergarten and Sunday school, and a few months after she chaired the convention, Cowles began work in the prestigious position of superintendent of girls' elementary and secondary schools in Canton, Ohio.

The secretaries read greetings from Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and others unable to attend. A speech that Mott had made in Philadelphia the previous December, "On Woman," was delivered, and the women proceeded to debate and adopt 22 resolutions without the least bit of timidity on the great question of demanding the vote.

Not only did women conduct this meeting, but they also did all of the debating: According to the report, "not a man was allowed to sit on the platform, to speak or vote. *Never did men so suffer.*" Betsey Cowles's school-teaching experience plainly showed, for the men "implored just to say one word; but no; the President was inflexible no man should be heard. If one meekly arose to make a suggestion, he was at once ruled out of order. For the first time in the world's history, men learned how it felt to sit in silence when questions in which they were interested were under discussion." In addition to their resolutions, the women adopted a "Memorial" to the upcoming constitutional convention. They reminded the men who planned to rewrite fundamental law:

Women have no part or lot in the foundation or administration of government. They can not vote or hold office. They are required to contribute their share, by way of taxes, to the support of the Government, but are allowed no voice....

We would especially direct attention to the legal condition of married women.... Legally, she ceases to exist.... All that she has becomes legally his, and he can collect and dispose of the profits of her labor as he sees fit.... If he renders life intolerable, so that she is forced to leave him, he has the power to retain her children, and "seize her and bring

her back, for he has a right to her society which he may enforce, either against herself or any other person who detains her." Woman by being thus subject to the control, and dependent on the will of man, loses her self-dependence; and no human being can be deprived of this without a sense of degradation.

An even longer document was aimed at their sisters. In an "Address to the Women of Ohio," they developed an argument based on the ideas of Locke and Jefferson, and these unknown women followed the concept of natural rights that human beings have rights as immutable as the natural laws of physics to its logical conclusion:

This government, having therefore exercised powers underived from the consent of the governed, and having signally failed to secure the end for which all just government is instituted, should be immediately altered, or abolished.

"The legal theory is, marriage makes the husband and wife one person, and that person is the husband.... There is scarcely a legal act that she is competent to perform.... She can make no contracts.... She has no power over his person, and her only claim upon his property is for a bare support. In no instance can she sue or be sued...." [quoted from Professor Walker, author of *Introduction to American Law*] Women of Ohio!... Slaves we are, politically and legally.... If men would be men worthy of the name, they must cease to disfranchise and rob their wives and mothers, they must forbear to consign to political and legal slavery their sisters and daughters. And we women...must cease to submit to such tyranny....

Woman, over half the globe, is now and always has been chattel. Wives are bargained for, bought and sold.... Can antiquity make wrong right?... We appeal to our sisters of Ohio to arise from the lethargy of ages...and take possession of your birthright to freedom and equality.

"A favorable and lengthy report" of the meeting "found its way into the *New York Tribune* and other leading journals," and Ohio women did not seem to

feel themselves as much the objects of scorn as New Yorkers had. Instead, they believed their convention "had accomplished a great educational work." This statewide meeting was quickly emulated with smaller local events. The leader of the follow-up activity was Frances Dana Gage, who had been unable to attend the Salem convention. Known as "Aunt Fanny," she was an established writer, who, in her own words, was "notorious" for "craziness." Nonetheless, Gage had a mainstream readership, which she risked for the mocked cause of women's rights, in such publications as the *Ohio Cultivator*, a farm magazine, and the *Ladies' Repository* of Cincinnati. With three others—"all the women that I knew in that region even favorable to a movement for the help of women"—she called a meeting for her southeastern Ohio town of McConneville in early May.

"Women dared not speak then," and even among this venturesome four, Gage stood alone in asking "for the ballot...without regard to sex or color." She drew up a petition to omit the words "white" and "male" from the state's constitution, and at the end of the day-long meeting, 40 of the 70 attendees signed it. Excited by this, the four planned another meeting in the Methodist church of nearby Morgan County for late May. They advertised it, and early in the morning of the appointed day, they "hired a hack" and rode 16 miles, where they discovered that they were "to be denied admittance to church or school-house." A sympathetic minister, however, was prepared for his colleagues' hostility: according to Gage, he "had found us shelter on the threshing-floor of a fine barn," where the women found "three or four hundred of the farmers and their wives, sons, and daughters" already assembled. "Many names were added to our Memorial, and on the whole, we had a delightful day," Gage summarized. She concluded ominously, however: "But to shut up doors against women was a new thing."

Gage and others worked hard, and the petitions they presented to Ohio's constitutional convention held a significant number of signatures. The one for "Equal Rights" in property laws and similar legislation was signed by 7,901 people. The one for the "Right of Suffrage," on the other hand, was still seen as a radical idea: only 2,106 signed it. The men of the constitutional convention, however, did not appear to take these thousands of petitioners with any seriousness at all. Rebecca Janney, a leader in Ohio's movement from its earliest days, summarized tersely: "The discussions in the Constitutional Convention were voted to be dropped from the records, because they were so low and obscene."

The young state of Indiana also held a constitutional convention in 1850. The women's movement was not yet organized there, but feminist Robert Dale Owen made their case for them. He doubtless was inspired by his wife, Mary Robinson Owen, a Virginian who had endured pioneer Indiana with him. When the Owens married in 1832, they wrote an unconventional compact in which Robert declared: "Of the unjust rights which...this ceremony... gives me over the person and property of another, I can not legally, but I can morally, divest myself." He also was influenced by his longtime colleague, Frances Wright. Both natives of Scotland, Wright and Owen worked together in a number of reform efforts, including a utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana.

When the constitutional convention met, he argued especially for the property rights of married women and widows, but without success. Perhaps inspired by the efforts that this man made for them, Indiana women began to organize themselves at an anti-slavery meeting the following year. The first Indiana women's rights convention was held in October 1851 in the Wayne County village of Dublin. "Such a Convention being a novel affair," reads their record in the *History of Woman Suffrage*, "it called out some ridicule and opposition," but the women were "so well pleased" that they immediately planned another. From 1851 through the end of the decade, Indiana women held annual conventions that were never distracted by jeering men as those in the East would be.

Often Ohio women came to Indiana to speak, especially the ever-popular Frances Dana Gage and the thoughtful Caroline Severance. Amanda Way was perhaps Indiana's primary leader at this time; a talented tailor and milliner, she was a bit unusual in the women's rights movement in that she never married. A Quaker, she had ties to Lucretia Mott and the temperance and abolitionist movements, and Way would take these causes with her as she moved west to Kansas and then California during the rest of the century. Another inspirational leader was Mary F. Thomas, a married woman with three young daughters who had learned of the women's movement while she lived in Salem, Ohio. At the first Indiana convention, she announced her intention to become a physician and by the 1856 convention, she was Dr. Thomas. Less than a decade after Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to graduate from a male medical school, Thomas completed her education at Cleveland's Western

Reserve College (now Case Western Reserve) and at Philadelphia's Penn Medical University.

She also managed to participate in most of Indiana's systematically scheduled and smoothly run conventions. The 1852 and 1853 ones were in the town of Richmond; 1854 and 1855 took them to the Masonic Hall in Indianapolis, but meetings returned for the rest of the decade to the small towns of Richmond and Winchester. The most hostile press was in the largest city: at the 1855 Indianapolis convention, "the reporters gave glowing pen sketches of the 'masculine women' and 'feminine men,' they described the dress and appearance of the women very minutely, but said little of the merits of the question or the arguments of the speakers."

With the New York and Ohio precedents set, Massachusetts hosted its first women's rights convention in autumn of the same year. Unlike the earlier meetings, however, this one was carefully planned months in advance. In May, at an anti-slavery gathering in Boston, nine women caucused in a "dark, dingy room" about a convention for their own civil rights. They scheduled the meeting for October 23 and 24, 1850, and chose the Massachusetts town of Worcester because of its central location. Most important, they decided to aim for a national, not merely a state, women's rights convention.

Paulina Wright Davis undertook most of the planning work. In 1835, as Paulina Kellogg Wright, she and her husband had organized one of the first



Paulina Wright Davis (Library of Congress)

anti-slavery meetings and endured a mob assault on their home in Utica, New York. He died in 1846, leaving her a widow wealthy enough to do something very unusual: with a female anatomical mannequin imported from Paris, she taught the basics of their bodies to the relatively few women who dared to explore this forbidden subject. A second marriage to jeweler Thomas Davis changed her name, and as Paulina Wright Davis, she organized the Massachusetts

meeting from her home in Providence, Rhode Island.

Pages 54-57 deliberately skipped.

1849 death, Taylor married Mill, but they had only a few years together before her sudden death. When he wrote his most famous work, *On Liberty* (1859), Mill acknowledged that “so much of it was the work of her whom I lost.” It goes without saying that his 1869 publication, *The Subjection of Women*, also originated in the mind of this unknown female philosopher. Still later, Mill wrote to Paulina Wright Davis:



John Stuart Mill (Library of Congress)

It gives me the greatest pleasure to know that the service rendered by my dear wife to the cause which was nearer her heart than any other, by her essay in the *Westminster Review*, has had so much effect and is so justly appreciated in the United States. Were it possible in a memoir to have the formation and growth of a mind like hers portrayed, to do so would be as valuable a benefit to mankind as was ever conferred by a biography. But such a psychological history is seldom possible.

Just as New York’s Seneca Falls convention was followed by one in the city of Rochester, Ohio’s 1850 event in Salem was a prelude to a larger one in Akron. Midwestern activism was renewed, and many of those who made history at Salem went to Akron on May 28 and 29, 1851. This meeting also heralded several women who would be among the most important suffragists for decades to come.

Frances Dana Gage, who had clearly established her leadership the previous year, presided. Gage also mentored several of the women there, including Caroline Severance, who eventually moved back East and became the founding president of the important New England Woman's Club. The conventioners were also excited about the presence of Maria L. Giddings; she not only gave "a very able digest on the common law," but also had political connections, for her father "represented Ohio in Congress for many years."

The appearance of Hannah Tracy, later Hannah Tracy Cutler, at the convention demonstrated tremendous commitment, for she had overcome serious handicaps. After her father refused to allow her to attend the new Oberlin College, she married at 18 and had three children. She was pregnant with the last when her husband died, after pro-slavery men assaulted him while he was helping slaves escape. Widowed, she then went to Oberlin, ran a boardinghouse to support her family, and even found time to write original feminist theory: *Woman as She Was, Is, and Should Be* was published in 1846. Tracy graduated the following year, and by the time of the Akron convention, she had the plum job of principal of the "female department" of the new Columbus high school. Most women in such a position would not risk it with radical feminist activity, but her courage was fired by experience.

Pittsburgh's Jane Grey Swisshelm had learned similar courage. The publisher of the abolitionist *Saturday Visiter* [sic] at the time, she attended the prior year's Worcester convention and would go on to national leadership in Minnesota and in Washington D.C. but despite this apparent success, Swisshelm still had a miserable personal life. Until her tyrannical husband discovered that her literacy could earn her money, he had sometimes forbidden her to read; he used his legal right to her wages to sue her family for the time that she devoted to her ailing mother. Another six years would pass before Swisshelm managed to get him to file for the divorce that would liberate her: in 1857, she took her little daughter and fled to Minnesota.

A network of female support was clearly developing. Among the out-of-state women who sent letters of support to Akron were Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton of Seneca Falls, newspaper editor Clarina Howard Nichols of Vermont, and Nantucket Island native Lydia Folger Fowler, who became the second female graduate of a traditional medical school this same year. Dr. Fowler, a happily married woman without children, wrote *Familiar Lessons on Physiology* in 1847 to teach women about their bodies. During a

lifelong Rochester career teaching obstetrics and gynecology, she set another precedent as the world's first female medical school professor.

Unlike the Salem convention, men were allowed to participate at Akron and at future Ohio meetings to the regret of some women who said in their report that “the sons of Adam crowded our platform and often made it the scene of varied pugilistic efforts.” The convention also was the first with entertainment: a popular singing group, the Hutchinson Family Singers, was a big hit at reform assemblies for decades.

Far and away the most important aspect of the Akron meeting, however, was the historic speech of Sojourner Truth. Born into slavery under the name



Sojourner Truth (Library of Congress)

Isabella in the late eighteenth century, she was owned by Dutch-speaking people who lived about 50 miles north of New York City. By her teenage years, she had been sold three times and was scarred from beatings she suffered when she did not understand orders in English.

In 1827, a year before New York implemented its gradual emancipation plan, she ran away to a Quaker family. They not only sheltered her, but even supported her in a legal battle: amazingly enough, her son Peter, who had been sold in violation of New York law, was

returned from Alabama. Feeling “tall within,” she set out for New York City. She left the Society of Friends, she said, because “they would not let me sing,” and developed her own deeply personal faith: “God himself talks to me.”

After a disastrous time in a New York commune that ended up with her successfully fighting a murder charge, she took the name of Sojourner Truth in 1843 and set out to preach. In traveling through New England, she came to the attention of William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists. When she arrived in Akron in 1851, she recently had published her autobiography, which she dictated to a white woman, Olive Gilbert. Sales of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* would support her for the rest of her life, as she continued to move

throughout the United States, living in Kansas during its tumultuous pre-Civil War years and finally settling in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Although she was listed as an attendee of the 1850 Worcester convention, the Massachusetts women who created its record for the *History of Woman Suffrage* did not see fit to discuss this black woman at any length in their convention report. Instead, it was Ohio's "Aunt Fanny," Frances Dana Gage, who detailed the appearance of Sojourner Truth at the Akron meeting:

The ladies of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an uncouth sun-bonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, "An abolition affair!" "Woman's rights and niggers!"....

At my request, order was restored, and the business of the Convention went on.... All through these sessions old Sojourner, quiet and reticent...sat crouched against the wall on the corner of the pulpit stairs.... At intermission she was busy selling the "Life of Sojourner Truth," a narrative of her own strange and adventurous life. Again and again, timorous ones came to me and said, with earnestness, "Don't let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced." My only answer was, "We shall see when the time comes."

The second day the work waxed warm. Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the ground of "superior intellect;" another, because of the "manhood of Christ".... Another gave us a theological view of the "sin of our first mother."

There were very few women in those days who dared to "speak in meeting;" and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture, as they supposed, of the "strongminded." Some of the tender-skinned friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere betokened a storm. When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth,

who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head. "Don't let her speak!" gasped a half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silent for a few moments.

The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piecing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house and away through the throng at the doors and windows. [In the following, Sojourner Truth's speech has been freed of the nineteenth-century dialect style that Gage used in recording it. Gage's occasional descriptive interjections into the body of the speech also have been eliminated.]

"Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that between the niggers of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there say that women needs to be helped into carriages, lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? ['Intellect' someone whispers near.] That's right, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Men had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now that they are asking to do it, the men better let them! Obligated to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner has got nothing more to say."

At Sojourner Truth's rebuke of the minister who made the point about "intellect," the audience's "cheering was loud and long." When she spoke to the story of Eve, "the first woman God ever made," Gage said that "almost every sentence elicited deafening applause." Sojourner Truth "returned to her corner, amid roars of applause, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us," Gage averred. "I have never in my life seen anything like her magical influence."

When the speech was over, "hundreds rushed up to shake hands with her," and Sojourner Truth's place as a celebrity suffragist was solidified. More than most men or women, black or white, she immediately understood the crucial link between women's rights and the anti-slavery cause; from the beginning, she could see that women's needs should not be trivialized nor forced to compete with those of blacks. Earlier than Susan B. Anthony and others who became famous, Sojourner Truth stood tall.



A Currier & Ives print of the Bloomer style, circa 1851. (Library of Congress)

Not all progress is political. Social change can be of at least equal significance, and one of the greatest issues of the 1850s became feminine apparel. Early in 1851, Elizabeth Smith Miller appeared on the streets of Seneca Falls wearing "Turkish trousers." An affluent and fashionable young mother, she came to visit her father's cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The full, almost skirt-like pants that Miller wore were based on a fashion introduced by