

# Women's Suffrage Part I

## 1848-1887

The rights of women in ancient through early modern times were always severely circumscribed. Even in civilized societies of Europe, females never possessed the right to vote or hold office. Rarely did they control their own property and normally fell under the legal authority of fathers and husbands. The only exception to subordinate status was in the person of female monarchs such as Queen Elizabeth I of England who by virtue of her position as head of state became the wealthiest person in her country in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

When under her successors English colonists came to America, they brought with them the traditions and discriminations of English common law. Although colonial women were at first a rare and beneficial presence, they were not rewarded with legal rights and privileges. They did on occasion cast votes on behalf of absent husbands, however. Their rightful provenance was considered the family, the family farm, and the church.

In 1756, a woman was at last permitted to vote on her own behalf. Lydia Chapin Taft received this privilege in Uxbridge, Massachusetts upon the death of her husband and eldest son. Twenty years later in the year of the Revolution, tax-paying women in New Jersey who owned property worth at least \$250 were granted the right to vote. However, while the Founding Fathers in Congress were proclaiming English violations of American rights and liberties outrageous, the legislatures of the other original states began passing laws to officially disenfranchise women. Peer pressure caused New Jersey to rescind the earlier decision in 1807. Small comfort to American women that property restrictions kept many men disenfranchised as well.

The movement for universal white male suffrage got rolling in states of the Old Northwest and Old Southwest Territories after the War of 1812. A full-blown democratic revolution in this respect was accomplished by the election of Tennessee war hero Andrew Jackson to the Executive Mansion in 1829. However, the efforts of women to obtain liberty were subsequently in the next decade directed not for their own behalf but

for the cause of freeing African-American slaves on southern and mid-Atlantic plantations. While the mainstream Abolition movement led by William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of *The Liberator* and co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, did permit females to participate, some women preferred their own local associations such as the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society of 1835.

A backlash against women activists occurred, however, when the next year Angelina Emily Grimke of that organization (but originally from a slave-holding, plantation family in Charleston, South Carolina) appealed to Southern women on Christian principles to support the immediate abolition of Slavery. Instead of making similar appeals against involuntary servitude, pastors of Congregational Churches in Massachusetts denounced Grimke for daring as a woman to make a public statement. The admonition mattered not because her soon-to-be husband Theodore Dwight Weld encouraged her to intensify her abolitionist activities. Many other women joined the movement.

Two of these were Lucretia Coffin Mott, a Quaker from Massachusetts and Elizabeth Smith Cady Stanton of New York. They journeyed to London in 1840 with other women only to be shut out of the World Anti-Slavery Convention solely because of their gender. It suddenly dawned on them that Women's Suffrage should march shoulder to shoulder with Abolitionism, Temperance, and other progressive issues in the consciousness of Americans, not be relegated to second class status. The primary difficulty they had to overcome was that few men



# I WILL VOTE

*Elizabeth Cady Stanton*



took the matter seriously.

Nor, they were forced to admit, had many women acquired the leadership skills needed to organize a mass movement. Heretofore, precious few had been able to carve out an independent economic existence, let alone a notable political role in society. Schooling for women was confined to isolated seminaries in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and by the 1830s Ohio. Not surprisingly, many future suffragette leaders were born and/or raised in these states. However it was Kentucky that first gave women the right to vote in school elections in 1837. No other state did likewise until Kansas in 1861.

In most cases, women's wealth was inherited from family. Widows such as Rebecca Webb Lukens, who assumed the management of her deceased husband's Brandy Wine River Pennsylvania boiler plate factory in 1825, sometimes proved their worth but only against severe societal disapproval. The employment of women outside the home was typically as teachers, wage earners in New England textile factories, waitresses, and other service-related jobs. Leisure time for political activity for working class women simply did not exist.

The professions finally began to offer advancement to select women in the 1840s. Sarah Margaret Fuller from Cambridgeport, Massachusetts began editing the literary journal *The Dial* and then four years later became a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. In 1845, she authored "Women in the Nineteenth Century" and the next year went as correspondent to England and finally Italy where she married an Italian marquis who supported revolutionary activities. Before she died in a ship wreck returning to New York City, her family disowned her.

Fuller was the daughter of a U.S. congressman. In point of fact, nearly all the leaders of what would become the Women's Suffrage movement were to some degree daughters and/or wives of position and privilege. They had much to

lose, therefore, in family relations, public opinion, and social standing. The personal price paid during the coming decades for political liberty was often quite high.

**1848** Nevertheless, the trials and tribulations ahead seem quite small when in April the New York State legislature passes the Married Woman's Property Rights Act. Divorced women are now permitted to keep some of their property and therefore their independence.

**1848** The time seems propitious for a frank discussion of what the aims of the incipient women's movement should be. In mid-July, Mott journeys to Seneca Falls in Seneca County, a flouring milling center utilizing abundant water power in west, central New York, to visit her sister Martha Wright and then Stanton. With Mary Ann McClintock and Jane Hunt, they decide to post an invitation to a convention in a newspaper to debate the "social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." Stanton drafts a Declaration of Sentiments based on the U.S. Declaration of Independence to assert that men and women were created equal by God and to list injuries

and grievances against men as the oppressors of women. When she proposes that the ultimate goal should be equal suffrage, however, Mott is opposed out of fear of public ridicule. The others prevail upon Mott to change her mind.

**1848** The first formal Women's Rights convention takes place in Seneca Falls on July 19-20 at the Wesleyan Methodist Church. About 300 people, mostly Quakers and including 40 men, attend. Ironically, it is a man—Lucretia's husband James Mott—who presides. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and now editor of the *Rochester North Star*, lifts his voice to persuade the delegates to agree to the Women's Suffrage resolution. Although the convention adjourns without incident, a second meeting a few days later in Rochester draws down venom from church leaders and news-

*Seneca Falls Convention*



papers. The New York Herald prints Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments for the purpose of ridicule, but tens of thousands of women become aware of the Women's Suffrage movement.

**1849** Actions taken by individual women are as important as group activities. Amelia Jenks Bloomer, one of the Seneca Falls participants and married to the editor/publisher of the Seneca Falls County Courier, becomes the first woman to own, operate, and edit a newspaper for women, which she calls *The Lily*. At the same time, an immigrant from Bristol, England named Elizabeth Blackwell becomes the first woman in America to receive a medical degree. The broad-minded institution that educates her is the Geneva Medical College of New York.

**1850** After a nearly two year hiatus, another women's rights convention is held in April in Salem, Ohio. In October, the first of a series of annual national women's rights conventions assembles in Worcester, Massachusetts, this time with substantial male support. When Susan Brownell Anthony, a Quaker teacher, temperance activist, and daughter of a ruined cotton manufacturer, reads an account by publisher of the New York Tribune Horace Greeley of a speech given by Lucy Stone, the first woman to receive a college degree (from Oberlin College west of Cleveland, Ohio in 1847), she decides to devote her life to Women's Suffrage. She subsequently meets Stone and Greeley at Seneca Falls.

**1852** Anthony finally makes the acquaintance of Stanton in the same location. They agree to work together on suffrage but also on a Woman's State Temperance Society. Harkening back to her own experiences as a teacher, Anthony also wants the legislature to provide equal pay for women with men, control of one's own earnings by women even if married, and guardianship of children after divorce. On the eve of the Civil War, she and Stanton have the satisfaction of watching New York enable women to own property, collect their own wages, sue in court, and have property rights similar to men after the death of a spouse.

**1853** One of Stone's classmates and friends at Oberlin was Antoinette Louisa Brown. But upon completing classwork, Brown is denied the theological degree she has earned. Nevertheless she becomes the first ordained women minister in the

*Susan Brownell Anthony*



U.S., at the First Congregationalist Church in South Butler, New York in Wayne County north of Seneca Falls. Not for another quarter century will she receive her formal degree.

**1855-58** Stone goes on to marry Blackwell's brother Henry and cause ripples by keeping her own name. The marriage ceremony explicitly rejects a husband's legal authority over a wife. Three years later, she refuses to pay her tax bill in New Jersey as a protest over lack of suffrage. The State simply confiscates and sells her household goods to cover the taxes.

**1856-69** Elizabeth Blackwell never marries. Instead, she moves to New York City to found and operate the Infirmary for Indigent Women & Children. A dozen years later, she also founds a Women's Medical College before leaving management of the hospital to her sister Emily, another physician with a degree from Western Reserve College in Cleveland. Moving to London, England, she opens a women's school for medicine and then a children's hospital.

**1861** Individual accomplishment serves as inspiration for other women, but there are limits to what can be achieved without the support of movers and shakers in society, all men. Even sympathizers such as Greeley balk at what in those times seem to be radical proposals, such as liberalization of divorce laws. Then to the chagrin of Anthony, the Civil War erupts and supercedes all suffragette activities and further progress on women's rights. As with the earlier participation of women in Abolitionism, most decide to sacrifice their own interests for the more immediate need of winning the war, preserving the Union, and freeing the slaves.

**1863** Thus, Stanton and Anthony found in New York the Loyal Women of the Nation society to collect signatures for the abolition of Slavery by a 13th Amendment the U.S. Constitution. The law is passed by Congress and ratified by the states by end of 1865.

**1865** As the war is ending, women's education receives a much needed upgrade when Vassar College opens in Poughkeepsie in Dutchess County, New York near New York City. Three hundred female students are taught by 22 women and eight male faculty. Over the next four decades, the number of female college graduates in the country rises toward 8,000.

Knowledge combined with leisure time is critical for the next generation of suffragette leaders.

**1867-68** After the Union victory over the Confederacy, Anthony and other suffragettes concentrate on securing for women the same legal and constitutional rights being considered for freed slaves. However, when Congress passes the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, citizens are defined for the first time as “male.” A subsequent attempt by the Kansas legislature to insure both African-American and women’s suffrage draws no support from other states. The U.S. Senate issues another rebuff by denying women the right to vote in the District of Columbia by an overwhelming vote. Anthony thus concludes that women will have to fight on themselves without the help of the male political establishment. She founds an Equal Rights Association to work for universal human suffrage.

**1868-69** A further slap in the face for women leaders is wording of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by Congress, awarding the vote to black men while denying the petition of women for suffrage. Julia Ward Howe, a poet who penned the stirring Battle of Hymn of the Republic during the Civil War, co-founds and becomes first president of the New England Woman Suffrage Association and the next year does the same with American Woman Suffrage Association when the earlier organization splits apart.

**1869** But the one man from whom women expect support—Frederick Douglass—turns his back on the women’s suffrage movement to devote all energies to translating African-American male legal and constitutional rights into practical economic, political, and social gains. Stung by this repudiation and the general indifference of political leaders, Anthony and Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association in May with Stanton as first president, not only to push for women’s suffrage but persuade legislatures to liberalize divorce laws and insure equal pay for equal work. Particularly embittered by the lack of male support, Stanton denounces what she characterizes as the selfish, aggressive, destructive qualities intrinsic in the male nature and the civil strife, wars, death, and disease that result. She justifies the Women’s Suffrage movement as needed to lift up men to the level of morality, purity, virtue, and religious devotion exhibited in the female character.

**1869** Broadening the scope of the women’s suffrage move-



ment seems a mistake to Stone, Howe, and an African-American suffragette from Boston named Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Supported by the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher who wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in 1852 to fuel northern indignation about southern Slavery, they found in November the American Woman Suffrage Association with Beecher as first president. Their objective is to advance the women’s movement without interfering with ratification of the 15th Amendment. A schism of tactics if not strategy is driven between women leaders for the next two decades.

**1869-70** Meanwhile an astonishing success is achieved out west. The Wyoming territorial legislature recognizes the contribution of female pioneers in braving dangers and settling the wilderness under the shadow of the Rocky Mountains by granting the few thousand women within the territory the right not only to vote but hold public office. The Utah territorial legislature, dominated by Mormons, follows the next year with voting suffrage for Utah’s 17,179 women. Inspired by the news, Angelina Grimke, older sister Sarah, and 42 other women attempt to vote in Massachusetts only to have their ballots set aside.

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**1871-72** Another confrontationist is Virginia Woodhull, an advocate of sexual freedom, divorce, and even prostitution who made a fortune as a Wall Street broker. In a more conventional moment, she argues before the House Judiciary Committee that the word “person” in the 14th and 15th Amendments implies the right of suffrage for all people regardless of gender. But she alarms even devoted followers at the NWSA convention in New York by advocating treason, secession, and revolution if necessary to achieve their objectives. Nevertheless, 10,000 copies of her speech are sold. When at the next year’s convention, Anthony refuses to let her speak, she breaks away to found an Equal Rights Party and be nominated for President. After accusing Henry Beecher of having an affair with a married lady, she is arrested on a charge of publishing an obscene newspaper and is ruined as a suffragette leader by spending a month in jail.

**1871-72** It always helps suffragettes to have the support of influential men. Having long since moved with her husband to Council Bluffs, Iowa and watched as he served for 11 years on the city board of education and then a term as mayor, Amelia Jenks Bloomer becomes president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association. But the state house rejects a bill passed in

the senate for women's suffrage. Too many men fear that women voters will swing the state toward a curb on consumption of alcohol to give them the vote.

**1872-73** Highlighting the dependence of women on men for their advancement is the case of Belva Ann Bennett McNall Lockwood of New York. A widowed wife of a Baptist minister, she graduates from college and builds a career as a school principal before becoming angry about pay half as great as men in the same profession. Attending law school in Washington D.C., she is denied her diploma. She must finally appeal to President Ulysses Grant himself to have the injustice rectified.

**1872-73** Frustrated that more progress is being made in the West than in the East where women's suffrage activity is centered, Anthony and a dozen women vote in Ontario county New York in the 1872 Presidential election. Promptly arrested and jailed until freed on \$1,000 bond, they go to trial. Convicted in June 1873, Anthony is fined \$100 plus court costs. She never pays the fine, however, and authorities never try to collect.

**1872-73** Meanwhile Howe, who is writing essays arguing against the notion that women are inferior to men, founds an Association for the Advancement of Women. For decades, she promotes a Mother's Day for Peace on June 2 and finally before her death in 1910 sees the idea take hold.

**1873-76** Women suffrage leaders now decide that more public

demonstrations are required to publicize their activities and efforts. They organize a protest at the centennial celebration of the Boston Tea Party. The next year in Philadelphia on July 4, 1876, suffragettes show up at a commemoration of the Battle of Lexington. Anthony herself reads out a "Declaration for the Rights of Women" on a podium in front of the Liberty Bell.

**1874** However, the U.S. Supreme Court has already ruled in *Minor v. Happerstett*, a case in which a woman named Virginia Minor was prevented from registering to vote in St. Louis, Missouri, that although women are citizens under the 14th Amendment, citizenship does not guarantee suffrage for state and national elections. On the other hand, a trend develops over the next decade and a half in which an increasing number of states do permit women to vote in what most closely affects them and their children—school elections.

**1878-86** What is obviously required for a broader right to vote, women conclude, is a constitutional amendment. Just such a bill is introduced by U.S. Senator Aaron Augustus Sargent II of California only to be pigeon-holed in House and Senate committees. In the interim in 1880, Lucretia Mott dies at the age of 87 and Lockwood runs in 1884 for President on the National Equal Rights Party without her votes being officially counted by Congress. Ultimately, the Senate defeats the amendment in a two to one vote, rendering the movement if not dead for another generation certainly gravely wounded.

**1886-87** Insult follows injury when women are excluded from the dedication ceremonies for the Statue of Liberty—ironically an idealized woman. The next year, Congress passes the Edmund-Tucker Act, disenfranchising Utah women. The stimulus for this exercise of federal authority over territorial rights is an unfortunate linkage between plural marriages (in which one man has many wives) and women's suffrage by a thrice-married Mormon suffragette named Emeline Blanche Wells. She has written in the women's rights newspaper *The Women's Exponent* that polygamy is justified in part by its compatibility with women's suffrage and women's work outside the home.

Thus as the United States approaches the last decade in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the prospects for Women's Suffrage as a universal national right seem small. The movement badly needs to be reinvigorated with new blood, new energy, and new ideas.

