

It Began at Seneca Falls

By Mary Lyle, Director of Education

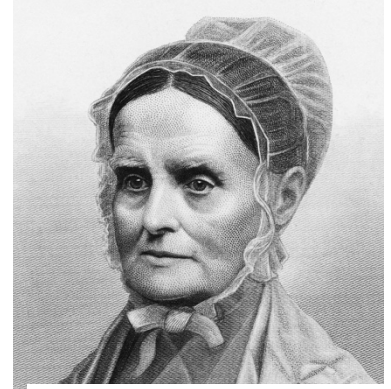
The first Women's Rights Convention took place on July 19 & 20, 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. It was the first but not the last of such gatherings, and it started the movement towards equal rights for women.

The Convention was the brainchild of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, who had met at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in England. All of the female delegates to the convention, Mott among them, were not allowed to participate in any of the official business. This insult was felt not only by the women in attendance, but by several of the male delegates, who refused to take their seats, in solidarity with the women. One good thing that came out of the convention was the friendship that developed between Stanton and Mott. The two women discussed hosting a women's rights convention in America, and although it took eight years, their dream became a reality.

Three hundred people attended the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention, and of these, one hundred signed the *Declaration of Sentiments* composed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Based on the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Declaration of Sentiments* begins:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

The same frustration felt by the "Founding Fathers" in the *Declaration of Independence* is expressed by the "Founding Mothers" in their own *Declaration*. As in the *Declaration of Independence*, Stanton goes on to enumerate "the 'injuries and usurpations' on the part of



Lucretia Mott

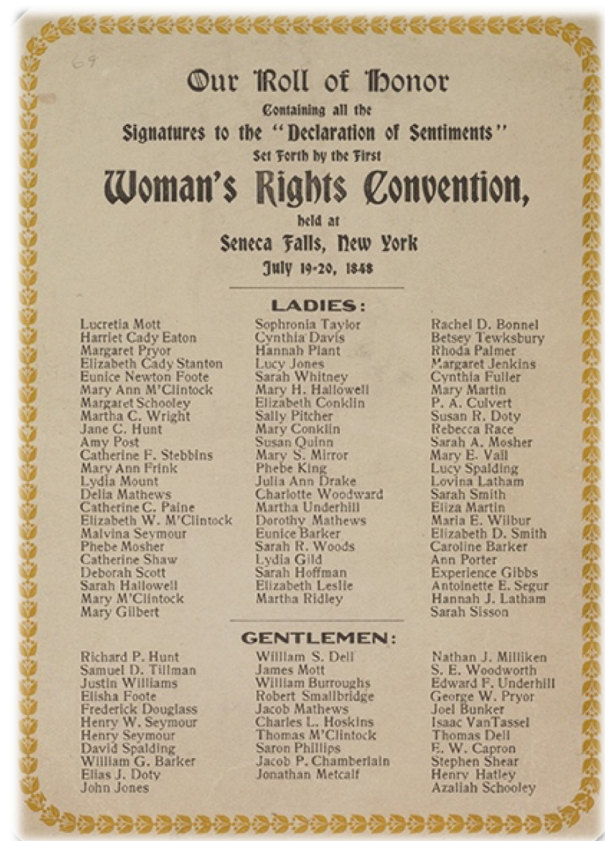


Elizabeth Cady Stanton

man toward woman."¹ Orator and antislavery activist Fredrick Douglass gave a rousing speech supporting the declaration. He was one of the thirty-eight male signers of the *Declaration of Sentiments*.

Believing that both the women's rights movement and the anti-slavery movement were comparable, the leaders of the women's rights movement accepted the idea that freedom for the slaves would be followed by equal rights for women. This was not the case. While black males were enfranchised as a result of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, black and white women had to wait another fifty years before they were allowed to exercise their right to vote. This contentious issue caused a rift in the leadership of the women's movement. Some, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton felt that they had waited long enough and that the Fifteenth Amendment should include women— if it did not, it should not pass. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony wanted to hold out for universal enfranchisement. They actively lobbied against the Fifteenth Amendment, which alienated them from the organization they had helped found. They started their own new organization *The National Woman Suffrage Association*, one of several women's rights organizations that would form through the years due to policy and strategy conflicts.

Progress, however slow, was being made during the next few decades. For example, the "Married Women's Property Acts," were passed state by state rather than by act of Congress. When Wyoming was admitted to the union in 1890 its constitution included women's suffrage. While other states followed, granting the right for women to vote in state elections, the state by state approach was slow. As had been the case with slavery, it would take a Constitutional Amendment to ensure that women would secure the right to vote.



¹ The Declaration of Sentiments - The U.S. Constitution Online. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.usconstitution.net/sentiments.html>