

# JULY

## *July 19 & 20: First Women's Rights Convention Held, Seneca Falls, New York*

The seed for the first Women's Rights Convention was planted in 1840, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton met Lucretia Mott at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The conference that refused to seat Mott and other women delegates from America because of their sex. Stanton, the young bride of an anti-slavery agent, and Mott, a Quaker preacher and veteran of reform, talked then of calling a convention to address the condition of women. Eight years later, it came about as a spontaneous event.

In July 1848, Mott was visiting her sister, Martha C. Wright, in Waterloo, New York. Stanton, now the restless mother of three small sons, was living in nearby Seneca Falls. A social visit brought together Mott, Stanton, Wright, Mary Ann McClintock, and Jane Hunt. All except Stanton were Quakers, a sect that afforded women some measure of equality, and all five were well acquainted with antislavery and temperance meetings.

Fresh in their minds was the April passage of the long deliberated New York Married Woman's Property Rights Act, a significant but far from comprehensive piece of legislation. The time had come, Stanton argued, for women's wrongs to be laid before the public, and women themselves must shoulder the responsibility.

Before the afternoon was out, the women decided on a call for a convention "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women."

To Stanton fell the task of drawing up the Declaration of Sentiments that would define the meeting. Taking the Declaration of Independence as her guide, Stanton submitted that "all men and women had been created equal" and went on to list eighteen "injuries and usurpations" -the same number of charges leveled against the King of England-"on the part of man toward woman."

Stanton also drafted eleven resolutions, making the argument that women had a natural right to equality in all spheres. The ninth resolution held forth the radical assertion that it was the duty of women to secure for themselves the right to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton afterwards recalled that a shocked Lucretia Mott exclaimed, "Why, Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous." Stanton stood firm. "But I persisted, for I saw clearly that the power to make the laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured."

The convention, to take place in five days' time, on July 19 and 20 at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls, was publicized only by a small, unsigned notice placed in the Seneca County Courier. "The convention will not be so large as it otherwise might be, owing to the busy time with the farmers," Mott told Stanton, "but it will be a beginning."

A crowd of about three hundred people, including forty men, came from five miles around. No woman felt capable of presiding; the task was undertaken by Lucretia's husband, James Mott. All of the resolutions were passed unanimously except for women suffrage, a strange idea and scarcely a concept designed to appeal to the predominantly Quaker audience, whose male contingent commonly declined to vote. The eloquent Frederick Douglass, a former slave and

now editor of the Rochester North Star, however, swayed the gathering into agreeing to the resolution. At the closing session, Lucretia Mott won approval of a final resolve "for the overthrowing of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to women equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce." One hundred women and men signed the Seneca Falls Declaration -- although subsequent criticism caused some of them to remove their names.

The proceedings in Seneca Falls, followed a few days later by a meeting in Rochester, brought forth a torrent of sarcasm and ridicule from the press and pulpit noted Frederick Douglass in the North Star: "A discussion of the rights of animals would be regarded with far more complacency by many of what are called the wise and the good of our land, than would be a discussion of the rights of women."

But Elizabeth Cady Stanton, although somewhat discomfited by the widespread misrepresentation, understood the value of attention in the press. "Just what I wanted," Stanton exclaimed when she saw that James Gordon Bennett, motivated by derision, printed the entire Declaration of Sentiments in the New York Herald. "Imagine the publicity given to our ideas by thus appearing in a widely circulated sheet like the Herald. It will start women thinking, and men too; and when men and women think about a new question, the first step in progress is taken."

Stanton, thirty-two years old at the time of the Seneca Falls Convention, grew gray in the cause. In 1851 she met temperance worker Susan B. Anthony, and shortly the two would be joined in the long struggle to secure the vote for women. When national victory came in 1920, seventy-two years after the first organized demand in 1848, only one signer of the Seneca Falls declaration - Charlotte Woodward, a young worker in a glove manufactory - had lived long enough to cast her ballot.