

*"They had souls large enough
to feel the wrongs of others."*

THE SENECA FALLS CONVENTION

July 19–20, 1848
Seneca Falls, New York

LUCRETIA MOTT, ELIZABETH CADY STANTON,
AND SUSAN B. ANTHONY

This account comes from the History of the Women's Suffrage Movement, edited by these pioneers for women's rights.

"WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION.—A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman, will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, N.Y. 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.

This call, without signature, was issued by Lucretia Mott, Martha C. Wright, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Mary Ann McClintock. At this time Mrs. Mott was visiting her sister Mrs. Wright, at Auburn, and attending the Yearly Meeting of Friends in Western New York. Mrs. Stanton, having recently removed from Boston to Seneca Falls, finding the most congenial associations in Quaker families, met Mrs. Mott incidentally for the first time since her residence there. They at once returned to the topic they had so often discussed, walking arm in arm in the streets of London, and Boston, "the propriety of holding a woman's convention." These four ladies, sitting round the table of Richard Hunt, a prominent Friend near Waterloo, decided to

put their long-talked-of resolution into action, and before the twilight deepened into night, the call was written, and sent to the Seneca County Courier. On Sunday morning they met in Mrs. McClintock's parlor to write their declaration, resolutions, and to consider subjects for speeches. As the convention was to assemble in three days, the time was short for such productions; but having no experience in the modus operandi of getting up conventions, nor in that kind of literature, they were quite innocent of the herculean labors they proposed. On the first attempt to frame a resolution; to crowd a complete thought, clearly and concisely, into three lines; they felt as helpless and hopeless as if they had been suddenly asked to construct a steam engine. And the humiliating fact may as well now be recorded that before taking the initiative step, those ladies resigned themselves to a faithful perusal of various masculine productions.

The reports of Peace, Temperance, and Anti-Slavery conventions were echoed, but all alike seemed too tame and pacific for the inauguration of a rebellion such as the world had never before seen. They knew women had wrongs, but how to state them was the difficulty, and this was increased from the fact that they themselves were fortunately organized and conditioned; they were neither "sour old maids," "childless women," nor "divorced wives," as the newspapers declared them to be. While they had felt the insults incident to sex, in many ways, as every proud, thinking woman must, in the laws, religion, and literature of the world, and in the invidious and degrading sentiments and customs of all nations, yet they had not in their own experience endured the coarser forms of tyranny resulting from unjust laws, or avocation with immoral and unscrupulous men, but they had souls large enough to feel the wrongs of others, without being scarified in their own flesh.

After much delay, one of the circle took up the Declaration of 1776, and read it aloud with much spirit and emphasis, and 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."

The eventful day dawned at last, and crowds in carriages and on foot, wended their way to the Wesleyan church. When those having charge of the Declaration, the resolutions, and several volumes of the Statutes of New York arrived on the scene, lo! the door was locked. However, an embryo Professor of Yale College was lifted through an open window to unbar the door; that done, the church was quickly filled. It had been decided to have no men present, but as they were already on the spot, and as the women who must take the responsibility of organizing the meeting, and leading the discussions, shrank from doing either, it was decided, in a hasty council round the altar, that this was an occasion when men might make themselves preeminently useful. It was agreed they should remain, and take the laboring oar through the Convention.

James Mott, tall and dignified, in Quaker costume, was called to the chair; Mary McClintock appointed Secretary, Frederick Douglass, Samuel Tillman, Ansel Bascom, E. W. Capron, and Thomas McClintock took part throughout in the discussions. Lucretia Mott, accustomed to public speaking in the Society of Friends, stated the objects of the Convention, and in taking a survey of the degraded condition of woman the world over, showed the importance of inaugurating some movement for her education and elevation. Elizabeth and Mary McClintock, and Mrs. Stanton, each read a well-written speech; Martha Wright read some satirical articles she had published in the daily papers answering the diatribes on woman's sphere. Ansel Bascom, who had been a member of the Constitutional Convention recently held in Albany, spoke at length on the property bill for married women, just passed the Legislature [the first of its kind in the United States], and the discussion on woman's rights in that Convention. Samuel Tillman, a young student of law, read a series of the most exasperating statutes for women, from English and American jurists, all reflecting the tender mercies of men toward their

wives, in taking care of their property and protecting them in their civil rights.

The Declaration having been freely discussed by many present, was re-read by Mrs. Stanton, and with some slight amendments adopted:

" . . . We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal . . . therefore:

"Resolved, That such laws as conflict, in any way, with the true and substantial happiness of woman, are contrary to the great precept of nature and of no validity, for this is 'superior in obligation to any other.'

"Resolved, That all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.

"Resolved, That woman is man's equal—intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such. . . .

The only resolution that was not unanimously adopted was the ninth, urging the women of the country to secure to themselves the elective franchise. Those who took part in the debate feared a demand for the right to vote would defeat others they deemed more rational, and make the whole movement ridiculous.

But Mrs. Stanton and Frederick Douglass seeing that the power to choose rulers and make laws, was the right by which all others could be secured, persistently advocated the resolution, and at last carried it by a small majority.

Thus it will be seen that the Declaration and resolutions in the very first Convention, demanded all the most radical friends of the movement have since claimed—such as equal rights in the universities, in the trades and professions; the right to vote; to share in all political offices, honors, and emoluments; to complete equality in marriage, to personal freedom, property, wages, children; to make contracts; to sue, and be sued; and to testify in courts of justice. At this time the condition of married women under the Common Law, was nearly as degraded as that of the slave on the Southern

plantation. The Convention continued through two entire days, and late into the evening. The deepest interest was manifested to its close.

The proceedings were extensively published, unsparingly ridiculed by the press, and denounced by the pulpit, much to the surprise and chagrin of the leaders. Being deeply in earnest, and believing their demands pre-eminently wise and just, they were wholly unprepared to find themselves the target for the jibes and jeers of the nation. The Declaration was signed by one hundred men, and women, many of whom withdrew their names as soon as the storm of ridicule began to break. The comments of the press were carefully preserved, and it is curious to see that the same old arguments, and objections rife at the start, are reproduced by the press of today. But the brave protests sent out from this Convention touched a responsive chord in the hearts of women all over the country.

"He's gone!"

MAN OVERBOARD!

*October 13, 1849
Atlantic Ocean*

HERMAN MELVILLE

Melville witnessed this event on a voyage from New York to London a few months before he began to write Moby-Dick.

Rose early this morning, opened my bull's-eye window, and looked out to the East. The sun was just rising, the horizon was red, a familiar sight to me, reminding me of old times. Before breakfast went up to the masthead by way of gymnastics. About 10 o'clock A.M. the wind rose, the rain fell, and the deck looked dismally enough. By dinner time, it blew half a gale, and the passengers mostly retired to their rooms, seasick. After dinner, the rain ceased, but it still blew stiffly, and we were slowly forging along under close-reefed topsails—mainsail furled. I was walking the deck, when I perceived

one of the steerage passengers looking over the side; I looked too, and saw a man in the water, his head completely lifted above the waves,—about twelve feet from the ship, right abreast the gangway. For an instant, I thought I was dreaming, for no one else seemed to see what I did. Next moment, I shouted "Man overboard!" and turned to go aft. The Captain ran forward, greatly confused.

I dropped overboard the tackle fall of the quarter-boat, and swung it towards the man, who was now drifting close to the ship. He did not get hold of it, and I got over the side, within a foot or two of the sea, and again swung the rope towards him. He now got hold of it. By this time, a crowd of people—sailors and others—were clustering about the bulwarks; but none seemed very anxious to save him. They warned me, however, not to fall overboard. After holding on to the rope about a quarter of a minute, the man let go of it, and drifted astern under the mizzen chains. Four or five of the seamen jumped over into the chains and swung him more ropes. But his conduct was unaccountable; he could have saved himself, had he been so minded. I was struck by the expression of his face in the water. It was merry. At last he drifted off under the ship's counter, and all hands cried "He's gone!" Running to the taffrail, we saw him again, floating off—saw a few bubbles and never saw him again. No boat was lowered, no sail was shortened, hardly any noise was made.