

Chapter 14: Women's Rights

1. Second Class Citizens

Denied Rights

In most societies, women had been seen as the weaker gender. As such, they were denied many of the rights held by men. In American colonial society, women were forbidden to own property, make contracts, or keep money they earned. When John Adams went to Philadelphia in 1776 to discuss independence from Great Britain, his wife, Abigail Adams, wrote to him and reminded him that women deserved rights too.

After the founding of the United States, women began to seek a greater role in American society. They faced many obstacles and it took centuries to gain basic rights.

2. Equal Rights

Abolition

African slavery existed mainly in the southern states. These people had few or no rights at all. Since women were also denied many rights, they felt sorry for those Africans enslaved. So, many women joined the **abolitionist** movement—the movement to end slavery.

Angelina Grimké (1805-1879) and Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) were sisters born in the slave state of South Carolina. They hated slavery and wanted to do something about it. They moved to the North and gave speeches and wrote letters calling for an end to slavery. When some people criticized the Grimkés for speaking in public, the sisters began to call for women to have rights equal to men.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born in 1815 to a wealthy New York family. She received a first rate education unlike most women at the time. She married an abolitionist and became active in ending slavery. In 1840, she went to London, England to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention. However, women were not allowed to speak or to vote on any issues. Stanton was angry for being denied a voice.

While at the convention, Stanton met Lucretia Mott and the two became friends. Stanton told Mott that something must be done to guarantee women basic rights. They came up with an idea to have a women's rights **convention**—a meeting of people to discuss important issues.

Seneca Falls

On July 19-20, 1848, Stanton, Mott and three other women held a women's rights convention at the Methodist Church in Seneca Falls, New York. The women wanted to discuss reforms to help women achieve political and social equality.

Stanton wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, a document similar to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Stanton wrote that all women were entitled to the same natural rights as men. She wanted to end **discrimination** against women. At the top of her list of reforms, Stanton demanded women have the right to an education and, most of all, the right to vote.

With the right to vote, women would have equal political power to men. Women could vote for politicians that would pass laws to allow women to get an education, keep the money they earned,

own property or a business, and do all the things that men could do.

About 400 people attended the convention—over 300 women and about 40 men. Although women had been fighting for civil rights for decades, historians often consider the Seneca Falls Convention the beginning of the women's rights movement.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (left) and Susan B. Anthony (right) became friends and worked together for women's rights. Stanton often wrote articles and speeches while Anthony used Stanton's material to speak in public demanding the right of women's suffrage. Source: *Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*. [Between 1880 and 1902] Photo. Library of Congress.

National Organizations

In 1851, women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony met Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two became best friends and worked together for decades to come. The two women created the National Woman **Suffrage** Association to fight for the right of women to vote. Other organizations formed to promote civil rights for women. However, it was not until the end of the Civil War that the

women's movement began to get a lot of attention across the nation.

3. The Right to Vote

New Amendments

The Civil War (1861-1865) brought an end to slavery; however, discrimination against African Americans continued. When Congress in 1868 passed the Fourteenth **Amendment** changing the Constitution to guarantee African American men rights, women complained they had been left out. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment gave the right to vote to all men but said nothing about women. At this point, women who had been former abolitionists began to focus most of their attention on their right to vote.

Voting

In New York state, on November 5, 1872, Susan B. Anthony and a handful of other women voted in the presidential election. A few weeks later, the police arrested Anthony and the other women for voting illegally. Anthony publicly protested her arrest and upcoming trial. To keep Anthony from using the trial to protest discrimination against women, the judge quickly declared Anthony guilty and fined her \$100.

In 1878, Anthony got Congress to debate an amendment to the Constitution granting women the right to vote. It failed. Yet, for several years the amendment continued to be introduced in Congress. Finally, on August 18, 1920, the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution giving women the right to vote.