

Reactions to Seneca Falls

The first Women's Rights Convention was held on July 19–20, 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. The Declaration of Sentiments (see **Appendix B**) was a list of grievances modeled on the Declaration of Independence. It was signed by sixty-eight women and, in a separate list, thirty-two men. The resolutions, including the call for suffrage, were endorsed by those present, but not signed.

In her autobiography, *Eighty Years And More*, Stanton wrote: “No words could express our astonishment on finding, a few days afterward, that what seemed to us so timely, so rational, and so sacred, should be a subject for sarcasm and ridicule. . . .” Perhaps she wasn't quite so astonished as she remembered. Before the convention, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth's husband, Henry Stanton, had both warned that the suffrage resolution would be seen as ridiculous. At the convention, it passed only after persuasive arguments by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass.

As follow-up conventions were held elsewhere, newspapers covered the growing story. Stanton continued in her autobiography:



Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her daughter, Harriot, 1856, Daguerreotype, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 97500106.

“The anti-slavery papers stood by us manfully . . . but so pronounced was the popular voice against us . . . that most of the ladies who had attended the convention and signed the declaration, one by one, withdrew their names and influence and joined our persecutors. Our friends gave us the cold shoulder and felt themselves disgraced by the whole proceeding.”

Discussion Questions

- ★ The *Mechanics' Advocate* and the *Lowell Courier* both objected to the convention on similar grounds. What was their main objection? Do you think their objection was reasonable? Why?
- ★ Why did “the ladies of Philadelphia” object to the convention? Was their objection reasonable? Why?
- ★ How did the women who participated in the Seneca Falls Convention feel about the backlash? How would you feel in their position?

In 1881, when Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage published the first volume of the *History of Women Suffrage*, they included several of the pro and con articles, undated, in an appendix. This resource is a selection of those in the “sarcasm and ridicule” category.

Sources: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years And More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 1, 1848–1861, rev. ed.

From the Newspapers

This is all wrong. . . . Society would have to be radically remodeled in order to accommodate itself to so great a change.

—*Mechanics' Advocate*, Albany, New York

The women folks have just held a Convention up in New York State, and passed a sort of “bill of rights”. . . . They should have resolved at the same time, that it was obligatory . . . upon the “lords” . . . to wash dishes, scour up, be put to the tub, handle the broom, darn stockings, patch breeches, scold the servants, dress in the latest fashion, wear trinkets, look beautiful, and be as fascinating as those blessed morsels of humanity whom God gave to preserve that rough animal man, in something like a reasonable civilization.

—*Lowell* (Massachusetts) *Courier*

A woman is nobody. A wife is everything. A pretty girl is equal to ten thousand men, and a mother is, next to God, all powerful. The ladies of Philadelphia, therefore, under the influence of the most serious “sober second thoughts,” are resolved to maintain their rights as Wives, Belles, Virgins, and Mothers, and not as Women.

—*Philadelphia Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 1, 1848–1861, rev. ed. (Rochester, NY: 1889).