From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

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Chapter Two: Speaking for Herself

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a newlywed in 1840, when she met Lucretia Mott.

Mott was an unusual woman for those days. She not only had a high school education, but was a minister in the Society of Friends, a religious group also known as the "Quakers." In a time when women rarely spoke at public meetings, Lucretia Mott was known for her speeches at gatherings of people who opposed slavery.

Now she and her husband, James, were traveling to London for the World Anti-Slavery Convention, which was also where Elizabeth and Henry Stanton planned to spend their honeymoon.

However, when the Americans arrived in England, they discovered that the convention planners would not allow women to be members of the convention.

Henry Stanton was part of the American delegation, but Elizabeth had only expected to attend and listen.

Lucretia Mott, however, was one of several women chosen for the group, and they were surprised and offended to be excluded.

But despite the arguments of the American men and women, the convention voted against letting women participate.

James Mott later wrote that one of the first acts of a convention to promote liberty and freedom was a vote “that the chains should not be broken, with which oppressive custom has so long bound the mind of woman.”

The controversy may have spoiled the convention for those who had traveled so far only to be shut out, but it created a friendship that would change American history, for it gave Mott and Stanton that much more to talk about as they got to know each other.

Like Mott, Stanton was more educated than most women. She had graduated from Johnstown Academy and, since women were allowed at so few colleges, had furthered her education at Emma Willard’s school, the Troy Female Seminary.

Still, she had met few people like Lucretia Mott, and, as she heard the older woman calmly but accurately make point after point in conversations with the other people at the convention, she was delighted to realize that she was meeting a woman who was all the things she had only dreamt a woman could be.

“I often longed to meet some woman who had sufficient confidence in herself to frame and hold an opinion in the face of opposition, a woman who understood the deep significance of life to whom I could talk freely,” she remembered years later. “My longings were answered at last.”

Stanton had read books about human rights, including the works of Mary Wollenstonecroft on women’s rights, but she had never had the chance to discuss them with someone like Mott.

“I had never heard a woman talk what … I had scarcely dared to think,” she said, and the two women agreed that there should be a convention about the rights and the needs of women.

Eight years later, when the Motts came to Auburn, NY, to visit Lucretia’s sister, Martha Wright, the three women got together at the home of Jane Hunt, an abolitionist friend in Waterloo, along with Mary Ann McClintock, another Quaker abolitionist deeply involved in the Underground Railroad.

They decided it was time to hold the convention that Mott and Stanton had discussed in London, not just “sometime,” but now.

They went to the newspaper office, and, on July 14, 1848, a notice appeared in the Seneca County Courier, announcing that there would be a convention “to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman" in Seneca Falls on the nineteenth and twentieth.

Then they sat down to write a document for the convention to discuss and debate. McClintock and Mott were both ministers, but Quaker ministers did not deliver written sermons, and, although Wright was a teacher, none of them had ever done the sort of writing that now faced them.

After some tries, however, they had an idea, and used the Declaration of Independence as a model for what they called “The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments.”

Stanton altered the famous words to say “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal” and changed “King George” to “all men” as they listed the ways in which women were treated unfairly by the law.

In the nearly 70 years since that first document had been written, women had begun to gain some rights, and, just three months before the Seneca Falls Convention, New York had become the first state to pass a law giving married women the right to own their own property and other rights that their husbands had previously held.

But there was still much to accomplish, and, though there had only been one announcement in the newspaper four days earlier, 300 people showed up the first day of the convention.

Through two days of discussions, the group unanimously approved each of the resolutions in the Declaration, except for one: “*Resolved*, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.”

There, the group split, with Mott among those who felt the right to vote was too great a demand and would turn people against them.

But Stanton was joined by another voice, that of the abolitionist hero, escaped slave and newspaper editor, Frederick Douglass, who said that being able to vote was the mark of a citizen, and the mark of equality.

The resolution passed, and, now a conversation that had taken place only in private, among women, became a conversation that would take place in public, among all Americans.