

# TO FIGHT BY REMEMBERING, OR THE MAKING OF SENECA FALLS

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FIG. 1

*Alice Paul, the National Chairman of the Woman's Party, unfurls the ratification flag from the organization's headquarters in Washington, DC.*

National Photo Company, 1920

Gelatin silver print

16.5 × 21.6 cm (6½ × 8½ in.)

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,

Washington, DC

As the last state ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, celebrations erupted across the country. Movement leader Alice Paul stitched the final yellow star onto her National Woman's Party flag, three bold stripes of purple, cream, and gold. For every state that ratified, Paul had added a star. States had quickly fallen in line, slowed, and then stopped—short of the thirty-six states needed. The long battle came down to one man in Tennessee, a southern state known for its fierce opposition to women's rights. Like many, Harry T. Burn, the Tennessee legislature's youngest member, only twenty-four years of age, declared his objection. It seemed clear the amendment would not pass. But on receiving a letter from his mother urging his support—in which she instructed him “to be a good boy”—Burn changed his vote. Surprising everyone, the Tennessee legislature approved the amendment by a one-vote margin. The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was finally ratified on August 18, 1920. Hastily affixing the last star, Paul rushed outside of her headquarters and triumphantly unfurled the flag (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Emphasizing the long struggle that had culminated in this moment, newspapers heralded the so-called Anthony Amendment “as a living monument to its dead framer, Susan B. Anthony.” History was invoked again and again. The United Press syndicate headlined its wire story the “Outline Story of Suffrage in the United States.” Sent to hundreds of subscriber newspapers, the piece recounted a story that many knew by heart: that the now triumphant movement took shape when “in 1848 at Seneca Falls, N.Y., Miss Anthony called to order the first national woman's [rights] convention.” There, Anthony had spearheaded women's demand for the vote. “She knew her cause was right,” the story continued, and “she assumed national control of

suffrage matters on the occasion of Seneca Falls.”<sup>2</sup> Women in the United States, it was said, had finally won the vote.

Errors abounded. The Anthony Amendment (as it remains known today) was actually written by another activist, Anthony’s close friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony had not even been at the famed 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls. Yet newspapers and celebrants alike constantly placed her there. Anthony had not joined the cause of suffrage until a full three years later, in 1851, when she met Stanton, who recruited her. Women had not even won the right to vote on that historic day in August 1920. The amendment stipulated in full that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”<sup>3</sup> Those twenty-eight words failed to prohibit other forms of discriminatory practices, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, which were then law in several states across the country. Together, with outright violent intimidation and targeted administration, those legal prohibitions continued to bar from the polls many women of color. When these women came to the leading suffrage organizations asking for help in securing voting rights, white women turned them away.<sup>4</sup> The vote, a fight begun by Anthony in 1848, it was said, had been won.

As we ponder how to commemorate this 2020 centennial moment, it behooves us to attend to the memories that suffragists themselves handed down. This essay interrogates how and why celebrants in 1920 so assuredly placed Anthony at Seneca Falls, even though she had not been there, and why they so confidently used Seneca Falls as the movement’s beginning, when the movement actually had no singular point of departure. When we pull at that thread and ask how this story came to be—not the facts of the 1848 convention itself, but the *story* about that convention, along with the lessons that inhered within it—we unravel something that we were not meant to see: history-telling as an important form of activism.

The reporters were absolutely right—history mattered—but not in ways that they fully grasped. They missed how, in the aftermath of the American Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had invented this Seneca Falls origin story in an effort to shape a postwar suffrage campaign. They missed how memory itself had played a critical role in the long fight for the vote. When Stanton and Anthony first argued that the suffrage movement had begun in July 1848, when Stanton called a women’s rights convention in the small hamlet of Seneca Falls, New York, where Stanton then lived, they were not reciting merely objective, agreed-on facts. They, along with others in the movement, did not tell this origins tale until some thirty to forty years after the convention. The story was a post-Civil War creation. Yet, as in 1920, people today tell the story of Seneca Falls as if it has always been true, and they forget to attend to *its* history. That oversight has resulted in a misunderstanding of the multiple facets of this long campaign.

Beginning in the 1870s, Stanton and Anthony first turned Seneca Falls into a story they could use to combat post-Civil War challenges. This fabricated memory helped them: (1) consolidate their own deeply contested postwar leadership; (2) set an agenda for a sprawling, and to their mind, undisciplined postwar women’s movement; (3) make a pointed and controversial public argument for the necessity of

women's suffrage; and (4) sustain the movement in the face of repeated, often devastating, setbacks.<sup>5</sup>

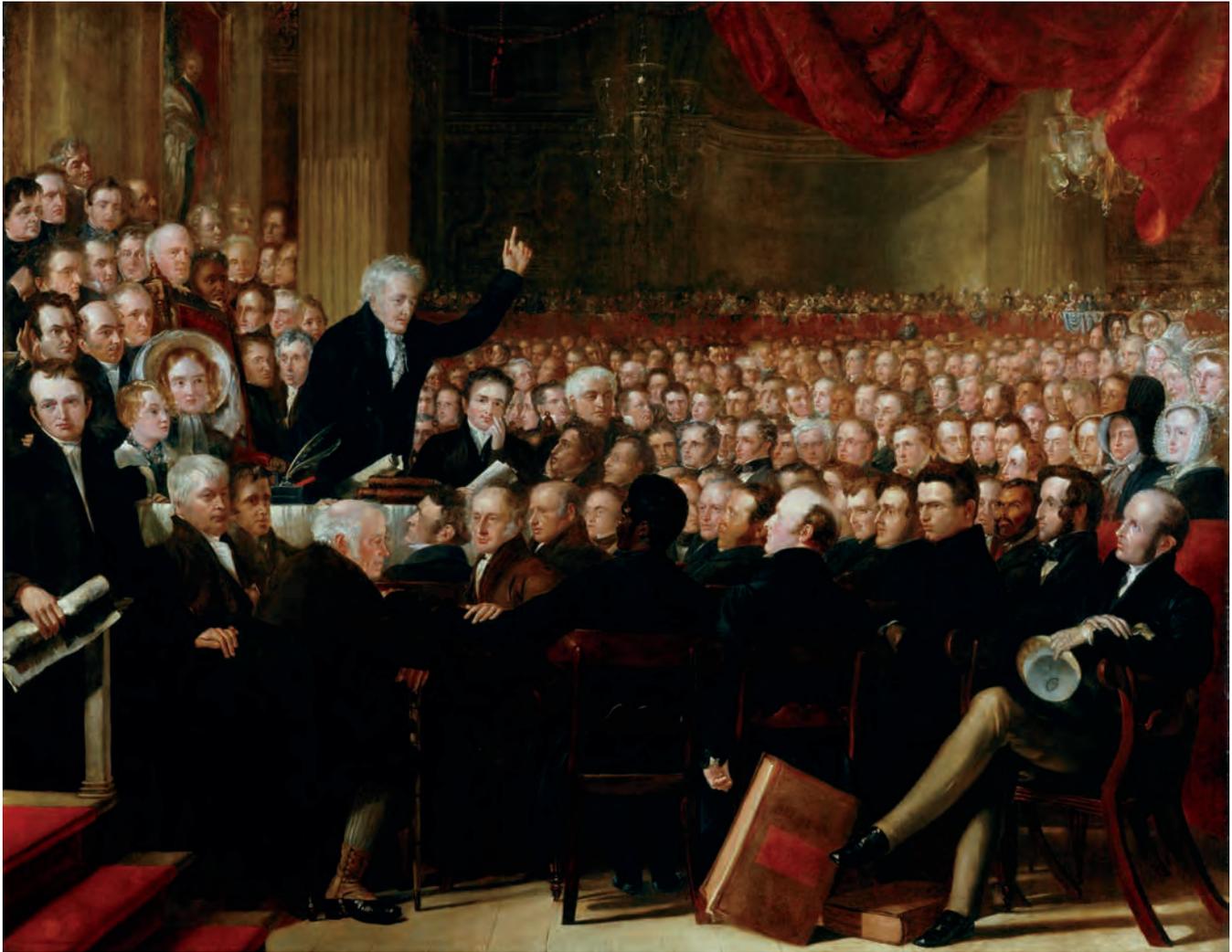
They carefully adapted and honed the story to address postwar fights while gently persuading more and more suffragists to adopt it. In doing so, people espoused, however unconsciously, the lessons Stanton and Anthony meant to impart. This origin story was not neutral. In fact, its appeal and its potential derived from its underlying political motives. The pair recognized that history-telling is, and could be, a decisive form of power. This was not unique to the story of Seneca Falls. All remembering, all history-telling, comes with fraught interpretative choices and implicitly coded lessons.<sup>6</sup>

The post-Civil War origins and purposes of this story would later be forgotten, however. Instead, it would seem to have been miraculously and unassailably true from 1848 forward. But stories don't write themselves. People make stories.<sup>7</sup> And people made this story, well after the event. They made it as a tool in their postwar fight for the vote. And it became a tool that served them well. Attending to that history, that process, tells us a great deal about how the movement restarted, defined, and sustained itself after the bloodiest war in American history, and how this social movement endured over roughly seventy-five years. It shows us how remembering was an essential piece of the long fight for the vote and how remembering is always loaded with significant political consequences.<sup>8</sup>

## An Antebellum Movement Takes Shape

So, let us go back to the ostensible beginning to sort out how this tangle of fact and falsehood got intertwined, and why it ultimately mattered. Elizabeth Cady, the supposed moving influence at Seneca Falls, had, in 1840, defied her father's wishes and, at the age of twenty-five, married a scruffy abolitionist named Henry Stanton. The newlyweds soon departed for a European honeymoon. While in England, Henry suggested they stop by the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The controversy that unfolded there, far across the Atlantic Ocean, would forever change Stanton's life and—it would be said—the course of US history.<sup>9</sup>

Stanton watched as the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention spiraled into chaos (fig. 2). The United States had sent a delegation to London, made up of both men and women. But the British delegation, comprised entirely of men, objected to the women's presence, deeming their participation offensive. The US abolition movement supported and sanctioned women's involvement, however, and many of the US men leaped to the women's defense. Instead of focusing on the issue at hand, how to abolish slavery, the convention's first day veered wildly off topic and devolved into a lengthy, acrimonious dispute about the rights of women to participate. Arguments ended in a ridiculous compromise: women could listen, seated behind a bar, but they could take no active part. The young Stanton was suitably furious. Meeting Lucretia Coffin Mott (fig. 3), however, transformed her rage into purpose. Mott was twenty-two years Stanton's senior and, unlike Stanton, already a



seasoned activist. Sent as a US delegate, Mott enjoyed universal respect within the US abolition movement. A penurious Quaker, she lived by her principles, and Stanton instantly revered her. Supposedly, the pair walked the streets of London spewing outrage over women's treatment by the British delegation, and they vowed to hold a women's rights convention on their return to the United States—an assembly dedicated solely to women's advancement.<sup>10</sup>

Then an eight-year gap in the story ensues. The idea gets rekindled, according to lore, when Mott joined Stanton for tea in July 1848. Following the Stantons' honeymoon, Henry had settled his new and growing family in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York—situated on the state's western edge and nestled among the Finger Lakes. There, he opened a small law practice. The town's provincial nature was no match for Elizabeth's prodigious intellect. And her increased boredom with the confinements of domestic life compounded her growing dissatisfaction. Although they had seen each other infrequently since London, Mott called on Stanton when she passed through Seneca Falls, inviting her to tea with three other area

FIG. 2

*Portrait of the 1840 Convention of the Anti-Slavery Society*  
Benjamin Robert Haydon  
(1786–1846)  
ca. 1841  
Oil on canvas  
297.2 × 383.6 cm (117 × 151 in.)  
National Portrait Gallery,  
London; given by British and  
Foreign Anti-Slavery Society,  
1880



FIG. 3

Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793–1880)  
Marcus Aurelius Root  
(1808–1888)  
1851  
Daguerreotype  
11.6 × 8.9 cm (4 $\frac{1}{16}$  × 3 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.)  
National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution

reformers. Around Jane Hunt’s parlor table, as the story goes, Stanton poured out her domestic woes. Together, the five women—Mott, Stanton, Hunt, Martha Coffin Wright (Mott’s pregnant sister), and Mary Ann M’Clintock—decided, then and there, to hold a convention to discuss women’s grievances. They had only a few days to organize. Hastily, they put an advertisement into the local newspaper, the *Seneca County Courier*, announcing: “A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women 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.”<sup>11</sup> The five women worried that no one would show.<sup>12</sup>

In the interim, they got to work preparing an agenda for the proceedings. They decided that the convention should have a guiding document, to focus discussion. That document would contain their complaints and their demands. As they struggled to compose something befitting, they struck on a brilliant idea: to model their document on the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they revised, “that all men *and women* are cre-

ated equal.” Where that founding document listed colonists’ grievances against the king, they substituted women’s grievances against “man,” detailing how the masculine sex deprived the feminine persuasion of their inherent rights. They then listed a series of twelve demands, called “resolutions.” They agreed that these resolutions would be taken up, one by one, in the convention, thoroughly debated and then voted on.<sup>13</sup>

On the morning of the convention, to their utter amazement, nearly three hundred people arrived, women and men alike.<sup>14</sup> While this was a women’s rights convention, organizers worried that appointing a woman to chair the proceedings would be too scandalous, so they appointed Mott’s husband, James. They worked their way through what they now called their “Declaration of Sentiments,” thoroughly debating each of its twelve resolutions. These included the right of married women to own property, the right to leave the confinements of the home and participate equally in the public sphere, women’s access to the professions, equal pay, equal education, and women’s right to vote. All passed unanimously, except for the ninth, women’s “sacred right to the elective franchise.” That demand, often credited to Stanton, met with considerable opposition. Only after the abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass, who lived in nearby Rochester, stood and vehemently defended women’s suffrage, did it finally pass (fig. 4). In the end, nearly one hundred convention goers signed the declaration and its accompanying demands.<sup>15</sup>

News of this impromptu local convention and its accompanying declaration circulated far and wide. Across the country, newspapers reported on the 1848 proceedings and its demands. Coverage varied, from comically disdainful to surprisingly respectful—even at times, supportive. Douglass, meanwhile, pulled together the proceedings and the declaration into a short pamphlet, published by the offices of his *North Star* newspaper.<sup>16</sup>

At the time, no one believed that this local convention had started a woman's (as it was known at the time, in the singular) suffrage movement, as is now often claimed. That story did not yet exist because it was not yet needed. And although Seneca Falls was absolutely the first women's rights convention in the United States—and certainly significant for this reason—it did not offer a novel definition of women's rights. Nor was this the first demand for the franchise, as would later be claimed. Women's rights ideas had been percolating for some time. Far from conceiving of women's suffrage and the other demands, the women at Seneca Falls simultaneously drew on a rich heritage and advanced that ongoing project.<sup>17</sup>

Before 1848, various women, in various ways, had called for many of the early women's rights demands outlined at Seneca Falls already, including the vote. In 1776, Abigail Adams had warned her husband John, a representative to the Continental Congress, who was busy drafting laws for the new nation, that women “threatened fomenting a Rebellion.” She assured him that women “would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.”<sup>18</sup> From its very beginning, the American Revolution unleashed aspirations of equality among the downtrodden, including white women.<sup>19</sup> In New Jersey, propertied white women even voted, casting ballots legally until 1807.<sup>20</sup> In 1845, Massachusetts-born Margaret Fuller, steeped in American transcendentalism, published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, one of the first major feminist works produced in the United States, in which she too called for the ballot.<sup>21</sup> And in 1846—two years before the convention at Seneca Falls—six women from Jefferson County, New York, petitioned their state legislature for their right to the elective franchise.<sup>22</sup>

The other women's rights demands made at Seneca Falls had important precursors, too. As women joined the abolitionist movement, ministers and other men attacked them for forcefully exercising their political opinions in public. Abolitionist women defended themselves by articulating some of the earliest women's rights stances. The most famous of these women were the Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, who were castigated in the 1830s for speaking against slavery before so-called promiscuous (or mixed-sex) audiences, violating the biblical Pauline dictate



FIG. 4

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)  
Unidentified photographer  
ca. 1847–1850  
Daguerreotype  
6.8 × 5.4 cm (2 11/16 × 2 1/8 in.)  
National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution

FIG. 5

*Sarah Moore Grimké* (1792–1873)  
Unidentified artist  
ca. 1850  
Wood engraving  
9 × 11.5 cm (3 ½ × 4 ½ in.)  
Library of Congress, Prints  
and Photographs Division,  
Washington, DC

FIG. 6

*Angelina Emily Grimké Weld*  
(1805–1879)  
Unidentified artist  
ca. 1850  
Wood engraving  
9 × 11.5 cm (3 ½ × 4 ½ in.)  
Library of Congress, Prints  
and Photographs Division,  
Washington, DC

that women should remain silent (figs. 5–6).<sup>23</sup> The Grimkés retorted that God meant for women to leave the domestic sphere and advocate their political and moral minds. And in 1838, Sarah authored her widely read *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, an important early women’s rights treatise. The Grimkés were part of a mass movement of black and white women within abolition who began blending their anti-slavery work with women’s rights activism.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in 1847, Lucy Stone, the first Massachusetts woman to earn a college degree, took a lecturing job with the American Anti-Slavery Society, in which she spoke about abolition during one part of the week and women’s rights during the other (fig. 7).<sup>25</sup> Immigrant women, too, helped build an early women’s rights analysis, arriving in the United States steeped in very different traditions of European radicalism.<sup>26</sup>

This ongoing national discussion about women’s rights, variously defined, and over several decades, was precisely what generated an audience of three hundred at the Wesleyan Chapel on a hot day in July 1848. Some were merely curious onlookers. The women’s rights discussion was emergent, rather than fully fledged. But some of these convention goers were surely midstream in their thinking about these issues when they took their seats at the meeting.

After the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls, the conversation continued and intensified. A central difference was that it now began to be articulated in women’s rights conventions (although it continued in other venues as well). A month after Seneca Falls, a follow-up meeting was held in nearby Rochester, New York—this time chaired by a woman. Activists in other states, such as Ohio, Indiana, and Massachusetts, also began holding local and state women’s rights conventions. Adherents started forming women’s rights organizations, which pursued the agendas spelled out in conventions. By 1850, these meetings and organizations were



FIG. 7

*Lucy Stone* (1818–1893)  
Unidentified photographer  
ca. 1855  
Daguerreotype  
13.9 × 10.7 cm (5 1/2 × 4 3/16 in.)  
National Portrait Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution



numerous enough that activists held the first *national* women's rights convention, in Worcester, Massachusetts. After this, women held national conventions, which gathered activists from around the country, every year (save for 1857), until the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861.<sup>27</sup> Although all this would later be pegged as the beginning of a women's *suffrage* movement, antebellum activists never centered the vote as the pinnacle of their work. They called themselves woman's rights activists, not suffragists, as the vote was only one of many demands. That switch came after the war.

During all this ferment, Stanton met Anthony, a meeting that irrevocably changed both their lives—and some would argue, the landscape of American feminism. Stanton had remained engaged in women's rights activity after her first foray in 1848, but she was limited by domestic and maternal duty, including new pregnancies (ultimately having seven children). Much of this growing women's rights activity proceeded without her. Notably, she would not attend a national convention, for example, until 1860. Meanwhile, as women's rights activity picked up around the country in the early 1850s, Anthony was living in Rochester, New York, where she worked as a schoolteacher, while also participating in area abolition and temperance



FIG. 8

*Susan B. Anthony* (1820–1906)  
and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*  
(1815–1902)  
Napoleon Sarony (1821–1896)  
ca. 1870  
Albumen silver print  
6.1 × 9.7 cm (2 3/8 × 3 13/16 in.)  
Susan B. Anthony Papers,  
1815–1961, Schlesinger  
Library, Radcliffe Institute,  
Harvard University

reform. Their 1851 meeting would transform their respective reform careers.<sup>28</sup>

The two quickly developed an astonishingly productive friendship, their respective skills being exceedingly well matched. Stanton persuaded Anthony to abandon temperance and focus on women’s rights, and it soon became their joint life’s work. It became hard to talk about one without talking about the other. Where Stanton was the intellect and philosopher, Anthony was the organizer. Soon, Anthony left teaching and became a full-time organizer. Never marrying, she dedicated her life to the cause. Needing content for meetings—calls, speeches, and the like—and not being a particularly good writer, Anthony would travel to Seneca Falls, lock the domestically preoccupied Stanton into a room with pointed directives to write, and babysit Stanton’s growing brood. As Anthony would later say of their close, lifelong collaboration, Stanton “forged the thunderbolts, and I fired them” (fig. 8).<sup>29</sup>

Although increasingly prominent and active over the 1850s, the two were by no means the center of an antebellum women’s rights movement. That mistaken impression—so prominently on display in the newspaper coverage of ratification in 1920, where reporters confidently declared that Anthony “assumed national control of suffrage matters” after 1848—would be forged through the Seneca Falls origin

story. In the wake of the American Civil War, which brought an entirely new set of political challenges, Stanton and Anthony leveraged and reinvented the past.<sup>30</sup>

## The World the War Made

In April 1861, cannon fire engulfed Fort Sumter, a US military fort in a South Carolina harbor. Thus began the American Civil War. Women’s rights activists immediately suspended their work on behalf of the “fairer sex” and threw themselves into supporting the Northern war effort. At first, Lincoln remained committed to restoring the Union, with slavery intact. But as the war dragged on and the North suffered repeated military defeats, Lincoln realized what many had already concluded: that slavery had to end. Two years into the war, in January 1863, Lincoln ended slavery in the Confederacy (where he technically had no jurisdiction) with the Emancipation Proclamation, causing chaos in the South, just as he had hoped. Freed people and abolitionists rejoiced. In 1865, Lincoln accepted the South’s surrender. Then began the hard work of what came next.<sup>31</sup>

The divisive national postwar battles about how to rebuild the war-torn nation engulfed the abolitionist and women’s rights movements, as they

struggled to navigate a new political climate. Although freed people were now nominally “free,” they had no clear legal status. Were they equal citizens, subject to the same laws as whites? Were they entitled to compensation for their long history of enslavement? These and so many other questions swirled around in postwar political culture.<sup>32</sup>

Antebellum reformers from the abolition-and-women’s-rights coalition reorganized into the American Equal Rights Association (AERA). Formed in 1866 to intervene in this larger national debate about postwar political rights, the AERA lobbied for two inextricable demands—the vote for both blacks and women. Membership included many prominent activists, notably Frederick Douglass (now the nation’s leading African American statesman), Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Coffin Mott, and a number of Northern black women, such as Sojourner Truth (fig. 9), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Purvis. Bitter internal disputes split the AERA, however, when the national political scene put their twin demands into conflict.<sup>33</sup>

In 1869, the US Congress precipitated a debate that would destroy the AERA. Unwilling to grant most of the rights freed people demanded—such as land, bodily protection, and education—Congress decided to grant their appeals for political representation. That February, they passed the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. The amendment barred the states from discrimination in voting on the basis of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” In effect, it granted black male suffrage. The AERA had fought to have “sex” included in the wording of the provision, which would have granted women’s suffrage too, but that had failed. Nevertheless, the AERA considered supporting the amendment as it headed to the states for ratification. Most considered it a vitally important step forward, but Stanton and Anthony balked. At the AERA’s May 1869 convention, they staunchly opposed the amendment for its exclusion of women. Although it is often said today that the two took the high road, refusing to compromise and insisting on equal voting for all (“universal suffrage”), the reality is considerably less savory.<sup>34</sup>

As the convention began, Stanton delivered the opening salvo. “‘Manhood suffrage’ is national suicide and women’s destruction,” she railed. “Remember, the fifteenth amendment takes in a larger population than the 3,000,000 black men on the Southern plantations. It takes in all the foreigners daily landing in our Eastern cities, [and] the Chinese crowding our western shores,” she continued. “Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung, who do not know the



FIG. 9

*Sojourner Truth* (1797–1883),  
*“I Sell the Shadow to Support  
the Substance”*

Unidentified photographer  
1864

Albumen silver print

8.5 × 5.4 cm (3 3/8 × 2 1/8 in.)

Metropolitan Museum of Art;  
purchase, Alfred Stieglitz Society  
Gifts, 2013

difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling book, making laws for Lucretia Mott . . . [or] Susan B. Anthony." The amendment, she charged, "creates an antagonism everywhere between educated, refined women and the lower orders of men, especially at the South." Many fought back against the blanket racism in Stanton's remarks, her elitism on naked display.<sup>35</sup>

As the tumult quelled, Douglass spoke. He attacked the use of such disparaging language and spoke in favor of the Fifteenth Amendment. "I must say," he shouted, referencing the uncontrolled, vigilante violence inflicted on freed people across the South, "I do not see how any one can pretend that there is the same urgency in giving the ballot to the woman as to the negro. . . . With us, the matter is a question of life and death. . . . When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York or New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when she is an object of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes bur[n]t down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools, then she will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own." Whereupon a newspaper indicated "Great applause." A voice from the audience shouted: "Is that not true about black women?" "Yes, yes, yes," Douglass rejoined, "but not because she is a woman but because she is black."<sup>36</sup>

The convention declined into chaos. Arguments flew on all sides. Like Stanton, Anthony shouted, "If you will not give the whole loaf of justice to the entire people, if you are determined to give it, piece by piece, then give it first to women, to the most intelligent & capable of the women at least," clearly meaning native-born, white women. Stone, by contrast, praised the Fifteenth Amendment and despaired over the introduction of questions of priority in the debate. She closed by asking that someone get them "out of this terrible pit." Harper, one of the black female activists, declared that "the question of color was far more to her than the question of sex." Like Harper, the other black women there also ardently supported the amendment. In the end, the convention could not even restore enough order to call a vote.<sup>37</sup>

The dispute effectively ended the AERA and began Stanton and Anthony's alienation from their former allies—a state of affairs they would omit when offering their own interpretation of the past. Refusing to sanction black men voting before white women, the pair pulled out of the AERA and in a small, unadvertised reception, they formed a brand-new organization, the National Woman Suffrage Association (National Association). Stone and the many other women's suffrage allies in the AERA charged that they had been deliberately excluded, that Stanton and Anthony had colluded to form a national organization without them. Stone gathered with reformers from across the country and formed an alternative national women's suffrage organization: the much larger American Woman Suffrage Association (American Association). By the end of 1869, the antebellum women's rights movement had reorganized into a bitterly divided postwar women's suffrage movement.<sup>38</sup>

As personal animosities grew, reformers also split over what a post-war women's suffrage movement *could* and *should* do. In Stanton and Anthony's mind, the Fifteenth Amendment had one redeeming feature: it set a new constitutional precedent by affirming federal regulation of voting, a right that had historically been regulated by individual states. States had determined who could vote within their boundaries. But with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the federal government had, for the first time in US history, imposed stipulations on *who* the states permitted to vote. According to Stanton and Anthony, this had changed the terms of the fight. Women no longer needed to demand voting rights from each individual state legislature, which had been the antebellum method. They could concentrate their efforts on a single point, demanding that the US Congress pass a Sixteenth Amendment prohibiting the states from using "male" as a voting qualification.

By contrast, Stone and the American Association staunchly disagreed that the Fifteenth Amendment changed constitutional prerogatives around voting. They argued that those still rested with the states and any winning strategy should focus there. So, while Stone and her allies threw themselves into organizing and coordinating activism in the individual states, Stanton, Anthony, and the National Association attacked the congressional citadel with demands for a Sixteenth Amendment (figs. 10–11).<sup>39</sup>

FIG. 10

*Flocking for Freedom*  
Udo J. Keppler (1872–1956) for  
*Puck*, January 23, 1878  
Lithograph  
46.5 × 31 cm (18 5/16 × 12 1/4 in.)  
Library of Congress, Prints  
and Photographs Division,  
Washington, DC

FIG. 11

*Appeal for a Sixteenth Amendment*  
National Woman Suffrage  
Association, November 10, 1876  
Printed paper, with inscription  
25.5 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)  
Center for Legislative  
Archives, National Archives,  
Washington, DC



Colorado  
Men - 11  
Women - 17  
Total - 27

House

# APPEAL

FOR A

# SIXTEENTH AMENDMENT.

TO THE WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES:

Having celebrated our Centennial birthday with a National jubilee, let us now dedicate the dawn of the Second Century to securing justice to Woman.

For this purpose we ask you to circulate a petition to Congress, just issued by the *National Woman Suffrage Association*, asking an amendment to the United States Constitution, that shall prohibit the several States from disfranchising any of their citizens on account of Sex. We have already sent this petition throughout the country for the signatures of those men and women who believe in the citizen's right to vote.

To see how large a petition each State rolls up, and to do the work as expeditiously as possible, it is necessary that some person, or society in each State and District should take the matter in charge, print, and send out petitions to reliable friends in every county, urging upon all thoroughness and haste. When the petitions are returned, they should be pasted together, neatly rolled up, the number of signatures marked on the outside, with the name of the State, and forwarded to Sarah Andrews Spencer, Chairman of our Congressional Committee, corner of L and 7th street, Washington, D. C. On the 16th and 17th of January, 1877, we shall hold our 8th Annual Convention at the Capitol and ask a hearing on our petition before Congress.

Having petitioned to our law-makers, State and National, for years, many from weariness and despair have vowed to appeal no more; for our petitions, say they, by the tens of thousands, are piled up amid the National archives unheeded and ignored. Yet, it is possible to roll up such a mammoth petition, borne into Congress on the shoulders of stalwart men, that we can no longer be neglected or forgotten. Statesmen and politicians, alike, are conquered by majorities. We urge the women of this country to make now the same united effort for their own rights, that they did for the slaves at the south, when the 13th amendment was passing. Then a petition of over 300,000 was rolled up by the leaders of the suffrage movement, and presented in the Senate by the Hon. Charles Sumner. But the leading statesmen who welcomed woman's untiring efforts to secure the black man's freedom, frowned down the same demands when made for herself. Is not liberty as sweet to her as to him? Are not the political disabilities of Sex as grievous as those of color? Is not a civil rights bill that shall open to woman the college doors, the trades and professions—that shall secure her personal and property rights, as necessary for her protection, as for that of the colored man?

And yet the highest judicial authorities have decided that the spirit and letter of our National Constitution are not broad enough to protect Woman in her political rights; and for the redress of her wrongs they remand her to the State. If this *Magna Charta of Human Rights* can be thus narrowed by judicial interpretations in favor of class legislation, then must we demand an amendment that in clear, unmistakable language, shall declare the equality of all citizens before the law.

Women are citizens, first of the United States, and second of the State wherein they reside; hence, if robbed by State authorities of any right founded in nature or secured by law, they have the same right to national protection against the State, as against the infringements of any foreign power. If the United States government can punish a woman for voting in one State, why has it not the same power to protect her in the exercise of that right in every State? The Constitution declares it the duty of Congress to guarantee to every State a republican form of government, to every citizen equality of rights. This is not done in States where women, thoroughly qualified, are denied admission into colleges, which their property is taxed to build and endow; where they are denied the right to practice law and are thus debarred from one of the most lucrative professions; where they are denied a voice in the government, and thus while suffering all the ills that grow out of the giant evils of intemperance, prostitution, war, heavy taxation and political corruption, stand powerless to effect any reform. Prayers, tears, psalm-singing and expostulation are light in the balance, compared with that power at the ballot box that converts opinions into law. If Women who are laboring for peace, temperance, social purity and the rights of labor, would take the speediest way to accomplish what they propose, let them demand the ballot in their own hands, that they may have a direct power in the government. Thus only can they improve the conditions of the outside world and purify the home. As political equality is the door to civil, religious and social liberty, here must our work begin.

Constituting as we do one-half the people, bearing the burdens of one-half the National debt, equally responsible with man for the education, religion and morals of the rising generation, let us with united voice send forth a protest against the present political status of Woman, that shall echo and re-echo through the land. In view of the numbers and character of those making the demand, this should be the largest petition ever yet rolled up in the old world or the new;—a petition that shall settle forever the popular objection that "Women do not want to vote."

ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION:

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, Pres.  
MATHILDA JOSLYN GAGE, Chairman Ex. Com.  
SUSAN B. ANTHONY, Cor. Sec.

Tenally, N. J., Nov. 10, 1876.

Over the late 1860s and early 1870s, there arose incredible optimism that the female franchise might be won. Women's suffrage now rolled off the tongues of most Americans—with plenty of talk in favor. One prominent activist, Mary Livermore, noted that after the war, “the whole country was seething with interest in the questions that relate to women.”<sup>40</sup> In 1869, the territory of Wyoming even granted women full voting rights. The next year, Utah did the same. In two territories, women now voted on the same terms as men.<sup>41</sup> Suffragists felt keenly that this historic opportunity should not be squandered with misdirected energy for fear that the cause be lost forever. As such, they believed that how the battle was fought and who led it urgently mattered.

By the early 1870s, when yet another dramatic controversy flowed in their wake, Stanton and Anthony had become a liability in the eyes of many suffragists. The pair received a rain of bad press because of their alliance with the controversial Victoria Woodhull, who seemingly burst onto the national scene out of nowhere (fig. 12).

The insanely rich railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt called on Woodhull's services as a clairvoyant—someone who could talk to the dead, an ability many nineteenth-century people believed in. Grateful for her assistance with all things psychic, Vanderbilt showered Woodhull and her sister, Tennessee Claflin (who scandalized the public by wearing men's attire and smoking cigars), with gifts. He set them up with the first female-run Wall Street brokerage firm, which gripped national attention, and he financed their reform-minded newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, which drew additional focus to the sisters' rising fame. Woodhull, meanwhile, espoused sex radicalism, being a so-called free lover. All of this made her a deeply controversial figure. Even though she was an outspoken proponent of the cause, some wanted her nowhere near the suffrage movement, for fear she would bring ill repute on the reform.<sup>42</sup>

When Woodhull, of all people, was invited to address the House Judiciary Committee in January 1871, on the topic of women suffrage, Stanton and Anthony felt determined to be present (fig. 13). The House Judiciary Committee, after all, was not in the habit of inviting females to address it. Neither did it routinely take up the topic of women's suffrage. Stanton and Anthony delayed the start of their association's annual convention in Washington, DC, in order to bear witness. Taken with Woodhull's meteoric public prominence and her eloquent defense of women's right to vote, the pair invited her to speak before their convention, which took place that same day. There, she delivered her address for a second time to a packed and enthusiastic hall.<sup>43</sup>

Woodhull promoted yet another new strategy for pursuing the vote, the “New Departure,” for which women creatively probed and interpreted existing



FIG. 12

*Victoria Claflin Woodhull*  
(1838–1927)  
Unidentified photographer  
ca. 1870  
Albumen silver print  
10 × 6 cm (4 × 2 ½ in.)  
The Library Company of  
Philadelphia



FIG. 13

*Lady Delegates Speaking to the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives*

*Standing:* Victoria Woodhull (1838–1927), *seated:* Lillie Devereux Blake (1833–1913), Isabella Beecher Hooker (1822–1907), Rev. Olympia Brown (1835–1926), Paulina Wright Davis (1813–1876), Kate Stanton (life dates unknown), Josephine Sophia White Griffing (1814–1872), Belva Ann Lockwood (1830–1917), and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906)  
Unidentified artist for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 4, 1871  
Wood engraving  
23 × 36 cm (9<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

constitutional amendments as a way of claiming that they *already* possessed the ballot. All they had to do was go vote, get arrested, and then argue this theory in court. If the courts could be persuaded to accept it, then suffragists would win their fight. In essence, the New Departure was an end run around the legislative process, one that relied on the judicial branch of government. Eagerly, the National Association jettisoned its Sixteenth Amendment work and began recruiting women to vote. The American Association was appalled. The idea seemed preposterous to them, a total distraction from the hard work they needed to do. It was yet more indication that the National Association had gone completely off the rails. Determined to pursue Woodhull's strategy, Anthony famously cast her vote in the 1872 presidential election, and was—as she hoped—arrested for it. But this short-lived strategy quickly failed, as the courts rebuffed women's claims.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, that same fall, Woodhull frequented the headlines, bringing more bad press to the movement. Some blamed Stanton and Anthony for having invited Woodhull into the movement. The fall of 1872 was momentous. Not only did hundreds of women go out and vote, but Woodhull also boldly declared herself a third-party candidate in the 1872 presidential race.<sup>45</sup> She was the first woman to ever run for US president.<sup>46</sup> Rather than rejoice over her candidacy (itself a women's rights victory), the American Association continually rebuffed Woodhull for her supposed “free-love” immorality. Woodhull seethed with anger over their hypocrisy; everyone



knew, even if no one dared speak about it, that the American Association's one-time president, the nation's leading minister, Henry Ward Beecher, was having an illicit affair with his best friend's wife. Having had enough of the attacks on her morals, Woodhull charged Beecher with adultery, on the front page of her newspaper, setting off the most famous sex scandal of the nineteenth century. It was a national sensation (fig. 14).<sup>47</sup> To compound matters, Woodhull named Stanton as her source, something Stanton (having no tolerance for the sexual double standard) happily corroborated. Anthony furiously tried to smooth the waters, but it was a public relations disaster. Branded "Mrs. Satan" by a leading political cartoonist (see cat. 31), Woodhull took the brunt of public criticism and was soon chased out of the country. The suffrage movement took a heavy blow as well, as it was now being branded in the press as no more than a conspiracy to promote "free love."

FIG. 14

*Testimony in the Great Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case Illustrated*

James E. Cook (active 1870s)  
ca. 1875

Lithograph

56.1 × 70.8 cm (22 1/16 × 27 7/8 in.)

Library of Congress, Prints  
and Photographs Division,  
Washington, DC

## To Fight by Remembering

In response to this swirling catastrophe, Stanton and Anthony began honing a new political strategy: history-telling. With no viable strategy for achieving the vote, now that the New Departure had failed, and facing the fallout of the Woodhull public relations disaster, Stanton and Anthony struggled with how to focus the National Association's 1873 annual convention. Finding little good news in the present, they looked backward to the 1848 convention. They began to use it as a political tool—tentatively, and perhaps even unconsciously at first, but then more overtly and deliberately. With very little to celebrate, they turned their National Association annual meeting into a Seneca Falls anniversary convention, something activists had never before publicly commemorated. It was perhaps no more than coincidence that the 1848 Seneca Falls convention was exactly twenty-five years old and ripe for an anniversary party at the dawn of 1873.

At this point, Seneca Falls, as a key memory of the movement, was almost nonexistent. Some of the older veterans still remembered the event as the first convention, but they attached no special significance to it. Almost no one considered Seneca Falls the beginning of the movement—not even Mott.<sup>48</sup> Many of the new recruits, on the other hand, who poured into the suffrage fight after the Civil War, knew nothing about a local 1848 meeting, or about the antebellum movement in general.<sup>49</sup> That antebellum past, now twenty to thirty years distant, was a relatively blank slate, and thus provided a prime political opportunity.

If antebellum activists had not been especially concerned with where and when the movement began, pinpointing a beginning served a very useful political purpose after the Civil War—namely, adjudicating authority within a bitterly divided national suffrage movement. Should suffragists disregard the work of the National Association and follow the path of the American Association? Should they jettison Stanton and Anthony's guidance? Was the pair the dangerous liability that Stone and others believed them to be? How were suffragists to know? Seneca Falls as an origin point offered clear—seemingly nonpartisan—answers.

If the movement began in 1848 at Seneca Falls, then surely Stanton and Anthony were on the right side of history in 1873. If they *originated* the movement, then it stood to reason that they *were* the movement. Amid all the chaos and confusion that now plagued the campaign, the correct path forward could be intuited by looking backward. Stanton and Anthony could not be the dangerous renegades that other suffragists charged them with being after the Civil War. On the contrary, having started it, they were, by definition, the movement's continuation, and their rivals were the deviants. Moreover, the event's exclusivity now served as a highly useful historical sieve. Being a small, hastily planned, local convention, many who were already active in the antebellum women's rights movement, like Stone herself, didn't attend the Seneca Falls gathering. Without having to resort to seemingly partisan exclusion, an 1848 story could focus on Stanton alone, and by proxy, owing to their close friendship and near inseparability, Anthony, even though she had not been there. But for this argument to work, Stanton and Anthony had to first

mark 1848 as the beginning of the movement and persuade other suffragists to adopt this claim (fig. 15).

As commemorative events go, the twenty-fifth anniversary convention was meager in its ceremonial display, perhaps underscoring just how tentative this new point of origin was. Aside from a “wreath of laurels, interwoven with a silver thread,” no other trappings or relics graced the stage, save for three of the original organizers: Mott, her sister Martha Coffin Wright, and Stanton. Because she had not been there in 1848, Anthony presided over the convention. Taking on the role of onstage historian, she narrated events she had not witnessed and imbued them with retrospective significance.<sup>50</sup>

Anthony opened by announcing their intent to celebrate “the twenty-fifth anniversary of the movement”—an entirely new claim. She then read from the printed report of the 1848 convention since most of those in attendance would not have been familiar with what had happened or what had been discussed. The retelling of the basic 1848 convention details underscores just how novel and inventive this nascent memory was. In what amounted to its first public telling, the account was not yet the codified, widely known tale that it would eventually become.<sup>51</sup>

Getting one’s hands on a printed report of the 1848 convention would have been nearly impossible only a few years earlier. Copies of the 1848 pamphlet that Douglass printed from his newspaper offices that same year were now relics and had become, in the words of one suffragist just after the war, exceedingly “rare.”<sup>52</sup> (Today, fewer than twenty-five copies survive.<sup>53</sup>) Those “rare” proceedings began to circulate more widely, however, after Stanton had them reprinted in 1870. This helped establish a documentary basis for this emergent origins account, making news of the meeting widely available for all who cared to learn.<sup>54</sup>

It was surely one of these reprints that Isabella Beecher Hooker—the half sister of the adulterous Henry Ward Beecher and National Association partisan—had in her hands when she enthusiastically read a letter to those assembled: “First, let me beg you . . . one and all, to read the report of the first convention at Seneca Falls twenty-five years ago . . . that you may join me in heartfelt admiration.” Hooker rejoiced that she had just finished reading the report “for the third time,” adding that “had I the means, the printed reports to this convention should be placed in the hands of every woman in the United States.” She exhorted women to learn their history, now available in convenient and plentiful form, and positioned this new origin as true and uncontested. Hooker’s enthusiasm helped begin the long process of turning this report—and more specifically, the Declaration of Sentiments—into a sacred text.<sup>55</sup>

By imploring activists to turn their attention to 1848, the celebration argued that much could be learned from the event. The proper lines of succession formed the first lesson. A convention resolution made this abundantly clear: “Resolved, that Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton will evermore be held in grateful remembrance as the pioneers in this grandest reform of the age,” it pre-saged; “that as the wrongs they attacked were broader and deeper than any other, so as time passes they will be revered as foremost among the benefactors of the race,

FIG. 15

*Susan B. Anthony* (1820–1906)  
*Napoleon Sarony* (1821–1896)  
ca. 1870  
Albumen silver print  
16.5 × 11 cm (6½ × 4⅝ in.)  
The New York Public Library;  
the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach  
Division of Art, Prints and  
Photographs: Photography  
Collection



and that we also hold sacred the memory of their co-laborers in the convention of 1848.”<sup>56</sup>

Worded in the future tense, the resolution looked forward, not backward. The venerated Mott, who was now eighty and visibly frail, wondered aloud whether this might be her last public appearance. With those words, the torch was all but passed to Stanton “evermore,” not only as Mott’s “foremost” successor but also as the woman who had, as this story explained, almost single-handedly inaugurated the women’s rights movement in the United States. Notably, the resolution made no mention of the other organizers, including Martha Coffin Wright, who also sat on the stage that day. Wright and the other organizers were not integral to the political work of this developing narrative (and they would soon drop out of the story altogether).

Anthony’s mythological inclusion also began here. During this 1873 anniversary celebration, Anthony became the keeper and onstage architect of this tale. She spent more time cultivating and disseminating this story than Stanton ever did. Through her guardianship of it, it seemed to be rightfully hers, marking her as an heir of the movement—and its logical leader since the campaign’s so-called 1848 inception. That she and Stanton were inseparable by this point also contributed heavily to this myth-making. This equation of Anthony and Seneca Falls happened through other channels as well, some of which emerged later, as the story matured.<sup>57</sup>

To be clear, Anthony would never falsely claim to have been there. Nevertheless, her conflation with the event began with the story’s very first public telling. More than an accidental error, her inclusion was part of the logic of the story. Indeed, it was no accident that news reports heralding the Nineteenth Amendment’s ratification placed her there. In many ways, those 1920 news reports captured the essence of the story perfectly, even if the facts were sometimes wrong.

Remembering always involves forgetting, and the 1873 anniversary proceedings left out the broad array of demands made at Seneca Falls. They only highlighted the vote, a response to the postwar political climate, where women split over what they believed was their most important goal. Not only was there keen disagreement within the suffrage movement about how to proceed, there was also considerable disagreement among women about what properly defined women’s rights: temperance, bodily sovereignty, economic security, and so forth. Suffrage was not the sum total of women’s rights activism in this period, a fact often overlooked because of the sway of the Seneca Falls origin tale, with its exclusive focus on the vote. This too was another of the story’s main purposes—to focus women on the vote and away from the many other causes that consumed them. Women pursued all of these women’s rights causes after the war, and many argued that voting was not the primary solution for women’s autonomy and self-determination.<sup>58</sup> This greatly frustrated Stanton and Anthony, and they worked overtime to persuade women to concentrate on the fight for enfranchisement.

This nascent origin story served another important political purpose as well: making a pointed, if controversial, case for granting women’s postwar voting rights. Still bitter over the Fifteenth Amendment, Stanton and Anthony once again, perhaps more tacitly, elevated white women’s votes over black men’s. After the Civil

War, one of the primary justifications for black men's voting was that history—the arc of progress—demanded it. Abolition, along with emancipation, was repeatedly heralded in Northern political culture as the most historic and momentous development of modern history. This understanding created a justification for black men's political rights. Stanton and Anthony used the history of Seneca Falls to counterpunch, crafting their interpretation to speak directly to this postwar political moment. By anchoring the postwar suffrage movement backward, to 1848, they were able to argue that women's suffrage was also a long-lived movement and therefore that women had waited long enough. In this way, by arguing that women had been demanding this reform, it was not, as many postwar politicians said, reasonable to let the “negro” go first. Stanton and Anthony then went a step further, calling the antebellum women's rights movement “the greatest movement for humanity ever inaugurated.” This strategic, pointed language was a direct attack on abolition's claim to this mantle, and on the priority of black men's votes.<sup>59</sup>

With that otherwise seemingly innocuous pronouncement, Stanton and Anthony pointedly argued—yet again—that white women had the most urgent claim to the ballot. They did not use the term “white women” but simply referred to themselves as “women”; in their mind, women were silently coded as white. Here, black women fell out of consideration, rendered invisible by the unspoken equation of women with whiteness, and blackness with men.<sup>60</sup> This was a continual hazard that black women faced while organizing for their own rights in a political culture that repeatedly erased them. Although they joined the suffrage movement, where they fought for visibility, they also organized independently, and on their own terms, pursuing a different range of issues from various, disparate angles.<sup>61</sup>

From 1873 forward, then, Stanton and Anthony had hit on a strategy they would use for the rest of their careers: history—or story—telling. And their work underscored a central truth about history—namely, that the past is simultaneously about the present. Present demands always shape what we remember and what we forget. The past hands us no stories. People, rather, invent them, from incomplete and partial shards. This is true for all history-telling. Stanton and Anthony adopted, in many ways, the role of history authors. They were not especially manipulative or conniving in *how* they remembered. They were ordinary, in that they were profoundly influenced by a present-day point of view. Yet they were exceptional in their determination and insight into how history could be leveraged as an asset. No other postwar suffragists would master this art better than Stanton and Anthony. And, over time, it would serve them exceptionally well.

As we recover the history of the Seneca Falls origin tale, it can be easy to see the pair as conniving, manipulating, and scheming. But this is not an especially useful lens. Indeed, they were absolutely true believers. The invention of this origin story came easily for Stanton and Anthony, not because they fully grasped all they could do with it, but because they genuinely believed it. Their story bent to their purposes, their particular vision, hopes, and ambitions, almost naturally. Stanton had always believed that a campaign took shape in 1848—for good reason.<sup>62</sup> It was her personal story, *her* beginning. And Anthony had little reason to defer. But there were

legions of other beginnings that could have been picked. In fact, it could easily be argued that seeking a single origin point for an antebellum (and postbellum) women's rights movement is nonsensical, given the many antecedents and contributing factors.<sup>63</sup> Yet Stanton, never short on ambition or self-confidence, always conflated *her* story with the *movement's* story. For her, and for Anthony, 1848 was simple truth.

Lucy Stone hated all this remembering. She thought it detracted from the work. But Stanton and Anthony were only getting started. They would continue to recall the Seneca Falls convention—however imperfectly—in new and inventive ways. They held another, more-robust anniversary convention in 1878. They wrote encyclopedia entries, pegging Seneca Falls as the suffrage movement's beginning. They also began writing a history of the movement itself, centered on Seneca Falls and their National Association. As each new memory project unfolded, Stone vehemently distrusted that Stanton and Anthony would tell the story properly. When they wrote her for material, she refused cooperation, signing her letter, "Yours with ceaseless regret that any 'wing' of suffragists should attempt to write the history of the other."<sup>64</sup> Stone remained continually blind to how remembering could serve as an effective form of activism for the movement—something she ignored to her peril. But over the 1880s, as the Seneca Falls narrative took an increasingly strong hold on the movement, she began to realize how dangerous this memory was to her own standing in, and vision for, the campaign.

## A Movement Memory Made

The 1880s witnessed two of Stanton and Anthony's seminal historical works, both of which firmly cemented their increasingly familiar postwar version of the antebellum past. The first was the publication of their enormous, multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage*, a three-thousand-page history of the movement; and the second historical act involved the elaborate staging of the now codified 1848 memory, during the historic 1888 International Council of Women (ICW), the largest international women's rights convention the nation had yet seen. After 1888, this story had no serious rivals. While Stone and the American Association held several small, local anniversary celebrations for the 1850 Worcester National Women's Rights Convention, during which they pointedly labeled the 1850 event as the beginning of the movement—one that Stone had attended, and which Stanton and Anthony had not—their commemorations never gained much traction.

In response to the *History of Woman Suffrage*, which completely marginalized Stone and the American Association, Stone wrote a few, very short, rival historical accounts, but she never published them.<sup>65</sup> By the time the 1888 ICW rolled around, now positioned by Stanton and Anthony as the fortieth anniversary not just of the US suffrage movement, but of a *global* women's rights movement (a claim buttressed by three massive, seemingly authoritative volumes of movement history), Stone felt hemmed in. She wrote privately of her fervent desire "to puncture the bubble that the Seneca Falls meeting . . . was the *first* public demand for suffrage," but

there was little she could do.<sup>66</sup> Since its first public iteration in 1873, this now dominant tale of a miraculous 1848 origin had helped resurrect Stanton and Anthony's standing in the movement, and helped eclipse Stone's.

Stanton and Anthony's monumental writings also served another important function—to sustain the campaign. When they began their work on the *History*, in 1876, the nation's political establishment had abandoned its commitment to remaking political rights, and it became increasingly clear that women's suffrage was unlikely to be won anytime soon. Suffragists' immediate postwar optimism was fading into tired resignation. Now in their late fifties and early sixties, Anthony and Stanton realized that women's suffrage might not be won in their lifetime. "We . . . have been moved," they wrote in their preface to volume one, "by the consideration that many of our co-workers have already fallen asleep, and that in a few years all who could tell the story will have passed away."<sup>67</sup>

Although they originally planned on publishing a single volume, to be dashed off in a summer, the project quickly swelled and consumed the next decade of their lives—a mark of their dogged commitment to, and admirable foresight about, the importance of women's history, well before such a field existed. The minutia and headaches in reconstructing past details from a haphazardly kept archive, culled from across the nation, drove the pair, and their coauthor, Matilda Joslyn Gage, to the brink of madness.<sup>68</sup> But the more they uncovered in their research, the more determined they became that things not be lost or forgotten. In the end, the *History* was colossal in scope, spanning an entire century, from the 1770s to the mid-1880s. Volume one covered the antebellum movement. Volume two addressed the national movement after the Civil War. And the final volume, appearing in 1886, covered the movement in each and every state. It was a stunning achievement—an excruciating labor of love and, in the end, a beautiful valentine to the movement.<sup>69</sup>

Standing for many decades as the first and *only* attempt at a comprehensive history of the campaign, the *History* quickly became an invaluable movement resource—one of its main functions. Its authors hoped that by knowing movement history, activists and ordinary Americans would be inspired to continue and support the fight.<sup>70</sup> Readers could better understand the injustices (white) women endured by seeing an endless chronicle of those abuses laid out on center stage. (This was not a history that considered the stark realities of women of color.) Readers could see how hard and how long (mostly white) women had fought, and they would, hopefully, become steadfast and resolved in their commitment to securing women's voting rights. If activists tired or lost faith, they could turn to the *History* for rejuvenation. There, they could find pride, inspiration—and, yes, joy. The massive edifice of the *History* also signaled that the campaign would not be easily torn down. It would, if it needed to, outlive all those who had launched it. This too became the promise of Seneca Falls, its story morphing into the organizing principle for the entire movement through the *History's* three volumes.

Yet the *History* was simultaneously a gift and a lesson, a legacy and a directive. For all its many strengths, it was also a deeply partisan document, and it continued the work of Stanton and Anthony's earlier memory projects, including

adjudicating authority within the movement. Over the 1880s, Stanton and Anthony's National Association, which had resumed its fight for a constitutional amendment, continued to wage battle with Stone's American Association, which still pursued a state strategy. Recounting the history of the bitter 1869 split in the *History's* pages, Stanton and Anthony positioned the American Association in the most inflammatory way imaginable: as secessionists. "During the autumn of this year," they exhorted, "there was a secession from our ranks, and . . . preliminary steps were taken for another organization."<sup>71</sup> To use this word in the aftermath of the Civil War, in which secession had produced unimaginable carnage, was astonishing, and deliberately damning. This argument only worked, however, if the movement began at Seneca Falls, in 1848—a claim the *History* reiterated, and a date that was by now firmly and almost exclusively grafted onto Stanton and Anthony. In this way, anyone who deviated from them was, by definition, on the wrong side of the movement, and thus on the wrong side of history.<sup>72</sup>

What is invisible in the pages of the *History* is just how effectively this 1848 story helped Stanton and Anthony assume leadership within the postwar movement, a movement that had, in the past, strongly questioned their fitness. A Seneca Falls origin narrative obscured all this by making it seem that the pair was in charge from the very beginning, something the *History* replicated and expanded upon. After telling their version of a Seneca Falls origin tale in the opening volume, Stanton nearly put Anthony there—a sign of how much Anthony had already been drawn into the story's logic by the early 1880s. Stanton claimed the two met in 1848. (This drew the ire of other suffragists and had to be corrected in subsequent editions.) After putting Anthony at her kitchen hearth as early as 1848, Stanton then claims that her home became "the center of the rebellion." A history of their antebellum work in New York, she confidently declared, "would in a measure be the history of the movement."<sup>73</sup> Stanton pulled no punches. Her argument was clear and straightforward: she and Anthony had inaugurated and led the campaign since its inception. They were the campaign.

The adoption of this story line, which continues today, has left us with almost no idea of how Stanton and Anthony cultivated leadership within the movement, which was not foreordained, even if a Seneca Falls mythology insists that it was. Yet to recount history strictly according to the logic of the Seneca Falls origin tale is, in fact, to read the end of the story back onto the beginning. It is to miss just how contested and contingent the outcome was, as well as how important history-telling was to the process.

Not surprisingly, the Lucy Stone-led American Association got short shrift in the *History*, dispatched with in a single, near-appendix-like chapter, stuck in the rear of a volume, and called nothing more than an ineffectual, state-level organization.<sup>74</sup> It was a considerable demotion and certainly did not reflect the able and effective work of that society. The *History* instead detailed the work of the National Association, which focused heavily on Stanton and Anthony's own labors. Stone tried to take down the *History* in an unfavorable newspaper review, in which she warned "no one reading this book would get an accurate or adequate idea of the *real* history

of the woman suffrage movement.”<sup>75</sup> Her review, and the protests of other American-aligned suffragists, had little effect on the official standing the *History* quickly acquired. Through this seemingly authoritative document, Stanton and Anthony’s bold interpretative lines now appeared to be nothing more than obvious truth. If Stanton and Anthony’s earlier memory projects had helped popularize the story and recruit more and more believers, the *History*—as a seemingly official record—helped cement it.

Two years later, in 1890, Stone lost control of national suffrage organizing when Stanton and Anthony took (and, for Anthony, maintained) control of the newly merged National American Woman Suffrage Association, or NAWSA. The old National and American Associations were no more. From here on out, as they had been in the *History*’s pages and on stage at the 1888 anniversary, Lucy Stone and her colleagues would be reorganized as supporting cast members, rather than central players—until they were forgotten altogether. Much later, after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Stone’s daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell, would lament that the *History*’s volumes stood unchallenged, calling it “our misfortune” and adding that “it cannot be helped now, for few persons will ever take the trouble to dig out our side from the files [of history].”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, almost no one has. Today, there exists no published history of the American Association, despite its energetic work over twenty years, and we still know far too little about Stone herself, who spent a lifetime in the movement.<sup>77</sup>

Then, in a surprising turn of events, Stanton was cast out of movement memory, showing how flexible and adaptable stories—and history—can be. By the 1890s, the movement had become more conservative, as scores of Christian temperance women flooded into it (hoping to use the vote to end liquor traffic). When Stanton published her inflammatory *Woman’s Bible* in 1895, an investigation into how men erroneously interpreted the *Bible* to oppress the opposite sex, Christian women blasted her as heretical. Anthony tried to calm them, but they issued a strident denunciation of Stanton, effectively excommunicating her from NAWSA (see cats. 68–69).<sup>78</sup> Once lauded as the mother of the movement, she was now branded an infidel. As a result, the memory of Seneca Falls began to rest even more heavily on Anthony.

When Stanton died in 1902, two weeks shy of her eighty-seventh birthday, her obituaries predictably put Anthony alongside her at the moment of the movement’s ostensible, miraculous creation. As one newspaper explained: “After returning from England with Susan B. Anthony and others she began to agitate for woman suffrage,” resulting in the “foundation at Seneca Falls early in 1848 of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.”<sup>79</sup> Every detail here was wrong. But it was nevertheless the logical result of decades of Stanton and Anthony’s memory work that had framed their lives and their activism, and the movement itself, around this singular event.

By the time Anthony died, four years later, in 1906, these errors and this logic persisted. Unlike Stanton, Anthony had remained sprightly and active into her final years. On returning home from a NAWSA convention and from her own

eighty-sixth birthday celebration, she felt unwell. A doctor diagnosed her with pneumonia, and while her lungs began to recover, her heart remained weak. She had suffered heart trouble during her final years, and heart failure likely took her life on the morning of March 13, 1906. That evening's widely circulated Associated Press story inevitably alleged that "with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other[s] Miss Anthony called in 1848 the first woman's rights convention, which met at Seneca Falls." Newspapers from Nebraska to New England, when not giving her outright credit for having "called" the meeting, placed Anthony in attendance, as in a much-reprinted statement that she and another woman "were the only survivors of that famous women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls in 1848."<sup>80</sup>

If Stanton increasingly receded in movement memory after the publication of her *Woman's Bible*, the reverse was true of Anthony, partly owing to a new fight within the movement. Just as Stanton and Anthony had done, a new generation of suffragists deployed history to do battle with one another. In the 1910s, suffragists forced another organizational split: with Carrie Chapman Catt's NAWSA on the one side and Alice Paul's National Woman's Party (NWP) on the other. Catt had been Anthony's handpicked successor, and NAWSA had been Anthony's organization. When Paul split with NAWSA, she also tried to legitimate her move by arguing that the will of Anthony and thus the weight of history were on her side. Resurrecting a version of the federal amendment written by Stanton, they strategically dubbed it the "Anthony Amendment." As these suffragists fought with one another, they wielded memory, one that increasingly narrowed to Anthony and the mistaken, if nevertheless carefully curated, impression that she *was* the movement. While she had absolutely been critical to the campaign, intramovement battles after her death meant that she began to assume a singular, heroic stature. She became a blunt weapon, rather than a multifaceted personality, to be wielded in the quest for legitimacy.<sup>81</sup>

It was no surprise, then, that when the Nineteenth Amendment finally cleared ratification in August 1920, Anthony and Seneca Falls framed victory (fig. 16). What is often missed, however, is just how important this story was to achieving



FIG. 16

*U.S. Women Get the Vote*  
Front page of the *San Francisco Call and Post*, August 18, 1920  
74.9 × 59.7 cm (29½ × 23½ in.)  
California Digital Newspaper Collection

victory. How much the creation of that story, which was of a hard-fought effort, helped sustain as well as direct the movement, and how, at the same time, it helped buttress Stanton and Anthony's struggle for leadership, along with their simultaneous struggle to define and advance a multifaceted women's rights campaign. When we talk about the women's rights story of the nineteenth century as defined by the struggle for the vote, we do so partly because of the continued dominance of this story as our framing narrative.



None of this is to say that the Seneca Falls tale is unimportant. Indeed, when we look at its history and functions as an invented story, it has been much, much *more* important than we have realized. To argue that the particular significance assigned to it in the aftermath of the war was retrospective and retroactive does not mean that it was not also important in 1848. To raise questions about where our understanding of that significance arises and to suggest we reexamine the narrative around the events of 1848 is not to demolish Seneca Falls as historically significant. In fact, it is to be responsible in that assessment.

This essay has been dedicated to the proposition that what we remember, and what we forget, matters. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this memory helped Stanton and Anthony to build and sustain their leadership; push for the vote as the most important women's rights demand amid a contested field; make a particular, pointed, public claim for the vote (one that denigrated men of color); and keep the movement afloat through tough times, offering inspiration and guidance. In short, Stanton and Anthony, more than any other suffragists, deployed memory as a weapon in their post-Civil War battle, both inside and outside the movement. But in the end, the story they created, the story of Seneca Falls, may tell us much more about the 1870s and the 1880s than about the 1840s.

As we approach 2020 and prepare to remember this remarkably important, if troubled, campaign, looking back reminds us of the power of memory. And it urges us to be thoughtful in the present in how we remember that past. For in our memories inhere present-day lessons as well, just as they existed in Stanton and Anthony's memories. If we remember 1920 as a victory, *the* victory, the conclusion of the 1848 story, we erase, for example, the long history of struggle for voting rights on the part of women of color. These women were not enfranchised by the Nineteenth Amendment, owing to state laws that barred them on the basis of criteria other than that of "sex." And if we frame our story of the 2020 anniversary with the story of Seneca Falls, as is likely to happen, what lessons are we imparting today? Our tendency to view the past as transparent truth has the potential to blind us to all the work that remains to be done. So, as we continue to struggle for justice and equality in the present, and as we move forward into the future, we must be mindful of what and how we remember.