

After 150 years, women have miles to go

By WILLIAM KASHATUS

One hundred and fifty years ago today, 300 women and men met in Seneca Falls, New York, at the first womens' rights convention. Most sat through the 18 hours of speeches, debates, and readings. Afterwards, 100 of them — 68 women and 32 men — signed a document known as the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, giving birth to a 72-year campaign that resulted in the vote for women.

Organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, the Seneca Falls Convention took place on July 19-20, 1848 in Methodist Chapel near Stanton's home. Both women were Quaker abolitionists whose concern for womens' rights was heightened when they were deprived of their voice at London's international antislavery convention in 1840, solely on the basis of sex.



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Emboldened by the rejection, Stanton and Mott called for a women's conference eight years later. Because the convention unexpectedly attracted 40 men and it was regarded as "unseemly" for a lady to conduct a public meeting, Lucretia's husband, James Mott, agreed to chair the event.

Despite male participation, the convention explicitly blamed men for the injustices suffered by the female sex and made clear that women must rely on themselves to achieve their own emancipation. These beliefs were articulated in a Declaration of Sentiments, which, like the Declaration of Independence upon which it was modeled, proclaimed that "all men and women are created equal" and "are endowed by

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their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Yet, men "endeavored in every way they could to destroy a woman's confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life."

The document went on the enumerate the ways in which men oppressed women, depriving them of the vote, equal property rights, equal access to employment and education, and the full rights and privileges of citizenship.

Eleven resolutions followed, calling for equal opportunities in education and work, equality before the law, the right to appear on public platforms, and most controversial: the "sacred right to the elective franchise." Before the close of the convention on the afternoon of the July 20, all the resolutions were unanimously approved.

Press coverage of the event was especially hostile. Philadelphia's Public Ledger and Daily Transcript insisted that "a woman is nobody. A wife is everything." It added that the "ladies of Philadelphia are resolved to maintain their rights as Wives, Belles, Virgins and Mothers."

The New York Herald called the Seneca Falls Declaration "amusing," but did concede that Lucretia Mott would "make a better President than some of those who have lately tenanted the White House."

Only the New York Tribune, edited by the liberal abolitionist Horace Greeley, treated the event seriously. But even he expressed his belief that the

convention's demand for equal political rights was "unwise and mistaken."

Women continued to meet in annual conventions for the rest of the 19th century, working by resolution and petition to achieve equal political, legal, and property rights with men.

The right to vote, however, was the cornerstone of the movement until 1920 when the passage of the 19th Amendment made female suffrage part of the Constitution.

While women generally can take satisfaction in many of the gains they've achieved, they also recognize that major challenges still exist. Working women, in particular, are torn between career and family pressures. Some push themselves to become successful professionals, attentive mothers, efficient housekeepers, and seductive wives — all at the same time.

Others are concerned about functioning as equals in a still-male dominated society without assuming the competitiveness, status consciousness, and careerism that characterizes that society.

Perhaps it is time for a new Declaration of Sentiments, one that will free women from the near-impossible demands and pressures of their own successes and allow them to be comfortable in whatever role they choose for themselves.

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