Celebrating Women's Herstory

The Story of Seneca Falls

Exactly 150 years ago this month, a group of women in a small church in New York gave birth to the American Women's Movement. American women have long fought for liberty as women and as Americans. Scattered protests for women's rights occurred since Margaret Brent asked the Maryland legislature for the right to vote, but an organized and directed women's movement did not begin until 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention—the very first women's rights convention—in New York state.

The story of the Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights really begins in 1840 at the World Antislavery Convention in London. The Convention barred women delegates, such as Lucretia Mott, from participating in the Convention, relegating them instead to sit "behind the bar" with the other delegates' wives. Here Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton first met and Mott initiated the discussion between the two of them which eventually led to the decision to form their own convention for women's rights.

Eight years later, Stanton and Mott attended a tea party on July 13, 1848 at Jane Hunt's house in Waterloo, New York. Unhappy with her life as a housewife, Stanton "poured out the torrent of my long-accumulating discontent with such vehemence and indignation that I stirred myself, as well as the rest of the party." The group agreed to immediately organize a convention for women's rights and published an announcement for it in the next day's edition of the *Seneca County Courier*.

The group met several times during the intervening five days between the tea party and the convention in order to organize the event and prepare a statement of women's grievances. They looked at several types of documents until Stanton pulled the Declaration of Independence of 1776 from the pile and announced that they ought to pattern their declaration on this one. Stanton said they needed only to change "King George" to "all men."

It was also Stanton who insisted on including the demand for women's suffrage in this Declaration of Sentiment. Not everyone wanted to include suffrage for fear that it would make their reform effort seem too radical and so downplay other concerns for women's rights. But Stanton persisted with her suggestion and the final draft of the Declaration which the women brought to the Convention included a demand for the right to vote.

The Seneca Falls Convention took place July 19-20, 1848. None of the women organizers present felt confident enough to chair the Convention, which may have been because of the "radical" nature of their demands. So, Lucretia Mott's husband James chaired the Convention with Mary McClintock acting as secretary. Lucretia Mott, a practiced speaker as a Quaker minister, introduced the Convention, stated its objective and emphasized the need for women's rights to all those present.

The speakers then read the Declaration of Sentiment. This sparked a great deal of debate over which resolutions to adopt. The suffrage resolution was especially controversial as many of the attendees believed that such a demand would cast negative light on the other demands for women's rights. Stanton and Frederick Douglas, however, pushed for the suffrage resolution until the Convention adopted it. This was the only resolution which was not unanimously adopted, but only passed by a small majority.

Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the Declaration out of the 300 people who attended the Convention. Those who signed later faced a great deal of harassment as a result. The *Worcester Telegraph* called the women who signed "Amazons" and said the Convention was "bolting with a vengeance." As a result of the mocking, many of those who signed the Declaration later withdrew their names.

Two weeks later the same group of women hosted another women's rights convention as there were still many issues to discuss. This second convention took place in Rochester, New York. Despite the insistence by Mott, Stanton and McClintock that it would be "a most hazardous experiment" for a woman to chair this convention, Abigail Bush acted as President. This time, the suffrage resolution passed by a wider margin and those present, invigorated by success, began to prepare for women's rights conventions in other states.

While the Convention started with the specific goals to secure women the right to vote and hold property, it began a movement for full equality for women in America. As Lucretia Mott said in a speech delivered at the thirtieth anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention in July 1878, "Place woman in equal power, . . .give her the privilege to cooperate in making the laws she submits to, and there will be harmony without severity and justice without oppression."

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Margaret Brent: First American Suffragist

Margaret Brent (1600-1671) takes her place in history as the first Euro-American woman to ask for the right to vote in North America.

Born in Gloucester, England, Brent came to St. Mary's City, Maryland (the first city and first capitol of the English colony of Maryland) in 1638 with her siblings. There, she built a large farm with great tracts of land—the first freehold granted to a woman in Maryland. By 1657 she had become one of the largest landowners in the colony.

Brent kept the Maryland colony politically and financially afloat. During the armed dispute between Maryland governor Leonard Calvert and William Claiborne of Virginia she raised a group of armed volunteers. She became the executor of Governor Calvert's estate and thus was able to settle a dispute in 1647 over back pay owed to the governor's soldiers which could have destroyed the colony through civil war. She also became the attorney of Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, who founded and owned the colony.

On January 21, 1648 (350 years ago this year), Brent asked the Maryland Assembly which had gathered in St. Mary's City to grant her a vote based on her landholding (law required one to hold a certain amount of land in order to vote) and a second vote based on her work as Governor Calvert's executor and Lord Baltimore's attorney. The Assembly denied her both votes. Angered and insulted, Brent left Maryland and settled in Westmoreland county, Virginia where she died.

Brent never married (some historians believe this is because she was secretly a nun, something disapproved of by the anti-Catholic English, who especially disliked Catholic clergy and nuns) despite the tremendous financial and social pressure on colonial Maryland women to wed. This, her tremendous business skill, intelligence and courage make her not only a role model as a suffragist but also as a strong woman.

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