



"I was born and lived almost forty years in South Bristol, Ontario County—one of the most secluded spots in Western New York, but from the earliest dawn of reason I pined for that freedom of thought and action that was then denied to all womankind . . . But not until that meeting at Seneca Falls in 1848, of the pioneers in the cause, gave this feeling of unrest form and voice, did I take action."

—Emily Collins

For Emily Collins, who went on to start a local equal rights organization, and for other women of 1840s America the news of a women's rights convention was a vivid reminder of their inferior status. By law or by custom, an unmarried woman generally did not vote, speak in public, hold office, attend college, or earn a living other than as a teacher, seamstress, domestic, or mill worker. A married woman lived under these restrictions and more: she could not make contracts, sue in court, divorce an

abusive husband, gain custody of her children, or own property, even the clothes she wore. Though middle-class wives reigned over the domestic sphere, legally their husbands controlled them. Individual women publicly expressed their desire for equality, but it was not until 1848 that a handful of reformers in Seneca Falls, New York, called "A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of Woman."

Why Seneca Falls? A significant reform community emerged in western New York in the 1830s and 40s. Among these reformers were abolitionists who joined relatives and started businesses in Seneca Falls and Waterloo. Here and elsewhere, Quaker women such as Philadelphian Lucretia Mott took an active role in the effort to end slavery. For Mott, her sister Martha Wright, Jane Hunt, Mary Ann M'Clintock, and 32-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the next step was to demand rights for women. In July 1848 they planned the convention and hammered out a formal list of grievances based on the Declaration of Independence, denouncing inequities in property rights, education, employment, religion, marriage and family, and suffrage. The demand for the "elective franchise" was so radical that

even Mott protested, but Stanton had her way. On July 19 the Declaration of Sentiments was presented before an audience of 300. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal," announced Stanton at the First Women's Rights Convention.

The advocates expected controversy. True ladies, a Philadelphia newspaper wrote after the convention, would be foolish to sacrifice their status as "Wives, Belles, Virgins and Mothers" for equal rights. Many signers of the declaration removed their names. But 12 days later a second convention was held in Rochester. By the turn of the century armies of women marched for suffrage. Today many of the convention's most radical demands are taken for granted. The Declaration of Sentiments was the start; its words have a relevance that reaches far beyond that warm July day in Seneca Falls.

Location From the New York State Thruway (I-90): Take Exit 41 and go south on N.Y. Rte. 414. Turn east on U.S. 20, which becomes Fall Street, and follow signs to visitor center. Airports within one hour's drive include Rochester, Syracuse, and Ithaca. Admission to the park is free.

Administration Women's Rights National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address inquiries to Superintendent, 136 Fall St., Seneca Falls, NY 13148 or phone (315) 568-2991. The TDD phone number is (315) 568-9039.



About Your Visit

The setting for the First Women's Rights Convention and the homes of some participants are preserved today as **Women's Rights National Historical Park**, established by Congressional Act in 1980. Begin your tour at the **visitor center**, 136 Fall Street, open daily year-round except Thanksgiving day, December 25, and January 1. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with extended hours in summer. A schedule of activities is posted in the center; there are also exhibits and an orientation film. The center is fully acces-



sible to the mobility impaired; check with park staff for access to other sites.

Declaration Park features a granite water wall engraved with the words of the Declaration of Sentiments. The remains of the **Wesleyan Chapel** have been preserved;

the **Elizabeth Cady Stanton House** in Seneca Falls and the **M'Clintock House** in Waterloo have been restored. Guided tours of the Stanton house are available in summer and on a limited basis at other times of the year. The privately owned **Hunt House** is closed to visitors.

On July 19 and 20, 1848, 300 women and men gathered in the **Wesleyan Chapel** (left) to hear the first formal demands for women's rights. Curious local residents joined abolitionists, temperance workers, and other reformers to fill the chapel. On the first day participants debated the wording of the Declaration of Sentiments. The *Seneca County Courier* reported that "an intelligent and respectful audience" attended the public session that evening to hear the "eminently beautiful and instructive" discourse of Lucretia Mott.



At the next day's session, the amended declaration was adopted. One hundred men and women signed the document. Frederick Douglass reiterated his support at the final session.

The **Elizabeth Cady Stanton House** (above) was the family's home for 15 years. Stanton's philosophy was based in large part on her experiences as a Seneca Falls housewife. She was 31 years old when she moved here

in 1847 with her husband, a lawyer and abolitionist lecturer, and three boys. Stanton found small-town life oppressive: "My duties were too numerous and varied and none sufficiently exhilarating or intellectual to bring into play my higher faculties. I suffered with mental hunger, which, like an empty stomach, is very depressing." Accustomed to the activity of Boston reform circles, Stanton drew inspiration from the company of Lucretia Mott and her associates.

Stanton defied many of the day's housekeeping



and child-rearing customs. For many years she wore an outfit consisting of pants and a knee-length skirt, introduced by her cousin Libby Smith Miller and popularized by Amelia Bloomer, which allowed

freedom of movement prohibited by current fashion. She encouraged her seven children to join parlor discussions with visitors such as the Motts and Frederick Douglass. For several years Stanton hosted a "conversation

club" in the back parlor where young men and women discussed issues of the day and socialized. Her benevolent work with the town's poor residents made her all the more aware of the economic insecurity of women.

The **Hunt House** (left) was the home of Jane and Richard Hunt, Quakers active in the Waterloo reform community. Their mansion was the gathering place for Stanton, Mott, Wright, M'Clintock, and Jane Hunt as they planned the convention over tea on July 9, 1848.



The **M'Clintock House** (above) was owned by the Hunts, who rented it to relatives and fellow Quaker abolitionists,

Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock. The convention planners met here on July 16 to draft the Declaration of Sentiments.

