

# Women's Rights

Women's Rights  
National Historical Park  
New York

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



*"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 her 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 1840s. Among these reformers were abolitionists who joined relatives and started businesses in Seneca Falls and Waterloo. Here and elsewhere, Quaker women like 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 logical 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, demanding equality in property rights, education, employment, religion, marriage and family, and suffrage. The demand for the vote was so radical that even Mott protested, but Stanton had her way. On July 19 the Declaration of Sentiments was presented to an audience of about 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 women 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 1900 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 reach far beyond that warm July day in Seneca Falls.

"The First Wave" sculpture group by Lloyd Lillie. Facing row, left to right: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, two unidentified women, Martha Coffin Wright. In profile at right: Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock, unidentified woman.

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## Planning Your Visit

The setting for the First Women's Rights Convention and the homes of some participants are preserved at Women's Rights National Historical Park, established by Congress in 1980.

From I-90 (New York State Thruway) take exit 41; go south on NY 414; east on US 20, (becomes Fall St.); follow signs to the visitor center. There is no fee for admission.

Begin at the visitor center, 136 Fall St., open daily except fall and winter federal holidays. Hours are 9 am to 5 pm.

There are exhibits, a film, and a schedule of activities. The visitor center is accessible for visitors with disabilities; ask about access to the other sites. Service animals are welcome.

The **M'Clintock House** was owned by the Hunts, who rented it to relatives and fellow Quaker abolitionists Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock. Convention planners met here on July 16, 1848, to draft the Declaration of Sentiments.

The **Elizabeth Cady Stanton House** was the family's home for 15 years. Stanton's activism 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 Henry Stanton, a

lawyer and abolitionist lecturer, and three boys. They had four more children.

Until she met Lucretia Mott and other reformers, 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."

Stanton defied many of the day's housekeeping and child-rearing customs. For many years she dressed in an outfit popularized by Amelia Bloomer, loose pants and a knee-length skirt, which allowed freedom of movement.

She encouraged her seven children to join parlor discussions with visitors like the Motts and Frederick Douglass. She hosted a "conversation club" for young adults. Her benevolent work with the town's poor made her all the

more aware of women's economic insecurity.

Guided tours of the Stanton house are available in summer and on a limited basis during the rest of the year.

On July 19 and 20, 1848, some 300 women and men gathered in the **Wesleyan Chapel** to hear the first formal demands for women's rights. Curious local residents joined abolition-

ists, temperance workers, and reformers to fill the chapel.

On the first day they 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; 100

women and men signed the document. Frederick Douglass reiterated his support at the final session.

**More Information**  
Women's Rights National Historical Park  
136 Fall St.  
Seneca Falls, NY 13148  
315-568-2991  
[www.nps.gov/wori](http://www.nps.gov/wori)

Find us on Facebook and Twitter.



M'Clintock House



Hunt House

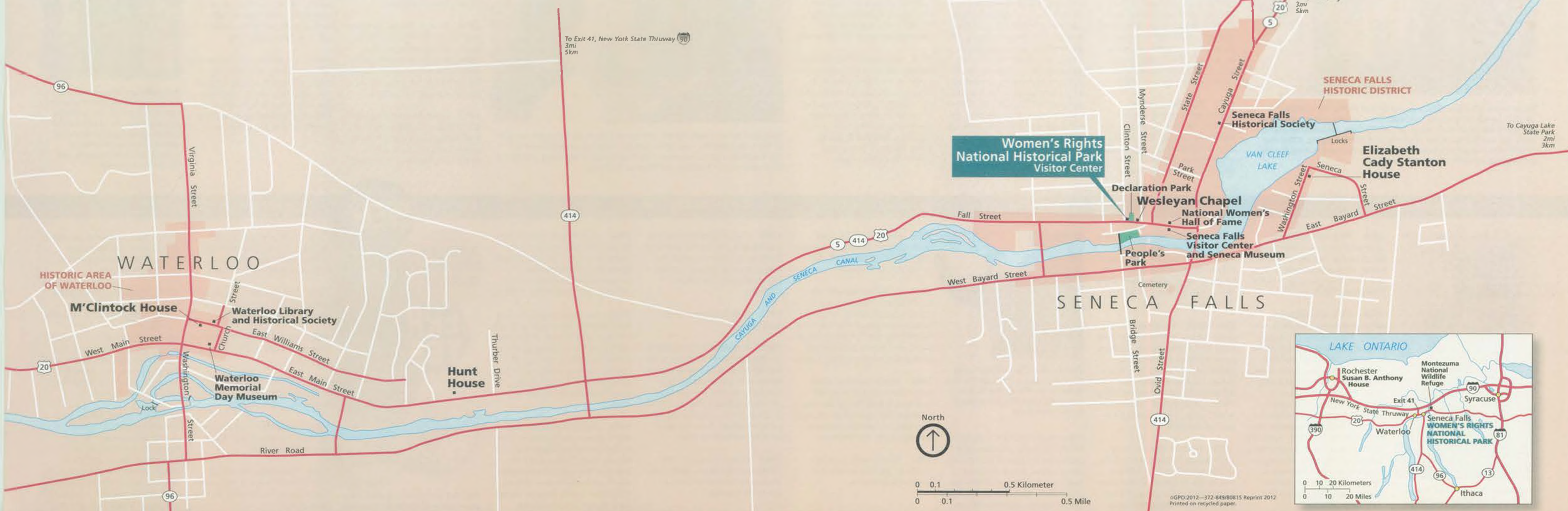


Elizabeth Cady Stanton House



Wesleyan Chapel

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG HARBIN



0 0.1 0.5 Kilometer  
0 0.1 0.5 Mile

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Seneca Falls and Beyond

“What are we next to do?” asked Elizabeth Cady Stanton after the 1848 convention. The women of Seneca Falls had challenged America to social revolution with a list of demands that touched every aspect of life. Fifty years after the convention, women saw progress in property rights, employment, education, divorce and custody laws, and social freedoms. By the early 1900s, a coalition of suffragists, temperance groups, progressive politicians, and social welfare organizations mustered a successful push for the vote.

Although the ballot was never the primary agent of social reform, as many had hoped, the suffrage movement expanded women’s influence in the political arena. Again the question, What next? Immediately after 1920 many women worked for reform through

groups like the League of Women Voters and national political parties. Some asserted their rights on a personal level by attending college, taking jobs, adopting new clothing fashions, and creating professional organizations. Then as now, each woman sought her own definition of freedom.

In 1848 the *Seneca County Courier* warned that the convention’s resolutions were “of the kind called radical . . . Some will regard them with respect—others with disapprobation and contempt.” The story of the women’s rights movement is the story of ideas once controversial, now commonplace. The chronology below outlines the major events that changed the status quo for women in America. Which of our present efforts will contribute toward a future of equality? What are we next to do?

Left to right: Elizabeth Cady Stanton with her daughter Harriot, Lucretia Mott, Martha Wright, Mary Ann M’Clintock, and Jane Hunt.

After the convention, Hunt and her husband continued with various reform efforts. The M’Clintocks moved to Philadelphia in 1856. Wright and two M’Clintock daughters became active suffragists. Stanton, Wright, and Mott, with Lucy Stone, Abby Kelly Foster, and Susan B. Anthony, led the woman’s rights movement through its formative years. Eventually the movement was called *women’s* rights.



Remember the Ladies

1775 American Revolution begins. Abigail Adams in 1776 admonishes husband John and other Revolutionary leaders to “remember the ladies” in forming the new government.

1784 Judith Sargent Murray writes essays endorsing women’s education. Murray’s “On the Equality of the Sexes” appears in *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1790.

1788 US Constitution is ratified. With decisions about voting qualifications left up to states, New Jersey women property owners have full franchise until 1807. Elsewhere women can vote in local elections.

Early 1800s Popular literature defines a new middle-class ideal: women dominate the “sphere” of home and family, with men viewed as leaders in politics and business.



“If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies,” writes Abigail Adams in 1776, “we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

1830s American Anti-Slavery Society is founded in Philadelphia in 1833 by Quakers seeking immediate emancipation of slaves. AASS’s 1,600 auxiliaries gather over 400,000 signatures on antislavery petitions by 1838.

As abolition cause escalates, lecturers like Sarah and Angelina Grimké promote wom-

en’s concerns simultaneously with abolition. Sarah draws criticism for her 1837 Letters on the Equality of the Sexes. AASS splits in 1839 over issue of women’s rights.

1840 Newlyweds Henry and Elizabeth Cady Stanton attend World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, where organizers refuse to seat women delegates. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott resolve to hold a convention devoted to women’s rights.

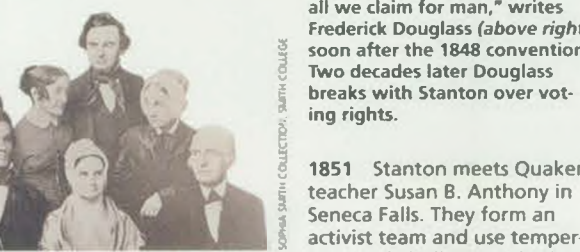


Denied leadership positions in many other abolitionist groups, women sit on the executive committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Lucretia and James Mott are at far right.

A Call to Convention

1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Quaker abolitionists Jane Hunt, Mary Ann M’Clintock, Lucretia Mott, and Martha Wright hold First Women’s Rights Convention; demand full and equal rights with men.

1850 Boston women abolitionists, including Lucy Stone, organize national women’s rights convention in Worcester, Mass.; over 1,000 people attend. More conventions are held throughout the 1850s.



Lucy Stone (above left) champions reform by leading abolition and women’s suffrage efforts, and by keeping her maiden name after marrying. “We hold women to be justly entitled to all we claim for man,” writes Frederick Douglass (above right) soon after the 1848 convention. Two decades later Douglass breaks with Stanton over voting rights.



War and Reconstruction

devises strategy, while Anthony lectures and circulates petitions.

1860 Stanton and Anthony work successfully to amend the 1848 Married Women’s Property Act of New York. Revised law allows wives to hold property, keep earnings and inheritances, make contracts, sue in court, and share child custody.

1861–65 Civil War. Northern and Southern women take over jobs on farms and in factories, businesses, and government offices. Thousands of women work as nurses, opening profession to females.

1862 Morrill Act grants federal land to support coeducational colleges and universities in the West. Homestead Act grants free land to any “head of household,” including women. New York’s 1860 property law is repealed.

1863 After Emancipation Proclamation frees many slaves in Confederacy, Stanton and Anthony’s National Women’s Loyal League urges Congress to outlaw slavery completely. Mott and contemporaries turn over leadership to the rising generation. Younger women’s leaders anticipate that postwar expansion of civil rights will include female suffrage. Thirteenth Amendment outlaws slavery in 1865.

1867 First statewide women’s suffrage campaigns in Kansas and New York are defeated.

1869 Suffragists split over strategy after 14th Amendment specifies voting rights for “male citizens.” Stanton and Anthony form National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which pushes for a women’s suffrage amendment. Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and others organize American Woman Suffrage

Revolution

Association (AWSA) to support voting rights first for black males, then women. Wyoming becomes first US territory to enact women’s suffrage.

1872 Anthony and colleagues test 14th and 15th amendments by casting votes in New York. Suffragists are arrested and fined. An 1875 US Supreme Court ruling upholds states’ right to deny women the vote. In 1876 Anthony and others crash US Centennial celebration in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, demanding women’s vote.

“It has been said,” writes Stanton of Susan B. Anthony (right), “that I forged the thunderbolts and she fired them.” Beginning in 1868 they publish the short-lived *Revolution*, advocating “Equal Pay,” “Cold Water Not Alcoholic Drinks,” and “a new Commercial and Financial Policy.”



Social Reform Movements



Temperance societies, first popular in the 1830s, are among the earliest American women’s groups. The crusade makes women all the more aware of their legal defenselessness against a drunken husband and the need for property and divorce rights. After the Civil War the movement reemerges, its leaders promoting female suffrage as a means of social reform.

1877 Backed by the NWSA, a women’s suffrage amendment is first introduced in Congress but not voted on for 10 more years. As Reconstruction era draws to a close, Southern blacks see erosion of their new civil rights.

1879 Frances Willard becomes president of Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), established in 1874 to fight alcohol-related social ills. Willard strongly advocates women’s suffrage as a means to impose a moral influence on society. WCTU becomes nation’s largest women’s organization by the 1880s.

1881 Knights of Labor organizes housewives, domestics, factory workers, railroad workers; 65,000 women join. Knights disband by 1886 after losing national strike. Women’s organized labor

recovers by the early 1900s to become an active force in suffragism.

1887 WCTU and suffragists present US Senate with petition supporting suffrage amendment. Amendment is defeated.

1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Starr establish Hull House in Chicago, nation’s first settlement house. In the following decades an army of educated female reformers—young single women, wives, mothers, and grandmothers—investigates labor conditions, starts settlement houses, promotes education and public health, agitates for liberalized birth control laws, and marches for suffrage. Increasingly, activists see vote as a mechanism to improve society.

1890 Wyoming is admitted as first women’s suffrage state. Colorado and Idaho follow; campaigns in these states are led by Carrie Chapman Catt. Utah enacts women’s suffrage in 1896 to ensure Mormon control. NWSA and AWSA merge into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Stanton is president, succeeded by Anthony in 1892. Frances Willard sits on executive board. NAWSA shifts from constitutional amendment to state referenda.

1902 Elizabeth Cady Stanton dies at age 86. Four years later Susan B. Anthony dies at 85. New generation of suffragists are solidly in power, arguing for vote on basis of female moral superiority rather than equality. NAWSA is led by Anna Howard Shaw and Carrie Chapman Catt.



Statues in Seneca Falls depict Stanton and Anthony being introduced in 1851. By 1892 the two (inset photo; Anthony on left) have led the women’s rights movement for four decades and have published four volumes of *A History of Woman Suffrage*.

The Suffrage Bandwagon

1910 State of Washington gives women full franchise, inspiring a nationwide campaign that soon brings success in several western states. Progressive Party endorses women’s suffrage in 1912. Stanton’s daughter Harriot Stanton Blatch organizes first suffrage parades in New York City; solicits working women’s support through Women’s Trade Union League.

1911 Jane Addams, as vice-president of NAWSA, advocates immigrant women’s right to vote, countering the belief that voting rights should be restricted to native-born, white, educated citizens.

1913 Alice Paul and newest generation of suffragists revive demand for constitutional amendment. Paul, who worked in England with mili-

tant suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst, leads mass demonstrations, hunger strikes, and constant pressure on political party in power. Paul and several thousand marchers protest Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration in March 1913. Paul and others leave NAWSA and form National Woman’s Party in 1916.

1916 Margaret Sanger and her sister Ethel Byrne open first American birth control clinic in New York City.

1917 US enters World War I. Women take over jobs for men serving in armed forces. Women’s Bureau is formed; for next several decades it is the only federal agency dealing with women’s concerns.



Antisuffragist arguments are based mainly on differences between the sexes. Pro-suffrage groups claim those differences make women better qualified voters. Some antisuffrage groups are exposed as fronts for liquor interests.

The 19th Amendment



Suffragists Elsie Hill and Katherine Morey are jailed in Boston.

1918 Women’s suffrage amendment is reintroduced by Jeanette Rankin (R-Montana), first woman elected to the US Congress; passes both houses by 1919.

1920 19th Amendment, nicknamed the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment,” is ratified, extending voting rights to women throughout the United States. National American Woman Suffrage Association becomes League of Women Voters, advocates social reforms and protective laws for working women. National Woman’s Party opposes protective laws and promotes full social equality. The terms “feminism” and “women’s rights” come into common usage, replacing terms like “woman suffrage.”

1923 At the 75th anniversary of the Seneca Falls convention, Alice Paul proposes an Equal Rights Amendment to remedy inequalities that were not addressed in the 19th Amendment.

Late 1920s Many states continue to bar women from jury duty and public office. Widows succeed their husbands as governors of Texas and Wyoming. Middle-class women attend college and enter labor force. Anticipated “women’s vote” fails to materialize by end of decade.

1933 Frances Perkins is appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as first female Secretary of Labor. In the New Deal years, at urging of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and

A New Deal



Women like this railroad brake operator take men’s jobs for the duration of World War II, permanently changing the makeup of the workforce

Democratic women’s leader Molly Dewson, women gain positions in federal social service bureaus. Mary McLeod Bethune is director of the Negro Affairs Division of the National Youth Administration.

1936 Federal court rules birth control legal for its own sake, rather than solely for prevention of disease.

1941 US enters World War II. Millions of women are recruited for defense industry jobs in war years and become significant part of labor force. WAC and WAVE established as first women’s military corps.

1947 Many women leave labor force to get married and make way for returning soldiers. But by end of decade, numbers of working women are again on the increase.

1952 Democratic and Republican parties eliminate women’s divisions.

The Feminine Mystique

1955 Civil Rights movement escalates in the South; Septima Clark and others lead sit-ins and demonstrations, providing strategies for future protests.

1960 FDA approves birth control pills.

1961 President’s Commission on the Status of Women is established, headed by Eleanor Roosevelt. Commission successfully pushes for passage in 1963 of Equal Pay Act, first federal law to require equal compensation for men and women in federal jobs.

1963 Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* articulates dissatisfaction with limitations on women.

1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits job discrimination on the basis of race or sex and establishes Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to address discrimination claims.

1966 National Organization for Women, founded by Betty Friedan and others, promotes child care for working mothers, abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and “full participation in the mainstream of American society now.”

1972 Equal Rights Amendment passes both houses and is signed by President Richard Nixon. Civil Rights Act bans sex discrimination in employment and education. Shirley Chisholm is first African American to run for president.



Colorful and concise buttons express some of women’s concerns in the late 1900s.

“All Rights and Privileges”

1973 In Roe v. Wade, US Supreme Court affirms right to first trimester abortions without state intervention.

1974 Ella Grasso of Connecticut is first woman governor elected in her own right.

1980 Women’s Rights National Historical Park is established Dec. 28.

1981 Sandra Day O’Connor is appointed first woman US Supreme Court justice.

1982 Deadline for ERA ratification expires three states short of adoption.

1984 Geraldine Ferraro is first woman from a major political party nominated as vice president.

1992 More women run for and are elected to public office than in any previous year in US history.

Today The fight for equality is waged on many fronts: women are seeking political influence, better education, health reform, job equity, and legal reform. The demands echo those of the movement throughout its history.

In 1848 Stanton, Mott, and others claimed on behalf of American women “all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens.” What would the reformers from Seneca Falls do today to contribute toward a future of equality? What will you do?