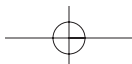




1

Stirrings of Discontent

Early grumblings among women over their second-class status surfaced during colonial times when Abigail Adams implored her husband and future president John Adams to “remember the ladies and be more favorable to them than your ancestors.” Adams was meeting with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia when Abigail wrote him in March 1776 from their farm near Boston to urge that any new code of laws drafted along with the Declaration of Independence put women on a more equal footing. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands,” she pleaded. “Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation. That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.”



8 FOUNDING SISTERS

Though Adams recognized that his wife's superior business sense allowed him the luxury of a life in politics, he didn't take seriously the yearnings she expressed. He was bemused by her letter, and presumed that somebody must have planted these strange thoughts in her head. He didn't even try to humor her. "Depend on it," he wrote back. "We know better than to repeal our masculine systems." There was no women's movement during the Revolutionary period to apply pressure on the Founding Fathers. Maybe we can credit pillow talk for the gender-neutral language in the Declaration of Independence. The promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and a government that derives power from "the consent of the governed" did not exclude women. To the contrary, it established democratic principles upon which the suffrage movement was based.

The early suffragists were abolitionists, and the drive to end slavery became linked in the public mind with agitation for women's civil rights. Women abolitionists crossed the ocean to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in June 1840. Among the delegates was twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was attending with her journalist husband, Henry. They had just gotten married the previous month and were on their honeymoon. Filled with the idealism of youth and brimming with ideas, Elizabeth Stanton expected to fully participate in this intellectual assemblage of world leaders. She wrote later how chagrined she was to discover that American clergymen, who had landed a few days earlier, had been "busily engaged in fanning the English prejudice into active hostility against the admission of

these women into the Convention.” The women argued that a country governed by Queen Victoria surely wouldn’t exclude them; their opponents pointed out with equal certitude that the queen had sent a man, Prince Albert, to convey her antislavery views instead of appearing herself. A vote on whether to seat the female delegates lost by a decisive margin, and the women were relegated to an area behind a curtain, where they could hear what was going on but would not be visible.

Stanton was outraged by the treatment. She had been rebelling against the boundaries imposed on her gender since she was a child. One of eleven children, she had seen several of her siblings die before reaching adulthood, not an uncommon experience in the days before vaccines and antibiotics. Four of her five brothers died when they were children, and the fifth passed away when he was twenty years old. Her father was overcome with grief, and the young Elizabeth would climb into his lap in an effort to comfort him. What he said would shape her life, and her life’s work. “Oh my darling, I wish you were a boy.” She tried hard to fill the void in his life, promising, “I will try to be all the boy my brother was.” There was no endeavor that was off-limits in her mind because of her gender. She learned to ride a horse and jump high fences as adeptly as any boy. She won a Latin competition and became so skilled at oratory that her father worried she was getting too good at tasks meant for men, a stigma that could make her less appealing as a wife.

Stanton worked for fifty years to see that women could vote, and she died before it happened. What sustained her

10 FOUNDING SISTERS

that day in 1840 as she sat behind the curtain was a vision of what was possible, if women would only demand their fair share. Stanton didn't worry about social conventions. She had persuaded her husband to omit the traditional bride's vow of obedience from their wedding ceremony. Sitting cordoned off like some alien species made her angry, and as women tend to do, Stanton found a soul-mate. Before long, she and Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia, who was a generation older and a battle-hardened veteran of the abolitionist wars, abandoned the convention and spent much of their time haranguing the male delegates staying at their hotel for their undemocratic behavior. The two women vowed to convene a woman's rights convention once they returned home to America.

Eight years passed before the promise they made to each other on a long walk in one of London's parks would become a reality. Life got in the way. Stanton had given birth to the first three of her seven children, while her husband studied law with her father, who was a judge in Johnstown, New York. After Henry Stanton passed the bar, the family moved to Boston, where Elizabeth thrived in the cosmopolitan atmosphere. Henry longed for a less competitive environment, and in 1847 the couple moved to Seneca Falls, New York, a sleepy upstate community where he could establish a law practice of his own without fear of competition. Elizabeth missed her activist Boston friends, and was miserable in Seneca Falls.

In one of those fateful moments of history, who should materialize at the same time in this out-of-the-way western New York town than Lucretia Mott. Her youngest sister

lived in the area and was pregnant with her seventh child. Mott had come to visit, pleased that despite the numerous pregnancies, her sister clung to unconventional ideas, teaching her sons needlework, and bragging that one had knit a bag for his marbles. At an afternoon tea at the home of a mutual acquaintance, Stanton and Mott renewed their friendship and revived their call for a woman's convention. Egged on by the other women there, all Quaker activists like Mott, they took action that very afternoon in 1848, composing the notice that would appear a few days later in the *Seneca County Courier* and launch the long campaign to win woman suffrage:

WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION—A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women, will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, New York, on Wednesday and Thursday, the nineteenth and 20th of July, current; commencing at 10 o'clock A.M. During the first day the meeting will be exclusively for women, who are earnestly invited to attend. The public generally are invited to be present on the second day, when Lucretia Mott, of Philadelphia, and other ladies and gentlemen, will address the convention.

The Sunday morning before the convention, the women gathered in the parlor of one of the local Quaker women activists to draft the program. First they pored over papers from the numerous meetings they had attended having to do with ending slavery, banning alcohol, and

12 FOUNDING SISTERS

promoting peace. None seemed right for the far-reaching changes they sought in the status of women. They decided to think really big, so they took as their model the Declaration of Independence, which had been written seventy-two years earlier, in 1776. Little did they know it would be another seventy-two years before their Declaration of Sentiments would be fulfilled, or they might not have been so giddy with enthusiasm as they struck the words “the present King of Great Britain” as the purveyor of tyranny and substituted “all men.”

Some three hundred people showed up at the Wesleyan Chapel on the morning of July 19, quite a large number considering it was a weekday, when people had chores to tend to, and Seneca Falls’s population was only eight thousand. The organizers had a last-minute moment of panic when they discovered the doors locked and they were without a key. One of Stanton’s nephews had to be boosted through a window to unlock the chapel. So many women had gotten their husbands to hitch up the horses to bring them to town that an unexpectedly large number of men were present. The leaders decided on the spot to let the men attend the first day’s proceedings, overruling their own newspaper ad and establishing the important precedent that attitude and outlook, not gender, determine who is a feminist.

Women were unaccustomed in 1848 to any kind of public role. There was a taboo against public speaking by women, and there were no women’s organizations of any consequence yet where women could learn the skills of running a meeting according to parliamentary rules.

Overwhelmed by the large crowd they had attracted, Stanton and the others hastily retreated to the altar in the church, where they held a quick meeting and decided that they would let the experienced men who were there take the lead role. Lucretia Mott's husband, James, presided, dressed in Quaker costume and looking quite dignified. Various women leaders read speeches, but the star of the convention was Frederick Douglass, ten years out of slavery and an imposing figure both physically and intellectually. Douglass stood well over six feet tall at a time when the average man was considerably shorter. He was a formidable lecturer, capable of holding the attention of thousands of people for up to two hours at a time, a far more taxing task on the vocal chords in the days before microphones. He could command \$100 for a lecture, a huge sum at the time. The speaking fees he earned eventually made him a rich man, and he delighted in displaying crystal and fine china in his home.

Douglass provided a charismatic presence at Seneca Falls that helped offset the ridicule aimed at the women who attended "The Seneca Falls Convention," as it was popularly dubbed. One newspaper writer described the women as "divorced wives, childless women, and some old maids." The widely held view that women agitating for rights were life's losers served as a powerful deterrent against women openly declaring themselves in favor of women's rights. If a woman's role was solely to bear and nurture children, then these women were society's misfits. The women themselves were divided over how far they legitimately could go without being totally dismissed as wackos, and

14 FOUNDING SISTERS

couldn't agree on whether to include a demand for the ballot on their list of grievances. Stanton favored it; Mott opposed, fearing that suffrage was so wild an idea that it would undermine any credibility the fledgling women's movement had. Stanton's husband, a radical reformer in his own right, told her that if she supported a woman's right to vote, he would be so embarrassed that he would have to leave town. She did, and he did, but only for the duration of the convention.

Douglass sided with Stanton, making the case that the right to participate in government is a fundamental principle of equality, from which all other rights would flow. The Stanton-Douglass position carried by a small majority. But when the final document was voted on after two days of debate, the resolution calling for the right to vote was the only one of a dozen resolutions that did not pass unanimously. For those with a looking glass into the future, that signaled the difficulty ahead when women activists and their male sympathizers could not fully agree that the ballot was necessary. For the ordinary rank and file of women, it would be decades before even a majority of them would favor suffrage.

With much work left undone and their enthusiasms unleashed, Stanton and the others arranged for a follow-up meeting in two weeks in Rochester, New York. They placed a notice in the daily newspapers, and once again so many women showed up that the Unitarian church where the meeting was held was filled to overflowing. This time the women did not shrink from their role as leaders. Though James Mott was there and volunteered to preside,

the women ran the meeting. Some had never spoken in public before and had difficulty summoning the vocal power needed to be heard by everyone in the church. There were repeated cries of “Louder! Louder!” but the women didn’t back down. It was an exercise in survival of the fittest until a handful of women emerged with the ability to project themselves well enough to be heard. Perhaps because the setting was a church, much of the discussion centered on the biblical interpretation of a woman’s place. Stanton pointed out that nowhere in the Bible does it dictate a woman should take her husband’s name.

Spurred on by the large turnout, the women grew bolder and more concrete in their actions. The first resolution they adopted called for the vote; another commended Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman admitted to a traditional medical school. In contrast to the lofty calls for equality issued at Seneca Falls, the Rochester convention focused on bread-and-butter issues: the inheritance rights of widows, property ownership, and the right of women to keep the money they earned. Women had almost no status in the eyes of the law. Granting a husband the legal right to his wife’s earnings reduces her “almost to the condition of a slave,” the conventioners declared, a statement meant to solidify the bonds between women’s aspirations and the growing abolitionist movement in America. Douglass was there to lend his considerable moral stature to the fight.

Susan B. Anthony, a stern and stubborn schoolteacher, read news reports about the conventions. She did not attend

16 FOUNDING SISTERS

either of them, and had no intention of becoming an activist. She backed the call for better education and more equal economic opportunity, but she balked at the demand for the ballot. She was a Quaker and a pacifist and believed it was wrong to cast a vote for any government that would go to war. Her father did not vote until 1860, when he was confronted with conflicting moral priorities. Because he was convinced that war was the only way to rid the country of slavery, he voted for Abraham Lincoln. Born on February 15, 1820, Susan B. Anthony displayed an independent streak from an early age. When a teacher in elementary school told her long division was only for boys (“A girl needs to know how to read her Bible and count her egg money, nothing more”), Anthony worked out a compromise that allowed her to sit behind the teacher and take notes. In an era when few women worked outside the home, Anthony had taken a teaching job to help support her family. Her father had gone bankrupt in 1837, the result of a collapse in land speculation.

This first national depression provided opportunities for women like Anthony who might otherwise never have created a household separate from their father’s. Anthony spent more than a decade as a teacher, and there were few hints that she would go on to become the woman most identified with the drive to gain women the vote. At the time of the Seneca Falls and Rochester conventions, she was twenty-eight, unmarried, and extremely skeptical about suffrage. On a visit home to Rochester, she was surprised to learn that her father, mother, and younger sister, Mary—shy and unassertive and hardly typical of the stereotypical

suffragist—all had attended the Rochester meeting and signed the resolutions, including the demand for equal suffrage. They were enthused by the experience and eager to share the inside gossip about how Stanton and Mott lobbied to have Douglass chair the convention because they were worried the women weren't up to the task and would cause embarrassment that could derail the fledgling movement. When several women threatened to go home if they didn't get leadership roles, Stanton and Mott relented.

Anthony found the tales of the suffrage sisters amusing, but she was drawn more to the growing temperance movement. Liquor was making women's lives hell. The degree of alcoholism in the country was extraordinarily high, and with it came violence, much of it expressed against women in domestic situations in their own homes. It seemed that almost all men drank immoderately, which some social historians speculate was the result of some 228 years of Puritanism, since the founding of the colonies, where anything joyful was associated with sin. Singing, dancing, card-playing, outdoor sports, even the boisterous play of children were frowned on. Many working men found escape in alcohol; for whatever reason, women typically did not seek the same relief, and instead bore the brunt of their husbands' inability to control either their drinking or their temper. Anthony was active in the local chapter of the Daughters of Temperance in the small town of Canajoharie in central New York State, where she was teaching, and began to devote much of her time to the cause. She organized supper events to raise money ("One dollar will admit a gentleman and a lady."), and on weekends traveled to

18 FOUNDING SISTERS

nearby towns and villages to help found additional women's chapters. She tried to persuade the Sons of Temperance, mostly reformed "old soaks" and pious clergymen, that women could play a key role in the movement.

Women brought far more energy and commitment to the cause, and when the New York Sons of Temperance held a convention of all the state chapters in January 1852 in Albany, they invited the women's branches to send delegates. Anthony attended as a representative of the Rochester Daughters of Temperance. She and the other women delegates were seated along with the men in the convention hall, which presented a visual image of equality. But when Anthony rose to speak, the chairman cut her off, telling her the women were there to listen and to learn but not to speak. No one had worked harder than she gathering the petitions calling on the state legislature to pass a law that would ban the sale and production of liquor. Indignant at being ignored, Anthony walked out, trailed by several equally irate women.

Anthony was an imposing woman whose physical presence could be intimidating. At five feet, six inches, she was tall for her day, but it was her leanness and sharp features that made her appear all angles, especially when contrasted with the woman who would become her best friend and soulmate. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was as round and cheery as Anthony was trim and serious. Though Anthony would become "Aunt Susan" to generations of suffragists, her plain looks and dark hair pulled back tightly over her ears into a bun gave no hint then of her charisma as a leader and the pivotal role she would play in history. Inflamed by

the men who had spurned her talents, men she called “white orthodox male saints,” Anthony went directly from the Sons of Temperance convention to the *Albany Evening Journal*. She persuaded a sympathetic editor to do a story on how the women had been shut out, and to urge interested citizens to come hear her and the other women delegates the next day at the local Presbyterian church.

The circumstances were less than ideal. Outside, a wicked snowstorm blanketed the area; inside, a balky chimney filled the meeting room with smoke, and a stovepipe crashed to the floor in the midst of the program. But the women forged ahead, resolving to convene their own Women’s State Temperance Convention, and to hell with the men. Anthony almost single-handedly raised the money, hired the hall, arranged for speakers, and wrote the hundreds of letters of invitation such an undertaking required in the days before e-mail and faxes. She asked her new friend Stanton, whose lively intelligence she admired, to be a featured speaker. The two women had met the previous spring when a mutual friend, Amelia Bloomer, editor of a temperance monthly, *The Lily*, introduced them in Seneca Falls, where they had both attended a lecture by William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent abolitionist and staunch ally of women’s suffrage. Bloomer’s name (or rather her husband’s name) became synonymous with the trousers that suffragists had begun wearing, which Bloomer had publicized in her journal. A cousin of Stanton’s had developed the simpler way to dress in order to be comfortable while she gardened and tended her young children. An envious Stanton watched her cousin maneuver

effortlessly while she struggled with the required corset, layers of petticoats, and floor-length dress that women of her station were expected to wear. Stanton was sold on the freedom the simplified garb offered, and wore the new look to the 1852 and 1853 meetings of the Women's State Temperance Society. Her husband was horrified when he saw his wife wearing baggy pants under a loose-fitting short dress that ended four inches below the knee. He worried that when the women sat onstage their legs would be exposed above the knees (albeit covered by fabric), and men in the audience could tell "whether their lady friends have round and plump legs, or lean and scrawny ones." But Stanton loved the ease of movement, and adopted dress reform as a symbol of women's independence. "Depend on it," she told her friend Lucretia Mott. "Woman can never develop in her present drapery. She is a slave to her rags."

Women wearing pants took on enormous significance, threatening the entire social order and inviting ridicule in much the same way that feminists more than a century later became the objects of scorn for burning their bras and refusing to shave their legs. Stanton's father told her she was not welcome in his house wearing such an outfit, and her sons, who were away at boarding school, pleaded with her to wear something else when she visited. Anthony had reluctantly adopted the new look. She cared nothing for fashion, and agreed at first only to placate Stanton. Lucy Stone, a teacher and early ally of Anthony and Stanton, described being surrounded on a New York street and jeered by "a wall of men and boys" because the

women were wearing the short dress that identified them as “ultras,” the most radical wing of the suffrage movement. By early 1854, after they had made their point, most women quietly returned to conventional dress rather than put up with the constant harassment. Anthony was one of the last holdouts. Having committed herself to the cause of dress reform, she hated surrendering the principle even though she realized how divisive and diversionary the short dress had become. Stanton kept after the hardheaded Anthony. “Let the hem of your dress out today,” Stanton urged. “The cup of ridicule is greater than you can bear. It is not wise, Susan, to use up so much energy in that way.”

Anthony finally relented, explaining that the short dress had become “an intellectual slavery.” For somebody like her, who despised the frivolous focus on self, she couldn’t bear the knowledge that audiences were more interested in her clothes than her words.

The five hundred women who gathered for the Women’s State Temperance Convention in Rochester, New York, on April 20, 1852, chose Anthony as their secretary and Stanton as their president, a division of labor that represented the complementary talents of these two women, who would remain lifelong friends until Stanton’s death in 1902. Stanton’s inaugural speech was a blockbuster. She advocated divorce to end marriages plagued by drunkenness, with custody of any children to the mother, and said women should refuse to bear the children of a drunkard. Divorce was a taboo subject at the time, and nobody in

polite society talked about birth control, though there were quack remedies available, and thinly veiled newspaper advertisements for abortionists. Anthony was enthralled by Stanton's ability to convey her convictions with such clarity and eloquence, and began spending a great deal of time at Stanton's home in Seneca Falls.

Anthony was thirty-three and Stanton was thirty-eight when they began their collaboration. They came from different backgrounds and had radically opposite dispositions, but they were fearless about where they were going and what they wanted. Their shared goal bonded them for half a century. Stanton was already drifting into matronhood and had begun wearing a cap, as though to conceal the thinning hair of old age. Anthony was seen as an "old maid," the moniker given any unmarried woman over age thirty. Stanton had been born an aristocrat. Her father, a noted judge who also had served in Congress, had grudging admiration for her "masculine mind," which showed in her confident manner and facility at quick repartee. But he did not believe in women participating in public life and opposed her at every turn, even threatening to disinherit her when she got out of hand. Anthony's father, Daniel, a devout Quaker, encouraged his daughter and even offered to bankroll her activities once he recovered financially from the economic depression of 1837. Teachers then "boarded round," which meant staying in a series of cramped rooms with various farm families and having no private life. Anthony understood what it was like to work for a living, which Stanton, coming from a more privileged family, knew only in theory. "In thought and sympathy we were

one, and in the division of labor we exactly complemented each other,” Stanton said of their collaboration. “In writing we did better work than either could do alone. While she is slow and analytic in composition I am rapid and synthetic. I am the better writer, the better critic. She supplied the facts and statistics, I the philosophy and rhetoric. . . . Our speeches may be considered the joint products of our two brains.”

When the Men’s State Temperance Society held their next convention, in Syracuse, Anthony’s organization was once again invited to send delegates. Anthony was ecstatic, certain that the men had seen the light. But when she and Mrs. Bloomer arrived in Syracuse, they were told that the other delegates, most of them ministers and members of the clergy, objected to having them there, and they would have to leave. The women refused. So the clergymen railed on about the nerve of these women to crash men’s meetings, and to confuse the high moral calling of temperance with crass appeals for women’s rights such as divorce and “free love,” and who knows what else. Angry clergy denounced the women as “a hybrid species, half man and half woman, belonging to neither sex.” Anthony stood her ground, pointing out over howls of protest that more than a hundred thousand women had signed petitions for a prohibition law in Maine the previous winter. Still, the experience shook her to the core and made her question whether more radical steps were needed.

Maybe Anthony’s temperance crusade didn’t address the

basic ills of society. More and more, she used her speeches to argue for women's rights. Her father's farm on the outskirts of Rochester had become a center of progressive activity. Among the regular visitors was Frederick Douglass, whose newspaper the *North Star* was edited in Rochester. Douglass was an outspoken defender of women's rights in addition to being a leading abolitionist, and on visits home, Anthony came to realize that the causes of fighting slavery and supporting suffrage were one. At about the same time, her temperance activities began to falter. A little-noticed clause in the constitution for the Women's State Temperance Society that she and Stanton had founded the previous year, in 1852, allowed men as members but limited officeholders to women. Many of the traditional women members and, of course, most of the men thought this was an unconscionable abridgment of men's liberties, and Stanton, as president, yielded to their way of thinking even as she feared the consequences. The result was predictable: the men quickly dominated all the proceedings, struck gender from the society's name, calling it The People's League, and booted Stanton from the presidency. They reelected Anthony as secretary, but she declined the honor, preferring instead to resign, in solidarity with Stanton. Within two years, the society disbanded. But the experience was a revelation for Anthony.

"Do you see, at last?" Stanton said to her. Stanton believed all along that women must first gain their rights, and had joined the temperance crusade more out of loyalty to Anthony than conviction.

"At last, I see," Anthony replied.