



FIRST AMENDMENT IN HISTORY

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY: THE 1848 SENECA FALLS CONVENTION

RESOURCES

- <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr040.html>
- <http://www.rochester.edu/SBA/convention.html>
- <http://www.npg.si.edu/col/seneca/senfalls1.htm>
- <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/Senecafalls.html>
- Wellman, Judith. *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention*. University of Illinois Press, 2004.

ACTIVITY

The women came all the way across the Atlantic—from America to England—to serve as delegates to the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. They were writers and orators, knowledgeable and articulate. But they were told they would only be able to watch—not participate in—the convention. And they would have to do it from behind a partition.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were among those turned away in London. They would meet eight years later in New York in what historians would call “one of the greatest rebellions of modern times” and the birth of the modern women’s rights movement.

In the summer of 1848, Stanton, Mott, and several other women decided to call a convention to discuss the “social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman.” They advertised the convention with only a small notice in the local paper. Just over a week later, on July 19th and 20th, three hundred people (including forty men) exercised their right to peaceably assemble at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls for the first women’s rights convention in American history.

Stanton used the Declaration of Independence as a model for the “Declaration of Sentiments.” Stanton’s document added to Jefferson’s by declaring, “All men and women are created equal.” Where the Declaration of Independence listed acts of tyranny by the British King, the Declaration of Sentiments listed acts of tyranny by men against women. These included depriving them of rights to participate in government, to vote, to receive an education, and to own property.

The delegates discussed and agreed on twelve resolutions. These resolutions affirmed that God intended the sexes to be equal, and asserted that any laws that “place [woman] in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature and therefore of no force or authority.” The final resolution, which Mott strongly encouraged, called for “the overthrowing of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to woman equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce.”

In the press, the convention and delegates were often mocked and ridiculed. But Stanton recognized the value of the publicity. She said, “It will start women thinking, and men too; and when men and women think about a new question, the first step in progress is taken.”

The Seneca Falls Convention delegates exercised their First Amendment rights to free assembly in order to communicate their message and bring about change. Those women and men began the struggle for many of the freedoms that American women enjoy today.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Stanton and Mott call for a convention in Seneca Falls?
2. How did the Declaration of Sentiments compare to the Declaration of Independence?
3. What did the Resolutions of the Seneca Falls Convention say?
4. Notable delegates to the Seneca Falls convention included African Americans Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass. What did the abolitionist movement and the women’s rights movement have in common? Explain.
5. How did the First Amendment right to peaceable assembly energize the birth of the women’s rights movement?



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ANSWERS

1. Stanton and Mott called for a convention to discuss the “social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman.”
2. The Declaration of Sentiments used the language of the Declaration of Independence but referred explicitly to “men and women” as being created equal. Further, the document listed not grievances against the tyranny of a distant king, but grievances against men’s tyranny over women. These included depriving women of rights to participate in government, to vote, to receive an education, and to own property.
3. The resolutions said that any law giving men power over women to be unnatural and wrong, and called for women’s “equal participation” with men in all aspects of trade, profession and commerce.
4. Students may say that both movements sought to liberate and extend political rights to groups of people who had not enjoyed them before. Both movements were on behalf of groups of people who were believed to be “naturally” inferior and less capable of participating in civil life, and thus faced the challenge of “proving” their natural equality to others. Both movements demanded that people with power over others give up that power to allow slaves and women an equal chance to take part in society and control their own lives.
5. In a democracy, individuals must often convince others of the worthiness of their cause in order to rally majority support. Sometimes the sheer number of people who assemble can have an impact on the way a group’s message is perceived and cause others to take that message more seriously. Assembling also allows people to share and develop ideas, strategize, and begin to put plans into action.