Elizabeth Cady Stanton timed her marriage in 1840 so that she could accompany her husband to London for the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, where her husband was a delegate. At the antislavery convention, Stanton and the other women delegates received an unpleasant surprise.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  ELIZABETH Cady STANTON**

“Though women were members of the National Anti-Slavery society, accustomed to speak and vote in all its conventions, and to take an equally active part with men in the whole antislavery struggle, and were there as delegates from associations of men and women, as well as those distinctively of their own sex, yet all alike were rejected because they were women.”

—quoted in Elizabeth Cady Stanton

At the convention, Stanton found a friend in the Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott. Stanton and Mott vowed “to hold a convention as soon as we returned home, and form a society to advocate the rights of women.” They kept their pledge and headed the first women’s rights convention, assembled at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.

**Women’s Roles in the Mid-1800s**

In the early 19th century, women faced limited options. Prevailing customs demanded that women restrict their activities after marriage to the home and family. Housework and child care were considered the only proper activities for married women. Later that tradition became known as the **cult of domesticity**.

By 1850, roughly one in five white women had worked for wages a few years before they were married. About one in ten single white women worked outside
the home, earning about half the pay men received to do the
same job. Women could neither vote nor sit on juries in
the early 1800s, even if they were taxpayers. Typically, when
a woman married, her property and any money she earned
became her husband’s. In many instances, married women
lacked guardianship rights over their children.

Women Mobilize for Reform

Despite such limits, women actively participated in all the
important reform movements of the 19th century. Many
middle-class white women were inspired by the optimistic
message of the Second Great Awakening. Women were often
shut out of meetings by disapproving men, and responded by
expanding their efforts to seek equal rights for themselves.

WOMEN ABOLITIONISTS Sarah and Angelina Grimké,
daughters of a South Carolina slaveholder, spoke eloquently
for abolition. In 1836 Angelina Grimké published An Appeal
to Christian Women of the South, in which she called upon
women to “overthrow this horrible system of oppression and
cruelty.” Women abolitionists also raised money, distributed
literature, and collected signatures for petitions to Congress.

Some men supported women’s efforts. William Lloyd
Garrison, for example, joined the determined women who
had been denied participation in the World’s Anti-Slavery
Convention in 1840. Garrison said, “After battling so many
long years for the liberties of African slaves, I can take no part
in a convention that strikes down the most sacred rights of all
women.” Other men, however, denounced the female aboli-
tionists. The Massachusetts clergy criticized the Grimké sisters
for assuming “the place and tone of man as public reformer.”

Opposition only served to make women reformers more
determined. The abolitionist cause became a powerful spur
to other reform causes, as well as to the women’s rights movement.

WORKING FOR TEMPERANCE The temperance movement, the effort to
prohibit the drinking of alcohol, was another offshoot of the influence of church-
es and the women’s rights movement. Speaking at a temperance meeting in 1852,
Mary C. Vaughan attested to the evils of alcohol.

A PERSONAL VOICE MARY C. VAUGHAN

“There is no reform in which woman can act better or more appropriately than
temperance. . . . Its effects fall so crushingly upon her . . . she has so often seen
its slow, insidious, but not the less surely fatal advances, gaining upon its victim.
. . . Oh! the misery, the utter, hopeless misery of the drunkard’s wife!”

—quoted in Women’s America: Refocusing the Past

In the early 19th century, alcohol flowed freely in America. Liquor helped
wash down the salted meat and fish that composed the dominant diet and, until
the development of anesthetics in the 1840s, doctors dosed their patients with
whiskey or brandy before operating.

Many Americans, however, recognized drunkenness as a serious problem.
Lyman Beecher, a prominent Connecticut minister, had begun lecturing against
all use of liquor in 1825. A year later, the American Temperance Society was
founded. By 1833, some 6,000 local temperance societies dotted the country.
They held rallies, produced pamphlets, and brought about a decline in the consumption of alcohol that would continue into the 1860s.

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Until the 1820s, American girls had few educational avenues open to them beyond elementary school. As Sarah Grimké, who ran a school for women with her sister Angelina, complained in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (1838), a woman who knew “chemistry enough to keep the pot boiling, and geography enough to know the location of the different rooms in her house,” was considered learned enough.

A PERSONAL VOICE SARAH GRIMKÉ

“During the early part of my life, my lot was cast among the butterflies of the fashionable world. I am constrained to say . . . that their education is miserably deficient. . . . Our brethren may reject my doctrine . . . but I believe they would be ‘partakers of the benefit’ . . . and would find that woman, as their equal, was unspeakably more valuable than woman as their inferior, both as a moral and an intellectual being.”

—*Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman*

In 1821 Emma Willard opened one of the nation’s first academically rigorous schools for girls in Troy, New York. The Troy Female Seminary became the model for a new type of women’s school. Despite much mockery that “they will be educating cows next,” Willard’s school prospered.

In 1837 Mary Lyon overcame heated resistance to found another important institution of higher learning for women, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (later Mount Holyoke College) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. In the same year Ohio’s Oberlin College admitted four women to its degree program, thus becoming the nation’s first fully coeducational college.

African-American women faced greater obstacles to getting an education. In 1831 white Quaker Prudence Crandall opened a school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut. Two years later she admitted an African-American girl, but the townspeople protested so vigorously against desegregated education that Crandall decided to admit only African-American students. This aroused even more opposition, and in 1834 Crandall was forced to close the school and leave town. Only after the Civil War would the severely limited educational opportunities for African-American women finally, though slowly, begin to expand.

WOMEN AND HEALTH REFORM

In the mid-19th century, educated women also began to work for health reforms. Elizabeth Blackwell, who in 1849 became the first woman to graduate from medical college, later opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. In the 1850s, Lyman Beecher’s daughter, Catharine, undertook a national survey of women’s health. To her dismay, Beecher found three sick women for every healthy one. It was no wonder: women
rarely bathed or exercised, and the fashion of the day included corsets so restrictive that breathing sometimes was difficult.

Amelia Bloomer, publisher of a temperance newspaper, rebelled. Bloomer often wore a costume of loose-fitting pants tied at the ankles and covered by a short skirt. Readers besieged her with requests for the sewing pattern. Most women who sewed the “bloomers,” however, considered it a daring venture, as many men were outraged by women wearing pants.

**Women’s Rights Movement Emerges**

The various reform movements of the mid-19th century fed the growth of the women’s movement by providing women with increased opportunities to act outside the home.

**SENECA FALLS** In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott decided to hold a women’s rights convention. They announced what would become known as the **Seneca Falls Convention** (for the New York town in which it was held). Stanton and Mott composed an agenda and a detailed statement of grievances. Stanton carefully modeled this “Declaration of Sentiments” on the Declaration of Independence. The second paragraph began with a revision of very familiar words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.” Some of the resolutions that were also proposed at the convention spoke to the circumstances with which women reformers had struggled.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

“Resolved, That all laws which prevent women from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.

Resolved, That woman is man’s equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.”

—Resolutions adopted at Seneca Falls Convention, 1848

Nearly 300 women and men gathered at the Wesleyan Methodist Church for the convention. The participants approved all parts of the declaration unanimously—including several resolutions to encourage women to participate in all public issues on an equal basis with men—except one. The one exception, which still passed by a narrow majority, was the resolution calling for women “to secure to
themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise,” the right to vote. The vote remained a controversial aim. Some thought suffrage was an extreme solution to a nonexistent problem. As Lucy Stone’s sister wrote in 1846, “I can’t vote, but what care I for that, I would not if I could.”

SOJOURNER TRUTH Women reformers made significant contributions to improving social conditions in the mid-19th century. Yet conditions for slaves worsened. Isabella Baumfree, a slave for the first 30 years of her life, took the name Sojourner Truth when she decided to sojourn (travel) throughout the country preaching, and later, arguing for abolition. At a women’s rights convention in 1851, the tall, muscular black woman was hissed at in disapproval. Because Truth supported abolition, some participants feared her speaking would make their own cause less popular. But Truth won applause with her speech that urged men to grant women their rights.

A PERSONAL VOICE SOJOURNER TRUTH

“Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”

—quoted in Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave

As Truth showed, hard work was a central fact of life for most women. In the mid-19th century, this continued to be the case as women entered the emerging industrial workplace. Once there, they continued the calls for women’s rights and other social reforms.