The Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention: A Study of Social Networks

Judith Wellman

Journal of Women's History, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1991, pp. 9-37 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jowh/summary/v003/3.1.wellman.html
Shortly after 11:00 a.m. on the bright, sunlit morning of July 19, 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton walked to the front of the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. The time had come to take public action, to inaugurate, as Stanton later recalled, "the greatest rebellion the world has ever seen." She was so nervous, she remembered, that she "wanted to abandon all her principles" and run away. But she did not, and the first women's rights convention of modern North America began.¹

For the next two days, perhaps three hundred people met in the Wesleyan Chapel to discuss not only the "social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman" but also women's political rights, especially the right to vote. When the meeting was over, one hundred people (sixty-eight women and thirty-two men) had signed the Declaration of Sentiments, which was patterned after the Declaration of Independence, and asserted "that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..." Just as the colonists had brought charges against King George, so the signers at Seneca Falls brought charges against the men of America, against an establishment that legitimized male authority, denied women political rights (including the right to vote), gave husbands the power even to beat their wives, discriminated against women in employment, education, and property ownership, and took from women a sense of self-respect and of confidence in their own abilities.²

By using the Declaration of Independence as their model, women's rights advocates at Seneca Falls drew immediate public attention to their cause, and they initiated a new, activist phase of the women's rights movement. As the historian Ellen Carol DuBois has argued, "For many years before 1848, American women had manifested considerable discontent with their lot... Yet women's discontent remained unexamined, implicit, and above all, disorganized... The women's rights movement crystallized these sentiments into a feminist politics... [and] began a new phase in the history of feminism." Certainly the fires of women's discontent had long been smoldering. The Seneca Falls convention fanned them into bright flames. More than any other place, Seneca Falls symbolizes the beginning of the modern U.S. movement for women's rights.³

This is the story of the one hundred signers of the Declaration of Sentiments. Who were they? And why did they sign a document that they
agreed was "of the kind called radical"? Because only eight days elapsed between the first newspaper announcement of the convention and the meeting itself, we might assume that those who attended were not simply isolated individuals. In fact, most of the signers were linked together by preexisting social networks.4

In 1888, Frederick Douglass, then editor of the North Star in Rochester, New York, and himself one of the signers, provided us a clue about the nature of these networks at the fortieth anniversary of the convention, held by the International Council of Women in Washington, D.C.:

Then who were we, for I count myself in, who did this thing? We were few in numbers, moderate in resources, and very little known in the world. The most that we had to commend us, was a firm conviction that we were in the right, and a firm faith that the right must ultimately prevail.5

For Douglass, it was shared values rather than a shared relationship to material resources that brought these women's rights advocates together at Seneca Falls. One value, that of equality, was central to all of their lives. "All men and women are created equal," they had affirmed. So we might hypothesize that the networks that linked the signers would reflect egalitarian values.

Secondary literature offers us more specific insights about the nature of those networks. Two standard approaches explain why the nineteenth-century U.S. women's movement emerged when and where it did. The first one relates most directly to Seneca Falls. It suggests that the Seneca Falls convention was essentially a part of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's own personal history. In this view, Stanton organized the convention as a political response to her own personal experience of discrimination. As a young girl, she realized that her lawyer father valued sons more than daughters and that women faced obstacles not only within the family but also in the legal and political structures of the larger world. The second explanation relates more broadly to the women's rights movement as a whole. It argues that the movement emerged primarily out of the thwarted efforts of American women to participate in the antislavery movement and that major leaders of the women's rights movement emerged from the radical Garrisonian wing of abolitionism (as opposed to the political wing). Both explanations are valid insofar as they rely primarily on evidence about the main leaders of the women's movement, most of whom forged their commitment to reform in the fires of abolitionism.6

But those who signed the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments were not leaders. They were, in fact, very ordinary people. Only five of them—Frederick Douglass, Lucretia and James Mott, Martha Wright, and Stanton
herself—ever became figures of national importance. Why did these relatively obscure people take such an early and unequivocal stand for women’s rights? Were they swept away by arguments from Stanton’s own life? Had they been prior advocates of radical, antipolitical abolitionism? Or did their commitment to women’s rights flow from entirely different sources? This essay will give a qualified “yes” to each of these questions.

Beyond the simple act of signing the Declaration of Sentiments itself, few of these signers left any record of what shaped and sustained their egalitarian ideals. They did, however, leave imprints of their basic values on the social institutions in which they lived out their daily lives. Using a variety of sources—including census reports, local histories, genealogies, cemetery records, newspapers, church records, tax assessments, subscription lists, and correspondence—I have begun to identify those institutions and to isolate the most important social networks.

Against a backdrop of an expansive and rapidly changing economic and social milieu, these reformers used their energies to promote egalitarian ideals at the local, state, and national levels. Most important, three major reform organizations linked these signers into value-oriented networks long before they knew about the Seneca Falls convention. These networks were composed of (1) legal reformers, who worked to implement the right of married women to own property and who also raised the question of political rights for women; (2) political abolitionists, who helped form the emerging Free Soil party; and (3) Quaker abolitionists, who supported Garrisonian abolitionism.

The first two of these networks were most important in Seneca Falls. The last linked women’s rights advocates in Waterloo with those in other parts of central New York. In the spring and early summer of 1848, none of these networks was quite solidified. Events in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s own life would coincide with the particular organizational needs of these three groups to provide the spark that ignited the women’s rights movement.

Three networks, three events, three concerns. How did these develop? How did they coalesce in the summer of 1848 to motivate one hundred people to sign the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments? Before we answer these questions directly, let us briefly explore Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s own situation, as well as some of the economic and social factors that provided the background for women’s rights activism.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was clearly the main organizer of the convention, and understanding her own story is key to understanding why the
convention occurred in the first place. In 1847 and early 1848, events in Seneca Falls brought back painful recollections from her girlhood and made her especially receptive to arguments for change.

Three months before Stanton’s eleventh birthday, in August 1826, her oldest brother, Eleazer, came home from Union College to die. Three more brothers died in infancy or early childhood, leaving Stanton’s parents—Daniel and Margaret Cady—with six girls but no living sons. Daniel Cady never fully recovered, and he rebuffed Elizabeth’s efforts to be as good as the sons he had lost. “I taxed every power,” she remembered in her autobiography, “hoping some day to hear my father say: ‘Well, a girl is as good as a boy, after all.’ But he never said it.”

A few months later, Elizabeth’s sister, Tryphena, married Edward Bayard, and the newlywedded couple became surrogate parents for the remaining Cady children. Edward and his brother, Henry, studied law with Daniel Cady, Elizabeth’s father, and she began to spend much of her time in her father’s law office. With the revision of New York State’s laws in 1828, the legal position of married women was suddenly clouded with doubt, and Daniel Cady’s law students liked to tease Elizabeth about her powerlessness under the law. Contacts she made in her father’s office would connect her with a significant network of legal reformers.

As she grew, Stanton began to spend considerable time with her cousin and his wife, Gerrit and Nancy Smith, at their home in Peterboro, New York. There she was introduced to a second network, that of political abolitionists. One of the most famous was Henry B. Stanton, abolitionist orator and organizer. Against her father’s wishes, Elizabeth married Henry in May 1840. Through Gerrit Smith and Henry Stanton, Elizabeth made important contacts among a second major network, that of political abolitionists.

On their honeymoon, Elizabeth and Henry attended the World Anti-Slavery convention in London. By refusing to seat women delegates, antislavery males unwittingly transformed this meeting into an episode in the development of the women’s rights movement. As Stanton recalled:

The action of this convention was the topic of discussion, in public and private, for a long time, and . . . gave rise to the movement for women’s political equality both in England and the United States. As the convention adjourned, the remark was heard on all sides, “It is about time some demand was made for new liberties for women.”

Most important for Stanton was her introduction to Lucretia Mott and the circle of Quaker abolitionist women from Philadelphia. As an older woman, an abolitionist, and an accomplished public speaker, Mott represented “a new world of thought” to Stanton. She also connected Stanton
to another wing of the antislavery movement, those who emphasized not political action but moral suasion. Often called Garrisonians after William Lloyd Garrison, perhaps the most vocal proponent of this view, these abolitionists embraced total equality for all people, "the equal brotherhood of the entire Human Family, without distinction of color, sex, or clime." It may have been in London that Elizabeth began to call herself a Garrisonian. Shortly afterward, she began to subscribe to the Liberator, Garrison's newspaper, and she continued to do so, in her own name, until the paper went out of existence.9

In 1840, just before the London meeting, political abolitionists had split with moral suasionist Garrisonians at the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. They were never to be reconciled. Stanton, however, would maintain strong ties with both groups—with the political abolitionists through her husband, Henry, and her cousin, Gerrit Smith, and with the moral suasionists through her new mentor, Lucretia Mott.

All three of these networks—the legal reformers Stanton had met through her father's law office, the political abolitionists she knew so well through her husband, and the Garrisonian abolitionists that she herself belonged to and that she had come to know through Mott—came together in Stanton's life in the summer of 1848.

Stanton would be ready to take public action with these three networks in 1848, in part because of deeply disturbing events in her own personal life. Stanton had moved to Seneca Falls from Boston, and the change was both dramatic and depressing. With her husband almost always away from home, she struggled to maintain herself and her three rambunctious sons with little household help. Their house was on the outskirts of the village, in an Irish working-class neighborhood, overlooking the Seneca Turnpike, the Seneca and Cayuga Canal, and the mills along the Seneca River. Her life was made even more difficult when her children and servants all developed malaria. As she recalled, "Cleanliness, order, the love of the beautiful and artistic, all faded away in the struggle to accomplish what was absolutely necessary from hour to hour." Overwhelmed, Stanton fled to her parents' home in Johnstown, New York.10

Increasingly frustrated, increasingly angry, Stanton tried to make sense of her feelings. She thought about cooperative housekeeping and about the advantages of Fourierist communities. Although she probably suffered either a miscarriage or a still birth, she did not have the fourth child she might normally have had at this stage. She was a woman in a state of siege. At that critical point in her life, events outside her control would rouse her neighbors to organized action. The passage of the Married Women's Property Act in April 1848, the formation of the Free-Soil party, and the organization of dissident Quakers into the Congregational Friends
in June 1848 set the stage to help Stanton transform her personal problems into political action through a convention for the rights of women.

Background Influences

Although national in its impact, the Seneca Falls convention was local in its origins. Of the eighty-three known signers, 69 percent of them came either from Seneca Falls or the neighboring town of Waterloo. So many people attended the convention from Waterloo, in fact, that one newspaper called the meeting the "Waterloo Female Convention." A few people came from other townships in Seneca County, and a few more arrived from as far away as Rochester (forty miles west of Seneca Falls), Wayne County (just north of Seneca Falls), or Syracuse (forty miles east). Only three came from farther distances, and these were all on visits to relatives in central New York.11

In the 1840s, upstate New York, like the whole northeastern United States, was changing rapidly. Both Seneca Falls and Waterloo were at the cutting edge of economic and social change. Both lay on the country's major east-west transportation route, developed first as the Seneca Turnpike, then as the Erie Canal (connected to Seneca County by the Seneca and Cayuga Canal), and finally as a major rail route. Local industries epitomized the early industrial revolution. The 43-foot waterfall from which Seneca Falls took its name provided abundant waterpower for mills and factories. Four miles west, Waterloo's woolen factory sustained production from the mid-1830s.

By the 1840s, Seneca Falls found itself economically in transition. Strongly affected by the depression of 1837, the town lost its older economy, which was based on milling local wheat into flour for eastern markets, as wheat production moved farther west. Local entrepreneurs had begun to manufacture both pumps and textiles, but these industries would not provide a dependable economic base until the 1850s.

Economic change eroded stable social institutions and challenged basic values of community cohesion. At the same time, it offered opportunities. On the one hand, signers of the Declaration of Sentiments were secure enough in their basic economic, social, and cultural positions to be willing to take risks. On the other hand, they found themselves on the shifting sands of change, where risk was not only possible but necessary. A complex mix—different for different signers—of personal characteristics, economic status, and family patterns set the stage for the involvement of these individuals in reform. By themselves, these elements do not explain why the signers became women's rights activists. They did, how-
ever, provide a context that promoted the growth of women's rights activism.  

Gender, for example, was an important variable but not a definitive one. Two-thirds of the signers were women. Whether or not men should sign the Declaration of Sentiments was, in fact, one of only two topics that occasioned disagreement at the convention. (The other was the question of women's right to vote.) With the exception of Stanton herself, people from Seneca Falls generally acted on the belief that men as well as women should sign. Half of the signers from Seneca Falls were male. Signers from Waterloo and central New York, however, were predominately female (68.2% of the signers from Waterloo and 65% from central New York were women). All but one of the unidentified signers was female.

Age did not link the signers, who ranged from fourteen-year-old Susan Quinn, the youngest signer, to sixty-eight-year-old George W. Pryor, the oldest. Their mean age was 38.7 years old.

Ethnicity, race, and place of birth were also contributing but not defining factors. In race and ethnicity, the majority of signers reflected the majority of the surrounding population: they were native-born European Americans. Only one known signer, Frederick Douglass, was African American. Only one, Susan Quinn, was of Irish descent. Most had been born in New York State, New England, or Pennsylvania.

Wealth, too, provided a context but not a cause for reform. According to the 1850 census, signers' families did, on average, own more property than did nonsigners' families. Variation among signers' families was so great, however, that wealth alone does not adequately distinguish the signers from the ordinary population. Excluding the four richest signatories from our calculations, the average value of property held by signers' families was $2,051. The average value of property held by nonsigning families in Seneca Falls and Waterloo, in contrast, was $1,117. (Seneca Falls had by far the lowest average amount of property ownership, with $869 per family, compared to $2,915 in Waterloo and $4,220 in central New York generally.)

Occupations also provide clues about the relationship of signers to one another and to a new economic order. Although many of the signers worked in occupations strongly affected by economic change, employment associations did not provide the most important link among the signers. Sorting the occupations of the signers' heads of households into primary (farming, fishing, mining, and lumbering), secondary (manufacturing), and tertiary (trade and service) occupations offers a very rough measure of involvement with economic changes.

Those who worked in manufacturing certainly had to confront directly the possibility of dramatic changes in the way they earned their
living. In fact, 39.6 percent of signers lived in households that derived their main income from manufacturing. Only 30.2 percent were involved in farming and 30.2 percent in services or trade. In Seneca Falls, most signers (55.2%) lived in manufacturing households. Of these, six (37.5%) were clearly part of new, large-scale techniques of production. These included one spinner (Justin Williams, the only signer clearly identified as a textile factory worker rather than an owner), one machinist, one sash manufacturer, one candle-maker, and two pump manufacturers. The other nine manufacturers (56.3%)—including one boat-builder, one milliner, one carriage-maker, one tailor, and five coopers—worked in older, craft-style occupations. The coopers, in particular, found themselves in declining demand, as local flour mills closed and as their supply of oak trees dwindled.17

Other signers, although they listed their occupations as farmers or as professionals, derived at least part of their income from industrialization. Richard P. Hunt, for example, told the census taker that he was a farmer. He did, indeed, own several farms in Waterloo, but he was also the major investor in the Waterloo woolen factory and one of the owners of Waterloo's main business district. Elisha Foote, a lawyer, specialized in patent law and himself held several patents. And John Jones, a steamboat agent, obviously depended on the use of steam power in transportation to create his employment.18

Family networks give us another important clue about the relationship of these signers to other people. Almost half the identifiable signers (and perhaps almost two-thirds of the total) attended the convention with at least one other family member. Wives and husbands came together. Mothers brought their daughters, and fathers brought sons. Sisters and brothers came together, and so, in some cases, did uncles and cousins.19

These family patterns can be interpreted in two ways. First, they hint at the strength of family ties. Some families did argue among themselves about women's rights. Henry Stanton, for example, refused to attend the convention at all. But many of the signers (including Stanton herself, who brought Harriet Cady Eaton, her sister, and Daniel Cady Eaton, her nephew) could count on at least one other family member to lend support. Women's rights may have divided some families, but it brought others together in a common cause.

Second, these family patterns lead us to suspect that husbands and wives had important ties not only with each other but with their own parents and siblings. While many husbands and wives signed the Declaration together, many women and men also signed the Declaration with members of their birth families. Sometimes these family relationships became very complicated. Richard P. Hunt, for example, signed not only
with his wife, Jane, but with two sisters (Lydia Mount and Hannah Plant) and with Lydia's daughter, Mary E. Vail. Experience Gibbs signed with at least one, and possibly two, of her sisters. Amy Post signed with her sister, Sarah Hallowell and Amy's stepdaughter, Mary Hallowell. Mary Ann and Thomas McClintock signed with two of their daughters, Elizabeth and Mary Ann.20

Clearly, these signers valued their ties with sisters, brothers, parents, and children as much as those with husbands and wives. Links with their families of origin balanced marital relationships and provided women with a large network of support of "significant others." In spite of legal theory and emerging popular opinion, wives in this group did not define themselves solely by their relationship to their husbands.21

Finally, for many signers, home was not simply a private place. It was also a public place, part of the world of work and of social interaction beyond the nuclear family. Many signers incorporated non-family members into their households, including apprentices, servants, boarders, and children. Most unrelated household members were European American, born either in the United States or in Ireland. But some were African American, such as Mary Jackson, aged seventeen, and S.L. Freeman, eight, who lived with the McClintock family, or Matilda Rany, seventeen, who lived with Margaret and George Pryor. Through networks of kinship and household, these signers reached out to the community as a whole. The emerging distinction between women (whose place was in the home) and men (who worked outside the home) was blurred for these signers. Families and households were not peripheral to public activity but the very basis of community life itself.

All of these factors—sex, age, race and ethnicity, wealth and work, family and household—set the stage for the involvement of these people in the Seneca Falls convention. But these were contributing factors, not defining ones. I believe that the convention happened when and where it did primarily because these signers were linked together into three value-oriented networks and because Elizabeth Cady Stanton herself mobilized people in all three groups to create the Seneca Falls women's rights convention.

Women and Legal Reform in New York State

The first network emerged from a statewide debate about the legal rights of women in New York State. For almost two decades before the Seneca Falls convention, this debate was so widespread and so intertwined with fundamental questions of American identity that it engaged people at a grass-roots level all across New York State. And it framed the debate
about women's rights in the language of the Declaration of Independence. Did the phrase "all men are created equal" include women? Were women, indeed, citizens? In effect, the debate over legal rights for married women provided a dress rehearsal for the Seneca Falls convention itself.22

In Seneca Falls, legal reform found its most ardent advocate in Ansel Bascom, lawyer, abolitionist, legal reformer, and temperance man. Bascom did not sign the Declaration of Sentiments. He was a candidate for Congress in 1848 and perhaps did not want to commit himself to such a radical position. He did, however, attend the women's rights meeting, and he took a very active part in the discussion.23

Stanton herself formed a second member of this legal reform network. As a child, she had listened to her father and her father's law students debate women's legal rights. She had lobbied in Albany for legal reform in the 1840s. And she contributed in her own special way to the Declaration of Sentiments by emphasizing women's citizenship rights, especially the right of all women—married or single—to vote, which she articulated in terms of the statewide debate about women and the law.

Discussions about women's legal rights undoubtedly affected other signers, too. Elisha Foote, for example, a Seneca Falls lawyer and one of Stanton's father's former law students, quite likely took an active part. So, probably, did men such as Charles Hoskins and Jacob P. Chamberlain, who were politically aware, interested in questions of equality, financially well off, and worried about the future of their several daughters. At least one other signer, Martha Wright from Auburn, New York, mentioned debates about legal reform in an 1841 letter.24

Two questions about legal rights for women roused considerable attention in New York State. The first was the right of married women to own property. The second concerned the right of women as citizens to participate in a democratic government. Particularly, should women be allowed to vote? Under the broad umbrella of republican rhetoric that dominated political discourse from the Revolution to the Civil War, these two questions, of property rights and citizenship rights, although often debated separately, were integrally intertwined. Only those with some material investment in the body politic, some argued, should be given a voice in public affairs. Such investment could be property ownership (which led to the payment of taxes) or militia service. As long as women were subject to neither, the rationale for denying them the vote remained intact. If laws were changed to allow married women to own property in their own names, then the whole legal and philosophical scaffolding of resistance to women's political power collapsed. As George Geddes, one of the supporters of a married women's property act, realized, such legis-
lation raised "the whole question of woman's proper place in society, in the family and everywhere." 25

New York State's citizens had publicly debated the question of women's rights at least since the 1821 state constitutional convention. There, opponents of universal male suffrage (i.e., of voting rights for all males, regardless of property ownership or race) argued that citizenship rights did not necessarily include voting rights. Over and over again, they used the exclusion of women from voting rights (as well as the exclusion of children, native Americans, foreigners, paupers, and felons) as a rationale for denying suffrage to others, including black males and white males without property. If women could legitimately be disfranchised, why could not others be excluded as well? 26

In 1828, the question of married women's rights emerged in full force. Under the old law, based on English common law, wealthy New York families could protect property rights for their wives and married daughters by means of legal trusts, administered through equity courts. Many New Yorkers, however, viewed equity courts as fortresses of privilege for the wealthy. After 1828, New York State's Revised Statutes abolished equity courts, and with them went any sure protection for the right of married women to own property.

By the mid-1830s, considerable support existed across the state for a law protecting married women's right to own property. Men from wealthy families pushed for such a law most vigorously. They, after all, had most to lose, either to profligate sons-in-law or to ill-fated business ventures. Women's rights advocates, however, added their own small voice for reform. In 1836, Ernestine Rose, who was Polish American and Jewish, circulated a petition urging the passage of the married women's property act promoted by Thomas Herttell, a Democratic assemblyman from New York City. Although only six women signed this petition, it marked the first time that women themselves had taken public action for legal reform. 27

Nowhere did the argument for full rights for women emerge more clearly than in a speech given in the late 1830s or early 1840s before the lyceum in Ogdensburg, New York. Arguing strenuously for married women's property rights, the author also raised the prospect both of the right to vote and the right to hold office. The Declaration of Independence provided the key. "THAT ALL ARE CREATED FREE AND EQUAL; THAT THEY ARE ENDOWed BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS; THAT AMONG THESE ARE LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS—is acknowledged to be the fundamental doctrine upon which this Republic is founded," the author asserted. Furthermore, this idea "is freedom's golden rule. . . None should ever be allowed to restrict its universality. Women, as well as men, are entitled to
the full enjoyment of its practical blessings." Clearly, women were citizens of this Republic, "amenable to the constitution and laws." Yet,

would any man be denominated free who was deprived of a representation in the government, under which he lived, who was thus disfranchised and had no voice in the affairs of his country? ... He would be called a slave. Such, I blush for my country to say it—such is the degraded condition of women, in this boasted land of liberty.... Is this slavish condition of women compatible with the doctrine that all are created free and equal?28

Obviously, in this author's mind, not.

Extensive delays in passing a married women's property act, however, only broadened public awareness. By the 1840s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton remembered, married women's property had become

the topic of general interest around many fashionable dinner-tables, and at many humble firesides. In this way all phases of the question were touched upon, involving the relations of the sexes, and gradually widening to all human interests—political, religious, civil and social. The press and the pulpit became suddenly vigilant in marking out woman's sphere, while woman herself seemed equally vigilant in her efforts to step outside the prescribed limits.

As if to prove her point, the Seneca Observer, published in Seneca County, New York, argued in 1843 that "the right of voting should be extended to females in common with males" and that "it is a violation of the great doctrine of equal rights that such is not the case."29

Discussion of women's rights—both property rights and political rights—reached a crescendo in 1846, when New York State called a new constitutional convention. The convention opened up once more the question of suffrage. Who should be allowed to vote in the State of New York? Should illiterates? Foreigners? Blacks? Even women? The issue seemed especially pressing because of recent unsuccessful efforts to legalize equal rights to suffrage for blacks in New York State.30

For women, however, the right to vote was not at first raised by convention members but by female citizens of the state themselves. At least three petitions (from Albany, Jefferson, and Wyoming counties, New York) asked for women's suffrage. Jefferson County petitioners argued, for example, that

the present government of this state has widely departed from the true democratic principles upon which all just governments must be based by denying to the female portion of the community the right of suffrage and any participation in forming the government and laws under which they live, and to which they are amenable, and by
imposing upon them burdens of taxation, both directly and indirectly, without admitting them the right of representation. . . . 31

No taxation without representation constituted so powerful an argument that the convention could not entirely ignore it. Yet there was little sentiment in favor of doing anything about it. Instead, the opposition successfully used both ridicule and reason to combat the idea. The convention debated a resolution, for example, that "men are by nature free and independent, and in their social and political relations entitled to equal rights." Levi S. Chatfield, from Otsego County, wanted to add the words "without regard to color." Charles O'Connor, of New York, decided to poke some fun. "Will the gentleman accept an amendment to that or an addition," he asked, "viz: the words 'age or sex!' " 32

Those attending this New York state constitutional convention may have laughed, but Stanton did not. Neither did Samuel J. May, minister of the Unitarian Church in Syracuse. In November, he castigated opponents of women's suffrage from his pulpit. It was, he argued, "all unequal, all unrighteous—this utter annihilation, politically considered, of more than one half of the whole community. . . . This entire disfranchisement of females is as unjust as the disfranchisement of the males would be. . . ." 33

In April 1848, the New York State legislature again addressed the problem of married women's property rights. Again, they were prodded by petitions from citizens. One in particular revealed the importance of revolutionary rhetoric and grass-roots commitment in sustaining support for women's rights. In March 1848, forty-four "ladies" (married, as they were clear to assert), petitioned the legislature from the towns of Darien and Covington in Genesee and Wyoming counties, New York. Their petition argued, with potent sarcasm:

That your Declaration of Independence declares, that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. And as women have never consented to, been represented in, or recognized by this government, it is evident that in justice no allegiance can be claimed from them.

Your laws after depriving us of property, of the means of acquiring it, and even of individuality, require the same obedience from us as from free citizens.

We therefore think, common justice and humanity would dictate, that when you class us and our privileges with those of idiots, and lunatics, you should do the same with regard to our responsibilities; and as our husbands assume responsibility for our debts and trespasses, they should also for our misdemeanors and crimes; for justice
can never hold lunatics, idiots, infants, or married women (as the law now is) accountable for their conduct.

When women are allowed the privilege of rational and accountable beings, it will be soon enough to expect from them the duties of such.

Our numerous and yearly petitions for this most desirable object having been disregarded, we now ask your august body, to abolish all laws which hold married women more accountable for their acts than infants, idiots, and lunatics.34

Perhaps inspired (or shamed) by such rhetoric, the New York State legislature did pass its first married women’s property act just one month later, in April 1848. In creating a supportive climate for the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention, discussion of the legal rights of women was extremely important. Passage of the Married Women’s Property Act helped legitimize more radical action and prompted Stanton herself to promote women’s right to vote. As Stanton noted, the Married Women’s Property Act “encouraged action on the part of women, as the reflection naturally arose that, if the men who make the laws were ready for some onward step, surely the women themselves should express interest in legislation.”35

Free-Soil Organization

Passage of the Married Women’s Property Act in April 1848 was the first major event in 1848 to set the stage for the Seneca Falls convention. Two more key events followed. Both occurred in June. Both linked local people to larger concerns. Both involved value-oriented networks, and both reflected major disruptions in those networks. One (in Seneca Falls) ripped apart political allegiances. It was the growth, in the late spring and early summer of 1848, of the new Free-Soil party. The other (in Waterloo and beyond) mirrored a profound break in religious ties, when a group of Quaker abolitionists split away from the Genesee Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) to form the nucleus of the new Congregational or Progressive Friends. Both splits led directly to a confrontation over questions about equality in American life.

Both also involved people who were part of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s own personal circle. The Free-Soil movement drew support from men (and the women who had married these men) whom Stanton had met in her father’s law office, as well as from political abolitionists she had met through her husband, Henry. The Quaker controversy deeply affected Friends who were linked to Lucretia Mott, Stanton’s mentor and friend.

Political institutions in Seneca Falls were profoundly strained by debates surrounding the nomination of presidential candidates in 1848.
Discussion centered on one question: Should slavery be allowed in the territories? In New York State, the question hit the Democratic party, already under stress from a decade of bickering, with particular force. At a meeting in Syracuse in September 1847, the radical Barnburner wing of the party stalked out in anger when the conservative Hunkers refused to support resolutions against the extension of slavery. In May 1848, the national Democratic convention nominated Lewis Cass for president. For the Barnburners, now joined by former president Martin Van Buren, that was the last straw. They called a Barnburner state convention, to meet at Utica on June 22. Joined by antislavery Whigs and by men from the Liberty party, these dissident Democrats formed the nucleus of a new Free-Soil party, which would be organized formally at Buffalo in August. Championing “free soil, free labor, free men,” they would rally behind Martin Van Buren for president.

Ejectors in Seneca Falls found themselves swept into this national confrontation. On June 13, in preparation for the Utica meeting, 196 voters published an invitation in the Seneca County Courier to the “freemen of Seneca Falls” to meet in the Wesleyan Chapel to consider “the course of action which existing circumstances require of Northern Freemen.” Chaired by Jacob Chamberlain, owner of a local flour mill, the attendees of the June 15 meeting agreed that slavery was “the chiefest curse and foulest disgrace” in America. The author of these stern resolutions? Ansel Bascom.

Henry Stanton, too, leaped into the fight with gusto. He teamed up with Bascom to stump the state for the Free-Soil party. And he was one of 102 local delegates to the Buffalo Free-Soil convention, held in August.

Old party issues were insignificant compared to the pressing need to find a presidential candidate who would restrict slavery. Such sentiments allied Seneca Falls Free-Soilers with the party’s abolitionist wing. Nationally, many Free-Soil adherents supported the party not from antislavery principles but as a way to keep the west for whites only. People in Seneca Falls, however, considered slavery a moral evil and hoped the new party would strike a mortal blow against it.

Some of them would go even further. They would take the idea of equality seriously enough to consider not only rights for black and white males but also for women. They would attend the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention and would sign its Declaration of Sentiments. Direct influence of the Free-Soil movement on the women’s rights convention is easier to document than is the impact of debates over the Married Women’s Property Act. Of the twenty-six separate families of signers of the Declaration of Sentiments identifiable from Seneca Falls, eighteen of them also included a Free-Soil advocate. In Seneca Falls, not all
Free-Soilers were women's rights advocates. But 69.2% of the households of women's rights advocates (compared to only 21.2% of nonsigners households) were affiliated with the Free-Soilers.  

Congregational Friends

Organizing for the Free-Soil party, combined with public discussion over women's legal rights, prepared citizens in Seneca Falls for the women's rights convention. Meanwhile, in Waterloo, four miles west of Seneca Falls, a different kind of excitement prevailed at just the same time. The Junius Monthly Meeting of Friends, a member of the Farmington Quarterly Meeting and of the Genesee Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) had just been shaken to its core by disagreements with other members of the Yearly Meeting at their annual June conference. These Friends—Garrisonian abolitionists as well as Quakers—would form the core of another network, drawing people from outside Seneca Falls to the women's rights convention. Based on religious rather than political ties, this network, too, represented a split in traditional organizations. And, like the Free-Soil party, it emerged fully only in June 1848.  

The Genesee Yearly Meeting of Friends, held at Farmington, in Ontario County, opened calmly enough, in spite of the heat. But tense disputes, left over from the year before, soon broke the Sabbath peace. On Sunday, June 11, the meeting house was filled to overflowing. Several speakers, "not very talented," as one observer commented, made the audience restive before Lucretia Mott rose and delivered an impressive sermon.  

Angry accusations, left over from the year before, erupted during the next two days. Disagreements were acrimonious and fundamental. Partly they centered on slavery. Conservative Quakers objected to the antislavery activities of many of their fellow Friends. Especially they did not want to open Quaker meeting houses for public discussion of abolitionism. The experience of Frederick Douglass, Charles Lenox Remond, and Daniel Delaney in Mendon, New York, was typical. "The weather was cold and otherwise inclement," they reported in December 1847, "and our meeting was held in the school house.—Friends meeting house having been closed against us on the ground that our views differed from theirs." The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had argued in 1843 that the Society of Friends, "as a body, is false to its own standard of duty," and many Quaker abolitionists agreed.  

Several influential Friends (including Isaac Hopper and Charles Marriott from New York Yearly Meeting, Joseph Dugdale from Green Plain, Ohio, and Griffith Cooper from Farmington Monthly Meeting) left the Society in the 1840s over questions of abolitionism and individual con-
science. Such dramatic disownments and resignations helped make these issues the most important internal concerns among Friends generally in the 1840s.

Partly the disagreements involved the question of proper authority. Did essential authority reside within each individual person and then within each individual meeting? Or did the meeting of ministers and elders, along with quarterly and yearly meetings, have special power to determine the actions of local (i.e., monthly) meetings? This issue, like the question of abolitionism, had been festering for many years. The Michigan Quarterly Meeting, subsidiary to the Genesee Yearly Meeting, had discontinued its separate meeting of ministers and elders in 1843. In 1847, the Genesee Yearly Meeting laid down (i.e., severed ties with) the Michigan Quakers, in spite of the “preponderating voice” of “more than one half of the Meeting” in their favor.45

For Genesee Yearly Meeting, both these questions came to a head in June 1848. In spite of repeated requests, clerks from both men’s and women’s meetings refused to read reports from the ostensibly disowned Michigan Quarterly Meeting. When the clerk of the men’s meeting accepted reappointment, everyone understood that this was “equivalent to recording a separation of the Yearly Meeting.” About two hundred Friends (“something towards half,” according to one observer) walked out, unhappy with what they felt was a manipulative and unfair action.46

With strong support from Quakers in Waterloo, Rochester, and Wayne County, these dissidents adjourned to a three-day conference of their own, held June 14-16. In An Address to Friends of Genesee Yearly Meeting and Elsewhere, they explained their action. “For a number of years past,” they wrote:

we have failed to realize that unity, the existence of which was indispensable to enable us, as a body, to advance the great principles of righteousness embraced in some of the most needful reforms of this age. . . . Evidence has been lamentably furnished, of the existence and growth among us of a spirit of proscription and intolerance. A Spirit which has been unwilling to concede to every equal brother and sister those rights which it claimed for itself—the rights of conscience, and action in conformity to apprehended immediate Divine requiring.47

Daniel Anthony, one of the few contemporaries to leave a detailed comment on the split, wrote to his daughter, Susan, that those who had left the “shriveled up nutshell” of the Genesee Yearly Meeting were those “who take the liberty of holding up to view the wickedness of War—Slavery—Intemperance—Hanging & c” and “who are of the opinion that each
individual should have a right to even think as well as act for himself & in his own way to assist in rooling [sic] on the wheel of reform."

Daniel Anthony reported, a month after the meeting, that "in Rochester they have commenced a new Meeting under the dictation of neither Priest deacon nor Elder." We can assume that dissident Friends in the Waterloo area, affiliated with the Junius Monthly Meeting (after the original name of the township that once included Waterloo), did the same, for in Waterloo lived one of the main organizers of the walkout, a worthy Friend, Thomas McClintock.

Thomas McClintock had been a Quaker leader in Philadelphia in 1828 when the Quakers had split into two wings. Orthodox Friends emphasized such Christian ideas as the Trinity. Hicksite Friends, however (named after the Quaker Elias Hicks), focused on the more traditional Quaker belief in the inner light and its power to give continuing revelation. Thomas McClintock had been not only a biblical scholar of some renown and a founder of the Free-Produce Society, but also a Hicksite leader, and, by 1835, a Quaker minister.

The McClintock family (Thomas and Mary Ann and their four children) had come to Waterloo by canal in 1837. Thomas ran a drugstore on Main Street, where, in a business block constructed by his brother-in-law, Richard P. Hunt, McClintock sold goods "free from the labor of slaves." Hunt also rented the family a comfortable brick house just behind the store.

In Waterloo, the McClintock family continued their religious and reform work. As Quakers and as abolitionists, they took leadership roles in their own meeting. Thomas acted as minister for the Junius Monthly Meeting. From 1839 to 1843, he was also clerk of the Genesee Yearly Meeting. Mary Ann was assistant clerk of the Women's Yearly Meeting. The whole family signed abolitionist petitions, helped organize antislavery fairs, and hosted antislavery lecturers.

When the split in the Genesee Yearly Meeting came in June 1848, Thomas was one of those who walked out. In the fall, this group would meet again. They would call themselves the Congregational Friends, and they would adopt a new form of organization. Men and women would meet together, not separately, as in traditional Quaker meetings. No person was to be subordinate to another. There were to be no ministers and no hierarchy of meetings. They were not to be tied to creeds or rituals, and they need not agree with one another on points of doctrine. They would focus instead on practical philanthropy, on "unity of heart and oneness of purpose in respect to the great practical duties of life." The document that outlined this new organization was called The Basis of Religious Association, and it was written, at least in part, by Thomas McClintock.
Lucretia Mott, ever in the forefront of Quaker developments, clearly sympathized with these egalitarian abolitionists. Separate meetings for ministers and elders were a major source of the problem, she believed. “After nearly thirty years’ experience and observation of the results of this establishment [she noted in 1846], we have come to the conclusion that nearly all the divisions among us have their origin in these meetings.” Mott was equally sure that cooperation with non-Quaker abolitionists was a legitimate part of the Quaker tradition. “Our Friends . . . know full well,” she asserted, “that such a position is neither contrary to our Discipline, to Scripture, . . . nor to common sense.” Finally, Mott linked these issues to the question of equality for men and women. She charged in 1846 that “the assumed authority of men’s meetings, and the admitted subordination of women’s is another cause of complaint.”

In mid-July, these Friends would become the single largest group to sign the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments. At least twenty-three signers were affiliated with this wing of Friends. Most of them (nineteen) came from Junius Monthly Meeting at Waterloo. One signer, Rhoda Palmer, remembered, in fact, that “every member” of that meeting attended the women’s rights convention.

Just as the Free-Soilers of Seneca Falls had broken out of traditional political parties, so had the Waterloo Quakers broken away from their traditional religious affiliation. Both had split away over issues of equality. Both did so in dramatic and emotionally wrenching ways.

In late June and early July, both groups were in the process of self-definition. They had many questions: Who were their members? What did they believe? In particular, how far did they want to carry this idea of equality?

The Results of Local Agitation

At this critical juncture, in the midst of excitement caused by the Free-Soilers and the Congregational Friends, Lucretia Mott came with her sister, Martha Wright, to meet with Quaker women at the home of Jane and Richard Hunt. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was also invited. There, Stanton “poured out,” as she remembered, “the torrent of my long-accumulating discontent, with such vehemence and indignation that I stirred myself, as well as the rest of the party, to do and dare anything.” That evening, they wrote the call for a woman’s rights convention and published it on Tuesday, July 11, in the Seneca County Courier. Area newspapers (the North Star and the Odd Bee, for example) printed the call in their own editions on Friday, July 14.
Local people, concerned about women's legal rights, agitated about deep changes in their own institutional affiliations, and willing in this time of trial and transformation to expand their own boundaries, considered the purposes of the women's rights convention to be, as Stanton later remembered, "timely, rational and sacred." A core group of legal reformers, Free-Soilers, and Congregational Friends found the Declaration of Sentiments sensible, a logical extension of their own beliefs in ideals of liberty, equality, and independence.

But what about Elizabeth Cady Stanton? Can she still be called the convention's main organizer? Indeed she can. The convention would not have happened at all without her. Before the women's rights convention, Free-Soilers and advocates of legal reform in Seneca Falls had few identifiable contacts with the Congregational Friends of Waterloo and central New York. Stanton, however, knew leaders in all three movements. She knew Ansel Bascom, champion of legal reform. Among the Free-Soilers, she could count as friends not only Jacob Chamberlain (president of the June 13 Free-Soil meeting and Stanton's neighbor), and Charles Hoskins (secretary of that meeting and fellow attender of the Episcopal Church), but also her own husband, Henry. Finally, Stanton gained credibility among the Quakers of Waterloo, first, by her long-standing friendship with Lucretia Mott and, second, by her introduction to the McClintocks, who wholeheartedly endorsed her convention plans. Stanton persuaded these leaders to come to the convention. They, in turn, would attract their followers. She would become what network theorists call a broker, bringing together three networks at a critical juncture in their own development.55

Stanton willingly played this position, not because she wanted primarily to promote the Free-Soil party or Congregational Friends, nor even because she wanted to take up the challenge posed to women by passage of the Married Women's Property Act, to act on their own behalf. Instead, Stanton's most powerful motivation emerged from the stresses of her own personal life in 1848. The move to Seneca Falls, Henry's frequent absences, the lack of trained household help, and her family's sickness threatened to overwhelm her. Other women might have become depressed. Not Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Instead, she used her energy to enlist legal reformers, Free-Soilers, and Congregational Friends into a battle against social structures that oppressed women, rather than against individual oppressors.

People across the country reacted to the Seneca Falls convention. Many observers ridiculed the whole idea. The New York Evening Post squealed incredulously that the convention "had seriously resolved that all men and women are created equal!" Women's rights, said the Mechanic's Advocate, were "impracticable, uncalled for, and unnecessary;" "a mon-
strous injury to all mankind," while *The Religious Recorder* of Syracuse simply dismissed it as "excessively silly."  

A few, however, endorsed women’s rights with enthusiasm. "Success to the cause in which they have enlisted," cheered O.C.W. in the Herkimer * Freeman. "Railroad speed to the ends they would accomplish!" The Rochester *National Reformer* encouraged continued agitation. "To the ladies we say," wrote editor George W. Cooper, "act—agitatem—bid high, you will not get, in this age, more than you demand."  

It had been the genius of the convention’s organizers, however, to couch their demands in terms of the Declaration of Independence. Americans found it difficult to repudiate the document upon which their nation had been founded. Many, therefore, would have agreed with Horace Greeley, the influential editor of the *New York Tribune*. Greeley, always logical, had to admit the justice of the cause, for

when a sincere republican is asked to say in sober earnest, what adequate reason he can give for refusing the demand of women to an equal participation with men in political rights, he must answer, None at all. . . . However unwise and mistaken the demand, it is but the assertion of a natural right, and as such must be conceded.

By using the language of the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments reached deep into the culture and conscience of many Americans. Although it may have been a historical accident that Stanton found herself in Seneca Falls in 1848, she seized the moment of agitation over married women’s property rights, of political turmoil among the Free-Soilers, and of religious divisions among the Quakers to turn her personal vision into what would become a major political movement.

NOTES

I owe more thanks for help for this article than I have space to acknowledge. In particular, I want to thank the people of Seneca Falls, including those at the Seneca Falls Historical Society, the Women’s Rights National Historical Park, the Women’s Hall of Fame, and the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Foundation. Betty Auten, county historian, has also been extremely helpful. Pat Holland and Ann Gordon, editors of the Stanton-Anthony Papers, have been simply wonderful colleagues and friends. Robert Schell, associate dean of students at SUNY, Oswego, provided essential advice for statistical analyses. To all those colleagues, librarians, archivists, and local historians who have so generously offered assistance through many years, and to my friend and spouse, Paul Malo, a special thanks. I owe much appreciation, also, to SUNY, Oswego, which funded some of the work on this article in the summer of 1989. I dedicate this article to my children, Mark Malo-Wellman and Amaliya Malo-Wellman, and to all the children of the world.
1 For references to weather, see Mary A. Bull, "Woman's Rights and Other "Reforms" in Seneca Falls," Seneca Falls Reveille, July 9, 1880, and manuscript diary of Jefferson Palmer, Montezuma, July 1848, in Seneca Falls Historical Society. Quotations about the convention are in History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 1 (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881), 68; and Laura Curtis Bullard, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton," in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, et al., eds., Our Famous Women (Hartford: Hartford Publishing, 1888), 613. I refer to this convention as the first in modern North America, because I think we might imagine something akin to women's rights meetings held by certain Native American Indian women, powerful within their own cultures, long before the convention at Seneca Falls.

2 Call to the convention, Seneca County Courier, July 11, 1848; Report of the Woman's Rights Convention Held at Seneca Falls, N.Y., July 19th and 20th, 1848 (Rochester: John Dick at North Star, 1848), facsimile reprint by Seneca Falls Historical Society, 1975. Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 76, notes that three hundred people attended the convention. She based this estimate on that of Rheta Child Dorr in Susan B. Anthony (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 47. This is corroborated by calculations derived from the size of the Wesleyan Methodist Church building itself and from the arrangement of seats within it. The chapel was sixty feet long by forty feet wide, with pews on the first floor and a gallery on three sides above it. A building this size would hold, at maximum, about three hundred people.


4 John Dick at the North Star office in Rochester printed a list of one hundred signers in the Report of the Woman's Rights Convention. This list may or may not contain the names of all those who originally signed the Declaration of Sentiments. In her autobiography, Stanton remembered that "so pronounced was the popular voice against us, in the parlor, press, and pulpit, that most of the ladies who had attended the convention and signed the declaration, one by one, withdrew their names and influence and joined our persecutors." Eighty Years and More reprint (New York· Schocken Books, 1971), 149. No manuscript of the Declaration has ever been found, and we do not know whether the printed list duplicates the original or omits those signers who later withdrew their names. Nathan Milliken, a signer, called the document "radical" in his editorial in the Seneca County Courier, July 21, 1848. Stanton always recalled that the first announcement of the convention came only five days before the meeting. (See, for example, Eighty Years, 148). The Seneca County Courier, however, published the first notice on Tuesday, July 11, 1848.


6 For discussions of these issues, see, for example (listed in chronological order), Alma Lutz, Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (New York: John Day, 1940); Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle; Gerda Lerner, The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Ross Evans Paulson, Women's Suffrage and Prohibition: A Comparative Study of Equality and Social Control (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1973); Keith Melder, Beginnings of Sisterhood:

7 Eighty Years, chapter 2, deals with this period of Stanton's life. For major biographies of Stanton's life, see Lutz, Created Equal; Banner, Stanton; and Griffiths, In Her Own Right.

8 Stanton, Eighty Years, 82.

9 Ibid., 83; Minutes of Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, May 12-15, 1840, in Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library; Liberator subscription list, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library. I have been influenced in this analysis by Elisabeth Griffith's use of social learning theory in In Her Own Right.

10 Stanton, Eighty Years, 147. Stanton's last living child, Gerrit, had been born in September 1845; her next child, Theodore, would arrive on February 10, 1851. In a letter that may have been written shortly before Theodore's birth, Stanton would write to Abby Kelley Foster, welcoming her to Seneca Falls for an abolitionist lecture. Stanton herself would not be able to go to the meeting, she wrote, "in consequence of a kind of biennial clumsiness to which I have been subject many years." Stanton to Abby Kelley Foster, Sunday, January 12, 1851 (?), Abby Kelley Foster Papers, Worcester Historical Society. Stanton dated this letter to Abby Kelley Foster as Sunday, 12 o'clock Foster's reply to her is clearly dated, however, and January 12, 1851, is the only Sunday this could have been in the 1850s. The date is therefore reasonably firm, but it was not on Stanton's original letter.

11 Data on residence comes primarily from the 1850 federal census. There are problems with linkage. If anyone listed in the 1850 census in Seneca Falls or Waterloo had the same name as one of the signers, I assumed she or he was the same person. In several cases (Elizabeth Smith and Sarah Sisson, for example), more than one local person bore that name. In these instances, I counted those people as living in Seneca Falls or Waterloo but did not use further data about them. I then used the index to the 1850 census for New York State (New York 1850 Census Index, Ronald Vern Jackson and Gary Ronald Teeples, eds., [Bountiful, Utah: Accelerated Indexing Systems, Inc., 1977]) to try to identify names of signers from outside the immediate area. Since this index does not include names of married women living with their spouses, it may well have omitted some of these signers. Many of the unidentified signers may also have died, moved, or married

The following brief analysis is based on preliminary results of a detailed statistical study, now under way, of all the residents of Seneca Falls and Waterloo in 1850, comparing the signers of the Declaration of Sentiments with the non-signers in these two townships.

People signed the declaration in two groups, female and male, so we know the sex of the signers, even if no other information is available. The Report of the Woman's Rights Convention suggests that "the propriety of obtaining the signatures of men to the Declaration was discussed in an animated manner: a vote in favor was given; but concluding that the final decision would be the legitimate business of the next day, it was referred." 3-4. No further mention of this appeared in the minutes for the second day, but Lucretia Mott did introduce a resolution on the evening of the second day, "That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women . . ." (p. 12). Stanton believed "that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation."


Seneca Falls had the youngest average age, with 37.5; Waterloo had the oldest, with 41.1. In Seneca Falls, female and male signers were virtually the same age (37 mean age for women, 37.9 mean age for men). In Waterloo and central New York, however, male signers were, on the average, six years or more older than women signers (46.3 vs. 38.7 in Waterloo and 41 vs 35.4 in central New York). Source: [U.S. Census for 1850].

The sixteen signers about whom we have no reliable information may, of course, have been either black or foreign born. Seneca Falls had only twenty-four black residents in 1850 (.5% of the population), and Waterloo had sixty-one (1.7%). Of the 1,473 households in Seneca Falls in 1850, 196 of them (13.3%) were headed by Irish-born residents. Source: [U.S. Census for 1850].

Fifty-five signers' families appeared in the 1850 census. Average value of real estate for these families was $3,720. But these figures obscure considerable variation, both from family to family and from place to place. Overall, almost half (47.3%) of the signers' families held no property at all in 1850, varying from 64.3% in Waterloo to 59.3% in Seneca Falls to 7.1% elsewhere in central New York. Four families, in contrast, owned more than $15,000 of real estate. Those families of signers who owned more than $15,000 worth of property included the Hunts from Waterloo ($40,000), the father of S. D. Tillman, from Seneca Falls ($25,000), Martha Wright's family in Auburn ($20,000), and the family with whom Charlotte Woodward lived in DeWitt ($15,000). For consistency, I have used 1850 census data throughout this discussion. Censuses are often unreliable, however, in their reports of real estate owned. This seems especially true for Seneca Falls in 1850. Comparable data from the 1851 tax assessment for Seneca Falls yield what is probably a more accurate conclusion. In 1851, the mean amount of real property
owned by the 777 nonsigning families in Seneca Falls was $1,236, not far from the $1,117 mean in 1850. Signers' families (not including Jacob P. Chamberlain, with $23,400 worth of property) averaged $2,371, almost three times the mean wealth of signers' families reported in 1850. In addition, the values I have used apply to families rather than to individuals. In some cases, signers were sons, daughters, or workers in these families. It is unclear whether the value of real estate owned by the head of household accurately reflects the expectations of the signers themselves.

17 Information about occupations comes primarily from the 1850 census. For our purposes, this census has a major defect: it did not list occupations for women. Although Justin Williams was the only identified textile factory worker, several other signers were involved (or would become involved) in textile manufacture, either as investors or as owners. These included Charles Hoskins and Jacob Chamberlain (Seneca Falls), Richard P. Hunt (Waterloo), and the husbands of Mary H. Hallowell (Rochester) and Elizabeth Leslie (Seneca County). Some of the women signers may also have been textile workers.


19 At least 47 percent of the signers (and perhaps as many as 62.7%) attended with at least one other family member. Sources: U.S. Census for 1850 and family genealogies.

20 Census takers recorded family members household by household, implying that families consisted primarily of nuclear families with male "heads." Genealogies and family papers, however, reveal the strong ties that married women (and men) retained with their birth families, in spite of name changes and moves to different houses. Married couples included Mary Ann and Thomas McClintock, George and Margaret Pryor, and Jane and Richard P. Hunt (all from Waterloo); Henry W. and Malvina Seymour and Elisha and Eunice Foote (from Seneca Falls); and James and Lucretia Mott (from Philadelphia).

21 Karen Sachs, in Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), has argued that societies that promote strong ties between brothers and sisters also tend to have a relatively high status for women.


23 Information on Bascom comes from many sources, including scattered copies of The Memorialist, a legal reform paper published by Bascom in Seneca Falls, University of Rochester; Bascom, et al, to Abby Kelley, August 1843, in Abby
Kelley Foster papers, American Antiquarian Society; Water Bucket, February 25, 1842; Stephen Burritt, "Early History," Seneca Falls Reveille, November 12, 1875.

24 Martha Wright to Lucretia Mott, March 11, 1841, in Garrison Papers, Smith College.


26 For examples of the debate, see Nathaniel H. Carter and William L. Stone, Reports of the Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of 1821 (Albany: E. and E. Hosford, 1821), 181, 190, 191, 248-49, 278. These ideas occurred to more than one person. One Syracuse editor, although he ignored the question of race, did point out the irony of giving the vote to white males, whether or not they owned property, while denying the vote to women. In poetic form, William Ray asked a pointed question: "That Ev'ry one must have a vote, / Who does not wear a petticoat, / Is generally admitted; / But why should women be denied, / And have their tongues completely tied, / For party broils well fitted." Poems, on Various Subjects, Religious, Moral, Sentimental and Humorous (Auburn: V.F. Doubleday, 1821), 174-176. I am indebted to Richard Wright of the Onondaga Historical Association for finding this source.

27 Basch, In the Eyes of the Law, 115-119.

28 Lecture Delivered Before the Ogdensburg Lyceum on the Political Rights of Women (Ogdensburg, New York: Tyler and James, 1837). This may have been delivered by Democratic politician and Judge John Fine. Many thanks to the curator of the Seward home in Auburn, New York, who let me use Frances Seward's personal copy of this volume. The question continued to bother Americans, including those outside New York State, in the 1830s. Angelina Grimke, for example, came right to the point in her Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838): "Are we aliens because we are women?" she asked. "Are we bereft of citizenship because we are the mothers, wives, and daughters of a mighty people?" (19). Many thoughtful people answered "no." Among them was Abraham Lincoln. Running for the Illinois legislature, he stated his position clearly in the Sangamon Journal: "I go for all sharing the privileges of the government, who assist in bearing its burthens ... admitting all whites to the right of suffrage, who pay taxes or bear arms (by no means excluding females)." Abraham Lincoln to editor of the Sangamon Journal, June 13, 1836, in Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), I: 48.

29 Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., History of Woman Suffrage, I: 51-52; Seneca Observer quoted in the Seneca Falls Democrat, September 14, 1843.

30 Phyllis Field, Politics of Race in New York: The Struggle for Black Suffrage in the Civil War Era (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). Special thanks to Sally Roesch Wagner for sharing with me her insights on the connection between black suffrage and women's suffrage in the 1840s.


38 Seneca County Courier, June 13, 1848, and June 16, 1848.

39 Seneca County Courier, August 4, 1848.


41 I identified Free-Soil advocates as those who signed one or more of three Free-Soil lists in the Seneca County Courier (June 13, August 4, or August 18, 1848).


Thomas McClintock and Rhoda DeGarmo; *New York Tribune*, June 16, 1855; and minutes of annual meetings of the Waterloo Progressive Friends, 1849-61. See also Christopher Densmore, "Bibliography and Union List of Society of Friends (Quaker) Publications in Western New York, 1800-1900." Special thanks to Chris Densmore for his lively interest in these Friends and for his supportive dialogue. Thanks also to Carolyn Sefanco-Schill for her thoughtful paper on Congregational Friends at the 1980 Quaker History Conference.


45 In Genesee Yearly Meeting, the power of ministers and elders had been continually challenged for almost a decade. By 1843, the Michigan Quarterly Meeting (established in 1838 as part of Genesee Yearly Meeting) informed the Yearly Meeting that "this meeting considering the Meeting of Ministers and Elders no longer beneficial to us, have discontinued it, and we cannot feel a duty to resume that Meeting. And we are desirous of having the Discipline so revised as to make that order no longer obligatory upon us. The women's meeting concurring." *Minutes of Genesee Yearly Meeting for 1839-1843*, quoted in A. Day Bradley, "Progressive Friends," 96; Address 3-4.

46 Address, 2-3, 6; Daniel Anthony to Susan B. Anthony, July 16, 1848, in Anthony Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe.

47 Address, 2.

48 Daniel Anthony to Susan B. Anthony, July 16, 1848, Anthony Papers, Schlesinger Library.

49 Ibid.


54 Stanton, Eighty Years, 148.

55 Ronald S. Burt, “Models of Network Structure,” Annual Review of Sociology 6 (1980): 91, footnote 8, identifies a broker as one who is “the only connection between two subgroups of actors.”


57 Herkimer Freeman, as reprinted in the Liberator, September 22, 1848; National Reformer, August 10, 1848, in Alma Lutz notes, Vassar College.