

# Women's History

**On July 19-20, 1848**, one of the most significant historic events for American women occurred at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York: the first women's rights convention. After two days of discussion and debate, the Declaration of Sentiments was released. This document is very closely modeled on its more famous sister, the Declaration of Independence. The first paragraphs of the two documents are identical, but a key difference can be found in the first sentence of the second paragraph. In what was probably considered heresy at the time, this sentence reads:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: 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; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. [emphasis added]*

The Declaration of Sentiments outlines a series of grievances that describe the rights that women were denied at the time. These grievances included the right to vote, the right to her own property – even the wages that she earned, any rights within a marriage, the right to the custody of children in case of a divorce, the right to pursue a wide variety of possible careers, and the right to an education.

Many women took up the challenge to fight to secure the rights described in the Declaration of Sentiments. This article focuses on three specific women: Emma Willard who fought for women's right to an education, Lucretia Mott who fought for women's suffrage, and Ernestine Rose who fought for women's rights to their own property.



In 1821, **Emma Willard** opened the Troy Female Seminary in New York. Next to last of seventeen children, she was encouraged by her father to acquire an education beyond that generally expected for a girl of her time, especially a farm girl. Willard's progress was so rapid (she taught herself geometry at age thirteen) that by the age of fifteen, she was teaching others. After she married, her husband's nephew came to live with them. As she watched his educational progress and the subjects he was studying, Willard saw even more clearly the educational deprivation of American women.

Willard opened the Middlebury Female Seminary in Vermont in 1814, demonstrating that women could teach and girls could learn classical and scientific subjects thought only appropriate for males to study. The school predated the first public high schools that were opened for girls in New York and Boston in 1826. The Troy School ultimately became one of the most influential schools for women in the United States. One of its most renowned graduates was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1895, the school was renamed the Emma Willard School and it is still in operation today.

Influential Quaker, abolitionist and women's rights pioneer, **Lucretia Mott** met Elizabeth Cady Stanton in London in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Convention. Although a delegate, Mott was denied her seat at that Convention because she was a woman. She and Stanton decided they would advocate for women's rights when they returned to the U.S. They were two of the primary organizers of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. Mott later said: "I grew up so thoroughly imbued with women's rights that it was





the most important question of my life from a very early day.” Her experience with women teachers being paid less than half of what men received impressed her with the “unequal condition of women” and made her resolve to claim the rights that she believed all people should have.

Mott and Stanton did not feel equal to the task of running the Seneca Falls Convention. Thus, James Mott, Lucretia’s husband, assumed that task. Two weeks after the Seneca Falls Convention, a second convention was held in Rochester, New York. From that time forward, Mott devoted much of her time and attention to



women’s rights. In 1866, she was named president at the first convention of the American Equal Rights Association (a women’s suffrage movement). For more than fifty years, she was one of the most consistently effective women to play a major role in social reforms. Mott seldom missed a woman’s rights or suffrage convention and almost always addressed the delegates at those conventions. She said “The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation because in the degradation of women the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source.”

Also in 1840, reformer and feminist **Ernestine Rose** began work on legislation to grant married women property rights. These efforts were conducted in conjunction with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Paulina Wright Davis. Although a bill finally passed in the New York legislature in 1848, it did not contain key provisions advocated for by its supporters – those provisions took twelve more years to achieve.

Born in Poland, Rose said that she was a rebel by age five. One of the most significant things that she rebelled against was the notion that women were inferior to men. This was commonly taught in schools for young men at the time. Rose immigrated to the U.S. in 1836. For over two decades, she campaigned tirelessly for women’s rights. Although she was not present at Seneca Falls, she did attend the 1850 national women’s rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts where she introduced a resolution calling for “political, legal and social equality with men.”

Between 1850 and 1870, Rose lectured in more than twenty states, addressing legislative bodies, and attending most national and state women's rights conventions. Her lectures interwove the issues of antislavery, temperance, and freedom of thought with women's rights. She worked with and had the strong support of Susan B. Anthony, among others. Rose was one of the leading women orators of the day; she was sometimes called "The Queen of the Platform."

Emma Willard, Lucretia Mott, and Ernestine Rose certainly demonstrate that all "men and women are created equal." We are indebted to them for leading the way to secure the rights that women in the U.S. enjoy today.



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