

A Movement Without a Face: Anonymity and the Push for Women's Rights in 1800s America

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Abstract

Despite the plethora of research compiled regarding the beginning of the women's rights movement in America in the mid-1800s, only a small number of historians have looked beyond the convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Although this convention brought the women's movement into the limelight for the first time, strides were being made in the decades prior. This study sheds light on the 20 years prior to the convention and the legal and social advances that had been made in regards to women's rights within marriage and society as a whole. Using newspapers and letters from the time, as well as secondary historical sources, my research details the hard work of lone liberators prior to the movement gaining a face in 1848.

“The rights of men, and the rights of women...May the former never be infringed, nor the latter curtailed.”¹ This toast, spoken by men in the years following the Revolution, reveals an air of optimism regarding gender equality. With hearts full of new-found nationalism and relief over victory in the Revolution, Americans of both genders were willing to cooperate with one another in the hopes of bettering the nation. However, after the dust had settled and normalcy resumed, the optimism that had once brought men and women together and inspired toasts throughout the country was now fleeting. Women began the decade with the hopes of advancing their status, having participated informally in the Revolution. Men, having just set in stone the new rules for the country, were eager to take their places in government and have women run the home front. While men struggled for normalcy and a sense of equilibrium, some women hoped to take advantage of the temporary chaos and break the ties that had bound them for so long. It was in the early 1800s, in the midst of the nation’s fresh start, that the women’s rights movement in America gained its steam. Using anonymously written newspaper articles, group meeting synopses, court hearings, and secondary sources, this research focuses on the 20 years prior to Seneca Falls and provides a glimpse of a movement gaining steam in these decades.

The turn of the nineteenth century ushered in a new age of industrialization and a new sense of independence for women. Industrialization brought women from their sphere of the home into the gritty factory scene. While employment had the potential to liberate women from traditional gender roles, coverture laws of the time prevented the income from going into the pocketbook of its rightful owners. Under coverture laws, women and men became one when they married and all assets and legal power went to the husband. As the century progressed, the coverture laws began to ease. The 1830s saw the passage of the first Married Women’s Property Law, the pioneer issue of *Liberator*, and the foundation of the Female Anti-Slavery Society. The following decade began with women being barred from the Anti-Slavery Convention in London but ended with the women’s rights convention in Seneca

Falls, New York, which many consider the beginning of the women's rights movement in America.

The conference in Seneca Falls often is deemed the beginning of the women's rights movement in America. *Women's Rights Emerges from the Anti-Slavery Movement in 1830-1870* has a chapter titled, "An Independent Women's Rights Movement is Born, 1840-1858." This book, like many others, puts all of the force behind the movement into the context of the 1840s. The difference between the 1848 convention and the decades prior lies in the organization of its participants. While the women who gathered in Seneca Falls had formed a semi-cohesive movement, women prior to this convention were acting in relatively local spheres, rather than on a national or international level. This is not to say that they did not empathize with the other women in similar situations; pre-Seneca Falls activists were simply lacking vocal leaders such as Lucretia Mott and the Grimke sisters, who would be seen in later decades. Despite their lack of national organization, pre-women's movement activists still fought for the cause and made substantial gains. Newspapers from the time show the change in public opinion regarding women's participation in the social sphere, from defiance of coverture to women-only organizations to collaborative efforts in the fight against slavery and for temperance. Prior to Seneca Falls, local court cases and anonymously written newspaper articles show support from average Americans, starting a grass roots movement supporting greater rights for women.

Other historians have tackled the issue of exactly when the women's rights movement in America started. Rosemarie Zagari, author of "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," believes that the movement started much earlier, "in the wake of the American Revolution and...after the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*"² in 1792. The success of Wollstonecraft's book translated into "discussions of women's rights long before there was an organized movement to mobilize their sentiments."³ The publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* introduced new terminology, such as "women's rights," that the American public could now use to discuss women. Although Wollstonecraft's book finally gave the American public the proper terminology, coverture laws were still too deeply embedded in American culture to spark the creation

of a full-fledged movement. Zagari points out that women even had the right to vote in New Jersey up through 1807 but “women apparently voiced no public protests”⁴ when their voting abilities were stripped from them in that state. It wasn’t until decades later, when the yoke of coverture began to slip, that American women finally reached the point of no return, when popular opinion began to sway in their favor and women’s public speaking was met with slightly less indignation.

The nineteenth century started out, like the century before, with laws of coverture, including property and income rights that made women subordinate to their husbands. Under coverture, women could not own property, participate in the legal realm such as contracts, or sue or be sued. *Feme soles*, or single females, still retained the same property rights as men, but in most cases lacked the voting, jury, and military rights men had. If these single women married, they became *feme covert*s, or “covered women,” and their rights passed to their husbands, who now held all of the legal rights for the family. Due to social stratification at the time, coverture laws only applied to middle class white women. Lower class women frequently entered into marriages that were not concerned with “his and hers” property, as there was not enough property to go around. Women in these marriages frequently were employed, either as domestic workers or factories, out of necessity, not out of a sense of female-entitlement. In the case of married middle class women, court cases such as *Cole v. Van Riper* stated, “It is simply impossible that a woman should be able to control and enjoy her property as if she were sole, without practically leaving her at liberty to annul the marriage.”⁵ Men within the government worried that if women were given the liberty of property rights and the ability to take possession of their own income, they would ruin the institution of marriage and chaos would erupt. According to Hendrik Hartog, “...to recognize a wife’s capacity to represent herself was to imagine the end of marriage.”⁶ Without economic dependence on their husbands, what incentive would women have to stay?

Participation in the employment sector was met with similar uneasiness. Again, men feared that if women were working in factories or as domestic servants, their work within the domestic sphere

would suffer and this would reflect badly upon their husbands. Representing a common view of the day, one man noted, “the two sexes are constructed and intended for different purposes. Man may enter a woman’s and a woman man’s, but ‘revolting of the soul would attend this violence to nature; this abuse of physical and intellectual energy; while the beauty of social order would be defaced and the fountains of earth’s felicity broken up.’”⁷ Some saw the separate spheres as a religious notion, others as a social responsibility, and finally, some saw the women’s sphere as a physical necessity. *The Southern Literary Messenger*, a Virginia-based periodical, stated in 1835 that women could never be physicians, lawyers, or statesmen because “to succeed at all, she would be obliged to desert the station and defeat the ends for which nature intended her.”⁸ This argument synthesizes all basic arguments in favor of separate spheres: if women are not in the home, not only are they neglecting their motherly duties, they will also be physically incapable of doing much else. The separate spheres mentality was the status quo for gender roles, and the defiance of it when women entered the labor force made many uneasy. *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, one of the most widely circulated magazines for women at the time, popularized the term “Cult of Domesticity” to refer to this widely held belief.⁹

Within the notion of separate spheres, women and men were expected to have certain characteristics representative of their genders. Just as working outside the home and receiving a higher education were deemed “manly,” emotions, sentiments, and actions also had a gender. Men were materialistic, aggressive, vulgar, hard, and rational.¹⁰ Women, on the other hand, were supposed to be moral and stable and provide a place of serenity for their husbands, so men could have a temporary break from the insanity of the cruel, dirty, and busy masculine world. As for aspirations in life, “Men have a thousand objectives in life—the professions, glory, ambition, the arts, authorship, advancement, and money getting...”¹¹ Women’s aspirations consisted of providing a warm home full of leisure for their husbands and families. If she “succeed not in the one sole hope of her hazardous career, she is utterly lost to all the purposes of exertion of happiness, the past has been all thrown away, and the future presents nothing but cheerless desolation.”¹² This outlook of doom and gloom was the result of

an ingrained notion of separate spheres that dictated a lifestyle of servitude for women and pressure to succeed as mothers and wives. With the separate spheres mentality so pervasive in society, women felt as though their only hope to succeed was in their career as mothers. If they should fail, not only would society stigmatize them as failures, but their inability would carry on with them into the desolate future.

According to the *Independent Statesman*, love carried similar standards based on gender. “Love is only a luxury to men, but it may be termed a necessity to women, both by the constitution of society and the decrees of nature, for she has endowed them with superior susceptibility and overflowing affections, which, if they be not provided with a vent, perpetually corrode and gnaw at the heart. And what are her feelings and chances in this fearful lottery? A constant sense of degradation, in being compelled to make her whole life a game, a maneuver, a speculation; while she is haunted with the fear and shame of ultimate failure.”¹³ For men, love was optional. Since they had incomes but few expenditures while single, a wife was not a necessity. Women, on the other hand, earned little to no income, forcing them to be dependent on a male breadwinner. This, plus the societal expectation of marriage at a young age, forced women into marriage with the weight of the world on their shoulders. The author of this article, though his or her gender is unknown, has much to say regarding societal expectations for women versus men. Despite a lack of outward disapproval, woven into each sentence is a warning. Verbs such as “corrode” and “gnaw” foretell consequences for women if they did not properly maintain their households or sufficiently provide comforting homes for their husbands.

In the 1820s, men were still the sole authority regarding property rights. Although many felt that the nineteenth century was an “age of innovation; in which all the received notions of justice and government are to be supplanted,” a bill was being introduced in Georgia in 1827 that would “enable the husband, under any circumstances, to dispose of his real estate without consent of his wife, as far as regards the right of dower or thirds.”¹⁴ Dowers, or morning gifts, traditionally could not be touched by the husband, as they were intended to provide for the wife should she outlive the husband. Since the laws of coverture gave all property and possessions the woman had prior to marriage to the husband,

dowers were “intended as a kind of equivalent for those vested rights which the husband received in virtue of his marriage. Indeed, without the right of dower, the wife will be left without the least guaranty against the profligacy of the husband....”¹⁵ Although a lack of property rights for women was customary in this time period, this Georgian law hoped to take away further rights, including her security in widowhood and her right to one-third of her husband’s real estate. Even though this law had nothing to do with the women of Maryland, the author of the article in the *Baltimore Chronicle*, the original source, felt that the law was a “contagion [that] may be wafted within our borders, and we shall be obliged to use a curative, instead of a preventative.”¹⁶ Sympathetic reporters worried that the new anti-property rights act would spread like a virus and would need to be dealt with as such.

Other states “were accepting the idea that a woman should be given the legal ability to support herself, particularly if her husband were a debtor.”¹⁷ These supportive states and their decision in the 1820s began the slow movement toward liberation. Although some states’ ideologies reflected past notions of gender divisions and separate spheres, public opinion was beginning to show sympathy for women in loveless marriages that left them prey to reckless husbands. Several court cases ruled in favor of women having separate spheres, provided it did not throw off the power balance or threaten the unity of marriage. In New York, the court case of *Kenny v. Udall and Kenny* ruled that due to the “dishonest behavior of her husband,” Mrs. Kenny’s property should be placed in a separate estate so as to protect her.¹⁸ Regulations on wills and inheritance of property were slowly becoming more lax and allowing inheritance for women or with the help of appointed trustees. Courts began to rule in favor of women who were forced into unfortunate circumstances by debt-prone husbands, and then were left with little money. Women’s loss of property due to coverture made courts feel sympathetic to women and more apt to grant them settlements.

This new tide of sympathy left women with more control over property and less susceptibility to the whims of a drunken husband. Lending a helping hand to women’s property rights was the temperance movement which gained steam alongside the new waves of religious fervor in the early

1800s. Both men and women were involved in the temperance movement and though they joined for different reasons, both helped to boost the movement and bring attention to the rampant alcoholism that was both morally and monetarily draining families. Thanks to the efforts of the temperance movement, alcohol consumption was reduced from five gallons annually per capita in 1830 to less than two gallons just ten years later.¹⁹

While American courts were dealing with the ownership of properties within marriage, the House of Commons in Great Britain was discussing the legality of women signing political petitions. *The Commercial Advertiser*, a newspaper based in New York, reported the story, followed by its own interpretation of the Speaker's actions. The Speaker of the House ruled that he saw no reason or law that would prevent women from signing petitions for the House. The *Advertiser* then added in brackets, “[It may be remembered that during the recess the Speaker married.]”²⁰ The author of this article clearly thought that the Speaker's recent marriage had left him susceptible to the whims of a woman, thereby altering his judgment in favor of women's rights. At the time this article was published, Britain was in the process of passing the Representation of the People Act. This act, which finally passed in 1832, stated blatantly that voting rights would go to males, making it legally binding that only men could have suffrage. This terminology ignited the fire that started the women's rights movement in Britain and gave hope to women in America just beginning to assemble.

Although women in the 1820s were slowly being allowed to keep money and possessions after the deaths of their husbands or in light of unfortunate circumstances, little changed regarding their own possessions during marriage until the next decade. In an article published in the *Norfolk Advertiser*, a Massachusetts-based newspaper, the author of an article titled “The Rights of Woman” questions why women are paid so little and why so few men help to resolve their predicament. “The world is a scene of violence, where every man scrambles for his share of plunder; but weak woman is constrained by her physical inferiority to stand apart and gaze hopelessly, with little to sustain her or her little ones, but the stray fragments that may fall in her way.”²¹ The article focuses on the toil of women and the double

standard that existed between male and female workers. “The widow may toil with superior assiduity and receive less than the tithes of the wages of man—and who strives for her? Is her labor less useful or necessary. [sic] By no means. Are her orphans any more ready [sic] or cheaply sustained than the children of the labourer [sic]? Of course they are not. Yet she is allowed to toil unnecessarily, and receives a pittance which, if quadrupled, would be spurned by a male labourer [sic] with spurn?”²² The article asserts that while women’s work is equally important and comparable to men’s, women are still only paid a fraction of a man’s wage. She is then expected to provide for the whole family with her low stipend from her husband and the pittance she earns, all while putting on a façade that the pittance is sufficient.

The author then questions why there is such a dichotomous nature between labor, representation, and gender. “But who, we ask again, who strikes for the lone widow? Who compassionates her wrongs and asserts her rights? Perhaps it may be asserted that women have no rights. Men are entitled to high wages, but women should not expect it! Men must not labor more than ten hours, but women may toil day and night! Might makes right, and the woman, being weak and unable to demand her fair share of the advantages that result from labor, must consent to be as she has been, the drudge and slave of those who prate about her beauty and their chivalry.”²³ This article says two important things regarding the view of women at the time. First, it shows that people are seriously acknowledging all of the work that women do. The author clearly believes that women’s work is of value and should receive adequate compensation. His or her argument is this: how can a woman sustain herself and her family if she is paid only a mere pittance and forced to rely on her husband who enjoys all freedoms and earns a sustainable wage? Secondly, the article makes it clear that sexism remains. Although the author believes that women are capable of doing work and running a household, he or she does not hesitate to repeatedly refer to women as weak. Within the article, the author uses “weak,” “lone,” and “in need of defending” to describe women. Rather than asserting the strengths of women, the article focuses on how men are needed to step in and help women to initiate their own fight for

rights. This article is both forward-thinking and stuck in sexism of the past. The reprinting of this article by other newspapers shows that the notion of weak women resonated throughout the United States.

The pre-women's rights movement had been evolving for a decade, but was missing a vocal, unwavering spokesperson. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, the outspoken abolitionist, formed his influential newspaper *Liberator*. During this time, abolitionist groups, some open to both men and women, began springing up throughout the country. Garrison encouraged women to become involved in both his movement and the women's rights movement. His belief in the involvement of women in both political movements shows that the spark had been ignited regarding women's participation.

Much like Garrison's intertwining of abolitionism and women's rights, during the nineteenth century social change groups would often become enmeshed with one another. The same women who were fighting for increased property rights also often fought for the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of alcohol. Many women, fed up with scrounging for money for food while their husbands spent late nights at the local bar, retaliated in a variety of ways, often with violence toward their husbands or through joining the temperance movement. Many social organizations gave women a voice that had previously been silenced. Unfortunately, while Garrison believed in the cohesiveness of these groups because "he appreciated the substantial impact that women's experiences, beliefs and work could have on public opinion, political issues, and the rehabilitation of nineteenth-century American culture," many disagreed.²⁴ The *New York Spectator* recounted the minutes of a New England Anti-Slavery Society meeting in which the participation of women was being discussed. Miss Kelley, one of the female attendees, argued that "the creator has as much right to put a soul into a female frame as into a male frame, and that the abolitionists should take the yoke off the heads of females, before they break the chain from the negro's heel."²⁵ Although Kelley participated in both the abolition and women's rights movements, she prioritized the rights of females. At the end of the article, the author predicts another split within the abolitionist movement, this time between those for and against the participation

and rights of women.

One year later, in 1839, the participation of women within the Society was still being debated. The argument by the opposition this time was that “they [women] neither enrolled their names as members, nor did they sign the Declaration of Sentiments; that such a claim had never been made or recognized in the society before; that for women to take as active part in such an assembly was contrary to the generally received roles of propriety...”²⁶ Members of the Society who supported the participation of women used the Constitution of the Society as evidence. According to their Constitution, the only requirements for membership were that the person “consent to the principles of the Constitution, ...contribute[s] to the funds of the society and is not a slaveholder.”²⁷ The supporters of women’s participation argued that because women fit all of the qualifications, they should be able to vote within the Society. But even many forward-thinking abolitionists did not see the wealth of information and experience that women could bring to the table.

Although some groups allowed women, many men still felt that women were too emotional to participate in politics. At the time, women’s voices in public extended only so far as speaking to other women or slaves, whom men considered to be at an equal or lower level than to the women themselves. Abby Kelley, the abolitionist and feminist mentioned previously, toured with Frederick Douglass, an African American who shared her anti-slavery and pro-women’s rights attitudes. Kelley took advantage of the rare opportunity to speak in public and kept the issue of women’s rights out of her speeches so as not to anger her audience. The Grimke sisters also spoke in public regarding the anti-slavery movement. While Kelley and Douglass spoke solely of the abolitionist movement while on tour, the Grimkes combined their views and encountered problems. The Grimkes held the audience’s attention, but when the notion of equality for women was addressed, abolitionists in the audience grew restless and discontented. As Angelina Grimke said in a letter to Theodore Weld, a fellow abolitionist and her future husband,

You seem greatly alarmed at the idea of our advocating the *rights of woman*...These letters have not been the means of *arousing* the public attention to the subject of Womans rights, it was the Pastoral Letter which did the mischief. The ministers seemed panic struck at once and commenced a most violent attack upon us...*This letter* then roused the attention of the whole country to enquire what *right* we have to open our mouths for the dumb; the people were continually told “it is a *shame* for a *woman* to speak in the churches.” Paul suffered not a *woman* to *teach* but commanded *her* to be in silence.²⁸

Clergy were outraged by Grimke’s entrance into the public sphere. Her unwavering speech angered the clergy and abolitionists who thought that women should push for abolition but keep their feminist sentiments within the confines of feminist groups or, ideally, to themselves. Grimke grew angry toward the middle of her letter. Unlike Kelley, who was allowed to speak, Grimke had encountered men who told her that women were out of their sphere even when “we circulate petitions; out of our ‘appropriate sphere’ when we speak to women only; and out of them when we *sing* in the churches. Silence is *our* province, submission *our* duty.”²⁹ Grimke argued in the post-script of her letter that “We never mention women’s rights in our *lectures* except so far as is necessary to urge them to meet their responsibilities. We speak of their *responsibilities* and leave *them* to *infer* their *rights*.”³⁰ The Grimkes’ goal was to encourage women to acknowledge their lack of social rights and that the fight was their responsibility.

In the later half of the 1830s, while Garrison was publishing his newspaper and the Grimkes were sparking fury amongst fellow abolitionists, property rights laws began to make their way through the legal system. The first Married Women’s Property Act was passed in Mississippi in 1839. This pioneer act reflected previous concerns regarding women’s property being taken away because of their husbands’ debts. The Married Women’s Property Act protected women from having their property seized by creditors and gave them access to income gained from the property. This act was in the same vein as previous court cases, such as those in New York and Virginia, which had ruled in favor of dependent women. Despite these advances, the act still left men in charge of buying, selling, and managing any property, leaving much unchanged. The act protected women without granting them any rights that would detract from the rights of their husbands or other males.

The same year as the passage of the Mississippi Act, *The North American* copied an article from

The Bangor Whig. In the same spirit as the Married Women's Property Act, the staff at *The Bangor Whig* "advocate[d]...the propriety of extending to women the privilege of making proposals in preliminary matter pertaining to matrimonial engagements."³¹ While many of the Property Acts focused on women retaining property after marriage, the staff at *The Bangor Whig* was advocating rights for women prior to engaging in marriage. These rights would allow women to have more participation in marital arrangements, and women would have greater say in dowry, morning gifts, and life after the marriage had been initiated. When combined with the new rights gained in various property laws, women would have the opportunity to be more vocal and secure through every stage of marriage, from engagement to widowhood.

Mississippi's Act stood alone until 1848 when New York followed suit. Even though the Act did not pass until 1848, articles as early as 1837 anxiously discussed its introduction. News regarding the introduction of the Act was published in many newspapers, including *The Philanthropist*, *Newport Mercury*, *The Cleveland Messenger*, and *The Patriot and Democrat*.³² According to *The Patriot and Democrat*, the New York Property Act would work "for the promotion and preservation of the rights and property of married women!"³³ The first section of the act would give "...all estate, real and personal, belonging to a woman at the time of her marriage, who shall be married after the date of this law, and all the estate which she may afterwards acquire by inheritance, gift, bequest, or devise, shall continue vested in her after marriage; nor shall such estate, or the rents or process of it insure to the husband during the life of the wife, without her consent."³⁴ The proposed version of the New York Married Women's Property Act went above and beyond the act in Mississippi. The Married Women's Property Act from Mississippi was mainly focused on slaveholding, a vital part of Southern economy, whereas the proposed act from New York allotted additional freedoms to women. Not only were they allowed to retain all property from before the marriage, which normally would belong to the husband under coverture laws, they were also allowed to keep any property they acquired after the marriage.

The major difference between the Mississippi Act and the first section of the New York Act was

that in the proposed Act from New York men were not allowed to tamper with a woman's portion of the estate without her consent. The Mississippi Act still granted males full control over buying and selling rights of the property. According to the second section, the husband was "entitled to so much of his wife's property, at her death, as by the laws of the state the widow is now entitled to at the time of his demise—in other words, he shall have dower."³⁵ As seen in the previous Georgia law, dowers were originally to protect women in widowhood and insure their economic stability. The proposed New York Act would have enacted semi-equality regarding the loss of a spouse. Unlike the law in Georgia, this Act did not attempt to take the dower away from women. The final section of the proposed Act "prohibits married women from making conveyance to their husbands of any real or personal estate, except the income thereof, without the permission of the Chancellor."³⁶ This section prohibited women from handing their property over to their husbands, most likely to protect women from unfair deals or debtors.

While many of the newspapers simply reported the sections of the Property Act that had been introduced, *The Philanthropist* took a more opinionated stance on the issue. Reprinted from *The Cleveland Messenger*, the article used religion to support the advancement of women's rights, similar to Abby Kelley's argument. "Though christianity [sic] has done much for the female sex, and restored them many lost rights and privileges, still it is a humiliating fact that in christian [sic] lands, woman has far less freedom than justice and humanity demands."³⁷ The author of "Rights of Women" was clearly distressed that so little had changed for women even in civilized nations. According to the unnamed author, the new Act "commends itself to the common sense of and conscience of every enlightened citizen who will examine it."³⁸ The author understands that men and women supposedly become one flesh when they are married, but does not believe that this should "not in any such sense as to destroy the personal identity of each...."³⁹ The author of "Rights of Women" believed that laws should ensure the protection of all women's property and that the division of responsibilities by sex needed to end. It was the hope of *The Cleveland Messenger* that "such a law...will soon be enacted in every state in the

Union, and in every nation on Earth.”⁴⁰ Although this was a lofty goal, the tide had been gradually turning towards women’s legal emancipation over the past decade, making these attitudes popular and their aims plausible.

Amidst the buzz of the newly proposed New York Property Act, a future forerunner in the fight for women’s rights in America was gaining momentum. Lucretia Mott, a Hicksite Quaker born in Massachusetts, began her political participation as a part of the abolition movement. After being denied entrance into other anti-slavery societies due to gender, Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Mott became friends with William Lloyd Garrison in the early 1830s, as Garrison was gaining fame for his organizations and newspaper. Their friendship would propel her to the forefront of the movement and make both of their names synonymous with radical change. Years later, Mott would challenge the sexism of abolitionist societies. After facing rejection and disappointment, Mott and others felt it was time for women to have their own convention, separate from the drama of the abolitionist movement.

In May 1837, Mott, along with 200 other women, helped organize the first female anti-slavery convention in New York. This so-called National Petticoat Convention was the topic of conversation in numerous newspapers. In an article published two months after the event, *The Commercial Advertiser* applauded the efforts of the women involved. The *Advertiser* was also impressed with the spread of women’s rights movements across the globe. “Europe is getting on right ground upon the subject. England has changed her gouty old king for a queen. Portugal has done the same; and Spain would follow the example, were it not for that obstinate old rusty-fusty, Don Carlos.”⁴¹ In 1837, Queen Victoria was crowned and so began the Victorian Era in British history, marking female rule across the Atlantic. *The Commercial Advertiser* supported the efforts abroad and was happy to see this change in attitude being reflected in the United States.

It was in the late 1830s that women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to make their presence known throughout the United States. Not surprisingly, many men opposed their

participation within the public sphere and their activity within the movements. Unfortunately for the men, who opposed the participation, Mott, Stanton, and Kelley refused to be silenced by sexism. The 1840s ushered in a new decade that would see even greater gains in the domain of women's rights. New York finally passed its Married Women's Property Act, and in 1848 a conference was held in Seneca Falls, New York, that gathered hundreds of women and their supporters to bring suffrage and equality for women to be "laid before the public."⁴² Seneca Falls resulted in the culmination of efforts known as the Declaration of Sentiments, a woman-centered version of the Declaration of Independence devised by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Naturally, the convention was met with a "torrent of sarcasm and ridicule from the press and pulpit."⁴³ Seneca Falls, for the first time in the history of the movement, added the cohesiveness of a large group to the push for liberation. The group now had a solid following with one goal. Prior conventions had to deal with rifts between members and leaders as well as opposition between temperance, abolitionism, and women's rights. Starting in 1840, the movement gained the momentum it needed thanks to vocal leaders that it had been lacking. The widespread recognition that was gained at Seneca Falls led many to believe that the women's rights movement in America began in 1848.

Rosemarie Zagarri, in her book *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, states that, "The period between the American Revolution and the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 appears to be nothing more than a frustrating hiatus in the development of women's rights."⁴⁴ Although Zagarri too agrees that women were actively seeking rights prior to 1848, she argues that women's ability to participate in the public sphere ended in the 1820s. The Revolution did open doors for women, allowing them to informally participate in the political scene; however, this foothold was lost shortly thereafter, as was seen in New Jersey. It was not until decades later, in the 20 years prior to the convention, that women began a larger push for a movement. These women, though nameless and unassembled, fought for the passage of laws and the lifting of coverture. The women of the late eighteenth century, those mentioned in Zagarri's article, were still too deeply embedded in a

society not ready for women's equality. According to Nancy F. Cott, author of *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, the coverture system gave women one domain that they could feel proud of, the home, and as a result some sense of power. The quality of their work within the home could boost their esteem and lead to some comfort within the constraints of coverture.⁴⁵ Thirty years later, however, coverture laws had begun to ease and women found it less difficult to shake off the chains that bound them and finally became vocal in their quest for equal rights.

When the 1800s started, women were not present in the workplace or the political sphere, marriage transferred a woman's possessions from her father to husband, and property rights for women were almost non-existent. From the turn of the century until the convention in Seneca Falls, women made remarkable gains in almost every category. Mississippi women saw the passage of a property act almost a decade before any state in the North granted women such rights. Court cases in New York and Virginia granted women protection from debt-prone husbands, allowing them more financial security. Of course, in the latter half of the 1830s famous abolitionists and women's rights proponents like William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott came on the scene. However, without the help of nameless women's earlier fights for legal and social equality, the forward-thinking attitudes of people like Garrison and Mott would never have propelled the movement in the way that it did. The convention in Seneca Falls would not have been plausible if it weren't for the social gains that resulted in the collectivity of the movement.

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, the movement grew as the yoke of separate spheres was slowly removed from women's necks. This decay of the separate spheres mentality allowed women to come out of hiding and profess their desire for independence and enabled future proponents to come out and speak in favor of the movement, creating the propulsion that made Seneca Falls possible. The turning tide of public opinion, as vocalized through local newspapers, created an atmosphere welcoming enough to draw women out into the open and the issue to the headlines. The loosening of social restraints allowed women to leave the private domain and make their way into the

political sphere, one organization at a time. This new freedom fostered the collectivity of men and women that resulted in Seneca Falls which, in the end, was the catalyst the movement needed to succeed.

Notes

1. Rosemarie Zagari, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 203.
2. *Ibid.*, 203.
3. *Ibid.*, 210.
4. *Ibid.*, 206.
5. BZ Khan, "Married Women's Property Laws and Female Commercial Activity: Evidence from United States Patent Records 1790–1895," *Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996): 360.
6. Hendrik Hartog, *Man and wife in America: a history*, (USA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000), 118.
7. Cynthia Kinnard, *Antifeminism in American Thought: An Annotated Bibliography* (Massachusetts: GK Hall, 1986), 5.
8. Cynthia Kinnard, *Antifeminism in American Thought: An Annotated Bibliography*, 5.
9. Catherine Lavender, "True Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity," teaching slides for History/Women's Studies, accessed August 3, 2011, <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/286/08.pdf>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "From the New Monthly Magazine [Illegible] of Women—Chances of Female Happiness" *Independent Statesman*, January 2, 1823, 4.
12. *Ibid.*, 4.
13. *Ibid.*, 4.
14. "Female Rights," *Hallowell Gazette*, January 17, 1827, 1.
15. *Ibid.*, 1.
16. *Ibid.*, 1.
17. Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of Northern Carolina Press, 1986), 91.
18. *Ibid.*, 91.
19. "American Alcohol Consumption," accessed August 3, 2011, <http://dui.com/dui-library/studies/research/colonial-america>.
20. "Rights of Women," *Commercial Advertiser*, April 25, 1829, 2.
21. "The Rights of Woman," *Norfolk Advertiser*, December 17, 1836, 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 1.
23. *Ibid.*, 1.
24. James Baker Stewart. *William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 45.
25. "Rights of Women," *Spectator*, June 14, 1838, 3.
26. "The Woman Question," *Liberator*, May 31, 1839, 87.
27. *Ibid.*, 87.
28. Angelina Grimke, Letter to Theodore Weld in J.G. Whittier, August 20, 1837.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. "Rights of Women," *The Bangor Whig*, in *The North American*, December 5, 1839, 2.

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32. Quoted in *The Philanthropist*, *Newport Mercury*, *The Cleveland Messenger*, and *The Patriot and Democrat*, 1837.
 33. "Rights of Married Women," *The Patriot and Democrat*, April 8, 1837, 2.
 34. "Rights of Women," *Newport Mercury*, March 25, 1837, 2.
 35. *Ibid.*, 2.
 36. *Ibid.*, 2.
 37. "Rights of Women," *The Philanthropist*, June 30, 1837, 4.
 38. *Ibid.*, 4.
 39. *Ibid.*, 4.
 40. *Ibid.*, 4.
 41. "Rights of Women," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, July 28, 1837, 2.
 42. "The Seneca Falls Convention," accessed August 3, 2011, <http://www.npg.si.edu/col/seneca/senfalls1.htm>.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 3.
 45. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (Yale University: Yale University Press, 1997), 205.

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