

Women's Rights

National Historical Park
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FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and abolitionist lecturer, is remembered as one of the greatest leaders of the nineteenth century in the struggle against racial injustice. Douglass made it his life's work to remove the barriers of social segregation, economic exploitation, and lynch laws which kept the black community from the realization of

their rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness".

It is not commonly known that Frederick Douglass also worked for social justice for women, and was an active participant in the first Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in July, 1848.



FIRST WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION



Douglass was a close friend of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the conveners of the 1848 Convention. When the news of a meeting to address the status of women reached him at his home in nearby Rochester, New York, he determined that he would attend. He was motivated by more than his relationship with Elizabeth Cady Stanton. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Douglass and others recognized that the existence of injustice - the oppression of any individual - was wrong for one and all.

In preparation for the Seneca Falls Convention, Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met to discuss the issues of the upcoming meeting. They had conversed regularly since

their first meeting in Boston in 1843, and they would continue to meet and exchange ideas over the next half century of activism. For Douglass, these talks were an opportunity to better understand the ideas and goals of the women's rights movement. For Elizabeth Cady Stanton, talks with Douglass before the 1848 Convention helped shape her ideas on the women's movement and the most politically effective forms her activism could take. By 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was developing her own thesis that winning the right to vote was crucial to women's eventual liberation. Her talks with Douglass in the days before the Seneca Falls meeting helped her to develop arguments in support of the suffrage resolution which was included in

the Declaration of Sentiments. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton read the Declaration at the first Women's Rights Convention, the highly controversial suffrage proposal passed by a slim majority thanks to Stanton's efforts and Douglass' support. Douglass seconded her motion and in an eloquent speech, reiterated Elizabeth Cady Stanton's assertion "that the power to choose the rulers and make laws was the right by which all others could be secured." The suffrage resolution was ultimately included in the Convention's Declaration of Sentiments, the document which became the foundation for the women's movement following the gathering at Seneca Falls.

THE FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT



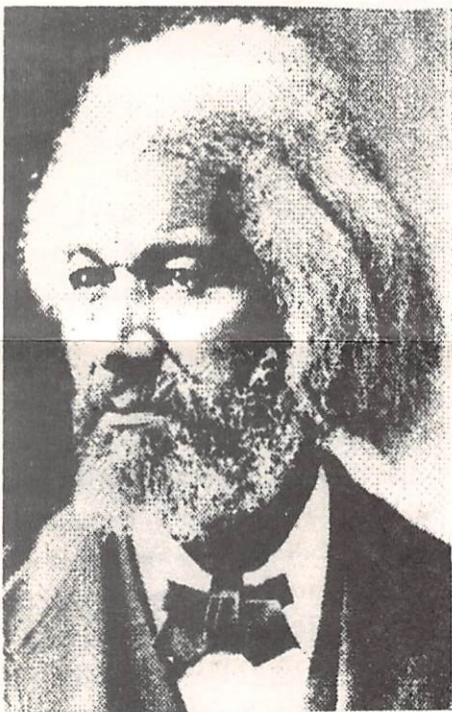
Many times in the next half century, Douglass shared the speakers platform with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women's rights activists. In the immediate post-Civil War years, however, problems developed within this alliance and within the women's rights movement itself. This was the result of the proposal and passage of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which intended to eliminate restrictions and barriers against black men exercising their right to vote. Women's rights advocates knew the Amendment, while allowing black

men to vote, would at the same time, constitutionally disenfranchise women. The women's rights activists first aimed their efforts at including men and women, black and white, in the Amendment, but when opposition to this proved insurmountable; Frederick Douglass, Lucy Stone, and others abandoned the women's right to enfranchisement to work solely for the cause of black men. Searching for allies and feeling abandoned by Frederick Douglass and abolitionists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and other like-minded leaders solicited support from the

democratic party. Some democrats, including James Brooks, Samuel Cox, and George Francis Train, were known as Copperheads, a group notorious for anti-black sentiments.

In the post-Civil War era, women's rights organizations as well as those aimed at ending racial injustice and violence became involved in the struggle for power between Republicans and Democrats at this historical junction. For the Democrats (and Train), the ally was women; for the Republicans, it was Douglass and the Freedmen.

DEDICATED TO LIBERATION



Frederick Douglass continued his commitment to the struggle for equal rights for women, once the black men's vote had been secured. In the last years of his life, he continued to give speeches at the women's rights conventions, where he shared platforms with Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and others. At those gatherings he would often speak of the shared oppression of black people, white women, and the poor, and of the need to work and grow together as a social movement while maintaining independence as organized political groups. And he spoke of Seneca Falls in 1848 and of a small group of individuals who came together to found a movement. Characteristically downplaying his own role, he gave highest praise to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and the other women, for the revolution in

thought and action they had begun. It was remarkable, he felt, that those women could see beyond lifetimes of social convention, of stifling laws and stifling relations, to break free of reactionary forms in the interests of liberty for each individual and justice for all. Douglass proudly remembered that he was there in Seneca Falls to witness this blossoming, but he was too modest in evaluating his own contribution. Born a slave, he died a great leader dedicated to the liberation of all who are oppressed. His legacy to the American people is his awareness of the effect of injustice in its many forms on all citizens of the nation. The lesson of his life is that all people of the United States share the responsibility to fight against the oppressive elements in our society and in ourselves.