

## Lucretia Mott

Lucretia Coffin Mott (1796-1880) was one of the most active and successful reformers of the 19th century. A devout Quaker, she attributed her courage and eloquence to divine inspiration. She believed that the divine was in every

human being, and that everyone was therefore equal, regardless of race, sex, or class. For Mott, the logical outgrowth of this belief was to devote her life to working for equality for all.



### Early Life



Lucretia Coffin grew up on Nantucket Island, off the coast of Cape Cod. Her sea captain father was often absent, but her mother, a successful storekeeper, provided a model of strength and self-reliance for her oldest daughter. Lucretia began school at the age of four and later attended the Nine Partners boarding school in Dutchess County, NY. An outstanding student, she joined the faculty after her graduation and met another young teacher, James Mott. They married in 1811

and set up housekeeping in Philadelphia.

Their marriage was quite egalitarian, in keeping with their Quaker beliefs. Their faith was central to their lives, and both took leadership roles in the local meeting. By 1821, Lucretia Mott, despite her youth, was chosen a minister by her congregation. Over the next 10 years, she became a well-known and respected lecturer as she travelled throughout the Northeast preaching on religious and social issues.

### Antislavery Leader

The direction of Mott's work was deeply affected by the growing controversy within the Quaker church over the issue of slavery. Some Quakers, including Mott, felt called to speak out in meetings against the injustice of human bondage; however, many conservative elders and ministers felt such discussions were inappropriate. In 1827, the liberal "Hicksites" broke away from the Orthodox Quaker church. The Hicksites believed it was their religious duty to protest slavery, but the Orthodox church dismissed them as heretics. After much inner turmoil, Mott joined the Hicksites and became more actively involved in the antislavery struggle.

#### AN AMERICAN WOMAN.



In 1833, Mott met with local abolitionist women - black and white - to organize the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society. The local white community was horrified by the idea of interracial organizations and publicly protested the women's group. The women, however, believed that blacks and whites meeting and working together was an important step in combatting racism, and they stood their ground. Led by Mott, the women circulated petitions and held annual fairs to raise money for the cause, in addition to educating others by their example of interracial friendship and cooperation.



## Advocate for Women's Rights

Mott was also at the center of another growing controversy: the role of women in the antislavery movement. In the 1830s, petitioning and fundraising were the only activities considered acceptable and proper for female reformers. Women were generally denied access to leadership positions in male-dominated antislavery societies and were discouraged from participating in public activities, such as addressing "promiscuous" (mixed male and female) audiences or serving as delegates to national conventions. Many female

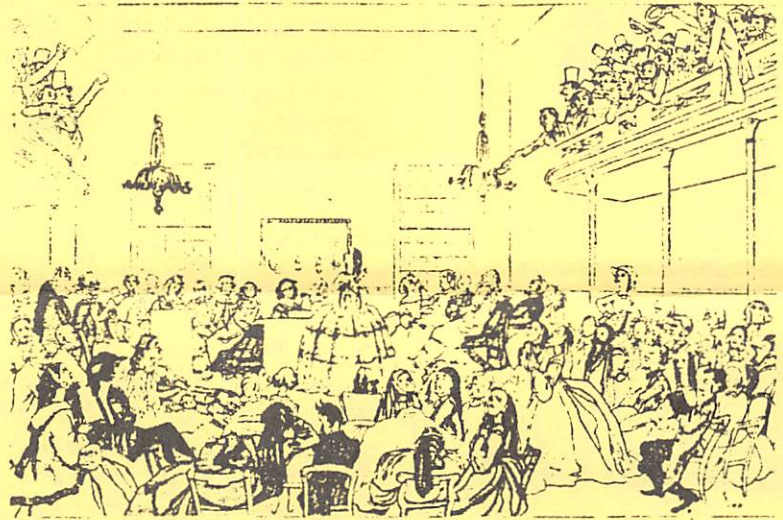
abolitionists, including Mott, resented these restrictions, arguing that the whole movement suffered when women were not allowed to participate fully. Some male abolitionists agreed, but others feared the "woman issue" would alienate mainstream voters from the cause.

These issues came to a head in 1840 at the World Antislavery Convention in London. Mott and seven other women attended as representatives of female antislavery societies, but the male delegates were divided over whether to

recognize the women as "legitimate" delegates. A heated debate ensued, and in the end the women were forced to sit in the visitors gallery and listen in silence to the convention proceedings. Seated with them was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who struck up a friendship with Mott. Both women were outraged by the exclusion of the female delegates. As they left arm in arm that afternoon, they decided to call their own convention to discuss women's rights when they returned to the United States.

## Seneca Falls and Beyond

Eight years passed before Mott and Stanton were able to act on that decision. In July 1848, Mott travelled to upstate New York for a Quaker Yearly Meeting and was invited to tea at the home of Jane Hunt, a Waterloo Hicksite Quaker. At that party, held on July 9, Mott and her old friend Cady Stanton, with Martha Coffin Wright, Jane Hunt and Mary Ann McClintock, planned the first woman's rights convention. The convention, held only ten days later at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, was attended by 300 people, many of them local Quakers and antislavery sympathizers.



*The woman's rights movement as seen by Harper's Weekly, 1859*

The Seneca Falls convention marked the beginning of an organized feminist movement, and Mott became an important leader and spokesperson for women's rights as well as antislavery. In 1866 she

became the first president of the American Equal Rights Association, an interracial group organized to work for the right to vote for both women and black men.

## Other Reform Work

As a believer in full human equality, Mott championed a wide variety of reform issues. She preached often about poverty and the plight of poor working people, especially women. A lifelong peace activist, Mott believed in non-violence and was opposed to the Civil War, even though many abolitionists believed it was the only way to end slavery. Mott was interested



in Indian rights as well and opposed white aggression against native tribes and their lands.

Mott challenged intolerance and prejudice throughout her life. She was never cowed by those who attacked her beliefs and never stopped working against injustice and for a better world. She continued her life's work until her death in 1880.