



The Wesleyan Chapel

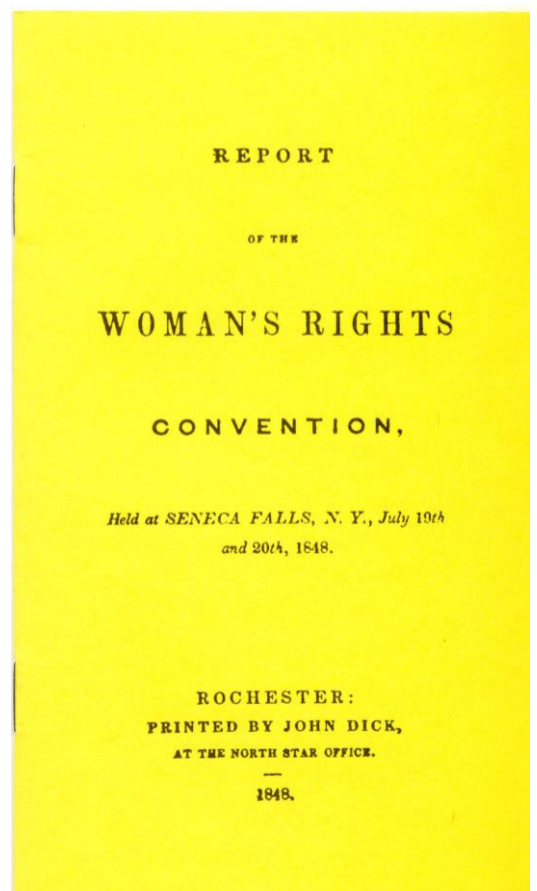


72 years after 'The Declaration of Independence' was signed, 300 people met at the Wesleyan Chapel to protest the laws and customs that discriminated against women. Here they signed a new document, 'The Declaration of Sentiments'. Both of these documents challenged the *status quo* and both of them were just the beginning of a years-long struggle for freedom. It would take another 72 years after the convention before women were given the right to vote. Like the movement, the chapel underwent many changes, but its significance as a cradle of liberty was not forgotten.

Origins

In 1843 a small group of reform-minded Seneca Falls residents declared they were forming a Wesleyan Methodist church. This followed a national trend that had begun several years earlier when antislavery members of the Methodist Episcopal Church decided to break away and organize a new church that condemned slavery. The Seneca Falls Wesleyan Methodists set to work building their new church, and by October 1843 the building was completed. An article about the church published in the *True Wesleyan* described its appearance: "[The Chapel is] of brick, 44 x 64, with a gallery on three sides, and is well finished, though, as it should be, it is plain."

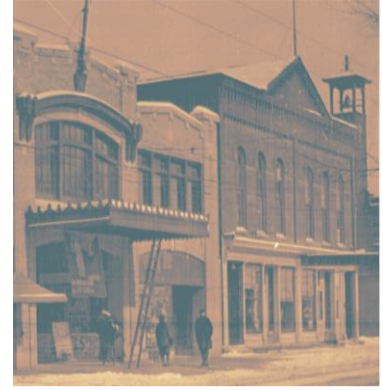
The spirit of reform that inspired the Seneca Falls First Woman's Rights Convention was already present in the early use of the chapel. Antoinette Brown, the first ordained female minister in America, spoke about the violence in Kansas Territory at the chapel in May 1855. Noted abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass also spoke in the chapel. During the turbulent period leading to the Civil War, the Wesleyan Chapel played a pivotal role in keeping the issue of slavery front-and-center in the village of Seneca Falls.



Minutes of the First Woman's Rights Convention held in the Wesleyan Chapel, July 19 and 20, 1848.

Transition

The year 1872 marked the beginning of the chapel's conversion from a place of worship to a series of businesses, almost symbolically at the time the women's rights movement splintered. After the Wesleyan Methodists moved into a new church on Fall Street, the chapel was transformed into Johnson Hall, a public auditorium where speeches, fairs, and performances were held. By the end of the nineteenth century the building's name had changed to the Johnson Opera House, and through the first half of the twentieth century it was used for a number of purposes, including furniture store, movie theater, car garage and repair shop, and laundromat.



Wesleyan Chapel around 1890 when it was used as an opera house.

Although the building underwent numerous renovations during this time, its connection to the women's rights movement was not forgotten. Harriot Stanton Blatch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's youngest daughter, returned in 1908 to place a commemorative plaque on the wall of the opera house, and celebrations held in 1915 and 1948 marked the 100th anniversary of Stanton's birthday and the Seneca Falls Convention, respectively. A marker was placed on the corner of Fall and Mynderse Streets in the 1930s to give silent testimony to the historic importance of the site. Despite many changes, the building continued to be associated with the women's rights movement.



The Seneca Falls Garage on the corner of Fall and Mynderse Streets, ca. 1920.

National Park

The 1960s and '70s witnessed a resurgence in women's rights activism. Renewed interest in the Seneca Falls Convention led to an effort to preserve the Wesleyan Chapel in recognition of its importance in American history.

In 1980 President Jimmy Carter signed legislation authorizing the establishment of Women's Rights National Historical Park, and in 1985 the National Park Service acquired the chapel and held a design competition to determine the chapel's preservation treatment. The winning architects, Ann Wills Marshall and Ray Kinoshita, created a monument incorporating material from the original building to commemorate the First Woman's Rights Convention.



Wesleyan Chapel, 2008.

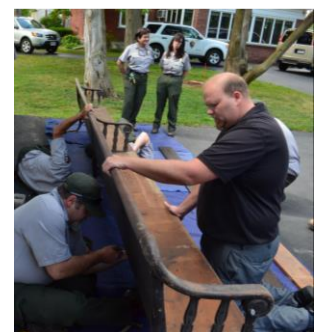
The Chapel Today

Beginning in 2009 the Wesleyan Chapel underwent another alteration, one that ensures that future generations can visit the site of America's second revolution for freedom. Weather-related damage to the historic fabric of the monument led the National Park Service to determine that the best course of action was to enclose the space and extend the roof over the entire structure. Because no period photographs of the original chapel exist, this design is considered a rehabilitation rather than a faithful re-creation. The new design allows for quiet contemplation and helps visitors connect with the site where the crusade for women's rights formally began.

The location of the seating that adorned the Wesleyan Chapel from its inception in 1848 is unknown. The pews inside the Wesleyan Chapel were constructed for the First Congregational Church of Seneca Falls, which split from the Wesleyan Methodists in 1869.



Wesleyan Chapel interior, Convention days 2016



Chapel Pews being assembled 2012.