

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: The Road to Seneca Falls

by

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed it was by a sense of right and duty that she overcame her diffidence to appear in public to address attendees of the first women's rights convention, in Seneca Falls, New York on July 19, 1848. Because of man's tyranny, "few can nerve themselves to meet the storm, so long has the chain been about her that she knows not there is a remedy" she told her audience that day.¹ It was a combination of unique and universal circumstances in the life of Cady Stanton that enabled her to nerve herself to meet the storm. Indeed, on that day, she created the storm by demanding women's suffrage. It was the first time anyone had dared.

Cady Stanton was uniquely equipped to challenge male domination of women. A woman of affluence and unorthodox upbringing, she had the best education money could buy for a female of the period. Exposure to harsh religious teachings and reformist ideas in her youth enabled her to cast off both religious and societal restraints. And, finally, marriage to a career reformer of small means and being mother to seven children allowed her to experience the burdens of women of lesser circumstance. Each of these factors contributed to putting Cady Stanton on the road to Seneca Falls.

Elizabeth Cady was born on November 12, 1815 in Johnstown, New York,² to a mother who could claim blood ties to Dutch aristocrats and a father who was a judge and state legislator.³ Margaret and Daniel Cady could afford to provide their family the best of everything. The Cady sisters grew up in a fully staffed mansion, freeing them from housework. They enjoyed their own horses, music lessons, holiday treats, and fine clothes. In other words, Cady Stanton grew up firmly entrenched in upper middle class society. This provided her a sense of place and a self-confidence that was rare among women at the time. It also enabled her to shrug off the restrictions that kept women in a subordinate position.

Sadness and tragedy also marred Cady Stanton's life and these shaped her character as much as her family's affluence. The Cadys had eleven children—six daughters and five sons. All of the sons but one, Eleazar, died in childhood. Eleazar, in Cady Stanton's words, "was a fine, manly fellow, the very apple of my father's eye." Two weeks after he graduated from Union College in 1826, Eleazar fell sick and died. He was twenty years old.

Having a son inherit the estate was of utmost importance in the early nineteenth century. The law forbade married women to inherit or hold property and the only way to insure that wealth remained under family control was to pass it to a son. Although he had five surviving daughters, Daniel Cady had no heir. Cady Stanton,

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who was eleven when her brother died, witnessed her father's grief. In an effort to console him and be consoled, she climbed onto his lap. He sighed, and according to Cady Stanton, said "Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!" In response she threw her arms around him and said, "I will try to be all my brother was." She later wrote, "while my father was kind to all of us, the one son filled a larger place in his affections and future plans than five daughters together."

This event was significant to Cady Stanton's development in two ways. Not only did it make clear to her that girls were deemed inferior to boys, but it precipitated a dramatic change in the Cady household. So keen was the desire to have a son that Margaret Cady, who was more than forty years old and had born no children for seven years, conceived and gave birth to a son the year following Eleazar's death. Named for his older brother, this son also died—before his first birthday. Exhausted physically and emotionally, Mrs. Cady withdrew from family life into invalidism.⁴

With both parents grieving, care of Cady Stanton and her sisters fell to the oldest sister, Tryphena, and her husband Edward Bayard. Whether due to permissiveness or inattention, Cady Stanton enjoyed freedoms and privileges rarely afforded girls. Bayard taught her equestrian arts and philosophy. Allowed to spend as much time as she wanted in her father's law office, she read whatever she chose and debated with the law clerks. She was even allowed to observe court proceedings. Her father encouraged her to perform and compete—masculine behaviors highly unusual for girls to cultivate.⁵ The result was that her naturally keen mind was trained to think analytically and logically.

Cady Stanton set about fulfilling her promise to her father to try to fill her brother's shoes. She asked her neighbor, Reverend Simon Hosack, to teach her Greek. "My father prefers boys to girls," she told Reverend Hosack, "so I intend to be as near like one as possible. I am going to ride horseback and study Greek."⁶ She attended Johnstown Academy where she studied Greek, Latin, and mathematics in a class that included boys. She took the second place prize—a Greek Testament—in Greek. Her father again told her, "My daughter, it's a pity you were not a boy."⁷

It was in her father's office that Cady Stanton gained an awareness of the suffering of women due to inequity in the laws. She witnessed the distress of a woman who consulted Judge Cady because her deceased husband's property went to their son who wasn't providing for her. The woman cried, but there was nothing to be done. Cady Stanton questioned her father about it later.⁸ After he told her that the law forbade him to help the woman, she began to realize that the political process—which begins when power is transferred through the vote—was an important means to achieve desired results.

She graduated from Johnstown Academy in 1830 when she was fifteen years of age. While her male classmates mostly went on to Union College, no four-year university in the country at the time admitted women. The closest approximation was the progressive Troy Female Seminary, founded by Emma Willard in 1821.⁹ Willard's mission was to provide young women an education that rivaled that offered men. It was the best school available to Cady Stanton, and even though

outraged at not being able to attend a university, she entered Troy in 1831.¹⁰

That same year the Great Troy Revival, led by Charles Grandison Finney, swept through the region and many of the students at Troy Academy, including Cady Stanton, attended the meetings. Since the Revolution there had been a movement away from organized religion and these revivals were designed to scare people into returning to church. Cady Stanton had been reared, in gloomy Presbyterian tradition, to believe that God was a punitive being and Finney was highly effective in his fire and brimstone sermons. Young, impressionable and overwhelmed by Finney, Cady Stanton finally confessed her sins and experienced a conversion. But instead of feeling peace and relief, she felt sinful and afraid. Plunged into depression, she became ill and had to go home to Johnstown. “Fear of judgment seized my soul,” Cady Stanton said in her autobiography. “Visions of the lost haunted my dreams . . . I often at night roused my father from his slumber to pray for me.”¹¹

Her father and brother-in-law took her to Niagara Falls for a few weeks to recover from her conversion experience, which she did. Nonetheless, it left an indelible mark on her personality. She became a lifelong skeptic of religion and generally kept her distance from it. Later, while developing her feminist ideology, this skepticism enabled her to disregard the argument that women were subordinate by divine decree. She never suspended her belief in God, but adhered to a theology in which God was benevolent and created men and women to be equal.¹²

Cady Stanton’s coming of age coincided with the beginnings of an ideology called the Cult of True Womanhood. Beginning about 1830, many preachers and ladies’ magazines posited the idea that a true woman was more pure and moral than man. The Cult of True Womanhood praised women for their piety and humility and charged them with the guardianship of morality. Many women internalized this idea of moralistic piety and passed it on to their daughters.¹³ It became an excuse to confine women to a separate sphere—one in which their activities were limited and they were denied a place in society¹⁴ Confined to the home, urban middle class women were virtually imprisoned and forced to be dependent on men.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the idea reached such ridiculous heights that the medical profession came up with theories to try to explain away the condition of a woman. English theorist Herbert Spencer, who was widely read and cited, speculated that women were mentally inferior as a result of evolution—because their energy must be expended on the physically draining experience of giving birth. Women were discouraged from seeking an education because they were told that if they tried to increase their mental capacity they would become infertile.¹⁵

The image of the perfect lady became the image of the female as an invalid. A lady was weak, delicate, and perpetually prone to illness.¹⁶ Women’s natural functions, pregnancy and menstruation, were regarded as illnesses and being female became a pathological condition.¹⁷ These ideas about women took hold, even though the majority of women—those of the working class, including immigrants and minorities—worked hard to provide economic benefits for their families.

In addition, women were deprived of a legal existence. They could not seek divorce, even from abusive or negligent husbands and had no custodial rights to their children. And, as noted above, women did not speak out in public; it was considered indecent and immodest. During the decade of the 1830s Cady Stanton felt these injustices to women, but did not articulate any feminist ideas.

After graduation from the seminary in 1833,¹⁸ she began visiting her cousin Gerrit Smith in Peterboro, New York. Smith was a wealthy philanthropist and abolitionist. At his home, Cady Stanton was exposed to reform thinking and introduced to many reformers and runaway slaves. Lively debate and enthusiasm for reform causes dominated the atmosphere.¹⁹ It was at Peterboro that she met Henry Brewster Stanton.

Stanton was a hero of the abolitionist movement. As a student at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, he had been the sole opponent of the Fugitive Slave Law at a debate during the summer of 1832. He, along with Theodore Weld, a Lane professor, led the walkout of the "Lane Rebels." They founded Oberlin College in northern Ohio, which admitted blacks and women. He was a rising star in the abolition movement. The American Anti-slavery Society recruited Stanton as an agent, and in 1835 he became one of the Band of Seventy that crisscrossed the country, facing down angry mobs and converting entire audiences to their cause. An eloquent speaker, lucid writer, and skilled organizer, he distinguished himself, was assigned to Massachusetts, and became secretary of the society. He was tall, handsome and ten years older than Elizabeth Cady.

They met at Smith's home in 1839. She thrilled to his speeches and became a convert to his ideas. He assumed she shared his political beliefs and believed that he could channel her intelligence and energy toward his causes. However, he opposed allowing women in anti-slavery societies to vote for fear of ridicule. To Cady, he was not only handsome and engaging, but offered the excitement of being at the center of the reform movement. She admired the fact that he was committed to a moral cause, and perhaps most importantly, he didn't seem alarmed or put off by her intelligence and other strengths. Still under the guardianship of her father, she looked forward to marriage as an independent state. She didn't believe that she was entering bondage.²⁰

They married on May 10, 1840 in a ceremony in which the word "obey" was expunged. Cady Stanton later claimed, "I refuse to obey anyone with whom I am entering into an equal relationship."²¹ In fact, Stanton's closest friend, Theodore Weld set a precedent by doing the same in his wedding to Angelina Grimke the year before, so it is questionable whether it was really Cady Stanton's idea.²² But all indications show that she entered marriage expecting to be treated as an equal partner.

The newlyweds went to New York and immediately set sail for the World's Anti-slavery Convention in London at which Stanton would be a delegate. Their honeymoon marked the beginning of the feminism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Since her graduation from Troy she had mostly been engaged in social pursuits, despite

her education and unusual upbringing. She had displayed no real political bent and made no effort to join the reform causes she had been exposed to even though she enjoyed the intellectual intercourse. But because of her upbringing, she was more free and more outspoken than most women in her social strata. Since childhood she had striven to prove equality to her male peers and believed in her heart that she was equal though she had not articulated a feminist ideology or even shown an interest in working for the cause of abolition. During this new phase of her life the ideology that would lead to the writing of the Declaration of Sentiments and shape her feminist thought for the next sixty years began to form.

In London, in June of 1840, many women delegates showed up to attend the anti-slavery convention, including Lucretia Mott. Mott was a Quaker, abolitionist, and feminist from Pennsylvania. She founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-slavery Society in 1833 and espoused a progressive agenda. Not only were these women at the forefront of the cause, but some represented societies made up solely of women. The women went to considerable expense to travel to London only to be told that they could not be participants. They could attend the sessions—unseen and unheard—seated behind a partition. The convention organizers were aghast that women would misconstrue the invitation, which was addressed to “friends,” to include them.

It must have been exhilarating for Cady Stanton to walk into the ensuing maelstrom. She was present only because she had married Henry Stanton, secretary to the convention, and yet she found herself right in the middle of a debate that was causing great schisms in anti-slavery societies. The women delegates, especially Mott, with whom she discussed women’s rights, fascinated her. Only weeks into her marriage, she began to assert her independence.

The delegates first addressed the question of whether to seat the women, debating the issue while the women listened. The clergy pointed out that women were subordinate by divine decree—it was God’s decision, not theirs. After hours of speeches, the overwhelming majority voted to exclude the women. It is unknown how Stanton voted because it was unrecorded, but at least two people reported that he voted against seating the women. His wife believed that he voted in favor, but during his career as an abolitionist, Stanton rarely supported women’s rights publicly, believing it was not pragmatic. Just the year before, prior to their wedding trip, a rift had occurred in the American Anti-slavery Society when a contingent of New Yorkers, including Stanton, held that allowing women’s participation undermined the cause. Apparently, Cady Stanton had agreed. But the convention episode, coupled with her conversations with Lucretia Mott, planted seeds of doubt about her husband’s stand on the issue.²³

She recalled that she felt “humiliated and chagrined, except as these feelings were outweighed by contempt for the shallow reasoning of the opponents and their comical poses and gestures . . . It was really pitiful to hear narrow-minded bigots, pretending to be teachers and leaders of men, so cruelly remanding their own mothers, with the rest of womankind, to absolute subjection to the ordinary

masculine type of humanity.” Cady Stanton sided against her husband, along with Mott and William Lloyd Garrison, who seated himself with the women in protest. She undertook spending as much time with Mott as possible to the surprise and dismay of Stanton. “Mrs. Mott was to me an entire new revelation of womanhood,” Cady Stanton later wrote. “I sought every opportunity to be at her side, and continually plied her with questions . . . I never heard a woman talk what, as a Scotch Presbyterian, I had scarcely dared to think.”²⁴

Not permitted to be involved in the debates of the convention, the women engaged the men in debate in the evenings at their boarding house. Apparently the discussions became so heated that James Gillespie Birney, an abolitionist and friend of Stanton, moved to other lodgings. Cady Stanton became angered and agitated and proposed to Mott that they organize a convention on women’s rights after their return to the States.²⁵

After the disturbances and revelations of the convention, the remainder of the wedding tour was anti-climactic and Cady Stanton was anxious to return home. Once there, feminism was put on the back burner as the bride turned her attentions toward more immediate considerations. Her husband hadn’t any money of his own and could not rely on a steady income from his abolitionist involvement. As a practical matter, he apprenticed with his father-in-law and the couple lived with her parents in Johnstown for the next two years. At the end of those two years, Stanton moved to Boston to set up his law practice and launch a political career. Cady Stanton followed the next year with their first son Daniel. She was unaccustomed to the insecurities of her husband’s financial situation, but with the advent of two more sons during their Boston years, she had no choice but to attend to her domestic responsibilities and lend support to Stanton’s endeavors.²⁶

But this was Boston—the center of reform activity—and Cady Stanton still found time to study law, theology, and history. She even spoke on temperance in Johnstown in 1842, but lacked the courage and self-confidence to speak out on women’s rights. Moreover, she was absorbed by the goings-on of her household. In a way, these years between the Anti-Slavery Convention and the Women’s Convention in Seneca Falls were years of preparation for Cady Stanton’s future reform career. Tied to her house and children, she nonetheless seized every opportunity to enrich herself by attending lectures, plays, church services, and conventions on temperance, prison, and anti-slavery reform. She corresponded with feminists like Lucretia Mott who chided her for her unwillingness to move forward on the women’s issue. She lobbied on behalf of the New York Married Women’s Property Act by circulating petitions in Johnstown while visiting her parents and talking to legislators in Albany.

In 1847, after four years in Boston, the Stantons moved to Seneca Falls, to a house given to them by Daniel Cady. This move proved crucial in Cady Stanton’s development as a feminist. Her prior exposure to feminism and her years of listening and learning as much as she could about politics and reform were about to be cemented into what would become the foundation for the women’s movement.

Seneca Falls was a small town, devoid of the cultural and reform activities of Boston, and for the first time in her married life, Cady Stanton had no domestic help. The first two years of her marriage she had lived at her parent's house, enjoying a full staff of servants. Even in Boston she had a few servants, but in Seneca Falls, not only was domestic help in short supply, but the Stantons could ill afford it. They were living in a house provided by her father, and Stanton's law practice wasn't terribly lucrative. After the move, Stanton began leaving home for extended business and political trips, leaving his wife in a small town with three small boys and no help. It wasn't long before Cady Stanton tired of her situation. She craved the intellectual stimulation she was accustomed to and the physical work wore her down. For the first time, she was experiencing what most other women accepted as their lot. It was at this time that Cady Stanton began to seriously criticize the plight of women. She became increasingly frustrated with Stanton's absences and his detachment from what was going on at home. She was especially irritated that he was free to come and go as he wished and pursue his own interests while she was bound to the home and hearth. These resentments led her to fulfill her proposition to Mott eight years before to organize a women's rights convention.

In July of 1848, nearly a year after moving to Seneca Falls, Cady Stanton learned that Lucretia Mott would pay a visit to her sister, Martha Wright, in Auburn. Wright invited Cady Stanton to spend the day with friends, including Jane Hunt and Mary McClintock. They talked of affronts to women and Cady Stanton eloquently unleashed her own discontent.²⁷ The group felt compelled to further express their grievances by calling a convention where, according to their advertisement in the newspaper, they would "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman."²⁸

They met the following Sunday to plan the convention. It was Cady Stanton who hit upon the idea to write a Declaration of Sentiments based on the Declaration of Independence and she was the one who wrote it. The list of eighteen grievances included property rights, child custody rights, women's rights to their own earnings, the right to testify against their husbands, unequal pay, and the moral double standard. Three hundred attended including forty men. On the second day Cady Stanton became emboldened, and as she read her Declaration of Sentiments, she added a new resolution: suffrage for women.²⁹ It was indeed a bold move and it electrified the audience. The Quakers opposed it, Mott contending that it would make them appear ridiculous and compromise their cause. The notion was deemed so outrageous that Stanton, having supported his wife up to that point, refused to attend the convention and left town to distance himself from it. Elizabeth Cady Stanton alone had the nerve to ask for it.

Thus was launched one of the most brilliant reform careers of the century. Elizabeth Cady Stanton poured enormous amounts of energy and creativity into the push for women's suffrage. She shrugged off the strictures placed on women of her time to make bold and controversial assertions. She might not have if her life had been different prior to 1848. Her privileged background had provided her with the

self-confidence to assert herself in a time when it was unheard of for women. Likewise, if she hadn't had such a solid social footing, she might not have been so willing to cast it aside. Had Eleazar not died, she might not have felt the need to push herself to develop the physical and mental acuity that contributed to her self-assurance. And perhaps her father would not have permitted her the freedom to do so. Without her harrowing religious experiences, she might not have been able to free herself of the bonds of ecclesiastic authority. And finally, if she had married a man of means, she might have been content to settle into a comfortable life within the woman's sphere as was expected of a matron of her social class.

Endnotes

1. Ellen Carol Dubois, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (New York, 1981), 28.
2. Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York, 1984), 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
4. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
5. *Ibid.*, 8.
6. Mary Ann B. Oakley, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (Brooklyn, 1972), 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 18.
8. Griffith, *Stanton*, 11.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
11. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
12. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Woman's Bible* (Seattle, 1974), 14.
13. Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York, 1988), 9.
14. *Ibid.*, 17.
15. Sara Delamonte and Lorna Duffin, *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (New York, 1978), 68.
16. *Ibid.*, 26.
17. *Ibid.*, 32.
18. Griffith, *Stanton*, 22.
19. *Ibid.*, 24.
20. *Ibid.*, 26-29.
21. Oakley, *Stanton*, 29.
22. Griffith, *Stanton*, 33.
23. Lois W. Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Woman's Rights* (Boston, 1981), 23-24.
24. Griffith, *Stanton*, 36-38.
25. Banner, *Stanton*, 25-26.
26. *Ibid.*, 27.

27. Ibid., 38-39.

28. Paul Buhle and Mari Jo Buhle, eds., *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage* (Urbana, 1978), 67.

29. Banner, *Stanton*, 42.