# CONTENTS

**Director’s Foreword**  
Kim Sajet  
VIII

**Introduction**  
Kate Clarke Lemay  
X

**To Fight by Remembering, or the Making of Seneca Falls**  
Lisa Tétrault  
1

**The Politics of Black Womanhood, 1848–2008**  
Martha S. Jones  
29

**A Woman’s Place: Organized Resistance to the Franchise**  
Susan Goodier  
49

**“Où sont les dames?”**  
Suffragists and the American Women’s Oversea Hospitals Unit in France during World War I  
Kate Clarke Lemay  
69

**CATALOGUE**  
Kate Clarke Lemay

1  
Radical Women, 1832–1869  
89

2  
Women Activists, 1870–1892  
117

3  
The New Woman, 1893–1912  
139

4  
Compelling Tactics, 1913–1916  
167

5  
Militancy in the American Suffragist Movement, 1917–1919  
201

6  
The Nineteenth Amendment and Its Legacy, 1920 to Today  
217

**Notes**  
232

**Selected Bibliography**  
261

**Chronology**  
Nicole Ashley Vance, with Grace Marra  
269

**Acknowledgments**  
279

**Index**  
282

**Credits**  
288
As the last state ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, celebrations erupted across the country. Movement leader Alice Paul stitched the final yellow star onto her National Woman’s Party flag, three bold stripes of purple, cream, and gold. For every state that ratified, Paul had added a star. States had quickly fallen in line, slowed, and then stopped—short of the thirty-six states needed. The long battle came down to one man in Tennessee, a southern state known for its fierce opposition to women’s rights. Like many, Harry T. Burn, the Tennessee legislature’s youngest member, only twenty-four years of age, declared his objection. It seemed clear the amendment would not pass. But on receiving a letter from his mother urging his support—in which she instructed him “to be a good boy”—Burn changed his vote. Surprising everyone, the Tennessee legislature approved the amendment by a one-vote margin. The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was finally ratified on August 18, 1920. Hastily affixing the last star, Paul rushed outside of her headquarters and triumphantly unfurled the flag (fig. 1).

Emphasizing the long struggle that had culminated in this moment, newspapers heralded the so-called Anthony Amendment “as a living monument to its dead framer, Susan B. Anthony.” History was invoked again and again. The United Press syndicate headlined its wire story the “Outline Story of Suffrage in the United States.” Sent to hundreds of subscriber newspapers, the piece recounted a story that many knew by heart: that the now triumphant movement took shape when “in 1848 at Seneca Falls, N.Y., Miss Anthony called to order the first national woman’s [rights] convention.” There, Anthony had spearheaded women’s demand for the vote. “She knew her cause was right,” the story continued, and “she assumed national control of
suffrage matters on the occasion of Seneca Falls.” Women in the United States, it was said, had finally won the vote.

Errors abounded. The Anthony Amendment (as it remains known today) was actually written by another activist, Anthony’s close friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony had not even been at the famed 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls. Yet newspapers and celebrants alike constantly placed her there. Anthony had not joined the cause of suffrage until a full three years later, in 1851, when she met Stanton, who recruited her. Women had not even won the right to vote on that historic day in August 1920. The amendment stipulated in full that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Those twenty-eight words failed to prohibit other forms of discriminatory practices, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, which were then law in several states across the country. Together, with outright violent intimidation and targeted administration, those legal prohibitions continued to bar from the polls many women of color. When these women came to the leading suffrage organizations asking for help in securing voting rights, white women turned them away. The vote, a fight begun by Anthony in 1848, it was said, had been won.

As we ponder how to commemorate this 2020 centennial moment, it behooves us to attend to the memories that suffragists themselves handed down. This essay interrogates how and why celebrants in 1920 so assuredly placed Anthony at Seneca Falls, even though she had not been there, and why they so confidently used Seneca Falls as the movement’s beginning, when the movement actually had no singular point of departure. When we pull at that thread and ask how this story came to be—not the facts of the 1848 convention itself, but the story about that convention, along with the lessons that inhered within it—we unravel something that we were not meant to see: history-telling as an important form of activism.

The reporters were absolutely right—history mattered—but not in ways that they fully grasped. They missed how, in the aftermath of the American Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had invented this Seneca Falls origin story in an effort to shape a postwar suffrage campaign. They missed how memory itself had played a critical role in the long fight for the vote. When Stanton and Anthony first argued that the suffrage movement had begun in July 1848, when Stanton called a women’s rights convention in the small hamlet of Seneca Falls, New York, where Stanton then lived, they were not reciting merely objective, agreed-on facts. They, along with others in the movement, did not tell this origins tale until some thirty to forty years after the convention. The story was a post–Civil War creation. Yet, as in 1920, people today tell the story of Seneca Falls as if it has always been true, and they forget to attend to its history. That oversight has resulted in a misunderstanding of the multiple facets of this long campaign.

Beginning in the 1870s, Stanton and Anthony first turned Seneca Falls into a story they could use to combat post–Civil War challenges. This fabricated memory helped them: (1) consolidate their own deeply contested postwar leadership; (2) set an agenda for a sprawling, and to their mind, undisciplined postwar women’s movement; (3) make a pointed and controversial public argument for the necessity of
women’s suffrage; and (4) sustain the movement in the face of repeated, often devastat-
ing, setbacks.⁵

They carefully adapted and honed the story to address postwar fights while gently persuading more and more suffragists to adopt it. In doing so, people espoused, however unconsciously, the lessons Stanton and Anthony meant to impart. This origin story was not neutral. In fact, its appeal and its potential derived from its underlying political motives. The pair recognized that history-telling is, and could be, a decisive form of power. This was not unique to the story of Seneca Falls. All remembering, all history-telling, comes with fraught interpretative choices and implicitly coded lessons.⁶

The post–Civil War origins and purposes of this story would later be forgotten, however. Instead, it would seem to have been miraculously and unassail-
ably true from 1848 forward. But stories don’t write themselves. People make sto-
ries.⁷ And people made this story, well after the event. They made it as a tool in their postwar fight for the vote. And it became a tool that served them well. Attending to that history, that process, tells us a great deal about how the movement restarted, defined, and sustained itself after the bloodiest war in American history, and how this social movement endured over roughly seventy-five years. It shows us how remembering was an essential piece of the long fight for the vote and how remembering is always loaded with significant political consequences.⁸

**An Antebellum Movement Takes Shape**

So, let us go back to the ostensible beginning to sort out how this tangle of fact and falsehood got intertwined, and why it ultimately mattered. Elizabeth Cady, the supposed moving influence at Seneca Falls, had, in 1840, defied her father’s wishes and, at the age of twenty-five, married a scruffy abolitionist named Henry Stanton. The newlyweds soon departed for a European honeymoon. While in England, Henry suggested they stop by the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The contro-
versy that unfolded there, far across the Atlantic Ocean, would forever change Stanton’s life and — it would be said — the course of US history.⁹

Stanton watched as the 1840 World’s Anti-Slavery Convention spiraled into chaos (fig. 2). The United States had sent a delegation to London, made up of both men and women. But the British delegation, comprised entirely of men, objected to the women’s presence, deeming their participation offensive. The US abolition movement supported and sanctioned women’s involvement, however, and many of the US men leaped to the women’s defense. Instead of focusing on the issue at hand, how to abolish slavery, the convention’s first day veered wildly off topic and devolved into a lengthy, acrimonious dispute about the rights of women to partici-
bate. Arguments ended in a ridiculous compromise: women could listen, seated behind a bar, but they could take no active part. The young Stanton was suitably furious. Meeting Lucretia Coffin Mott (fig. 3), however, transformed her rage into pur-
pose. Mott was twenty-two years Stanton’s senior and, unlike Stanton, already a
seasoned activist. Sent as a US delegate, Mott enjoyed universal respect within the US abolition movement. A penurious Quaker, she lived by her principles, and Stanton instantly revered her. Supposedly, the pair walked the streets of London spewing outrage over women’s treatment by the British delegation, and they vowed to hold a women’s rights convention on their return to the United States—an assembly dedicated solely to women’s advancement.¹⁰

Then an eight-year gap in the story ensues. The idea gets rekindled, according to lore, when Mott joined Stanton for tea in July 1848. Following the Stantons’ honeymoon, Henry had settled his new and growing family in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York—situated on the state’s western edge and nestled among the Finger Lakes. There, he opened a small law practice. The town’s provincial nature was no match for Elizabeth’s prodigious intellect. And her increased boredom with the confinements of domestic life compounded her growing dissatisfaction. Although they had seen each other infrequently since London, Mott called on Stanton when she passed through Seneca Falls, inviting her to tea with three other area

FIG. 2

Portrait of the 1840 Convention of the Anti-Slavery Society
Benjamin Robert Haydon
(1786–1846)
c. 1841
Oil on canvas
297.2 × 383.6 cm (117 × 151 in.)
National Portrait Gallery,
London; given by British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1880
reformers. Around Jane Hunt’s parlor table, as the story goes, Stanton poured out her domestic woes. Together, the five women—Mott, Stanton, Hunt, Martha Coffin Wright (Mott’s pregnant sister), and Mary Ann M’Clintock—decided, then and there, to hold a convention to discuss women’s grievances. They had only a few days to organize. Hastily, they put an advertisement into the local newspaper, the Seneca County Courier, announcing: “A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, N.Y., on Wednesday and Thursday, the 19th and 20th of July current; commencing at 10 o’clock A.M.”

The five women worried that no one would show.

In the interim, they got to work preparing an agenda for the proceedings. They decided that the convention should have a guiding document, to focus discussion. That document would contain their complaints and their demands. As they struggled to compose something befitting, they struck on a brilliant idea: to model their document on the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they revised, “that all men and women are created equal.” Where that founding document listed colonists’ grievances against the king, they substituted women’s grievances against “man,” detailing how the masculine sex deprived the feminine persuasion of their inherent rights. They then listed a series of twelve demands, called “resolutions.” They agreed that these resolutions would be taken up, one by one, in the convention, thoroughly debated and then voted on.

On the morning of the convention, to their utter amazement, nearly three hundred people arrived, women and men alike. While this was a women’s rights convention, organizers worried that appointing a woman to chair the proceedings would be too scandalous, so they appointed Mott’s husband, James. They worked their way through what they now called their “Declaration of Sentiments,” thoroughly debating each of its twelve resolutions. These included the right of married women to own property, the right to leave the confines of the home and participate equally in the public sphere, women’s access to the professions, equal pay, equal education, and women’s right to vote. All passed unanimously, except for the ninth, women’s “sacred right to the elective franchise.” That demand, often credited to Stanton, met with considerable opposition. Only after the abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass, who lived in nearby Rochester, stood and vehemently defended women’s suffrage, did it finally pass (fig. 4). In the end, nearly one hundred convention goers signed the declaration and its accompanying demands.
News of this impromptu local convention and its accompanying declaration circulated far and wide. Across the country, newspapers reported on the 1848 proceedings and its demands. Coverage varied, from comically disdainful to surprisingly respectful—even at times, supportive. Douglass, meanwhile, pulled together the proceedings and the declaration into a short pamphlet, published by the offices of his *North Star* newspaper.16

At the time, no one believed that this local convention had started a woman’s (as it was known at the time, in the singular) suffrage movement, as is now often claimed. That story did not yet exist because it was not yet needed. And although Seneca Falls was absolutely the first women’s rights convention in the United States—and certainly significant for this reason—it did not offer a novel definition of women’s rights. Nor was this the first demand for the franchise, as would later be claimed. Women’s rights ideas had been percolating for some time. Far from conceiving of women’s suffrage and the other demands, the women at Seneca Falls simultaneously drew on a rich heritage and advanced that ongoing project.17

Before 1848, various women, in various ways, had called for many of the early women’s rights demands outlined at Seneca Falls already, including the vote. In 1776, Abigail Adams had warned her husband John, a representative to the Continental Congress, who was busy drafting laws for the new nation, that women “threatened fomenting a Rebellion.” She assured him that women “would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.”18 From its very beginning, the American Revolution unleashed aspirations of equality among the downtrodden, including white women.19 In New Jersey, propertied white women even voted, casting ballots legally until 1807.20 In 1845, Massachusetts-born Margaret Fuller, steeped in American transcendentalism, published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, one of the first major feminist works produced in the United States, in which she too called for the ballot.21 And in 1846—two years before the convention at Seneca Falls—six women from Jefferson County, New York, petitioned their state legislature for their right to the elective franchise.22

The other women’s rights demands made at Seneca Falls had important precursors, too. As women joined the abolitionist movement, ministers and other men attacked them for forcefully exercising their political opinions in public. Abolitionist women defended themselves by articulating some of the earliest women’s rights stances. The most famous of these women were the Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, who were castigated in the 1830s for speaking against slavery before so-called promiscuous (or mixed-sex) audiences, violating the biblical Pauline dictate.
that women should remain silent (figs. 5–6). The Grimkés retorted that God meant for women to leave the domestic sphere and advocate their political and moral minds. And in 1838, Sarah authored her widely read Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, an important early women’s rights treatise. The Grimkés were part of a mass movement of black and white women within abolition who began blending their anti-slavery work with women’s rights activism. For instance, in 1847, Lucy Stone, the first Massachusetts woman to earn a college degree, took a lecturing job with the American Anti-Slavery Society, in which she spoke about abolition during one part of the week and women’s rights during the other (fig. 7). Immigrant women, too, helped build an early women’s rights analysis, arriving in the United States steeped in very different traditions of European radicalism.

This ongoing national discussion about women’s rights, variously defined, and over several decades, was precisely what generated an audience of three hundred at the Wesleyan Chapel on a hot day in July 1848. Some were merely curious onlookers. The women’s rights discussion was emergent, rather than fully fledged. But some of these convention goers were surely midstream in their thinking about these issues when they took their seats at the meeting.

After the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls, the conversation continued and intensified. A central difference was that it now began to be articulated in women’s rights conventions (although it continued in other venues as well). A month after Seneca Falls, a follow-up meeting was held in nearby Rochester, New York—this time chaired by a woman. Activists in other states, such as Ohio, Indiana, and Massachusetts, also began holding local and state women’s rights conventions. Adherents started forming women’s rights organizations, which pursued the agendas spelled out in conventions. By 1850, these meetings and organizations were
numerous enough that activists held the first national women’s rights convention, in Worcester, Massachusetts. After this, women held national conventions, which gathered activists from around the country, every year (save for 1857), until the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861.27 Although all this would later be pegged as the beginning of a women’s suffrage movement, antebellum activists never centered the vote as the pinnacle of their work. They called themselves woman’s rights activists, not suffragists, as the vote was only one of many demands. That switch came after the war.

During all this ferment, Stanton met Anthony, a meeting that irrevocably changed both their lives— and some would argue, the landscape of American feminism. Stanton had remained engaged in women’s rights activity after her first foray in 1848, but she was limited by domestic and maternal duty, including new pregnancies (ultimately having seven children). Much of this growing women’s rights activity proceeded without her. Notably, she would not attend a national convention, for example, until 1860. Meanwhile, as women’s rights activity picked up around the country in the early 1850s, Anthony was living in Rochester, New York, where she worked as a schoolteacher, while also participating in area abolition and temperance.
reform. Their 1851 meeting would transform their respective reform careers.28

The two quickly developed an astonishingly productive friendship, their respective skills being exceeding-ingly well matched. Stanton persuaded Anthony to abandon temperance and focus on women’s rights, and it soon became their joint life’s work. It became hard to talk about one without talking about the other. Where Stanton was the intellect and philosopher, Anthony was the organizer. Soon, Anthony left teaching and became a full-time organizer. Never marrying, she dedicated her life to the cause. Needing content for meetings—calls, speeches, and the like—and not being a particularly good writer, Anthony would travel to Seneca Falls, lock the domestically preoccupied Stanton into a room with pointed directives to write, and babysit Stanton’s growing brood. As Anthony would later say of their close, lifelong collaboration, Stanton “forged the thunderbolts, and I fired them” (fig. 8).29

Although increasingly prominent and active over the 1850s, the two were by no means the center of an antebellum women’s rights movement. That mistaken impres-sion—so prominently on display in the newspaper coverage of ratification in 1920, where reporters confidently declared that Anthony “assumed national control of suffrage matters” after 1848—would be forged through the Seneca Falls origin story. In the wake of the American Civil War, which brought an entirely new set of political challenges, Stanton and Anthony leveraged and reinvented the past.30

The World the War Made

In April 1861, cannon fire engulfed Fort Sumter, a US military fort in a South Carolina harbor. Thus began the American Civil War. Women’s rights activists immediately suspended their work on behalf of the “fairer sex” and threw themselves into supporting the Northern war effort. At first, Lincoln remained committed to restoring the Union, with slavery intact. But as the war dragged on and the North suffered repeated military defeats, Lincoln realized what many had already concluded: that slavery had to end. Two years into the war, in January 1863, Lincoln ended slavery in the Confederacy (where he technically had no jurisdiction) with the Emancipation Proclamation, causing chaos in the South, just as he had hoped. Freed people and abolitionists rejoiced. In 1865, Lincoln accepted the South’s surrender. Then began the hard work of what came next.31

The divisive national postwar battles about how to rebuild the war-torn nation engulfed the abolitionist and women’s rights movements, as they
struggled to navigate a new political climate. Although freed people were now nominally “free,” they had no clear legal status. Were they equal citizens, subject to the same laws as whites? Were they entitled to compensation for their long history of enslavement? These and so many other questions swirled around in postwar political culture.\textsuperscript{32}

Antebellum reformers from the abolition-and-women’s-rights coalition reorganized into the American Equal Rights Association (AERA). Formed in 1866 to intervene in this larger national debate about postwar political rights, the AERA lobbied for two inextricable demands—the vote for both blacks and women. Membership included many prominent activists, notably Frederick Douglass (now the nation’s leading African American statesman), Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Coffin Mott, and a number of Northern black women, such as Sojourner Truth (fig. 9), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Purvis. Bitter internal disputes split the AERA, however, when the national political scene put their twin demands into conflict.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1869, the US Congress precipitated a debate that would destroy the AERA. Unwilling to grant most of the rights freed people demanded—such as land, bodily protection, and education—Congress decided to grant their appeals for political representation. That February, they passed the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. The amendment barred the states from discrimination in voting on the basis of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” In effect, it granted black male suffrage. The AERA had fought to have “sex” included in the wording of the provision, which would have granted women’s suffrage too, but that had failed. Nevertheless, the AERA considered supporting the amendment as it headed to the states for ratification. Most considered it a vitally important step forward, but Stanton and Anthony balked. At the AERA’s May 1869 convention, they staunchly opposed the amendment for its exclusion of women. Although it is often said today that the two took the high road, refusing to compromise and insisting on equal voting for all (“universal suffrage”), the reality is considerably less savory.\textsuperscript{34}

As the convention began, Stanton delivered the opening salvo. “‘Manhood suffrage’ is national suicide and women’s destruction,” she railed. “Remember, the fifteenth amendment takes in a larger population than the 3,000,000 black men on the Southern plantations. It takes in all the foreigners daily landing in our Eastern cities, [and] the Chinese crowding our western shores,” she continued. “Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung, who do not know the

\textbf{FIG. 9}

\textit{Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance”}

Unidentified photographer
1864
Albumen silver print
8.5 × 5.4 cm (3 ⅜ × 2 ⅛ in.)
Metropolitan Museum of Art; purchase, Alfred Stieglitz Society Gifts, 2013
difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book, making laws for Lucretia Mott . . . [or] Susan B. Anthony.” The amendment, she charged, “creates an antagonism everywhere between educated, refined women and the lower orders of men, especially at the South.” Many fought back against the blanket racism in Stanton’s remarks, her elitism on naked display.

As the tumult quelled, Douglass spoke. He attacked the use of such disparaging language and spoke in favor of the Fifteenth Amendment. “I must say,” he shouted, referencing the uncontrolled, vigilante violence inflicted on freed people across the South, “I do not see how any one can pretend that there is the same urgency in giving the ballot to the woman as to the negro. . . . With us, the matter is a question of life and death. . . . When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York or New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when she is an object of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burned down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools, then she will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.” Whereupon a newspaper indicated “Great applause.” A voice from the audience shouted: “Is that not true about black women?” “Yes, yes, yes,” Douglass rejoined, “but not because she is a woman but because she is black.”

The convention declined into chaos. Arguments flew on all sides. Like Stanton, Anthony shouted, “If you will not give the whole loaf of justice to the entire people, if you are determined to give it, piece by piece, then give it first to women, to the most intelligent & capable of the women at least,” clearly meaning native-born, white women. Stone, by contrast, praised the Fifteenth Amendment and despaired over the introduction of questions of priority in the debate. She closed by asking that someone get them “out of this terrible pit.” Harper, one of the black female activists, declared that “the question of color was far more to her than the question of sex.” Like Harper, the other black women there also ardently supported the amendment. In the end, the convention could not even restore enough order to call a vote.

The dispute effectively ended the AERA and began Stanton and Anthony’s alienation from their former allies—a state of affairs they would omit when offering their own interpretation of the past. Refusing to sanction black men voting before white women, the pair pulled out of the AERA and in a small, unadvertised reception, they formed a brand-new organization, the National Woman Suffrage Association (National Association). Stone and the many other women’s suffrage allies in the AERA charged that they had been deliberately excluded, that Stanton and Anthony had colluded to form a national organization without them. Stone gathered with reformers from across the country and formed an alternative national women’s suffrage organization: the much larger American Woman Suffrage Association (American Association). By the end of 1869, the antebellum women’s rights movement had reorganized into a bitterly divided postwar women’s suffrage movement.
As personal animosities grew, reformers also split over what a post-war women’s suffrage movement could and should do. In Stanton and Anthony’s mind, the Fifteenth Amendment had one redeeming feature: it set a new constitutional precedent by affirming federal regulation of voting, a right that had historically been regulated by individual states. States had determined who could vote within their boundaries. But with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the federal government had, for the first time in US history, imposed stipulations on who the states permitted to vote. According to Stanton and Anthony, this had changed the terms of the fight. Women no longer needed to demand voting rights from each individual state legislature, which had been the antebellum method. They could concentrate their efforts on a single point, demanding that the US Congress pass a Sixteenth Amendment prohibiting the states from using “male” as a voting qualification.

By contrast, Stone and the American Association staunchly disagreed that the Fifteenth Amendment changed constitutional prerogatives around voting. They argued that those still rested with the states and any winning strategy should focus there. So, while Stone and her allies threw themselves into organizing and coordinating activism in the individual states, Stanton, Anthony, and the National Association attacked the congressional citadel with demands for a Sixteenth Amendment (figs. 10–11).³⁹
APPEAL
FOR A
SIXTEENTH AMENDMENT.

TO THE WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES:

Having celebrated our Centennial birthday with a National jubilee, let us now dedicate the dawn of the Second Century to securing justice to Woman.

For this purpose we ask you to circulate a petition to Congress, just issued by the "National Woman Suffrage Association," asking an amendment to the United States Constitution, that shall prohibit the several States from disfranchising any of their citizens on account of Sex. We have already sent this petition throughout the country for the signatures of those men and women who believe in the citizen's right to vote.

To see how large a petition each State calls up, and to do the work as expeditiously as possible, it is necessary that some person, or society in each State and District should take the matter in charge, print, and send out petitions to reliable friends in every county, urging upon all thoroughness and haste. When the petitions are returned, they should be posted together, nearly rolled up, the number of signatures marked on the outside, with the name of the State, and forwarded to Sarah Andrews Spencer, Chairman of our Congressional Committee, corner of L. and 7th street, Washington, D. C. On the 10th and 17th of January, 1877, we will hold our 8th Annual Convention at the Capitol and ask a hearing on our petition before Congress.

Having petitioned to our law-makers, State and National, for years, many from weariness and despair have vowed to appeal no more; for our petitions, say they, by the boxes of thousands, are piled up and the National archives unheeded and ignored. Yet, it is possible to roll up such a mammoth petition, borne into Congress on the shoulders of stalwart men, that we can no longer be neglected or forgotten. Statesmen and politicians, alike, are conquered by majorities. We urge the women of this country to make now the same united effort for their own rights, that they did for the slaves at the south, when the 13th amendment was pending. Thus a petition of over $20,000 was rolled up by the leaders of the suffrage movement, and presented in the Senate by the Hon. Charles Sumner. But the leading statesmen who welcomed woman's united efforts to secure the black man's freedom, frowned down the same demands when made for herself. Is not liberty as sweet to her as to him? Are not the political disabilities of Sex as great and as those of color? Is not a civil rights bill that shall open to women the college doors, the trades and professions—that shall secure her personal and property rights, as necessary for her protection, as for that of the colored man?

And yet the highest judicial authorities have decided that the spirit and letter of our National Constitution are not broad enough to protect Woman in her political rights; and for the redress of her wrongs they remand her to the State. If this Magna Charta of Human Rights can be thus narrowed by judicial interpretations in favor of class legislation, than must we demand an amendment that is clear, unmistakable language, shall declare the equality of all citizens before the law.

Women are citizens, first of the United States, and second of the State wherein they reside: hence, if robbed by State authorities of any right founded in nature or secured by law, they have the same right to national protection against the States, against the infringements of any foreign power. If the United States government can punish a woman for voting in one State, why has it not the same power to protect her in the exercise of that right in every State? The Constitution declares it the duty of Congress to guarantee to every State a republican form of government, to every citizen equality of rights. This is not done in States where women, thoroughly qualified, are denied admission into colleges, which their property is taxed to build and endow; where they are denied a voice in the government, and thus while suffering all the ills that grow out of the giant evils of intolerance, predation, war, heavy taxation and political corruption, stand powerless to effect any reform. Prayers, tears, psalm-singing and expectation are left in the balance, compared with that power at the ballot box that converts opinions into law. If Women who are laboring for peace, temperance, social purity and the rights of labor, would take the speediest way to accomplish what they propose, let them demand the ballot in their own hands, that they may have a direct power in the government. This only can they improve the conditions of the outside world and purify the home. As political equality is the door to civil, religious and social liberty, here must our work begin.

Constituting as we do one-half the people, bearing the burden of one-half the National debt, equally responsible with man for the education, religion and morals of the rising generation, let us with united voice raise forth a protest against the present political status of Woman, that shall echo and re-echo through the land. In view of the numbers and character of those making the demand, this should be the largest petition ever yet rolled up in the old world or the new—a petition that shall settle forever the popular objection that "Women do not want to vote."

ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION.

ELIZABETH CODY STANTON, Pres.
MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE, Chairman Ex. Com.
SUSAN B. ANTHONY, Cor. Sec.

Tennessee, N. J., Nov. 10, 1876.

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu.
Over the late 1860s and early 1870s, there arose incredible optimism that the female franchise might be won. Women’s suffrage now rolled off the tongues of most Americans—with plenty of talk in favor. One prominent activist, Mary Livermore, noted that after the war, “the whole country was seething with interest in the questions that relate to women.” In 1869, the territory of Wyoming even granted women full voting rights. The next year, Utah did the same. In two territories, women now voted on the same terms as men. Suffragists felt keenly that this historic opportunity should not be squandered with misdirected energy for fear that the cause be lost forever. As such, they believed that how the battle was fought and who led it urgently mattered.

By the early 1870s, when yet another dramatic controversy flowed in their wake, Stanton and Anthony had become a liability in the eyes of many suffragists. The pair received a rain of bad press because of their alliance with the controversial Victoria Woodhull, who seemingly burst onto the national scene out of nowhere (fig. 12).

The insanely rich railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt called on Woodhull’s services as a clairvoyant—someone who could talk to the dead, an ability many nineteenth-century people believed in. Grateful for her assistance with all things psychic, Vanderbilt showered Woodhull and her sister, Tennessee Claflin (who scandalized the public by wearing men’s attire and smoking cigars), with gifts. He set them up with the first female-run Wall Street brokerage firm, which gripped national attention, and he financed their reform-minded newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, which drew additional focus to the sisters’ rising fame. Woodhull, meanwhile, espoused sex radicalism, being a so-called free lover. All of this made her a deeply controversial figure. Even though she was an outspoken proponent of the cause, some wanted her nowhere near the suffrage movement, for fear she would bring ill repute on the reform.

When Woodhull, of all people, was invited to address the House Judiciary Committee in January 1871, on the topic of women suffrage, Stanton and Anthony felt determined to be present (fig. 13). The House Judiciary Committee, after all, was not in the habit of inviting females to address it. Neither did it routinely take up the topic of women’s suffrage. Stanton and Anthony delayed the start of their association’s annual convention in Washington, DC, in order to bear witness. Taken with Woodhull’s meteoric public prominence and her eloquent defense of women’s right to vote, the pair invited her to speak before their convention, which took place that same day. There, she delivered her address for a second time to a packed and enthusiastic hall.

Woodhull promoted yet another new strategy for pursuing the vote, the “New Departure,” for which women creatively probed and interpreted existing
To Fight by Remembering, or the Making of Seneca Falls

constitutional amendments as a way of claiming that they already possessed the ballot. All they had to do was go vote, get arrested, and then argue this theory in court. If the courts could be persuaded to accept it, then suffragists would win their fight. In essence, the New Departure was an end run around the legislative process, one that relied on the judicial branch of government. Eagerly, the National Association jettisoned its Sixteenth Amendment work and began recruiting women to vote. The American Association was appalled. The idea seemed preposterous to them, a total distraction from the hard work they needed to do. It was yet more indication that the National Association had gone completely off the rails. Determined to pursue Woodhull's strategy, Anthony famously cast her vote in the 1872 presidential election, and was—as she hoped—arrested for it. But this short-lived strategy quickly failed, as the courts rebuffed women's claims.44

Meanwhile, that same fall, Woodhull frequented the headlines, bringing more bad press to the movement. Some blamed Stanton and Anthony for having invited Woodhull into the movement. The fall of 1872 was momentous. Not only did hundreds of women go out and vote, but Woodhull also boldly declared herself a third-party candidate in the 1872 presidential race.45 She was the first woman to ever run for US president.46 Rather than rejoice over her candidacy (itself a women's rights victory), the American Association continually rebuffed Woodhull for her supposed “free-love” immorality. Woodhull seethed with anger over their hypocrisy; everyone
knew, even if no one dared speak about it, that the American Association’s one-time president, the nation’s leading minister, Henry Ward Beecher, was having an illicit affair with his best friend’s wife. Having had enough of the attacks on her morals, Woodhull charged Beecher with adultery, on the front page of her newspaper, setting off the most famous sex scandal of the nineteenth century. It was a national sensation (fig. 14). To compound matters, Woodhull named Stanton as her source, something Stanton (having no tolerance for the sexual double standard) happily corroborated. Anthony furiously tried to smooth the waters, but it was a public relations disaster. Branded “Mrs. Satan” by a leading political cartoonist (see cat. 31), Woodhull took the brunt of public criticism and was soon chased out of the country. The suffrage movement took a heavy blow as well, as it was now being branded in the press as no more than a conspiracy to promote “free love.”

**FIG. 14**

*Testimony in the Great Beecher—Tilton Scandal Case Illustrated*

James E. Cook (active 1870s)
ca. 1875
Lithograph
56.1 × 70.8 cm (22 1/8 × 27 7/8 in.)
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC
In response to this swirling catastrophe, Stanton and Anthony began honing a new political strategy: history-telling. With no viable strategy for achieving the vote, now that the New Departure had failed, and facing the fallout of the Woodhull public relations disaster, Stanton and Anthony struggled with how to focus the National Association’s 1873 annual convention. Finding little good news in the present, they looked backward to the 1848 convention. They began to use it as a political tool—tentatively, and perhaps even unconsciously at first, but then more overtly and deliberately. With very little to celebrate, they turned their National Association annual meeting into a Seneca Falls anniversary convention, something activists had never before publicly commemorated. It was perhaps no more than coincidence that the 1848 Seneca Falls convention was exactly twenty-five years old and ripe for an anniversary party at the dawn of 1873.

At this point, Seneca Falls, as a key memory of the movement, was almost nonexistent. Some of the older veterans still remembered the event as the first convention, but they attached no special significance to it. Almost no one considered Seneca Falls the beginning of the movement—not even Mott. Many of the new recruits, on the other hand, who poured into the suffrage fight after the Civil War, knew nothing about a local 1848 meeting, or about the antebellum movement in general. That antebellum past, now twenty to thirty years distant, was a relatively blank slate, and thus provided a prime political opportunity.

If antebellum activists had not been especially concerned with where and when the movement began, pinpointing a beginning served a very useful political purpose after the Civil War—namely, adjudicating authority within a bitterly divided national suffrage movement. Should suffragists disregard the work of the National Association and follow the path of the American Association? Should they jettison Stanton and Anthony’s guidance? Was the pair the dangerous liability that Stone and others believed them to be? How were suffragists to know? Seneca Falls as an origin point offered clear—seemingly non-partisan—answers.

If the movement began in 1848 at Seneca Falls, then surely Stanton and Anthony were on the right side of history in 1873. If they originated the movement, then it stood to reason that they were the movement. Amid all the chaos and confusion that now plagued the campaign, the correct path forward could be intuited by looking backward. Stanton and Anthony could not be the dangerous renegades that other suffragists charged them with being after the Civil War. On the contrary, having started it, they were, by definition, the movement’s continuation, and their rivals were the deviants. Moreover, the event’s exclusivity now served as a highly useful historical sieve. Being a small, hastily planned, local convention, many who were already active in the antebellum women’s rights movement, like Stone herself, didn’t attend the Seneca Falls gathering. Without having to resort to seemingly partisan exclusion, an 1848 story could focus on Stanton alone, and by proxy, owing to their close friendship and near inseparability, Anthony, even though she had not been there. But for this argument to work, Stanton and Anthony had to first
mark 1848 as the beginning of the movement and persuade other suffragists to adopt this claim (fig. 15).

As commemorative events go, the twenty-fifth anniversary convention was meager in its ceremonial display, perhaps underscoring just how tentative this new point of origin was. Aside from a “wreath of laurels, interwoven with a silver thread,” no other trappings or relics graced the stage, save for three of the original organizers: Mott, her sister Martha Coffin Wright, and Stanton. Because she had not been there in 1848, Anthony presided over the convention. Taking on the role of onstage historian, she narrated events she had not witnessed and imbued them with retrospective significance.

Anthony opened by announcing their intent to celebrate “the twenty-fifth anniversary of the movement”—an entirely new claim. She then read from the printed report of the 1848 convention since most of those in attendance would not have been familiar with what had happened or what had been discussed. The retelling of the basic 1848 convention details underscores just how novel and inventive this nascent memory was. In what amounted to its first public telling, the account was not yet the codified, widely known tale that it would eventually become.

Getting one’s hands on a printed report of the 1848 convention would have been nearly impossible only a few years earlier. Copies of the 1848 pamphlet that Douglass printed from his newspaper offices that same year were now relics and had become, in the words of one suffragist just after the war, exceedingly “rare.” Those “rare” proceedings began to circulate more widely, however, after Stanton had them reprinted in 1870. This helped establish a documentary basis for this emergent origins account, making news of the meeting widely available for all who cared to learn.

It was surely one of these reprints that Isabella Beecher Hooker—the half sister of the adulterous Henry Ward Beecher and National Association partisan—had in her hands when she enthusiastically read a letter to those assembled: “First, let me beg you . . . one and all, to read the report of the first convention at Seneca Falls twenty-five years ago . . . that you may join me in heartfelt admiration.” Hooker rejoiced that she had just finished reading the report “for the third time,” adding that “had I the means, the printed reports to this convention should be placed in the hands of every woman in the United States.” She exhorted women to learn their history, now available in convenient and plentiful form, and positioned this new origin as true and uncontested. Hooker’s enthusiasm helped begin the long process of turning this report—and more specifically, the Declaration of Sentiments—into a sacred text.

By imploring activists to turn their attention to 1848, the celebration argued that much could be learned from the event. The proper lines of succession formed the first lesson. A convention resolution made this abundantly clear: “Resolved, that Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton will evermore be held in grateful remembrance as the pioneers in this grandest reform of the age,” it presaged; “that as the wrongs they attacked were broader and deeper than any other, so as time passes they will be revered as foremost among the benefactors of the race,
and that we also hold sacred the memory of their co-labors in the convention of 1848.”

Worded in the future tense, the resolution looked forward, not backward. The venerated Mott, who was now eighty and visibly frail, wondered aloud whether this might be her last public appearance. With those words, the torch was all but passed to Stanton “evermore,” not only as Mott’s “foremost” successor but also as the woman who had, as this story explained, almost single-handedly inaugurated the women’s rights movement in the United States. Notably, the resolution made no mention of the other organizers, including Martha Coffin Wright, who also sat on the stage that day. Wright and the other organizers were not integral to the political work of this developing narrative (and they would soon drop out of the story altogether).

Anthony’s mythological inclusion also began here. During this 1873 anniversary celebration, Anthony became the keeper and onstage architect of this tale. She spent more time cultivating and disseminating this story than Stanton ever did. Through her guardianship of it, it seemed to be rightfully hers, marking her as an heir of the movement—and its logical leader since the campaign’s so-called 1848 inception. That she and Stanton were inseparable by this point also contributed heavily to this myth-making. This equation of Anthony and Seneca Falls happened through other channels as well, some of which emerged later, as the story matured.57

To be clear, Anthony would never falsely claim to have been there. Nevertheless, her conflation with the event began with the story’s very first public telling. More than an accidental error, her inclusion was part of the logic of the story. Indeed, it was no accident that news reports heralding the Nineteenth Amendment’s ratification placed her there. In many ways, those 1920 news reports captured the essence of the story perfectly, even if the facts were sometimes wrong.

Remembering always involves forgetting, and the 1873 anniversary proceedings left out the broad array of demands made at Seneca Falls. They only highlighted the vote, a response to the postwar political climate, where women split over what they believed was their most important goal. Not only was there keen disagreement within the suffrage movement about how to proceed, there was also considerable disagreement among women about what properly defined women’s rights: temperance, bodily sovereignty, economic security, and so forth. Suffrage was not the sum total of women’s rights activism in this period, a fact often overlooked because of the sway of the Seneca Falls origin tale, with its exclusive focus on the vote. This too was another of the story’s main purposes—to focus women on the vote and away from the many other causes that consumed them. Women pursued all of these women’s rights causes after the war, and many argued that voting was not the primary solution for women’s autonomy and self-determination.58 This greatly frustrated Stanton and Anthony, and they worked overtime to persuade women to concentrate on the fight for enfranchisement.

This nascent origin story served another important political purpose as well: making a pointed, if controversial, case for granting women’s postwar voting rights. Still bitter over the Fifteenth Amendment, Stanton and Anthony once again, perhaps more tacitly, elevated white women’s votes over black men’s. After the Civil
War, one of the primary justifications for black men’s voting was that history—the arc of progress—demanded it. Abolition, along with emancipation, was repeatedly heralded in Northern political culture as the most historic and momentous development of modern history. This understanding created a justification for black men’s political rights. Stanton and Anthony used the history of Seneca Falls to counterpunch, crafting their interpretation to speak directly to this postwar political moment. By anchoring the postwar suffrage movement backward, to 1848, they were able to argue that women’s suffrage was also a long-lived movement and therefore that women had waited long enough. In this way, by arguing that women had been demanding this reform, it was not, as many postwar politicians said, reasonable to let the “negro” go first. Stanton and Anthony then went a step further, calling the ante-bellum women’s rights movement “the greatest movement for humanity ever inaugurated.” This strategic, pointed language was a direct attack on abolition’s claim to this mantle, and on the priority of black men’s votes.59

With that otherwise seemingly innocuous pronouncement, Stanton and Anthony pointedly argued—yet again—that white women had the most urgent claim to the ballot. They did not use the term “white women” but simply referred to themselves as “women”; in their mind, women were silently coded as white. Here, black women fell out of consideration, rendered invisible by the unspoken equation of women with whiteness, and blackness with men.60 “This was a continual hazard that black women faced while organizing for their own rights in a political culture that repeatedly erased them. Although they joined the suffrage movement, where they fought for visibility, they also organized independently, and on their own terms, pursuing a different range of issues from various, disparate angles.61

From 1873 forward, then, Stanton and Anthony had hit on a strategy they would use for the rest of their careers: history—or story—telling. And their work underscored a central truth about history—namely, that the past is simultaneously about the present. Present demands always shape what we remember and what we forget. The past hands us no stories. People, rather, invent them, from incomplete and partial shards. This is true for all history-telling. Stanton and Anthony adopted, in many ways, the role of history authors. They were not especially manipulative or conniving in how they remembered. They were ordinary, in that they were profoundly influenced by a present-day point of view. Yet they were exceptional in their determination and insight into how history could be leveraged as an asset. No other postwar suffragists would master this art better than Stanton and Anthony. And, over time, it would serve them exceptionally well.

As we recover the history of the Seneca Falls origin tale, it can be easy to see the pair as conniving, manipulating, and scheming. But this is not an especially useful lens. Indeed, they were absolutely true believers. The invention of this origin story came easily for Stanton and Anthony, not because they fully grasped all they could do with it, but because they genuinely believed it. Their story bent to their purposes, their particular vision, hopes, and ambitions, almost naturally. Stanton had always believed that a campaign took shape in 1848—for good reason.62 It was her personal story, her beginning. And Anthony had little reason to defer. But there were
legions of other beginnings that could have been picked. In fact, it could easily be argued that seeking a single origin point for an antebellum (and postbellum) women’s rights movement is nonsensical, given the many antecedents and contributing factors. Yet Stanton, never short on ambition or self-confidence, always conflated her story with the movement’s story. For her, and for Anthony, 1848 was simple truth.

Lucy Stone hated all this remembering. She thought it detracted from the work. But Stanton and Anthony were only getting started. They would continue to recall the Seneca Falls convention—however imperfectly—in new and inventive ways. They held another, more-robust anniversary convention in 1878. They wrote encyclopedia entries, pegging Seneca Falls as the suffrage movement’s beginning. They also began writing a history of the movement itself, centered on Seneca Falls and their National Association. As each new memory project unfolded, Stone vehemently distrusted that Stanton and Anthony would tell the story properly. When they wrote her for material, she refused cooperation, signing her letter, “Yours with ceaseless regret that any ‘wing’ of suffragists should attempt to write the history of the other.” Stone remained continually blind to how remembering could serve as an effective form of activism for the movement—something she ignored to her peril. But over the 1880s, as the Seneca Falls narrative took an increasingly strong hold on the movement, she began to realize how dangerous this memory was to her own standing in, and vision for, the campaign.

**A Movement Memory Made**

The 1880s witnessed two of Stanton and Anthony’s seminal historical works, both of which firmly cemented their increasingly familiar postwar version of the antebellum past. The first was the publication of their enormous, multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage*, a three-thousand-page history of the movement; and the second historical act involved the elaborate staging of the now codified 1848 memory, during the historic 1888 International Council of Women (ICW), the largest international women’s rights convention the nation had yet seen. After 1888, this story had no serious rivals. While Stone and the American Association held several small, local anniversary celebrations for the 1850 Worcester National Women’s Rights Convention, during which they pointedly labeled the 1850 event as the beginning of the movement—one that Stone had attended, and which Stanton and Anthony had not—their commemorations never gained much traction.

In response to the *History of Woman Suffrage*, which completely marginalized Stone and the American Association, Stone wrote a few, very short, rival historical accounts, but she never published them. By the time the 1888 ICW rolled around, now positioned by Stanton and Anthony as the fortieth anniversary not just of the US suffrage movement, but of a *global* women’s rights movement (a claim buttressed by three massive, seemingly authoritative volumes of movement history), Stone felt hemmed in. She wrote privately of her fervent desire “to puncture the bubble that the Seneca Falls meeting . . . was the *first* public demand for suffrage,” but
there was little she could do. Since its first public iteration in 1873, this now dominant tale of a miraculous 1848 origin had helped resurrect Stanton and Anthony’s standing in the movement, and helped eclipse Stone’s.

Stanton and Anthony’s monumental writings also served another important function—to sustain the campaign. When they began their work on the History, in 1876, the nation’s political establishment had abandoned its commitment to remaking political rights, and it became increasingly clear that women’s suffrage was unlikely to be won anytime soon. Suffragists’ immediate postwar optimism was fading into tired resignation. Now in their late fifties and early sixties, Anthony and Stanton realized that women’s suffrage might not be won in their lifetime. “We . . . have been moved,” they wrote in their preface to volume one, “by the consideration that many of our co-workers have already fallen asleep, and that in a few years all who could tell the story will have passed away.”

Although they originally planned on publishing a single volume, to be dashed off in a summer, the project quickly swelled and consumed the next decade of their lives—a mark of their dogged commitment to, and admirable foresight about, the importance of women’s history, well before such a field existed. The minutia and headaches in reconstructing past details from a haphazardly kept archive, culled from across the nation, drove the pair, and their coauthor, Matilda Joslyn Gage, to the brink of madness. But the more they uncovered in their research, the more determined they became that things not be lost or forgotten. In the end, the History was colossal in scope, spanning an entire century, from the 1770s to the mid-1880s. Volume one covered the antebellum movement. Volume two addressed the national movement after the Civil War. And the final volume, appearing in 1886, covered the movement in each and every state. It was a stunning achievement—an excruciating labor of love and, in the end, a beautiful valentine to the movement.

Standing for many decades as the first and only attempt at a comprehensive history of the campaign, the History quickly became an invaluable movement resource—one of its main functions. Its authors hoped that by knowing movement history, activists and ordinary Americans would be inspired to continue and support the fight. Readers could better understand the injustices (white) women endured by seeing an endless chronicle of those abuses laid out on center stage. (This was not a history that considered the stark realities of women of color.) Readers could see how hard and how long (mostly white) women had fought, and they would, hopefully, become steadfast and resolved in their commitment to securing women’s voting rights. If activists tired or lost faith, they could turn to the History for rejuvenation. There, they could find pride, inspiration—and, yes, joy. The massive edifice of the History also signaled that the campaign would not be easily torn down. It would, if it needed to, outlive all those who had launched it. This too became the promise of Seneca Falls, its story morphing into the organizing principle for the entire movement through the History’s three volumes.

Yet the History was simultaneously a gift and a lesson, a legacy and a directive. For all its many strengths, it was also a deeply partisan document, and it continued the work of Stanton and Anthony’s earlier memory projects, including
adjudicating authority within the movement. Over the 1880s, Stanton and Anthony’s National Association, which had resumed its fight for a constitutional amendment, continued to wage battle with Stone’s American Association, which still pursued a state strategy. Recounting the history of the bitter 1869 split in the History’s pages, Stanton and Anthony positioned the American Association in the most inflammatory way imaginable: as secessionists. “During the autumn of this year,” they exhorted, “there was a secession from our ranks, and . . . preliminary steps were taken for another organization.”

To use this word in the aftermath of the Civil War, in which secession had produced unimaginable carnage, was astonishing, and deliberately damming. This argument only worked, however, if the movement began at Seneca Falls, in 1848—a claim the History reiterated, and a date that was by now firmly and almost exclusively grafted onto Stanton and Anthony. In this way, anyone who deviated from them was, by definition, on the wrong side of the movement, and thus on the wrong side of history.

What is invisible in the pages of the History is just how effectively this 1848 story helped Stanton and Anthony assume leadership within the postwar movement, a movement that had, in the past, strongly questioned their fitness. A Seneca Falls origin narrative obscured all this by making it seem that the pair was in charge from the very beginning, something the History replicated and expanded upon. After telling their version of a Seneca Falls origin tale in the opening volume, Stanton nearly put Anthony there—a sign of how much Anthony had already been drawn into the story’s logic by the early 1880s. Stanton claimed the two met in 1848. (This drew the ire of other suffragists and had to be corrected in subsequent editions.) After putting Anthony at her kitchen hearth as early as 1848, Stanton then claims that her home became “the center of the rebellion.” A history of their antebellum work in New York, she confidently declared, “would in a measure be the history of the movement.” Stanton pulled no punches. Her argument was clear and straightforward: she and Anthony had inaugurated and led the campaign since its inception. They were the campaign.

The adoption of this story line, which continues today, has left us with almost no idea of how Stanton and Anthony cultivated leadership within the movement, which was not foreordained, even if a Seneca Falls mythology insists that it was. Yet to recount history strictly according to the logic of the Seneca Falls origin tale is, in fact, to read the end of the story back onto the beginning. It is to miss just how contested and contingent the outcome was, as well as how important history-telling was to the process.

Not surprisingly, the Lucy Stone–led American Association got short shrift in the History, dispatched with in a single, near-appendix-like chapter, stuck in the rear of a volume, and called nothing more than an ineffectual, state-level organization. It was a considerable demotion and certainly did not reflect the able and effective work of that society. The History instead detailed the work of the National Association, which focused heavily on Stanton and Anthony’s own labors. Stone tried to take down the History in an unfavorable newspaper review, in which she warned “no one reading this book would get an accurate or adequate idea of the real history
of the woman suffrage movement.” Her review, and the protests of other American-aligned suffragists, had little effect on the official standing the History quickly acquired. Through this seemingly authoritative document, Stanton and Anthony’s bold interpretative lines now appeared to be nothing more than obvious truth. If Stanton and Anthony’s earlier memory projects had helped popularize the story and recruit more and more believers, the History—as a seemingly official record—helped cement it.

Two years later, in 1890, Stone lost control of national suffrage organizing when Stanton and Anthony took (and, for Anthony, maintained) control of the newly merged National American Woman Suffrage Association, or NAWSA. The old National and American Associations were no more. From here on out, as they had been in the History’s pages and on stage at the 1888 anniversary, Lucy Stone and her colleagues would be reorganized as supporting cast members, rather than central players—until they were forgotten altogether. Much later, after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Stone’s daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell, would lament that the History’s volumes stood unchallenged, calling it “our misfortune” and adding that “it cannot be helped now, for few persons will ever take the trouble to dig out our side from the files [of history].” Indeed, almost no one has. Today, there exists no published history of the American Association, despite its energetic work over twenty years, and we still know far too little about Stone herself, who spent a lifetime in the movement.

Then, in a surprising turn of events, Stanton was cast out of movement memory, showing how flexible and adaptable stories—and history—can be. By the 1890s, the movement had become more conservative, as scores of Christian temperance women flooded into it (hoping to use the vote to end liquor traffic). When Stanton published her inflammatory Woman’s Bible in 1895, an investigation into how men erroneously interpreted the Bible to oppress the opposite sex, Christian women blasted her as heretical. Anthony tried to calm them, but they issued a strident denunciation of Stanton, effectively excommunicating her from NAWSA (see cats. 68–69). Once lauded as the mother of the movement, she was now branded an infidel. As a result, the memory of Seneca Falls began to rest even more heavily on Anthony.

When Stanton died in 1902, two weeks shy of her eighty-seventh birthday, her obituaries predictably put Anthony alongside her at the moment of the movement’s ostensible, miraculous creation. As one newspaper explained: “After returning from England with Susan B. Anthony and others she began to agitate for woman suffrage,” resulting in the “foundation at Seneca Falls early in 1848 of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.” Every detail here was wrong. But it was nevertheless the logical result of decades of Stanton and Anthony’s memory work that had framed their lives and their activism, and the movement itself, around this singular event.

By the time Anthony died, four years later, in 1906, these errors and this logic persisted. Unlike Stanton, Anthony had remained sprightly and active into her final years. On returning home from a NAWSA convention and from her own
eighty-sixth birthday celebration, she felt unwell. A doctor diagnosed her with pneumonia, and while her lungs began to recover, her heart remained weak. She had suffered heart trouble during her final years, and heart failure likely took her life on the morning of March 13, 1906. That evening’s widely circulated Associated Press story inevitably alleged that “with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other[s] Miss Anthony called in 1848 the first woman’s rights convention, which met at Seneca Falls.” Newspapers from Nebraska to New England, when not giving her outright credit for having “called” the meeting, placed Anthony in attendance, as in a much-reprinted statement that she and another woman “were the only survivors of that famous women’s rights convention held in Seneca Falls in 1848.”

If Stanton increasingly receded in movement memory after the publication of her Woman’s Bible, the reverse was true of Anthony, partly owing to a new fight within the movement. Just as Stanton and Anthony had done, a new generation of suffragists deployed history to do battle with one another. In the 1910s, suffragists forced another organizational split: with Carrie Chapman Catt’s NAWSA on the one side and Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party (NWP) on the other. Catt had been Anthony’s handpicked successor, and NAWSA had been Anthony’s organization. When Paul split with NAWSA, she also tried to legitimate her move by arguing that the will of Anthony and thus the weight of history were on her side. Resurrecting a version of the federal amendment written by Stanton, they strategically dubbed it the “Anthony Amendment.” As these suffragists fought with one another, they wielded memory, one that increasingly narrowed to Anthony and the mistaken, if nevertheless carefully curated, impression that she was the movement. While she had absolutely been critical to the campaign, intramovement battles after her death meant that she began to assume a singular, heroic stature. She became a blunt weapon, rather than a multifaceted personality, to be wielded in the quest for legitimacy.

It was no surprise, then, that when the Nineteenth Amendment finally cleared ratification in August 1920, Anthony and Seneca Falls framed victory (fig. 16). What is often missed, however, is just how important this story was to achieving...
victory. How much the creation of that story, which was of a hard-fought effort, helped sustain as well as direct the movement, and how, at the same time, it helped buttress Stanton and Anthony’s struggle for leadership, along with their simultaneous struggle to define and advance a multifaceted women’s rights campaign. When we talk about the women’s rights story of the nineteenth century as defined by the struggle for the vote, we do so partly because of the continued dominance of this story as our framing narrative.

None of this is to say that the Seneca Falls tale is unimportant. Indeed, when we look at its history and functions as an invented story, it has been much, much more important than we have realized. To argue that the particular significance assigned to it in the aftermath of the war was retrospective and retroactive does not mean that it was not also important in 1848. To raise questions about where our understanding of that significance arises and to suggest we reexamine the narrative around the events of 1848 is not to demolish Seneca Falls as historically significant. In fact, it is to be responsible in that assessment.

This essay has been dedicated to the proposition that what we remember, and what we forget, matters. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this memory helped Stanton and Anthony to build and sustain their leadership; push for the vote as the most important women’s rights demand amid a contested field; make a particular, pointed, public claim for the vote (one that denigrated men of color); and keep the movement afloat through tough times, offering inspiration and guidance. In short, Stanton and Anthony, more than any other suffragists, deployed memory as a weapon in their post–Civil War battle, both inside and outside the movement. But in the end, the story they created, the story of Seneca Falls, may tell us much more about the 1870s and the 1880s than about the 1840s.

As we approach 2020 and prepare to remember this remarkably important, if troubled, campaign, looking back reminds us of the power of memory. And it urges us to be thoughtful in the present in how we remember that past. For in our memories inhere present-day lessons as well, just as they existed in Stanton and Anthony’s memories. If we remember 1920 as a victory, the victory, the conclusion of the 1848 story, we erase, for example, the long history of struggle for voting rights on the part of women of color. These women were not enfranchised by the Nineteenth Amendment, owing to state laws that barred them on the basis of criteria other than that of “sex.” And if we frame our story of the 2020 anniversary with the story of Seneca Falls, is it as likely to happen, what lessons are we imparting today? Our tendency to view the past as transparent truth has the potential to blind us to all the work that remains to be done. So, as we continue to struggle for justice and equality in the present, and as we move forward into the future, we must be mindful of what and how we remember.
INDEX

Note: Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations.

Abbott, Abby Hamlin, 58
Abbott, Lyman, 63
abolitionism, 3, 6–7, 9, 89, 91, 94, 98, 99, 112, 243n10
Adams, Abigail, 6
Adams, John, 6
AERA. See American Equal Rights Association

African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, 31–33, 39–40

Allender, Nina Evans, 195; His District (cat. 101), 198; Training for the Draft (cat. 111), 200 (detail), 206, 208, 208

Ambassadors of Justice, 183
American Anti-Slavery Society, 7; 94
American Commission for Belgian Relief, 85
American Equal Rights Association (AERA), 10–11, 36–38, 94, 113, 235n48, 238n26, 252n2
American Medical Association, 84, 243n9
American Medical Women's Association, 86
American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA, also American Association), 11–12, 15–16, 17, 22, 24–25, 38, 113, 148, 237n75, 252n2

Anthony Amendment. See Nineteenth Amendment; Sixteenth Amendment Anti-Sixteenth Amendment Society, 57
Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 89, 91
anti-slavery societies, 4, 31, 35, 89, 94; American Anti-Slavery Society, 7, 91, 94; Essex County Anti-Slavery Society, 94; Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 94; Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 35, 89, 249n2; Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, 94; Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, 94

anti-suffragists, 49–67, 71, 157, 165, 186, 217, 258n3

Appeal for a Sixteenth Amendment (National Woman Suffrage Association), 12, 13
Arizona, 69, 223, 225

Army Nurse Corps, 177
Arnold, Virginia, 206

Bain News Service, Hedwig Reicher as Columbia in Suffrage Pageant (cat. 84), 180, 181
Baker, Newton D., 72
Barnes, Nellie N., 83, 83, 86, 248n76
Bartholomew, Charles Lewis, What Shall We Do with Our Ex-Presidents—Susan B. Anthony Knows (cat. 67), 161, 161
Batchelor, Clarence Daniel, Our Right to Democracy! What's Yours? 73
Bedou, Arthur P., Adella Hunt Logan and Her Studio (cat. 28), 120. See also Mathew Brady Studio

Beecher family, 151, 255n26
Beecher, Henry Ward, 16, 18, 121, 252n12
Beecher family, 151, 255n26
Belmont, Alva (cat. 63), 156
Belmont, Oliva Hazard Perry, 157
Beloit Daily News (newspaper), 219, 220
Bernstorf, Johann Heinrich von, 72
Bethune, Mary McLeod (cat. 53), 146, 147
Blais, J. J. Gould, 32
Bingham, John, 118
Black History—Women’s History (button), 30
black men: Jim Crow strictures targeting, 225; voting rights of, 11, 21, 29–30, 37–38, 44, 125, 145, 177, 228; white women in relation to, 11, 21, 30, 33, 37–38, 41, 43, 91, 113, 148, 177, 214; in Woman’s Suffrage Parade, 177; World War I contributions of, 71–72, 214, 243n14
Blake, Lillie Devereux, 15, 57
Blatch, Harriett Stanton (cat. 9, cat. 87), 97, 98, 157, 167, 183, 183, 190, 256n24, 256n25
Bloomer, Amelia (cat. 18), 105, 108
Boyé, Bertha Margaret, Votes for Women (cat. 90), 186, 187
Bradford, Sarah H., 99
Bradley & Rulofson, Miriam Follin Leslie (cat. 64), 157, 158
Brady, Mathew B.: Anna Elizabeth Dickinson (cat. 27), 119; Victoria Cattlin Woodbull (cat. 28), 120. See also Mathew Brady Studio

Brannam, Lucy, 208, 211, 211
Brown, Antoinette, 98
Brown, Mary L., 71
Brown, May, 41–42
Brown, Mrs. Raymond, 68
Brown, Nikki, 243n14
Bruyn, Elizabeth, 82, 82
Buchanan, Ella, The Suffragist Arousing Her Sisters, 190
Burleson, Jane, 169
Burn, Harry T., 1, 66, 219, 221
Burns, Lucy (cats. 113–14), 167, 208, 209, 210
Burnside, Ambrose, 105
Burroughs, Nannie, 42
Bushnell, Elmer Andrews, The Sky Is Now Her Limit (cat. 121), ii (detail), 217, 219
California, 186
Cary, Evelyn Rumsey, Woman’s Suffrage (cat. 70), 164, 165
Cary, Mary Ann Shadd, 125, 133
Catt, Carrie Chapman (cat. 55), 26, 57–58, 64, 69–70, 148, 149, 157, 165, 201, 211

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Arrest of Clinedinst, Barnett McFee: 120

Civil War, 2–3, 8–9, 17, 23–24, 27, 36, 38–39, 57, 59, 99, 105, 108, 111, 115, 235n49, 235n48

Clafin, Tennessee (cat. 29), 14, 118, 120, 252n11

Cleveland, Grover, 157, 161, 255n37

Clinedinst, Barnett McFee: Arrest of Picketing Suffragists (cat. 110), 207;

Dodge, Arthur Murray, 60

Douglass, Frederick, 5–6, 6, 10–11, 37, 94, 97, 118, 125, 141, 145

Dred Scott v. Sandford, 40

Du Bois, W. E. B., 141, 144

Dunbar-Nelson, Alice (cat. 118), 214, 214

Duniway, Abigail Scott (cat. 40), 132, 132, 233n29

Dunston-Weiler Lithograph Company, Uncle Sam Suffragette, 60

Dürer, Albrecht, Four Horses of the Apocalypse, 129

Edouart, Augustine, Sarah Josepha Hale, 56

Edward, Mary Lee, 68, 72, 79–80, 83–85, 85, 244n24

Eichelberger, J. S., 66

Ellis, Anna, 82, 247n72

Emancipation Proclamation, 9

Emmons, Eva, 80

Enlistment Act, 108

Ensley, Elizabeth Piper, 148

Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, 183

Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 228

Equal Rights Amendment, 221, 231

Equal Rights Party, 121, 133

Essex County Anti-Slavery Society, 94

Falk, Benjamin J., Belva Ann Lockwood (cat. 42), 133, 135

Federalist Party, 111

Field, Sara Bard (cat. 98), 194–95, 195, 196

Fifteenth Amendment, 10–12, 20, 29, 30, 36, 39, 45, 57, 113, 115, 117, 118, 129, 243n10, 251n63

Finley, Caroline Sandford, 68, 72–74, 74, 77, 79–80, 83–85, 85, 244n21, 244n24, 245n29, 249n95

First National Conference of the Colored Women of America, 145, 146

Flood, Alice, 82, 86

Foote, Julia A. J., 31, 32, 40, 239n32

Foote, Mary Hallock, 58

Fordham, Marie K., 77–80

Forten, Charlotte, 36

Forten family, 35

Foster, Abby Kelley, 35

Foster, Laura E., Looking Backward, 48

Fourteenth Amendment, 29, 36, 112, 117

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly (magazine), 157, 159

Fuller, Margaret (cats. 10, 11), 6, 98, 100, 101, 250n31, 250n32; Woman in the Nineteenth Century, 6, 98

Gage, Matilda Joslyn (cat. 20), 23, 105, 110, 113, 133

Gardner, Eliza Ann, 39–41, 40

Garrison, William Lloyd, 97, 237n75

Garrity, Mary, Ida B. Wells-Barnett (cat. 50), 138 (detail), 144

Gavin, Lettie, 75

General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), 43

Geo. D. Barnard & Co., Ballot Box (cat. 36), 128, 129, 252n20

GFWC. See General Federation of Women’s Clubs

Gibbs, Gardner, and Company, “Am I Not a Woman & a Sister?” Abolitionist Hard Times Token (cat. 2), 89, 91

Gibson, Charles Dana: Congratulations (cat. 125), 216 (detail), 221, 222; Scribner’s for June (cat. 45), 139, 140

Gilder, Helena de Kay, 58–59, 59

Gilder, Jeannette, 58

Gilder, Joseph B., 58

Gilder, Richard Watson, 58, 59

Gilder, Rodman de Kay, 59

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins Stetson (cat. 59), 151, 153, 154, 253n26; “The Yellow Wallpaper” (cat. 60), 151, 153

Godey’s Lady’s Book (magazine), 57

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu.
Index

Gordon, Kate, 254n19
Grant, Gordon, *Giddap!* (cat. 89), 183, 185
Grant, Ulysses S., 57, 60
Gray, Natalie, *Piece of Cotton Embroidered in Occoquan Workhouse* (cat. 112), 208, 209
Gregory, Alice, 72–75, 75, 77–80, 83, 244n24
Gregory, Fannie Marion, 80
Griffiths, Helen Isabel O., 77
Grímke, Charlotte Forten, 146
Grímke, Sarah, 6–7, 7, 89, 91; *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (cat. 5), 91, 93
Gurney, Jeremiah, *Susan B. Anthony* (cat. 17), 107
Hagemeyer, Johan, *Sara Bard Field* (cat. 98), 195
Hale, Sarah Josepha, 56, 57
Hamer, Fannie Lou (cat. 131), 28–30, 30, 44, 47, 225, 228, 229
Hamilton, Grant E., *Out in the Cold* (cat. 44), 116
Happersett, Reese, 129
Harding, Warren G., 222
Harper, Ida Husted, 52
Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, 49
Harper’s Weekly (magazine), 58, 111, 115, 118, 121
Harris, John S., 57
Harris & Ewing Studio, 208; *Alice Paul Raises a Glass in Front of the Ratiﬁcation Banner, August 26, 1920* (cat. 123), 221, 221; *Lucy Burns in Jail* (cat. 113), 209; *Inez Milholland Boissevain* (cat. 75), 170, 171; *Lucy Brannham with Banner* (cat. 115), 208, 211, 211; *Party Watchﬁres Burn Outside White House* (cat. 119), 214–15, 215; *Virginia Arnold Holding Katier Wilson Banner* (cat. 108), 206
Harrison, Benjamin, 141
Harris-Perry, Melissa, 45
Haudenosaunee, 105, 190
Haydon, Benjamin Robert, *Portrait of the 1840 Convention of the Anti-Slavery Society*, 4
Heald, Sumner Bradley, *Lucy Stone* (cat. 15), 105
Henry, Edward Lamson, *The New Woman* (cat. 58), 151, 152
Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, 237n75
Higonnet, Margaret L., 80
Hoeker, Isabella Beecher (cat. 32), 15, 18, 118, 121, 124
Hoover, Herbert, 72
Hope Day Nursery for Colored Children, 60
House Judiciary Committee, 14, 57, 118, 121, 133
Howe, Julia Ward, 38
Hunt, Ida A. Gibbs (cat. 48), 141, 142
Hunt, Jane, 5
Hunt, Ward, 125
I&M Ottenheimer: *Liberty and Her Attendants (Suffragettes Tableau) in Front of Treasury Bldg March 3–1913–Washington DC* (cat. 83), 166 (detail), 180, 180; *Starting of Suffragette’s Parade Coming Up Penna. Ave. March 3, 1913, Washington, DC* (cat. 72), 169
Idaho, 139, 252–534n20
Indian Citizenship Act, 223
International Council of Nurses, 177
International Council of Women, 22
Iroquois, 105, 190, 194
Jacobi, Mary Putnam, 57
Jacobson, Franc Delzell, 190
Jennings, Linda Dezhia, *Washington Women’s Cook Book* (cat. 61), 154, 154
Jensen, Kimberly, 71
Jewell, Esther E. Dickinson, 60
Jewell, Marshall, 60
Jim Crow, 30, 41–44, 217, 225
Joan of Arc, 129, 170, 199
John Maddock and Sons, *Votes for Women Tableware* (cat. 94), 190, 192
Johnson, Andrew, 56, 111
Johnson, Helen Kendrick, 62; *Woman and the Republic*, 61, 62
Johnson, Lyndon B., 228
Johnson, Rossiter, 61
Johnston, Frances Benjamin, *Alice Hay Wadsworth*, 65
Johnston, Robert J., 53
Jones, Louise M., 151, 151
Jones, Rosalie (cat. 88), 183, 184
Journal of the American Medical Association, 84
Judge (magazine), cat. 44, 136, 133
Julian, George W., 57
Keckley, Elizabeth, 36
Keiley, Joseph T., *Zikula-So* (cat. 129), 223, 226
Kepler, Udo J.: *Flocking for Freedom*, 12; *Saragery to “Civilization”* (cat. 97), 190, 194
Kerwin, Louise, 151, 151
Kilbreth, Mary G., 66
Kindberg, Maria, 194, 196
Kindstedt, Ingeborg, 194, 196
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 47
Knights of Columbus, 76, 246n40
Ladies’ Home Journal, 157
La Follette, Belle, 64
La Motte, Ellen N., 80
Langston, Phyllis Terrell (cat. 49), 143
League of Women Voters, 66
Leet Brothers: *Police Protection for Inaugural Procession March 4, 1913, Fifteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue* (cat. 86), 180, 182; *Police Protection for Woman’s Suffrage Procession March 3, 1913, Fifteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue* (cat. 85), 180, 182
Lefort, Marie Louise, 82–83, 82, 86, 248n80
Leibovich, Mark, 45
Lenox, Nancy, 94, 250n18
Leslie, Frank, 157
Leslie, Miriam (cat. 64), 157, 158
The Liberator (newspaper), 89
Liberty Loans, 72
The Lily (newspaper), 105
Lincoln, Abraham, 9, 108
Lippincott, Sara Jane, 116, 117
Livermore, Mary, 14, 116, 117, 235n49
lobbying, 44, 64, 111, 113, 148, 167, 186, 195, 201, 214, 217, 219, 253n29
Lockwood, Belva Ann (cat. 42), 135
Lockwood, Belva Ann (cat. 42), 135
Logan, Adella Hunt, (cat. 82) 177, 179
Logan, Adella Hunt, (cat. 82) 177, 179
Logan, Warren, 177
lynching, 30, 41, 43–44, 141, 145
Man-Suffrage Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, 63
Marceau, Theodore C., *Carrie Chapman Catt* (cat. 55), 149
Martorell, Antonio, *Felisa Rincón de Gautier* (cat. 130), 225, 227, 228,
Index

Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 94
Mathew Brady Studio, Sojourner Truth, 35.
See also Brady, Mathew B.
Mayer, Henry, The Awakening (cat. 91), 186, 188–89, 260 (detail)
McCoy, Zenas Winsor, Suffrage March Line—How Thousands of Women Parade Today at the Capital (cat. 81), 178, 274
M‘Clintock, Mary Ann, 5
McCulloch, Catherine Waugh, 254n19
McKee, Jane, 84, 85
McMahon, Adah, 82, 82
Mead, Rebecca J., 148
82
McMahon, Adah, 82, 82
McKee, Jane, 84, 85
McCulloch, Catherine Waugh, 254n19
M‘Clintock, Mary Ann, 5
Mink, Patsy Takamoto (cat. 132), 225, 230
Minor, Virginia Louisa, 129, 253n21
Minor v. Happersett, 132
M‘Intire, Mary A., 61
Monahan, P. J., Votes for Women (cat. 65), 159
Montana, 167, 199
Mora, José María, Susette La Flesche Tibbles (cat. 128), 223, 226
More, Ellen S., 74
Morgan, Anne, 73
Morse, Irene May, 82, 82
Morton, H. Q., Charlotte Perkins Gilman Stetson (cat. 59), 133
Moss, Thomas, 141, 144
Mott, James, 5
Mott, Lucreta Coffin (cat. 7), 3–5, 5, 10, 11, 17, 18, 20, 32–33, 94, 96, 97, 105, 116, 117, 235x48, 235n50, 249n, 2254n19
Muñoz Marin, Luis, 223
Murray Washington, Margaret (cat. 51), 145–46, 145, 177
Nast, Thomas: Get thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan! (cat. 31), 16, 121, 123; Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving Dinner (cat. 24), 114, 115, 251n65
National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), 25–26, 66–67, 69–72, 75–77, 80, 82, 85–87, 113, 146, 148, 157, 165, 167, 170, 177, 183, 186, 199, 201–2, 206, 211, 217–19, 244n21, 254n19; Broadsie: To the 8,000,000 Working Women in the United States (cat. 104), 202, 203; Flier: Are You with Us? (cat. 117), 211, 213
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 44
National Association of Colored Women, 141, 145–46, 177
National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (cat. 52), 146
National Association of Day Nurseries, 64
National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, 52, 61, 63–64, 66
National Conference of Colored Women, 41
National Council of American Indians, 223
National Federation of Afro-American Women, 146
National League of Colored Women, 146
National Woman’s Party (NWP), 1, 26, 64, 157, 170, 199, 201–2, 204, 206, 211, 214–15, 217–19, 221, 242n4, 254n19, 256n25; Failure is Impossible (cat. 74), vi, 169–70, 171; Forward Out of Darkness (cat. 73), 169–70, 171
National Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), 11–12, 13, 14–15, 17–18, 22, 24–25, 38, 60, 113, 132, 148; Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States (cat. 41), 133, 154
National Women’s Colored Association. See National Association of Colored Women
Native Americans, 105, 190, 194, 222–23, 228, 231, 258n15
NAWSA. See National American Woman Suffrage Association
Nevada, 167
Nevin, Sophie, 75–76, 79, 83
New Departure, 14–15, 17, 117, 118, 121, 125
New Mexico, 69, 190, 223
New Northwest (newspaper), 132
New Woman, 42, 139–65
New York, 168, 169, 170, 177, 180, 183, 194–95, 199, 201, 206, 208, 211, 214–15, 221, 231, 232n1, 242n4, 256n25
Payne, Daniel, 32
Penn, L. Garland, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, 44
Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 35, 89, 249n2
Phillips, Wendell, 37
Platt, H. M.: Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (cat. 46), 142; Ida Alexander Gibbs Hunt (cat. 48), 142; Mary Church Terrell (cat. 47), x (detail), 142
Plumbe, John, Jr., Margaret Fuller (cat. 10), 98, 100, 250n31
Political Equality Association, 190
political parties, 55, 254n19
Pomeroy, Samuel C., 253n3
Ponca, 223
Popular Monthly (magazine), 157
Populism, 148, 254n19
Post, Amy Kirby (cat. 8), 94, 96, 97
Post, Isaac, 94
Povitsky, Olga R., 77
Price, Lucy, 64
Puck (magazine), 154, 183, 186, 190
Puerto Rico, 223, 225, 243n12
Quander, Nellie, 177
Queen, James Fuller, The New Costume Polka (cat. 19), 105, 109
Randall Studio, Sojourner Truth (cat. 14), 104, 104
Rankin, Jeannette Pickering (cat. 102), 69–70, 167, 198, 199

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For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu.
Reading, Charmian, Fannie Lou Hamer (cat. 131), 225, 229

Reconstruction, 29, 37, 38, 44, 129, 132

Red Cross, 63, 71, 75–76, 177

Red Scare, 66

Reicher, Hedwig (cat. 84), 180, 181

Remond, Sarah Parker (cat. 6), 10, 35, 94, 95

Republican National Committee, Women! For Your Own Good. Vote the Republican Ticket (cat. 126), 222, 225

Republican Party, 43, 222, 254n19

Revolution (newspaper), 37, 115

Rice, Cecil Spring, 72

Rice, Harriet, 71

Riddle, Agnes L., 151, 151

Rincón de Gautier, Felisa (cat. 130), 223, 225, 227, 228, 259n17

Rochester Woman's Rights Convention, 7, 31–33, 97

Root, Elihu, 63

Root, Marcus Aurelius, Lucretia Coffin Mott, 5

Ruffin, Josephine St. Pierre, 145

Saint-Gaudens, Augustus, Richard Gilder, Helena de Kay Gilder, and Rodman de Kay Gilder, 59

Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, 94

Salvation Army, 76, 246n40

San Francisco Call (newspaper), 26

San Francisco College Equal Suffrage League, 186

Sargent, Aaron A., 137, 253n35

Sarony, Napoleon: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 51; Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (cat. 25), 115, 115; Susan B. Anthony, 19, 125; Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 9

Sartain, John, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 37

satin ribbons: Belva Lockwood Rebus Ribbon (cat. 43), 133, 135; First Vote Badge (cat. 127), 222, 225

Schamer, L., Representative Women (cat. 26), 116, 117

Scott, Lucy Parkman, 58

Scottish Women's Hospitals, 72, 244–45n25

Scribner's (magazine) (cat. 45), 139, 140

Seagrave, Mabel, 71, 76, 77, 77, 78, 80, 86

Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention, 1–7, 17–18, 20–27, 31–33, 49, 53, 97, 232n1, 233n14

Shaw, Anna Howard (cat. 79), 57, 69, 70–71, 170, 176, 190

Shaw, Josephine Lowell, 59

Shaw, Robert Gould, 59

Shaw, Sarah Blake Sturgis, 58

Sherald, Amy, First Lady Michelle Obama, 46

Silent Sentinels, 199, 201, 204, 206, 208

Sixteenth Amendment, 12, 15, 57, 132, 133, 137, 257n3. See also Nineteenth Amendment

Smith, Washington G., Susan Augusta Fenimore Cooper, 50

Smith, William J., Fannie Lou Hamer, 28

Smith College, 72

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women, 63

Society of American Indians, 223

Spencer, Lilly Martin, The War Spirit at Home (cat. 22), 111, 112

Standing Bear, 223, 258n13


Stanton, Henry, 3–4

Steinem, Gloria, 45

Stetson, Charles Walter, 151

Stimson, Henry L., 180

Stone, Lucy (cat. 15), 7, 8, 10–12, 17, 22–25, 38, 61, 94, 98, 104, 105, 113, 148, 254n18; Draft of Marriage Protest Statement (cat. 16), 104, 106

Stuart, Frederick T., Margaret Fuller (cat. 11), 98, 101

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 29

suffragette movement (Britain), 165, 167

The Suffragist (newspaper, cat. 124), 221, 222

Sykes, Charles H., At Last (cat. 124), 221, 222

Sylvester, Richard, 180

Taft, William Howard, 63

Taney, Roger, 40

Taylor, Charles Jay, A Squeaker for Woman Suffrage (cat. 62), 154, 155

Taylor, Mary, No Vote Means No Remedy for Long Hours and Short Pay (cat. 103), 201–2, 202

Taylor, Susie King, 36

Tennessee, 1, 14, 66, 118, 141, 219, 220, 225; Tennessee Supreme Court, 144; Tennessee Vote Upholds Suffrage (cat. 122), 220

Tenth Amendment, 64

Terrell, Mary Church, Congressional Union for Woman's Suffrage, to Appeal the Voting Women of the West (cat. 100), 144, 195, 197

Threats, Susan Blackwell Fiske (cat. 128), 223, 226

Tiffany, Charles Lewis, 74

Tiffany, Katrina Brandes Ely, 74–76, 76

Tiffany, Louis Comfort, 75

Tilton, Elizabeth, 121, 252n12

Tilton, Theodore, 121, 252n12

Title IX, 228

Train, George Francis, 115, 157, 243n10

Truth, Sojourner (cat. 14), 10, 10, 33, 34, 35, 97, 99, 104, 104, 238n12, 251n44

Tubman, Harriet (cat. 12), 98, 99, 102, 146, 250n38; Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (cat. 12), 102

Tuskegee Institute, 145–46

Underground Railroad, 97, 99

Underwood & Underwood: Alice Paul (cat. 71), 168, 169; Dr. Alice Gregory of the Women's Oversea Hospitals Unit, in Uniform, 75; The First Contingent of the Women's Oversea Hospitals, Supported by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, 70

Unidentified artists: Am I Not a Woman and a Sinner? (cat. 1), 89, 90; Angelina Emily Grimké, 7; Broadside: Sojourner Truth Lecture, 35; Broadside: The Woman's Bible (cat. 69), 163, 165; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (cat. 13), 103; Frances Willard (cat. 37), 130; Helen Kendrick Johnson, 62; Lady Lobbyists at the White House (cat. 23), 111, 113; Margaret James (Murray Washington (cat. 51), 145; Mrs. Woodbull Asserting Her Right to Vote (cat. 30), 118, 122; National Association of Colored Women's Clubs Pin (cat. 52), 146, 146; Patsy Takemoto Mink (cat. 132), 228, 230; Route of Envoys Sent from East by the Congressional Union for Woman's Suffrage, to Appeal the Voting Women of the West (cat. 100), 195, 197; Tennessee Vote Upholds Suffrage (cat. 122), 218, 220; Votes for
Women! New York City (cat. 66), 160; Votes for Women Tray (cat. 95), 190, 193; Lady Delegates Speaking to the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives, 15; The Woman Voter and the Next President of the United States (cat. 120), 218; Women's Christian Temperance Union Oratorical Prize Medal (cat. 38), 130

Unidentified photographers: Abigail Scott Duniway (cat. 40), 132; Alice Dunbar-Nelson (cat. 118), 214, 214; Alice Stone Blackwell (cat. 54), 149; Alva Belmont (cat. 63), 156; Amelia Bloomer (cat. 18), 105, 108; Amy Kirby Post (cat. 8), 96; Anna Howard Shaw (cat. 79), 176; College Women Picketing in Front of the White House, New York State Day (cat. 106), 199, 204, 205; Dr. Caroline S. Finley Operating on a Fracture, 74; Dr. Mabel Seagrave Operating on a Soldier, 78; Dr. Nellie N. Barksness, 83; Drs. Finley, Edward, Sholly, and Miss McKee Receiving the Croix de Guerre, 85; Eliza Ann Gardner, 40; Elizabeth Cary Stanton and Her Daughter, Harriot Stanton Blatch (cat. 9), 97, 98; Frederick Douglass, 6; Harriot Stanton Blatch (cat. 87), 183; Isabella Beecher Hooker (cat. 32), 121, 124; Josephine Jewell Dodge, 61; Julia A. Foste, 32; Lucretia Coffin Mott (cat. 7), 96; Lucy Stone, 8; Mary Church Terrell with Daughter Phyllis Terrell Langston (cat. 49), 143; Mary Edwards Walker (cat. 21), 88 (detail), 105, 110; Matilda Joslyn Gage (cat. 20), 110; Medical Staff of Gas Unit, 82; Nannie Burroughs and eight other African American women gathering for the “Banner State Woman’s National Baptist Convention” 42; Nursing Staff and Ambulances outside of Hospital Buildings in Labouheyre, 81; Operating Room in Hospital, 81; Rosalie Gardiner Jones (cat. 88), 183, 184; Sarah Moore Grimké, 7; Sarah Parker Remond (cat. 6), 95; Sojourner Truth, “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” 10; Staff of Military Unit of Women’s Overseas Hospitals U.S.A., 68; Pickets in front of the White House, New York State Day (cat. 107), 199, 204, 205; Suffrage Parade on Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C.—Women on Wagon (cat. 80), 178, 270 (detail); Suffrage Procession (cat. 105), v (detail), 204; Tennessee Celeste Claflin (cat. 29), 118, 120; Truck Containing Bath Equipment and Boiler, 81; Victoria Claflin Woodburn, 14; Woman Suffrage Postcard (cat. 78), 175; Women Voters Envoys (cat. 99), 194–95, 196

United States Medical Reserve Corps, 73 United States v. Susan B. Anthony, 125

US Congress, 10, 12

Utah, 14, 57, 132, 139, 157, 223

Vanderbilt, Cornelius, 14, 118

Vanderbilt, William Kissam, 157

Vernon, Mabel, 194

Von Sholly, Anna, 68, 71, 72, 73, 77–80, 84,

85

voter discrimination: 10, 29, 228, 251n63

Wadsworth, Alice Hay, 63–64, 65, 66, 242n60

Wadsworth, James W., Jr., 52, 63–64, 242n60

Waite, Morrison, 129

Walker, Mary Edwards (cat. 21), 57, 88, 105, 108, 110

war. See Civil War; World War I

Ward, Nathan, 31

Warder, Winifred, 80

Washington (state), 125, 132, 139, 199

Washington, Booker T., 146, 177

Washington, Margaret Murray (cat. 51), 145–46, 145, 147

Washington Equal Suffrage Association, Washington Women’s Cook Book (cat. 61), 154, 154

WCTU. See Woman’s Christian Temperance Union

Wedgwood, Josiah, 89

Weld, Angelina Emily Grimké, 6–7, 8, 89, 91, An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States (cat. 4), 91, 93; Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Emily Grimké Weld, and Their Children, 92

Weld, Ezra Greenleaf, Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Emily Grimké Weld, and Their Children (cat. 3), 89, 92

Weld, Theodore Dwight, 91; Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Emily Grimké Weld, and Their Children, 92

Wells, Ida B. (cat. 50), 43–44, 44, 138, 141, 144–45, 144, 146, 177

Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, 94

Wheeler, Everett Pepperrrell, 52, 63

Wickersham, George W., 63

Willard, Frances (cat. 37), 129, 130

Williams, Andrée N., 99

Wilson, Woodrow, 63, 64, 69, 72, 169, 177, 180, 183, 186, 199, 201, 204, 206, 214–15, 217, 242n4

Winslow, Rose, 208

Wollstonecraft, Mary, 201

Woman Patriot (newspaper), 64, 66

Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), 43, 129, Oratorical Prize Medal (cat. 38) 130, 132, 148, 177

Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense, 69

Woman’s Era (magazine), 145

Woman’s Journal, 148, 186

Woman’s Protest (newspaper), 61, 63


Woman Suffrage Party, Votes for Women Pennant (cat. 96), 190, 193, 278–79

Women’s National Republican Club, 67

Women’s Overseas Hospitals Unit, 68, 70–87, 70, 75, 87

Women’s Party of Western Voters, 199

Women’s Political Union, 183, 256n25

Women’s Second Ward Republican Club, 146

Women Voters’ Anti-Suffrage Party, 66

Woodhull, Victoria Claflin (cats. 28, 30–31), 14–16, 14, 15, 17, 57, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 128, 133, 252n11; The Origins, Tendencies, and Principles of Government, 121

Woodburn and Claflin’s Weekly (newspaper), 14, 16, 118, 252n9

Worcester National Women’s Rights Convention, 8, 22, 33, 99

World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, 3–4, 94

World War I, 63, 69–87, 199, 204, 206

Wright, Martha Coffin, 5, 18, 20

Wust, Thomas, 267

Wust, Thomas, Graphic Statues, No. 17—"The Woman Who Dared" (cat. 35), 125, 127

Wyoming, 14, 57, 86, 132, 139, 148, 255n22

Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), 76, 246n40

Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), 71, 144

Zitkala-Sa (cat. 129), 223, 226