

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

Women's Suffrage Pioneer and President of the National Woman's Suffrage Association and the National American Woman Suffrage Association

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born on November 12, 1815, in Johnstown, New York, the daughter of Daniel Cady and Margaret (Livingston) Cady. Her family was very affluent, partly due to the wealth her mother had inherited and partly from the shrewd real estate investments made by her father. Daniel Cady had also distinguished himself as a lawyer, judge, and politician, serving in Congress and as an associate justice of the New York Supreme Court.



Stanton was schooled at Johnstown Academy and then at the Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, where she graduated in 1833. Possessed with a keen intelligence and a dislike for the rules set down by her parents and teachers, Stanton's rebellious streak was visible throughout her childhood. "I am so tired of that everlasting no! no! no!," she said. "At school, at home, everywhere it is a *no!*" She found herself drawn to other rebels. Gerrit Smith, her mother's cousin, was involved in most of the reform efforts of the mid-1800s, including abolition and temperance, and Stanton came to cherish the weeks she spent at Smith's estate each summer. There, Stanton said, she "felt a new inspiration in life and was enthused with new ideas of individual rights."

During a visit to Smith's home in 1839, she met Henry Stanton, an abolitionist employed by the American Anti-Slavery Society. The two were married in 1840. As part of their honeymoon they attended the World Anti-Slavery Conference in London, but Elizabeth and other abolitionist women, including Lucretia Mott, were prohibited from taking part in the discussions. Angry at their treatment, Stanton and Mott made vague plans to hold a women's rights convention when they returned in the United States. But these plans did not come to fruition for several years.

The Stantons settled in Boston in 1845, where their first three children were born. Elizabeth enjoyed big-city life, but when her husband's law prac-

tice faltered, the family relocated to Seneca Falls, New York, in 1847. Elizabeth Stanton immediately became dissatisfied with her new life. There was little intellectual stimulation in the small town, and she was forced to take on more of the household duties herself.

When Stanton was reunited with Lucretia Mott the following year, they fell into an earnest discussion of her disenchantment with married life. “I poured out ... the torrent of my long accumulating discontent, with such vehemence and indignation that I stirred myself as well as the rest of the party to do and dare anything,” Stanton recalled. Indeed, this conversation breathed new life into the embers of discontent that had been created seven years before at the anti-slavery conference in London. The two women quickly agreed that the time had come to make their vision of a woman’s rights convention become a reality.

Housewife and Revolutionary

Even after Stanton and Mott helped organize the historic Seneca Falls Convention of 1848—commonly recognized as the birthplace of the women’s suffrage movement in the United States—the domestic conditions of her life did not change dramatically. She continued to have children, eventually giving birth to five sons and two daughters. Her parental obligations meant that Stanton’s contributions to the movement centered more on writing, theorizing, and plotting strategy than on prolonged campaigning. Fortunately, her ability to craft ideas and put them into words were her strongest gifts. Her ability to explain the desire of women for more equitable treatment—and describe the societal benefits that would accrue from such changes—made her an invaluable member of the movement.

Stanton’s growing fame did not set well with Judge Cady, who criticized his daughter’s activism. Stanton also felt some resistance from her husband, who was sometimes put off by her outspokenness and may have been jealous of the attention she received. For her part, Stanton resented the fact that Henry was frequently away from home pursuing his political and business career while she was left to handle the children on her own. She accompanied Henry to New York City during the Civil War when he received a position as a customs official, but their relationship remained stormy. From the late 1860s forward they largely lived apart, though they never divorced.

The lack of family support did not deter Stanton to any great degree. She remained a staunch voice for suffrage, and she regularly criticized the

inequities in marriage relations and American divorce laws. Stanton's statements on these issues caused discord within the women's rights movement, but Stanton remained convinced that "this marriage question ... lies at the very foundation of all progress." The years following the Civil War were Stanton's most active, as she became embroiled in the movement's internal debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Her alliance during this period with pro-suffrage racists like businessman George Francis Train appalled many fellow activists, but she refused to disassociate herself from anyone who she viewed as an asset in the suffrage cause.

When Stanton's efforts to secure women's voting rights in this era failed, she became somewhat disillusioned. She seemed to sum up her feelings many years later when she wrote that "our enfranchisement ought to have occurred in Reconstruction days.... Our movement is belated and like all things too long postponed now gets on everybody's nerves."

In the 1870s a lot of Stanton's time was taken up with public speaking tours. While these lectures were valuable in promoting the general message of women's equality, they kept her away from other lobbying efforts. In the 1880s she withdrew from the battlefield even more, leaving the United States and spending extended periods in Europe. Some historians have attributed her disengagement to her restless and inquisitive mind. "I cannot work in the same old ruts any longer," she declared at one point. "I have said all I have to say on the subject of suffrage." Instead, she began devoting more attention to the subject of religion. This interest culminated in 1895 with *The Woman's Bible*, a critique of commonly held religious beliefs that triggered rebukes from a wide array of American religious leaders and criticism from fellow women's rights activists as well.

Stanton's health problems mounted in her final years. She put on a lot of weight, had difficulty walking, and lost most of her eyesight. Her final address to the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1895 had to be read by someone else because she found it too difficult to stand at the podium. Her mind remained active to the end, however. She regularly published newspaper and magazine articles in the final years of her life, and on the day before she died she composed a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt calling on him to bring about "the complete emancipation of thirty-six million women." She died on October 26, 1902, in her New York City apartment.

Sources

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