THE WOMAN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT
IN PENNSYLVANIA, 1848-1873

By Ira V. Brown*

The time was July, 1848. Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia, well-known in Quaker and abolitionist circles, was visiting her sister Martha Wright in Auburn, New York. Not far from there, in Seneca Falls, lived Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two ladies renewed a determination which had been formed at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London eight years before and, with the help of friends and neighbors in the beautiful Finger Lakes country, called together the first woman’s rights convention. Women not being accustomed to chairing public assemblies, Mrs. Mott’s husband James was asked to preside. The gathering was held in the Wesleyan Chapel at Seneca Falls on July 19 and 20, 1848, with about 300 persons in attendance.¹

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they declared in a document modelled on the Declaration of Independence: “that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . .”² Included among the “repeated injuries and usurpations” which they alleged had been inflicted by men on women were discrimination against their right to hold property and to keep the wages they earned, unjust laws regarding marriage, divorce, and the guardianship of children, denial of equal educational opportunities and entrance to the professions, “scanty remuneration” for such few employments as women were permitted to undertake, and denial of the right to vote. These grievances were the focus of a significant reform

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¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., eds., History of Woman Suffrage, 6 vols. (New York: Fowler, Anthony, 1881-1922), I, 67-77. This immense collection of source material is fundamental to all studies of the woman’s rights movement in the United States.

² Ibid., p. 70.
movement during the generation which followed. In this cause Pennsylvanians played a not inconsiderable part.

Philadelphia, indeed, had been the scene of a number of pioneer expressions of feminism, going back to the time of the American Revolution. Tom Paine had described and condemned discrimination against women in the Pennsylvania Magazine of August, 1775. Dr. Benjamin Rush had advocated equal educational opportunity for women in his Thoughts on Female Education (Philadelphia, 1787). The first American periodical directed exclusively to women, The Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge, published in Philadelphia during 1792 and 1793, had included a long and enthusiastic review of Mary Wollstonecraft's classic Vindication of the Rights of Women. This article may possibly have been written by Charles Brockden Brown, the pioneer American novelist, who was a native of Philadelphia, and who devoted his first book, Alcuin (1798), to the theme of woman's rights.

The immediate matrix of organized feminism was the anti-slavery movement. Here again Pennsylvania had played an important role. The American Anti-Slavery Society, the national voice of radical abolitionism, was organized in Philadelphia in December, 1833. Among those in attendance was Lucretia Mott, who was permitted to speak but not to sign the society's declaration of sentiments. Shortly thereafter the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society was organized. Through its annual fairs this group raised a large share of the funds which supported the work of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society over a long period of years. Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, Mary Grew, and other women served as officers in the state society. It was the assembling of the National Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Pennsylvania Hall which provoked the burning of this "temple

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6 Ibid., pp. 17, 340.
of freedom" by a mob on May 17, 1838, three days after its opening as a center for the discussion of controversial questions.7

The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society sent four women as delegates to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in June, 1840. There were also three women delegates from Massachusetts. All seven were denied seats in the convention and forced to withdraw to the visitors' gallery. William Lloyd Garrison, the most noteworthy of American delegates, sat with the ladies in the gallery as a protest against this illiberal decision of the convention. It was at this time that Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton became acquainted and arrived at the conclusion that women would have to fight for their own emancipation as well as emancipation of the slaves.8

The first significant victory for the woman's rights movement in Pennsylvania took place shortly before the Seneca Falls Convention. This was the passage of a married woman's property law, an action which had already been taken in a number of other states, beginning with Mississippi in 1839. Lucretia Mott, Mary Grew, and other Philadelphia women who had been active in the antislavery movement circulated petitions on behalf of this reform, and Mrs. Jane Grey Swisshelm agitated the cause in Pittsburgh. Judge John Bouvier of Philadelphia, author of treatises on law, gave the movement his support.9 Governor Francis R. Shunk endorsed the proposal in his annual message to the Assembly in 1848.10 The measure passed as part of an omnibus bill dealing with several unrelated matters and received the governor's signature on April 11, 1848. It provided that all property held by a single woman would continue to be her own after marriage, that she might acquire additional property during marriage, that her

7 [Samuel Webb], History of Pennsylvania Hall, etc. (Philadelphia, 1838), 128-135.
property was not to be sold to pay her husband’s debts, and that she might dispose of her property as she saw fit.¹¹ Court rulings emasculated this enactment to some extent, and more rigorous and comprehensive codes on the subject were passed in later years.¹²

“I am now trying to awaken sufficient interest to hold a woman’s rights meeting in this city [Philadelphia],” Mrs. Mott wrote to Mrs. Stanton on October 3, 1848, a few months after the Seneca Falls Convention.¹³ This was more easily said than done. Public opinion was generally hostile, especially to resolutions on behalf of political participation by women. Who was to keep house and care for the children if women got involved in politics, the Public Ledger asked in an editorial on September 26, 1848. “A woman is nobody. A wife is everything,” it declared. The ladies of Philadelphia, it suggested, should fight to maintain their rights as “Wives, Belles, Virgins and Mothers, and not as Women.”¹⁴ In other words, woman’s place was in the home.

Late in the following year, 1849, Richard H. Dana the elder of Boston (father of the man who wrote Two Years Before the Mast), a prominent lawyer, lectured in Philadelphia on what he considered the proper sphere of woman, as opposed to the Seneca Falls demands, which he ridiculed. Lucretia Mott, an accomplished public speaker, felt compelled to answer with a lecture of her own, which was published in 1850 under the title Discourse on Woman. Using arguments and examples drawn from Scripture, history, and contemporary events, she defended the capacity and the right of women to participate equally with men in various fields of human endeavor, including politics.¹⁵ In the Society of Friends and in Garrisonian abolitionism Mrs. Mott herself had experienced this equal opportunity firsthand.

The Seneca Falls Convention was followed by a series of others, both regional and national. The first one to meet in Pennsylvania was held at West Chester June 2-3, 1852. It adopted a set of

¹¹ Pennsylvania Laws (1848), pp. 536-538.
¹² Dahlinger, pp. 78-83; see also Charles W. O’Brien, “The Growth in Pennsylvania of the Property Rights of Married Women,” American Law Register, XLIX (September, 1901), 524-530.
¹⁴ Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 26, 1848.
resolutions comparable to those framed at Seneca Falls, and its proceedings were published in pamphlet form. Chester County was a center of Quakerism, abolitionism, and feminism in the pre-Civil War years. It was here that the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends was organized in 1853. This group erected a “temple of reform” at Longwood, which was the scene of many antislavery and woman’s rights discussions during the next decade.16

The fifth national woman’s rights convention met in Philadelphia October 18-20, 1854. Thus Mrs. Mott saw a dream fulfilled. Among the leaders of this convention, in addition to the Motts, were Ernestine L. Rose (the president), Susan B. Anthony, Frances D. Gage, Mary Grew, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Lloyd Garrison, Robert Purvis (a Philadelphia Negro), and Lucy Stone, who appeared in the Bloomer costume. An interesting argument took place at this convention over the relation of Scripture to the woman’s rights movement. The Reverend Henry Grew, Mary’s father, provoked considerable controversy when he insisted that the Bible did not sanction the cause of female equality. “Why go to the Bible?” replied Garrison. “What question was ever settled by the Bible?” Generally speaking, the feminists preferred to ground their argument on natural law rather than on Christianity.

No national woman’s rights organ was established in the 1850’s, but several Pennsylvania journals gave the movement assistance. Jane Grey Swisshelm used a legacy from her mother to establish the Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter [sic] in 1847. Through this political and literary weekly she advocated abolitionism, temperance, and woman’s rights. Unhappily married and eventually divorced, Mrs. Swisshelm was especially interested in the legal rights of married women. She was one of the first women to publish her own newspaper. Her writing was vivid and was widely quoted. In 1857 she moved to Minnesota.18 The Philadelphia Woman’s Advocate, edited by Anna E. McDowell from

1855 to 1857, insisted on the right of women to work and to receive equal pay for equal work. This paper was owned by a joint stock company of women, and all the editing and printing was done by women. 

_Godey's Lady's Book_, published in Philadelphia under the editorship of Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, the leading magazine for women during this period, assisted certain phases of the woman's rights movement. Although opposed to woman suffrage, Mrs. Hale advocated better educational facilities for girls, the training of women physicians, the employment of women as teachers, and federal aid for normal schools.

Women made considerable progress in the realm of education during the middle decades of the century. In 1838 and for several years thereafter the Pennsylvania legislature offered annual subsidies for various types of private colleges and secondary schools, including female seminaries. This incentive gave a considerable stimulus to the establishment of academies for girls. According to one authority, Pennsylvania had thirty-three such institutions in 1840. Many of them were short-lived, however. During the 1850's several "colleges" for women were established in the state, one in Montgomery County, one in Harrisburg, and one in Pittsburgh. None of these is still going, and it is doubtful whether they really did work of collegiate grade. Wilson College in Chambersburg and Chatham College in Pittsburgh were chartered in 1869. Bryn Mawr began in 1885 and from the beginning offered a high-level program. A number of coeducational colleges were founded in the mid-century years; among these the

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19 History of Woman Suffrage, I, 388.


24 Ibid., pp. 62-63, 66, 73.
most notable was Swarthmore, which admitted its first students in 1869. The older colleges for men began opening their doors to women in the 1870's.26

The Philadelphia Normal School for Girls was started in 1848; in 1859 it was reorganized as the Girls' High School. This institution was supported by the city.27 In 1857 the General Assembly provided for the division of the state into twelve districts, in each of which normal schools might be established by private individuals and recognized by the state. Millersville was given state approval in 1859 and Edinboro in 1861. Thus began the state teachers' colleges.28 The absence of men in the army during the Civil War created new opportunities for women in the teaching profession.

A major landmark both in the education of women and in professional opportunity for them was the founding of the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia in 1850. This institution was established largely through the efforts of William Mullen, a successful young businessman, with the encouragement of his wife who was interested in studying medicine. It opened in rented quarters on Arch Street and operated twenty-five years before it acquired a building of its own. The first board of trustees included the Reverend Albert Barnes, John Bouvier, William D. ("Pig Iron") Kelley, James Mott, and Thaddeus Stevens, among others. The college was chartered by the state legislature.29 Lucretia Mott took an active interest in its founding. The outstanding figure in its early history was Dr. Ann Preston, who graduated at its first commencement in 1851 and who was promptly appointed to the chair of physiology and hygiene. A Quaker, she was born in Chester County in 1813 and was active in social reform movements. She became dean of the college in 1866.30 By the time of her death in 1872, 138 students had received the M.D. degree from this institution. Largely through the efforts of Dr. Preston, the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia was established in 1861.

26 Ibid., pp. 37-44.
The female medical students encountered considerable hostility from their male counterparts, particularly when they were first admitted to hospital clinics, and the pioneer woman physicians were denied admission to the state and county medical societies until the 1870's. A number of the early graduates of the Woman's Medical College went abroad as foreign missionaries. Sarah Josepha Hale was especially interested in this aspect of the woman's medical movement.

One of the rights which the pioneer feminists fought for was that of making public speeches. This privilege had been accorded to women by the Society of Friends from its very beginning. In the 1830's women like Mrs. Mott and the Grimké sisters became prominent as antislavery orators. In the 1850's temperance societies and woman's rights meetings provided significant outlets for female speakers. The Civil War made it possible for at least a few women to make political speeches. Most outstanding in this connection was the spectacular career of young Anna Dickinson of Philadelphia. Born of Quaker parentage in 1842 and educated in Friends' schools, she began her public speaking before she was eighteen years old. She addressed the twenty-third annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society at Kennett Square in 1860. Introduced by Lucretia Mott, she lectured to a large crowd in Philadelphia's Concert Hall in 1861 on "The Rights and Wrongs of Women."

During the Civil War the Republican party enlisted Miss Dickinson as a political speaker in New Hampshire, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. In 1863 she campaigned for the reelection of Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin, who won over George W. Woodward by a narrow margin. One of her chief sponsors was Congressman William D. Kelley of Philadelphia, who arranged for her to speak on January 16, 1864, in the hall of the United States House of Representatives before the nation's political

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Alsop, *Women's Medical College*, pp. 54-58. This hostility is illustrated in *Men and Women Medical Students and the Woman Movement* (Philadelphia, 1869), a pamphlet in the John M. Read Collection at the Pennsylvania State University.


leaders, including President Lincoln himself. Her later career on the lyceum circuit and as an actress was something of an anticlimax. She lived until 1932, but the last forty years of her life were spent in obscurity. Although she did not enlist actively in the organized woman's rights movement, Anna Dickinson advanced the cause through her unusual success as an orator.

During the war years the feminists set aside their own interests in order to work for emancipation of the slaves. No woman's rights conventions were held between 1861 and 1866. The National Woman's Loyal League, organized in 1864, conducted an immense petition campaign directed toward congressional passage of the 13th Amendment. Four hundred thousand signatures were collected. Elizabeth Cady Stanton served as president of the League and Susan B. Anthony as secretary. This work convinced women of the importance of organization as a means of accomplishing their ends. About a year after the war, in May of 1866, the American Equal Rights Association was formed to advance the interests of both Negroes and women. Its main goal was the elimination of both race and sex restrictions on the right to vote. Lucretia Mott was chosen president and Elizabeth Cady Stanton first vice-president. Their objective proved an impossible one. The majority of abolitionists and Radical Republicans were convinced that Negro suffrage was a more pressing need than woman suffrage and that both could not be obtained at the same time. As they commonly put it, this was "the negro's hour."

Possibly to embarrass the Radicals, Pennsylvania's conservative Senator Edgar Cowan introduced an amendment to strike out the word "male" from an 1866 bill extending the franchise to Negroes in the District of Columbia. This brought about the first Senate debate on woman suffrage, which was rejected by a vote of thirty-seven to nine. Ben Wade of Ohio was one of the few Radical Republicans who supported it. The feminists suffered an even greater setback the same year when Congress passed the Fourteenth

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Footnotes:
16. Ibid., pp. 3-9, 45-84. See also James Harvey Young, "Anna Elizabeth Dickinson and the Civil War: for and against Lincoln," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXI (June, 1944), 59-80, and Judith Anderson, "Anna Dickinson, Antislavery Radical," Pennsylvania History, III (July, 1936), 142-163.
17. Flexner, Century of Struggle, pp. 110-111.
19. Flexner, Century of Struggle, pp. 142-143.
Amendment. The second section of this momentous enactment provided that a state's representation in Congress should be reduced in proportion to the number of male citizens over the age of twenty-one who were denied the right to vote. The crowning blow came in 1869 with the Fifteenth Amendment, which stated explicitly that the right to vote should not be denied by any state "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," but made no reference to discrimination on grounds of sex.

The American Equal Rights Association collapsed in 1869. In that year the feminists at last formed national organizations purely in their own interests—not one, however, but two, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. The National Association was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, while the American Association was led by Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe. The National opposed ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, while the American supported it. In the beginning the National refused to allow men as officers, while the American welcomed them. The National favored federal action for woman suffrage, while the American worked for state enactments. The National had its headquarters in New York, the American in Boston. The National was interested in a variety of reforms, including more liberal divorce laws; the American concentrated on the suffrage question. The National sponsored a short-lived journal called the Revolution; the American published Woman's Journal, which lasted for many years. As the years passed, the lines of distinction between the two groups became blurred, but they were not united until 1890.40

Pennsylvania's development in the matter of organized feminism paralleled the national development. An Equal Rights Association was formed in Philadelphia in 1866 to work for the enfranchisement of both Negroes and women.41 On December 22, 1869, the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association was organized in the same city. While men participated in the organizational meeting, Mary Grew was chosen to the presidency, a position to which she was reelected every year until 1892. A veteran of the antislavery struggle and a close friend of Lucretia Mott's, Miss Grew was the central figure in Pennsylvania feminism dur-

41 History of Woman Suffrage, III, 457.
The Pennsylvania group built up a membership of several hundred in good many counties around the state. Annual conventions were held in different cities. Monthly meetings of the Philadelphia leaders were held in Mary Grew's home. The association printed pamphlets and documents in support of the cause and sent petitions to the state legislature and to Congress. For several years it employed Matilda Hindman as a traveling agent and lobbyist. Reports of the Association's work were frequently published in Woman's Journal.

In the early 1870's a number of women here and there around the nation presented themselves at the polls and attempted to cast ballots. The result was a series of court cases, the most famous of which involved Susan B. Anthony. Among those who tried to vote in Pennsylvania was Carrie Burnham, who as a resident and taxpayer of Philadelphia presented her ballot in the election held on October 10, 1871. The election officials refusing to accept it, Miss Burnham petitioned the county court to require the acceptance of her ballot. Her application being denied, she carried her case to the state supreme court, which decided in 1873 that the word "freeman" in the Constitution of 1838 did not encompass women. Miss Burnham argued that "freeman" was synonymous with citizen and that the right to vote was one of the privileges and immunities of citizenship guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1881 (as Mrs. Kilgore) she became the first woman admitted to the University of Pennsylvania law school; after obtaining her LL.B. in 1883 she practiced law in Philadelphia for many years.

The culmination of the early woman's rights movement in Pennsylvania came with the suffrage debates conducted by the Constitutional Convention of 1872-1873. This body met in Har-
risburg from November 12 to November 27, 1872, reconvened in Philadelphia on January 7, 1873, and adjourned on November 3, 1873.\textsuperscript{47} There were 133 delegates, the majority of whom were Republicans. On February 1, 1873, Hugh N. McAllister of Bellefonte, on behalf of the Committee on Suffrage, Elections and Representation, reported a suffrage article which limited the voting privilege to male citizens over the age of twenty-one who could meet specified citizenship and residence requirements. Three members of the committee presented a minority report which recommended that the question of admitting women to the suffrage be referred to a popular referendum. John M. Broomall of Media, who had served in Congress from 1863 to 1869, moved an amendment to the majority report striking out the word "male."\textsuperscript{48} The convention had received a number of petitions asking the enfranchisement of women, and it spent most of a week (February 3-7) debating this issue in committee of the whole. It also permitted Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church to appear in the convention hall for an evening address supporting woman suffrage.\textsuperscript{49}

Opponents of woman suffrage, led by McAllister, argued that woman's place was in the home, that women were represented at the polls by their male relatives, that woman suffrage would produce family discord, and that participation in politics would be degrading to women. They also maintained that the vast majority of women did not want the right to vote and would not take advantage of it if it were granted. Advocates of the reform, led by Broomall, maintained that suffrage was a natural right, that many women had no men to represent their interests, that woman suffrage would elevate the tone of politics, that it was working well in Wyoming Territory, and that it would make possible effective control of the liquor evil. They also emphasized the innate capacity of women for participating equally with men in the affairs of the world. Supporters of woman suffrage came forward from both political parties, but it was obvious that they did not have enough strength to carry through this innovation, and in the end Broomall

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Debates of the Convention to Amend the Constitution of Pennsylvania}, etc., 9 vols. (Harrisburg, 1873), I, 503, 523-525.
\textsuperscript{49} Philadelphia \textit{Public Ledger}, February 8, 1873.
withdrew his amendment. The proposal for a popular referendum on the issue was eventually defeated by a vote of 75 to 25, with 33 absent. The feminists emerged from the convention with one small victory. Article X, Section 3 of the Constitution provided that women twenty-one years of age and older were to be eligible to any office of control or management under the school laws of the state.

The struggle for woman's rights had a long way to go, but in the quarter-century from 1848 to 1873 the foundations of the movement had been firmly laid in this commonwealth, and distinct progress had been made in all lines except politics. Women, like Negroes, had to wait for federal action before obtaining the right to vote in this state. In the case of women, this did not take place until after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Debates of the Convention, I, 525-628.
Ibid., V, 186-187.