Seneca Falls Goes Public

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I'VE BEEN WRITING and thinking about Seneca Falls for a few months short of thirty years. I am the author of *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* and *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage,* as well as the editor of *The Stanton/Anthony Reader.*[1] I began my research into the woman suffrage movement in 1969, when I was a second-year graduate student, simultaneously swept up into the earliest stages of feminism's second wave and trying to define my interests and future as a historian. Along with a few apprentice historians my age and even fewer established scholars who encouraged and guided us, we worked to build the neglected field of women's history from almost nothing into what it is now, one of the liveliest, most influential, and most widespread dimensions of historical learning and study in the United States.

Now, three decades later, one would be hard pressed to find a university, college, or community college in the U.S. at which women's history isn't taught and taken. Nor has all this information and interest remained confined to the "academic." Women's history ideas and perspectives have been brought to bear on popular consciousness about a wide variety of contemporary issues ranging from standards of beauty to women's patterns of employment to sexual behavior and family forms. Women's historians

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1. Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Ellen Carol DuBois, ed., *The Stanton/Anthony Reader* 2nd ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).

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pop up as "talking heads" on radio shows, in historical documentaries, and in television news magazines.

Yet it was not until 1998 that women's history was drawn into the central historical understandings of our country's national experience, and the innumerable ways that we tell each other and our children about the complex path of American political democracy, the promise and disappointments of our national claims, and how we think of ourselves as Americans. The events of and interest in the Seneca Falls sesquicentennial have been crucial to this process, initiating a new stage in what we might want to call the gender integration of our national narrative.

Let me begin by saying that there is nothing inherent in the arrival of a historical anniversary that leads us to pay attention to an important event in the past and to take the opportunity to reexamine its meaning for the present. The fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment came and went in 1970 with only a single march in New York City. This was, I think, because feminism was only then beginning to pervade popular consciousness, because women's history was not yet widely studied and understood, and—perhaps most important—because feminist energies were not very engaged with the political realm. Indeed, the most common historical judgment made at that time about woman suffrage was that it had produced very little difference in the position of women and the relative status of the sexes. Even feminists, especially younger feminists, were not particularly disposed to celebrate the woman suffrage movement. A whole generation was coming of age in a time of disillusionment with the democratic process and at the beginning of a long period of political regrouping.

How different things are in the 1990s! The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1995 was widely and creatively observed. Women in many different places, often without knowledge of each other's activities, simultaneously seemed to remember that their right to vote had been long fought and hard won, and was not yet fully utilized. All over the country, feminist organizations, historical societies, and just plain groups of women arranged for programs to honor the long battle to enfranchise women and, not incidentally, to encourage more deliberate political organization. I was offered my first curatorial opportunity, an exhibit called *Votes for Women: A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary* at the Huntington Library and Museum in San Marino, California. Public interest was strong enough to convince the Huntington to send a version of the exhibit on to tour California, the first traveling exhibit the Library had ever mounted.[2] Too many of our national holiday celebrations—most recently Martin Luther King Day—have been taken up from popular awareness and transformed into regularized, bureaucratized, commodified, and obligatory observa-

2. The exhibit is now accessible online at www.huntington.org.

tions, less an opportunity for historical reflection than a reason to take off from work and go shopping. Not so the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment.

The reasons for this tremendous upsurge in popular historical attention seem themselves to have been largely political. Beginning in 1989 with Anita Hill's role in the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings, and the stark accompanying images of the "men's club" character of the U.S. Senate, feminist awareness turned dramatically toward the legislative and political realm. The Hill/Thomas episode posed twin challenges: to increase the numbers of women representatives and senators and to bring issues of women's status into the center of political debate. The election in 1992 of Bill Clinton and of an unprecedented number of congresswomen constituted a powerful response to this challenge. Even the backlash two years later in 1994, when the "angry white male voter" took the lead, reflected the accelerating importance of gender issues to American politics. As I write now, in the fall of 1998, national politics—some fear even constitutional stability—has been thrown into chaos about issues which have at their root the changing relations between men and women in the modern world.

The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment paved the way for the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls women's rights convention. Perhaps because feminists and historians were more prepared for this than for the earlier observation, perhaps because Seneca Falls itself provided a centralized geographical location, activities around this event have, from the beginning, been more coordinated, less local, and more national in scope. Consciousness of the event has accordingly been much more widespread. A powerful consortium of local, state, federal, public, and private forces came together to assure that the women's rights sesquicentennial would enjoy a fittingly spectacular celebration.

The painstaking establishment over the last two decades of a National Park Service presence in Seneca Falls was in many ways the key to this success. There is something particularly apt in realizing that every stage in this process, from the purchase of the Stanton house to the excavation of the Wesleyan chapel to the events of summer 1998 themselves, was the result of political organization and pressure carefully applied, of members of congress and U.S. senators cultivated, of legislation formulated and passed, and thus of the power of women's vote promised and marshalled.

I was invited to be part of this event, in particular to contribute to a symposium on Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I came to Seneca Falls with my mother and two fourteen-year-old nieces. Hearing Hillary Rodham Clinton give the keynote address was one of the great thrills of my life. There were the historical events over which I had lovingly lingered for all my professional life, now presented with passion and precision by one of the most charismatic women of our time, to an audience of many thousand who hung on her every word. As I drove home with my family, south along the

Susquehanna, one of my nieces announced, "I'm really angry I never learned about this before in school. That's wrong." "That's right!" I thought. Even my own niece, a smart teenager with an aunt who lives and breathes Seneca Falls, needs a public celebration, a national acknowledgment, to have women's rights enter her historical consciousness.

The words spoken at and issued from the 1848 Seneca Falls women's rights convention still have great power today for the same reasons that they served to inaugurate sustained women's rights agitation 150 years ago. The Declaration, Grievances, and Resolutions brilliantly combine a comprehensive, radical feminist protest against the many intersecting dimensions of women's thwarted humanity, with a consolidating focus on winning political power as a way to change those conditions. This combination of broad vision and active and precise intent can and does still inspire collective "movement," and represents, as well as any other episode or moment in U.S. history, a standard for feminist activism.

One can misread the Seneca Falls Declaration as a random list of grievances and a demand for woman suffrage long since met, but this is to miss the deeper and more enduring nature of what was asserted there. The "government" against which the Declaration protests is meant, as I read it, to indict family rule and male-dominated marriage, and not only the Congress and the Constitution. The tyranny named and confronted here is thus domestic in the most intimate sense, and the revolution declared against it is far from finished.

Similarly, women's call for a voice in the formation of the laws to which we are subject still remains unmet even after our enfranchisement. It was only once women were possessed of the formal right to the franchise that we could start to ask ourselves how to use our votes, for whom and towards what. And it apparently is taking organized feminism as long to arrive at any conclusions about how to organize women's political power as it did to secure the basic right. But I think the link established in American feminism's original Declaration between subordination broadly understood and political action concretely defined remains the right approach. Analysis without action is diffuse and ultimately frustrating; action without analysis is empty and ultimately disillusioning.

The other combination that the Seneca Falls resolution powerfully achieves is to link the stuff of feminism with the basic elements of American political philosophy. From Seneca Falls on, the feminist movement functioned both from within and without the basic doctrines of American political life. It does this, of course, by framing women's demands as individual rights and insisting that their best weapon for realizing these goals must be the political franchise. Individual rights and political democracy are the basic elements of America's philosophical claims. Because the Seneca Falls Convention tied its vision of an organized movement of women so effectively to them, the 1848 event functions brilliantly to bring the feminist tradition into the mainstream of American history. The brilliance of the

Foremothers was to formulate women's aspirations for larger life in terms of the nation's founding document and to expand the possibilities of the original Declaration of Independence by so doing.

The Seneca Falls sesquicentennial has provided a wide range of opportunities, like this roundtable, to build historical awareness of the feminist tradition in American history. I have been invited to speak about the history of women's rights and woman suffrage to audiences more diverse than usual, including state humanities councils, undergraduate organizations, and community colleges. I have written popular, nonscholarly accounts of the 1848 convention and analyses of its consequences for general audiences for newspapers and pamphlets. I have also had the opportunity to work in media that are new to me. The anniversary has been the occasion for many public radio stations, local and national, to conduct interviews on the history of women's rights.

I have also been involved with several film and video documentaries, including a major project on the history of women's rights from Ken Burns's Florentine Films historical documentary workshop. Burns, of course, is the filmmaker most responsible for generating a wide audience for historical documentary as a medium for educating popular historical consciousness. So far, the subjects of his most widely seen works have been ones traditionally interesting to male audiences: the Civil War, the west, baseball. The American Lives series, of which this new film will be a part, has so far focused on men as well: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Frank Lloyd Wright. Florentine Films began exploring the possibility of a documentary on Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony several years ago, but the occasion of the Seneca Falls sesquicentennial has, I believe, pushed the project to fruition. The three-hour documentary on the lives of Anthony and Stanton is scheduled for nationwide showing for the fall of 1999. Nothing could better capture the degree to which women's rights history has arrived into national historical consciousness than the production of this documentary on the subject.

The sesquicentennial has not only led me to speak to new audiences through new media but to ask new questions about the 1848 convention. One test of a true historical turning point is that its meanings are not easily exhausted and the standpoint from which it is examined changes what it is that is seen. I now live in California, and 1998 is not only the sesquicentennial of Seneca Falls but also of the Mexican War, which delivered most of the southwest up to the United States government. I have been wondering about the relation between the two events, and these questions have led me in exciting new directions.

Here is one of them: One of the most troubling parts of the Declaration of Sentiments for me has always been the third grievance, which reads: "he ["man"] has withheld from her ["woman"] rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners." The nativism which intrudes here into what is otherwise a thoroughly democratic docu-

ment has as its context both the waves of Irish immigration unnerving the Yankees of upstate New York and the explosive continental expansion inaugurating the nation's Age of Manifest Destiny. The Seneca Falls convention of 1848, I now see more clearly, was situated midway between America's revolutionary past and its imperial future. Both democracy and domination run through the Declaration of Sentiments as well as in the women's rights movement which it inaugurated.

Another direction for historical inquiry that I have overlooked all these years and in which I am now interested has to do with the fascinating figure of Ernestine Rose. Rose was not at Seneca Falls, but her presence lurks just behind it. It was she who brought Elizabeth Stanton into the agitation for revision in the laws of New York state which deprived wives of all legal rights. When the campaign for the reform of these laws was begun a decade before, it was men who called for the change, and Rose was the only woman involved. In the spring of 1848, the state legislature finally took the first step in restoring to married women their basic property rights. The Seneca Falls convention was in part a response to this hesitant beginning. As Elizabeth Stanton put it many years later, "The reflection naturally arose that, if the men who make the laws were ready for some onward step, surely the women themselves should express some interest in the legislation."[3]

Perhaps Rose's absence at Seneca Falls itself is revealing. Rose was the only non-Protestant in the early women's rights movement. She was a Polish Jewish immigrant. Even though she had become a freethinker and no longer held to the religion of her ancestors, her difference on the women's rights platform was much noticed and roundly condemned. When Susan B. Anthony traveled with her a few years later, she confided to her diary her great pain at witnessing how badly Rose was treated and how isolated it must have made her feel.[4] I am Jewish, and working on the early women's rights movement puts me in largely Protestant company. Now, for the first time, Rose became interesting to me. I saw how charges of "infidelism" followed her, a freethinking Jew, wherever she went. What impact, I have begun to wonder, did this have on the earliest period of the women's rights movement? What role might it have played, for instance, for Elizabeth Stanton? Might Rose have been the model for Stanton's eventual emergence as feminism's leading religious skeptic and most unrelenting internal critic?

Above all, this wonderful new level of popular interest in what began at Seneca Falls should be leading to basic questions about the future of political democracy. There is little point in celebrating the history of the woman suffrage movement without some sort of contemporary enthusiasm for the possibilities of using the vote, but such faith is in very short supply. Consistently anemic voting levels and widespread cynicism about the voting

3. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1898* (Boston: Northeastern University Press reprint, 1993), p. 150.
4. DuBois, *Stanton/Anthony Reader*, p. 75.

process drain the electoral process of power and meaning. With luck, pressure for change in the campaign financing system will continue to mount until some sort of reform is secured. But procedural changes will never be enough, and it will take a more substantive electoral politics, issues that more people care more passionately about, to reinvigorate political democracy. American citizens in general need to put their minds and hearts to this problem; as women we owe it to our predecessors to make special efforts.

This was the theme of the First Lady's remarks at Seneca Falls in the summer of 1998, and it was what ultimately stirred my niece. "If we are to finish the work begun here," Mrs. Clinton said, "we must above all else take seriously the power of the vote and use it to make our voice heard. What the champions of suffrage understood was that the vote is not just a symbol of our equality, but that it can be, if used, a guarantee of results. . . . Help us imagine a future that keeps faith with the sentiments expressed here in 1848. . . to be on the side of history, no matter the risk or the cause." Compelling and continuing meaning in the present is what assures attention to the important events of the past. It is, to put it differently, that which turns what has happened into history. By that standard, the Seneca Falls women's rights convention of 1848 has earned its claim to national historical significance.