Readers' Theatre as a History Teaching Tool

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Last year marked the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the first women’s rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York. We wanted to celebrate the event with a dramatic presentation for our students. Lacking the skill to write a compelling play, we decided to put on a readers’ theatre version of the convention. Such productions are engaging and relatively easy to stage as the actors read from scripts, usually without costumes or scenery. Readers’ theatre also allows greater control over historical accuracy than a conventional play. Since history is only occasionally dramatic, the demands of theatre, whether on stage or in films and videos, raise historians’ fears of inaccuracy and a fast and loose use of primary sources. The problem of interpretation also arises, as the PBS production Liberty! The American Revolution shows with its oversimplification of a complex event.

In looking to the Seneca Falls Convention, we wanted an interpretation that was frankly celebratory. We believed the convention began efforts by generations of women and men to improve the status of women. Their efforts were only partly realized in 1920 after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote in federal elections. We also understood that the vote alone could not solve women’s problems: for example, the vote did not guarantee them access to professions and jobs closed to them on account of their gender. The vote neither...
raised women's incomes nor improved their economic status. Also, we
understood that the women who attended Seneca Falls had broader goals
for women than the franchise, as the minutes of the convention disclose.
To make that point clearly, we included Charlotte Woodward's com-
plaint about women's exclusion from the jobs and professions which
generated the all-important wage income. To make the point even clearer,
we decided to distribute to the audience and to have the actors read all of
Seneca Falls' most famous product, the Declaration of Sentiments.

We were familiar with much of the secondary literature on the topic. However, we also searched contemporary periodicals and newspapers for
accounts of and responses to the convention. Those periodicals that
acknowledged the convention published very brief accounts of the pro-
ceedings, amounting in most cases to nothing more than the statement
that the meeting had taken place and a copy of the Declaration of
Sentiments. The search did yield one gem: a copy of a satirical poem,
"The Times that Try Men's Souls." Attributed to "The Lords of Cre-
ation," it was actually written by Maria W. Chapman, and read to the
convention by Elizabeth W. McClintock during the lighthearted ending
of the Wednesday afternoon session. We used a number of newspaper
comments criticizing the ideas of the convention. We did take dramatic
license and used comments from a New York Herald editorial critical of
an 1850 convention as though the comments were directed at the Seneca
Falls Convention.

The minutes of the convention are available in printed form. However, while they indicate the convention's organization and the speakers'
identities, they contain little more than the title of speeches: e.g. Lucretia
Mott spoke on "the subject of Reform in general" on Wednesday evening,
and Frederick Douglass offered "an excellent and appropriate speech,
[which] ably supported the cause of woman" on Thursday night. We
decided to supplement the minutes with parts of speeches delivered
elsewhere by Lucretia Mott and Frederick Douglass on the same subjects.
The minutes also indicated dissension at the convention over whether
men should be allowed to sign the Declaration of Sentiments, but pro-
vided no details of the discussion. However, we decided to make dra-
matic use of the situation by planting a woman in the audience who stood
up and said men ought not be allowed to sign and a man who said he
should because he was a supporter of the cause. To give an idea of the
consequences of the convention, we included information about subse-
quent women's rights meetings, and, to add dramatic interest, we used
Sojourner Truth's speech, given at a later convention, as well as the sad
circumstance that prevented Charlotte Woodward from casting her vote
in 1920.
Although there are a number of ways to use readers’ theatre as a history teaching tool, we compiled our Seneca Falls script specifically to be staged as a co-curricular program during Women’s History Month. We turned to a colleague in the Department of Theatre, Elizabeth Reitz Mullinex, and asked her to assemble a cast and direct the performance. We were delighted that members of Illinois State University’s well-regarded theatre faculty were willing to commit their time to the project, regarding it as we did as a worthwhile educational project. Mullinex’s racially diverse cast consisted of two men and three women in addition to herself.

Using simple staging with readers dressed in black and white standing behind music stands for the narrative parts and stepping forward in character for the major speeches, the professionally trained actors made the language accessible and the speeches compelling. The cast added bits of humor to the proceedings by humming the music of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” behind the reading of the satiric verses of “The Times That Try Men’s Souls” and by their inflection in the reading of critical newspaper comment on the convention. The director decided to give a more dramatic flair to the end of the script by changing a newspaper account of Charlotte Woodward Pierce’s experience on election day 1920 to a first-person speech. The change was very effective.

A near-capacity audience of around one hundred attended the performance on March 24, 1998, and stayed for a cake and lemonade reception. Students from women’s history classes, United States history surveys, upper level classes, and women in politics classes attended, as did people from the community. Several students commented afterward that the forty-five-minute program was too short. In an age of seemingly short attention spans, we took that criticism as praise. Students from the women’s history classes had already studied the Seneca Falls Convention by reading and discussing Judith Wellman’s essay, “The Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention: A Study of Social Networks,” and the Declaration of Sentiments. For those students, the program reinforced previously learned material. On the other hand, the evening’s performance introduced the convention to a number of the others present.

Students from the women’s history classes wrote event review papers. In addition to discussing the historical content of the program, students gave their reactions to the format of the program. “It brought to life what we learn out of books and in the classroom” was a typical comment. Another student stated, “It allowed me, in a way, to take part in the convention. I felt like I was there in the audience, cheering on the speakers.” Students responded well to the plants in the audience: “When a man stood up in the audience and voiced his opinion as to why he
should be able to sign the Declaration, it really got my attention.” One young woman wrote: “The representation gave me a new sense of what it was like for these brave women who attended the first women’s rights convention. They seemed to be average women with extraordinary courage.” Overall, the students found the readers’ theatre format educational, insightful, and entertaining: “The six theatre members did a fantastic job on the performance.... The theatre members were very lively and kept the crowd entertained.” One student admitted, “I did not learn anything that I had not already learned in class. [However] People acting out the roles of something that I had only read about until this point, was very helpful in gaining a more full understanding of the convention.” These reactions encouraged us to think about other pedagogical uses for the reader’s theatre format.

The number of historical events and subjects that students and teachers may address using readers’ theatre is only limited by their imaginations. Readers’ theatre is particularly useful, however, when presenting women’s history. Although textbooks at both the high school and college level more commonly address women’s history topics than they have in the past, teachers may want to increase the coverage given to certain events in women’s history. Textbooks for survey classes may give major events only a line or two of text, leaving plenty of room for creative projects based on women’s history. Some texts, such as Carol Berkin’s Making America: A History of the United States, devote a full page to the Declaration of Sentiments, and another one to words from supporters and opponents. On the other hand, George Tindall and David Shi’s popular text America: A Narrative History, provides only a short paragraph on the convention. By expanding the textbook’s limited coverage into a larger classroom event like a reader’s theatre, teachers can give students the opportunity to think of that historical moment in new ways. For example, dramatizing an event such as the Seneca Falls convention allows teachers to highlight women as orators and public figures. Great men and their speeches, often considered in high school and college classrooms, may be balanced with great women and their available, but often neglected, speeches.

The use of readers’ theater also has the pedagogical benefit of encouraging young women’s participation in history classes, particularly those that are not strictly defined as women’s history courses. Our collective experience in teaching college-level history has been that, outside of the field of women’s history, young women are often reluctant participants in classroom activities. Classes are often male-dominated, both in terms of numbers, and levels of classroom activity. Presentation of a readers’ theatre based on events in women’s history gives young women a per-
sonal stake in the class, and an opportunity to participate, if only by reading from a prepared script. This experience could be the catalyst for continued participation in classes. And, because these scripts may also incorporate men’s voices, they can participate too.

Both high school and college-level instructors may adapt readers’ theatre in many ways for classroom use. The simplest use is merely reading an existing script (published or teacher-prepared), with students assigned to each of the parts. Since few scripts have enough parts for a whole class, some students will necessarily be observers, but hopefully active ones. For example, as part of the experience with the Seneca Falls script, students might be invited to sign (or not) the declaration or participate in discussion. There is room for student participation in the debate over men’s roles at the convention and regarding the resolution for the elective franchise. Writing assignments also could be linked to participation as an audience member, encouraging attentive listening. Again, using Seneca Falls as an example, students could put themselves in the place of the audience members of 150 years ago. Acting in that role, students might be asked to report on the convention for a local newspaper or write a letter to an editor or friend. Students might write a diary entry about the convention or write the speech that they would like to deliver at the next women’s rights convention.

Teachers may develop the experience further by requiring student actors to research their parts or the background of the event, in addition to preparing for a classroom reading. In the case of Seneca Falls, students could write biographical sketches of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, or other participants, or an analysis of the positions taken by participants who did not always see eye-to-eye. Students might write papers analyzing the degree to which the concerns expressed in the Declaration of Sentiments have been addressed in the 150 years since the convention.

An enterprising teacher could assign students to develop their own readers’ theatre. Based upon our experience, we would suggest that teachers make this a collaborative project, and give students a number of weeks to complete the assignment. Students should also be assigned, or choose, topics of a scope that they can reasonably research and complete. Our script of approximately twenty pages took several months to research and assemble. A project of five to ten pages may be reasonable for a group of three or four students. Readers’ theatre is suitable for any number of topics in women’s history, such as famous individuals (Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells), important events (the Seneca Falls Convention), or national movements (antislavery, the suffrage movement, the temperance movement). If the topic list is opened up to United
States history in general, the possibilities become endless. Students might want to research and reenact a debate in the constitutional convention, travel the overland trail by way of diaries, explore the career and oratory of William Jennings Bryan or Jane Addams, or deliver to their classmates the propaganda of World War I's "Four Minute Men." Whatever events students may choose to research and recreate, readers' theater gives them the opportunity to bring that moment to life for their classmates and themselves.

Notes

5. Woman's Rights Conventions, 5, 9.
The Seneca Falls Convention:  
150th Anniversary Celebration

A Reader’s Theatre Production

Compiled and Interpreted by: 
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Reader 1: One hundred and fifty years ago, the first women’s rights convention met in the small, upstate New York community of Seneca Falls. The year was 1848. The town, while perhaps an unlikely site for such an historic event, was nevertheless a bustling community served by stagecoach, railroad and canal.

Reader 2: It boasted two dozen mills and factories which produced
Reader 3: leather,
Reader 4: flour, paper, and axes,
Reader 5: cotton and wool cloth,
Reader 6: gloves,
Reader 1: boots and boats,
Reader 2: window sashes and water pumps.

Reader 3: There were five churches,
Reader 4: a general newspaper
Reader 5: and one devoted to legal reform,
Reader 6: two temperance societies,

Reader 1: and an anti-slavery society.

Reader 2: Most importantly, Seneca Falls was home to Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who with her husband Henry and three young children had moved there from Boston in the spring of 1847. As progressive as the residents of Seneca Falls may have felt themselves and their neighbors to be, Stanton found the contrast with Boston disheartening.

Stanton: “In Seneca Falls my life was comparatively solitary, and the change from Boston was somewhat depressing. There, all my immediate friends were reformers, I had near neighbors, a new home with all the modern conveniences, and well-trained servants. Here our residence was on the outskirts of the town, roads very often muddy and no sidewalks most of the way, Mr. Stanton was
frequently from home, I had poor servants, and an increasing number of children.... Up to this time life had glided by with comparative ease, but now the real struggle was upon me. My duties were too numerous and varied, and none sufficiently exhilarating or intellectual to bring into play my higher faculties. I suffered with mental hunger, which, like an empty stomach, is very depressing....”¹

**Reader 4:** As never before, she began to understand the day-to-day reality of the ordinary woman’s life.

**Stanton:** “I now fully understood the practical difficulties most women had to contend with in the isolated household, and the impossibility of woman’s best development if in contact, the chief part of her life, with servants and children.... The general discontent I felt with woman’s portion as wife, mother, housekeeper, physician, and spiritual guide...impressed me with a strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general, and of women in particular.”²

**Reader 5:** It was while she was in “this tempest-tossed condition of mind” that Mrs. Cady Stanton received an invitation to spend the day with Lucretia Mott who was visiting in nearby Waterloo.³

**Reader 6:** Lucretia Mott was a well-known antislavery speaker and Quaker lay minister from Philadelphia. She had first met the younger Stanton at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London eight years earlier where women delegates had been excluded from the convention solely on the basis of their sex. Stung by that event, Mott and Stanton had promised each other to try to do something to improve women’s lot.

**Reader 1:** Stanton welcomed the opportunity to renew her friendship with Mott and to meet for the first time “several members of different families of Friends”: Jane Hunt, Mary Ann McClintock, and Mott’s sister Martha Wright.⁴

**Stanton:** To these “earnest, thoughtful women, I poured out, that day, 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. My discontent, according to Emerson, must have been healthy, for it moved us all to prompt action, and we decided, then and there, to call a ‘Woman’s Rights Convention.’”⁵

**Reader 2:** The five women wrote a call to a convention and published it the very next day, July 14, in the *Seneca County Courier*, giving only five days’ notice, as the convention was to be held on the 19th and 20th.

**Seneca County Courier:** “Woman’s Rights Convention—A convention to discuss the social, civil and religious rights of woman will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, Seneca Falls, New York, on Wednesday and Thursday, the 19th and 20th of July current; commencing at 10 a.m. During the first day the meeting will be held exclusively for women, who are earnestly invited to attend. The public
generally are invited to be present on the second day, when Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia and other ladies and gentlemen will address the convention.  

Reader 3: Having decided to issue a call, the die was cast. The women had to formulate a plan or agenda for the meeting. It was Stanton who suggested adapting the Declaration of Independence into a woman’s rights manifesto, and Stanton who took on the task of the drafting resolutions to implement the Declaration.  

Reader 4: Lucretia and her husband James returned to their home in Philadelphia while Stanton went home to Seneca Falls and to work on her Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions.  

Reader 5: Charlotte Woodward, a young farmer’s daughter and glovemaker read the announcement in the Seneca Falls Courier and determined to attend the meeting. Excited by the prospect, she ran from one neighbor to another with the news. She wanted to be a typesetter and work in a print shop, aspirations that seemed impossible for a woman to attain. She was, as were many other women, bitter about her economic and legal position.  

Woodward: “We women did more than keep house, cook, sew, wash, spin and weave, and garden. Many of us were under the necessity of earning money besides….We worked secretly, in the seclusion of our bedchambers, because all society was built on the theory that men, not women, earned money, and that men alone supported the family…. Most women accepted this condition of society as normal and God-ordained and therefore changeless. But I do not believe that there was any community anywhere in which the souls of some women were not beating their wings in rebellion. For my own obscure self I can say that every fibre of my being rebelled, although silently, all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance which, after it was earned, could never be mine. I wanted to work, but I wanted to choose my task and I wanted to collect my wages. That was my form of rebellion against the life into which I was born.”  

Reader 6: As the time grew closer, Lucretia Mott began to fear that the meeting would be poorly attended.  

Mott: “The convention will not be as large as it otherwise might be, owing to the busy time with the farmers, harvest, etc. But it will be a beginning, and we hope it will be followed in due time by one of a more general character.”  

Reader 1: The morning of July 19 dawned fair and fine as Charlotte Woodward later wrote.  

Woodward: “I do clearly remember the wonderful beauty of the early morning when we dropped all our allotted tasks and climbed in the family waggon to drive over the rough roads to Seneca Falls. At first we travelled quite alone under the overhanging tree branches and wild vines, but before we had gone many miles we came on other waggon-loads of women, bound in the same direction. As we reached different cross-roads we saw waggons coming from every part of the county, and long before we reached Seneca Falls we were a procession.”
Reader 2: Mott need not have worried about attracting an audience. Some three hundred folks sat for two days and evenings.

Reader 3: At 11:00 in the morning the convention assembled. Among the three hundred were forty men who showed up on the first day which was to be reserved for women only, forcing the organizers to modify their plan.

Reader 4: It had been decided to have no men present, but as they were already on the spot, and as the women who had organized the meeting shrank from chairing the meeting, "it was decided, in a hasty council round the altar, that this was an occasion when men might make themselves pre-eminently useful," so James Mott, "tall and dignified in Quaker costume, was called to the chair."

JM: Thank you for your confidence in me, Ladies and Gentleman, but I call on Mrs. Cady Stanton, one of the organizers of Convention who will introduce Mrs. Mott.

ECS: We are assembled here to discuss the "social, civil, and religious condition of woman." No one can speak more to the point of this subject than Mrs. Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia. I now call on her to speak.

LM: "The question is often asked, 'What does woman want, more than she enjoys?' What is she seeking to obtain? Of what rights is she deprived? What privileges are withheld from her? I answer, she asks nothing as a favor, but as right, she wants to be acknowledged a moral, responsible being. She is seeking not to be governed by laws, in the making of which she has no voice. She is deprived of almost every right in civil society, and is a cypher in the nation, except in the right of presenting a petition. In religious society, her disabilities...have greatly retarded her progress. Her exclusion from the pulpit or ministry—her duties marked out for her by her equal brother man, subject to creeds, rules, and disciplines made for her by him—this is unworthy of her true dignity. In marriage, there is assumed superiority, on the part of the husband, an admitted inferiority, with a promise of obedience on the part of the wife. This subject calls loudly for examination, in order that the wrong may be redressed. Custom suited to darker ages in Eastern countries, are not binding upon enlightened society. The solemn covenant of marriage may be entered into without these lordly assumptions, and humiliating concessions and promises."

ECS: Thank you, Mrs. Mott. Now we offer all of you a Declaration of Sentiments for your perusal.

(Copies of the Declaration of Sentiments are passed out to audience.)

Reader 1: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: 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; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes
destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed.

Reader 2: But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

Reader 3: The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

Reader 4: He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

Reader 5: He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

Reader 6: He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.

Reader 1: Having deprived her of this right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

Reader 2: He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

Reader 3: He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

Reader 4: He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.

Reader 5: He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes of divorce; in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given; as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.
Reader 6: After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

Reader 1: He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.

Reader 2: He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

Reader 3: He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education—all colleges being closed against her.

Reader 4: He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

Reader 5: He has created a false public sentiment, by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated but deemed of little account in man.

Reader 6: He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

Reader 1: He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.”

Reader 3: I wish to raise the question as to whether men should be permitted to add their signatures to this declaration?

Woman in the audience: (Stands up) I believe men should be excluded from signing. After all we women are calling for the right to act on our own behalf.

Man in the audience: (Stands up) The men who have gathered here support women’s rights. We, too, should be allowed to sign. (Remains standing)

James Mott: We must not be distracted from the true purpose of this historic meeting. (Woman and man in audience sit down) All those in favor of allowing men to sign the Declaration of Sentiments say aye. Carried! This meeting is adjourned until half past two.

Reader 1: In the afternoon the meeting assembled to hear Elizabeth Cady Stanton speak.

ECS: “I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you at this time, having never before spoken in public, were I not nerved by a sense of right and
duty, did I not feel the time had fully come for the question of woman’s wrongs to be laid before the public, did I not believe that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degredation. Man cannot speak for her, because he has been educated to believe that she differs from him so materially, that he cannot judge of her thoughts, feelings, and opinions by his own.”20

**Reader 1:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton was followed by Lucretia Mott.

**LM:** “We would admit all the difference, that our great and beneficent Creator has made, in the relation of man and woman, nor would we seek to disturb this relation; but we deny that the present position of woman is her true sphere of usefulness; nor will she attain to this sphere, until the disabilities and disadvantages, religious, civil, and social, which impede her progress, are removed out of her way. These have enervated her mind and paralysed her powers.... The time is coming when educated females will not be satisfied with the present objects of their low ambition. When a woman now leaves the immediate business of her own education, how often, how generally do we find her, sinking down into the most useless inactivity.”21

**Reader 6:** Mrs. Elizabeth W. McClintock then rose to enliven the occasion with the reading of a humorous poem, “The Times that Try Men’s Souls,” written by “The Lords of Creation.”

“The Times that Try Men’s Souls

Confusion has seized us, and all things go wrong;
The women have leaped from ‘their spheres,’
And, instead of fixed stars, shoot as comets along,
And are setting the world by the ears!
In courses erratic they’re wheeling through space,
In brainless confusion and meaningless chase.

They’ve taken a notion to speak for themselves,
And are wielding the tongue and the pen;
They’ve mounted the rostrum, the termagant elves,
And, O horrid, are talking to men!
With faces unblanched in our presence they come
To harangue us, they say, in behalf of the dumb.

They insist on their right to petition and pray;
That St. Paul, in Corinthians, has given them rules
For appearing in public; despite what those say
Whom we’ve trained to instruct them in orthodox schools.
But vain such instruction, if women may scan
And quote texts of Scripture to favor their plan.
Oh! Shade of the prophet Mahomet, arise!
Place woman again in ‘her sphere,’
And teach that her soul was not born for the skies,
But to flutter a brief moment here.
This doctrine of Jesus, as preached up by Paul,
If embraced in its spirit, will ruin us all.”22

Reader 5: And on that note, James Mott adjourned the meeting for the evening.

Reader 6: On Thursday morning, the Convention assembled at the hour appointed, James Mott in the chair. The Declaration was re-read by Mrs. Stanton, freely discussed and adopted unanimously.23 Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men came forward to affix their signatures to the document. One of those was Charlotte Woodward, the only one to live to see the constitutional amendment giving women nationwide the right to vote in 1920.24

Reader 3: “The resolutions of the day before were read, and taken up separately. Some, from their self-evident truth, elicited but little remark; others, after some criticism, much debate, and some slight alterations, were finally passed by a large majority.”25

Reader 1: “Whereas, the great precept of nature is conceded to be, ‘that man shall pursue his own true and substantial happiness.’ Blackstone, in his Commentaries remarks, that this law of Nature being coeval with mankind, and dictated by God himself, is of course superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this, and such of them as are valid, derive all their force, and all their validity, and all their authority, mediately and immediately from this original; therefore,

[All readers pronounce the word resolved in unison on each of the following resolutions]

Reader 2: Resolved, That such laws as conflict, in any way, with the true and substantial happiness of woman, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and of no validity; for this is ‘superior in obligation to any other.’

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 3: Resolved, That all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.

All: Carried.

Reader 4: Resolved, That woman is man’s equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.

All: Carried unanimously!
Reader 5: Resolved, That the women of this country ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation, by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by asserting that they have all the rights they want.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 6: Resolved, That inasmuch as man, while claiming for himself intellectual superiority, does accord to woman moral superiority, it is pre-eminently his duty to encourage her to speak, and teach, as she has an opportunity, in all religious assemblies.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 1: Resolved, That the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior, that is required of woman in the social state, should also be required of man, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 2: Resolved, That the objection of indelicacy and impropriety, which is so often brought against woman when she addresses a public audience, comes with a very ill-grace from those who encourage, by their attendance, her appearance on the stage, in the concert, or in feats of the circus.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 3: Resolved, That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 4: Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.”

Reader 1: This resolution will make us look ridiculous!

Reader 2: We are moving too quickly! Surely if we vote we will be required to serve on juries and fight in our country’s wars.

Reader 3: Frederick Douglass, a self-emancipated slave and newspaper editor from Rochester, New York, then rose. A friend of Stanton’s, he had promised to be present and to take the floor in support of this motion.

FD: “We are free to say that in respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for man. We go farther, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for woman. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman, and if that government only is just which governs by the
free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to
woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and adminis-
tering the laws of the land. Our doctrine is that 'right is of no sex.'”27

LM: “Far be it for me to encourage woman to vote, or to take an active part in
politics, in the present state of our government. Her right to the elective fran-
chise, however, is the same, and should be yielded to her, whether she exercises
it or not.”28

Readers 1-3: Babble of ayes.

Reader 4: Carried, by a small margin.

Reader 5: “Resolved, That the equality of human rights results necessarily from
the fact of the identity of the race in capabilities and responsibilities.

All: Carried unanimously!

Reader 6: Resolved, therefore, That, being invested by the Creator with the
same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exer-
cise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to
promote every righteous cause, by every righteous means; and especially in
regard to the great subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to
participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by
writing and by speaking, by any instrumentalities proper to be used, and in any
assemblies proper to be held; and this being a self-evident truth, growing out of
the divinely implanted principles of human nature, any custom or authority
adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be
regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind.”29

All: Carried unanimously!

LM: “Let woman then go on not asking as favor, but claiming as right, the
removal of all the hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being. Let her
receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she
may enter profitably into the active business of life; employing her own hands, in
ministering to her necessities, strengthening her physical being by proper exer-
cise, and observance of the laws of health. Let her not be ambitious to display a
fair hand, and to promenade the fashionable streets of our city, but rather,
coveting earnestly the best gifts, let her strive to occupy such walks in society, as
will benefit her true dignity in all relations of life. No fear that she will then
transcend the proper limits of female delicacy. True modesty will be as fully
preserved, in acting out those important vocations to which she may be called, as
in the nursery or at the fireside, ministering to man’s self-indulgence.

Then in the marriage union, the independence of the husband and wife will be
equal, their dependence mutual, and their obligations reciprocal.

In conclusion, let me say, ‘Credit not the old fashioned absurdity, that
woman’s is a secondary lot, ministering to the necessities of her lord and master!
It is a higher destiny I would award you. If your immortality is as complete, and
your gift of mind as capable as ours, of increase and elevation, I would put no wisdom of mind against God's evident allotment. I would charge you to water the undying bud, and give it healthy culture, and open its beauty to the sun—and then you may hope, that when your life is bound up with another, you will go on equally, and in a fellowship that shall pervade every earthly interest."\(^{30}\)

**Reader 1:** Lucretia Mott then offered the following resolution, the last of the convention.

**LM:** "Resolved, That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and unyielding efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to woman an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce."\(^{31}\)

**All Say:** Carried unanimously!

**Reader 4:** Mary Ann McClintock rose and called upon woman “to arouse from her lethargy and be true to herself and her God.” After an “excellent and appropriate speech” by Frederick Douglass, and a “beautiful and spiritual appeal” from Lucretia Mott, the meeting drew to a close.\(^{32}\)

**Reader 1:** Stanton had written in the Declaration of Sentiments: “In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the state and national legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press in our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions, embracing every part of the country.”\(^{33}\)

**Reader 2:** She was right about the misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule.

**Reader 3:** The reporter for the *Oneida Whig* wrote, “This bolt is the most shocking and unnatural incident ever recorded in the history of womanity.”\(^{34}\)

**Reader 4:** From the *New York Herald*, “What do the leaders of the Woman’s Rights Convention want? They want to vote, and hustle with the rowdies at the polls. They want to be members of Congress, and in the heat of debate to subject themselves to coarse jests and indecent language.”\(^{35}\)

**Reader 5:** Even Susan Anthony, who had not yet joined this fledgling movement, “...laughed heartily at the novelty and presumption” of “The Woman’s Declaration of Independence.”\(^{36}\)

**Reader 3:** *The Mechanic’s Advocate* of Albany chastised the women for their privileged position. “The women who demand for their sex so many supposed Rights, and who aim to be placed upon an equal footing with the sterner sex, in all the relations of life, belong to a class that is, for the most part, unaffected by the serious evils that weigh so crushingly upon all classes of female operatives.... Work out a reform in them; bring about a diminution of the hours of toil,
and an increase in wages, and then it will be time enough for you to preach up the strange doctrines contained in your Declaration of Rights."  

**Reader 6:** The women were, however, able to secure some support from the pulpit and the press.

**Reader 1:** Said the Auburn *Daily Advertiser,* “This is emphatically the age of ‘democratic progression,’ of equality and fraternization, the age when all colours and sexes—the bond and free, black and white, male and female—are, as they by right ought to be, all tending downward and upward towards the common level of equality.”

**Reader 2:** Frederick Douglass commented in his paper, *The North Star,*

FD: “Standing as we do up on the watch-tower of human freedom, we cannot be deterred from an expression of our approbation of any movement, however humble, to improve and elevate the character of any members of the human family.”

**Reader 3:** The Seneca Falls Convention served as a model for many conventions to come, including one just two weeks later in Rochester, New York. From New York, the women’s rights movement spread outward, to small towns and large, in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Illinois. In 1851, supporters gathered in Akron, Ohio. There, Sojourner Truth, who had been born a slave, made her plea for women’s rights.

**Sojourner Truth:** “May I say a few words? I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart, why can’t she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don’t know what to do. Why children, if you have woman’s rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won’t be so much trouble. I can’t read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right.”

**Reader 4:** In the years following the Civil War, women and men gathered from time to time to commemorate the Seneca Falls Convention. In 1866, Lucretia Mott exhorted the young women of America to learn their history.

LM: “...I want you to make yourselves acquainted with the history of the Woman’s Rights movement.... I want to note the progress of this cause, and know now that Woman’s redemption is at hand, yea, even at the doors.”
Reader 4: Two years before her death, at the thirtieth anniversary of the convention, 85 year-old Lucretia Mott again expressed her confidence in the powers of woman.

LM: "Place woman in equal power, and you will find her capable of not abusing it: give her the elective franchise, and there will be an unseen, yet a deep and universal movement of the people to elect into office only those who are pure in intention and honest in sentiment! Give her the privilege to cooperate in making the laws she submits to, and there will be harmony without severity and justice without oppression. Make her, if married, a living being in the eye of the law—she will not assume beyond duty; give her rights of property and you may justly tax her patrimony as the result of her wages. Open to her your colleges—your legislators, your municipal, your domestic laws will be purified and enabled. Forbid her not, and she will use moderation."43

Reader 5: Like Mott, Frederick Douglass remained a supporter of women's rights throughout his life. In 1888, forty years after the convention, he expressed his convictions.

FD: "It is hardly necessary for me to say, after what I have already said, that I am a radical woman suffrage man. I was such a man nearly fifty years ago. I had hardly brushed the dust of slavery from my feet and stepped upon the free soil of Massachusetts, when I took the suffrage side of this question. Time, thought and experience have only increased the strength of my conviction. I believe equally in its justice, in its wisdom, and in its necessity."44 "When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of women, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act."45

Reader 5: On February 20, 1895, Frederick Douglas died. Earlier that day, he had attended a women's rights rally.46

Reader 6: In 1888, Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the International Council of Women, meeting on the fortieth anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention. She summarized the progress women had made in the years since that first small gathering in the Wesleyan Chapel.

ECS: "Now even married women enjoy, in a measure, their rights of person and property. They can make contracts, sue and be sued, testify in courts of justice, and with honor dissolve the marriage relation when it becomes intolerable. Now most of the colleges are open to girls, and they are rapidly taking their places in all the profitable industries, and in many of the offices under Government. They are in the professions, too, as lawyers, doctors, editors, professors in colleges, and ministers in the pulpits. Their political status is so far advanced that they enjoy all the rights of citizens in two Territories, municipal suffrage in one State, and school suffrage in half the States of the Union. Here is a good record of the work achieved in the past half-century; but we do not intend to rest our case until all our rights are secured."47
Reader 1: In 1920, the most controversial resolution of the convention finally became law, when three-quarters of the states ratified the nineteenth amendment.

Reader 2: The *Woman Citizen* made the following announcement upon the occasion of the first presidential election following the nineteenth amendment. “Charlotte Woodward Pierce is probably the only survivor of the women who attended the first local Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. She registered to vote in Philadelphia at the recent presidential election. She was looking forward to casting her ballot; and the Pennsylvania suffragists were looking forward with joy and tenderness to seeing her do it. But when election day came, Mrs. Pierce was ill in bed, and could not go to the polls.”

—The End—

Notes

5. Stanton, 148.
7. Flexner, 74-75.
8. Flexner, 75.
9. Flexner, 76.
11. Flexner, 75.
13. Flexner, 76.
19. *Woman’s Rights Conventions*, 3
28. Greene, 156.
29. *Woman’s Rights Conventions*, 4-5.
30. Greene, 161-162.
34. Sinclair, 62.
36. Stanton, 155.
37. Sinclair, 62.
38. Sinclair, 62.
39. Foner, 50.
40. Flexner, 81.
42. Lucretia Mott, “The Mothers Should Depart and Give Place to the Children,” May 10, 1866, in Greene, 270.
43. Lucretia Mott, “Place Woman in Equal Power,” July 1878, in Greene, 393.
44. Foner, 119.
46. Chesebrough, 36-37.
47. Stanton and Anthony, 211.