

Chapter Four

The Battle Cry of Freedom, 1860 to 1876

No women, of course, were allowed to vote in the presidential election of 1876, but that election set the course for the nation—and its women—for the rest of the century. Even without the vote, the political work of anti-slavery women was clear in that election: from a scorned philosophy that invited physical assault just a few years earlier, abolitionism moved to center stage and won the election. On only its second try, the new Republican Party elected its candidate, even though the Illinois lawyer was relatively unknown and possessed very slim political credentials: Abraham Lincoln had served one undistinguished term in Congress back in the 1840s. Not surprisingly, he won with far less than a majority of the popular vote. The nation was so badly fractured, however, that the Democratic Party split into Northern and Southern wings, and a fourth, minor-party candidate (who was also from Illinois) actually polled more electoral votes than the ostensible Democratic nominee. Except for opposing its expansion, Lincoln won without taking a firm stand against slavery. Although he evaded this crucial topic throughout the campaign, the anti-slavery “radical Republicans” had no choice but to support his candidacy as the best that they could do.

For the South, it was more than enough. Lincoln’s election signaled abolitionism to them, and the Democratic Party’s “Solid South” immediately rumbled rebellion. South Carolina seceded from the United States in December, months before the new administration took office in March, and Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and other states soon followed. When Lincoln went from Illinois to Washington, assassination threats were so real that he needed armed

escorts. Within days of the inauguration, guns began firing in South Carolina and the inevitable war was on.

To speak to the roles of women in that war would require another book, for the Civil War was a tremendous turning point in the history of American women. It was so long, bloody, and costly that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the nation has never again experienced anything like the horror of those four years. Every resource was needed, especially in the South, and traditional conceptions of ladyhood simply had to be set aside to meet pragmatic needs.



A scene from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which galvanized anti-slavery feeling on the eve of the Civil War. (Library of Congress)

Women discovered capabilities in themselves that they never knew they had, and the feats of tens of thousands of women earned grudging respect from men. Many disguised themselves and fought on battlefields as men; thousands nursed gruesomely wounded men, often without pay and under appalling conditions. On both sides, women did the necessary work of farm and factory while men went to war. Both sides used women as spies, and in both, women routinely performed Quartermaster Corps duty in supplying the armies. A number of women earned recognition as valuable orators for recruiting soldiers and molding public opinion, and dozens of female writers did the same—

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, more than any other single factor, turned the Civil War into a crusade against slavery. Women also organized entirely new systems for a military that had not yet developed modern humanitarian techniques. Clara Barton undertook the world's first systematic accounting of missing and dead soldiers, while the U.S. Sanitary Commission organized tens of thousands of women into local units that raised some \$30 million for hospitals—which, in turn, were staffed largely by women.

All this gave women an unusual opportunity for personal growth. The taboo against traveling alone, for example, seemed outdated when a woman needed to get on a train to find a husband who was missing in action or to retrieve a wounded brother from a prisoner-of-war camp. That the taboo against public speaking was over became clear in 1864, when 21-year-old Anna Dickinson proved such an inspiring orator that she was invited to address Congress with President Lincoln in the audience. The notion that women were incapable of managerial responsibility was overturned by women in both the North and South who ran the largest hospitals the world had ever seen—sometimes with a pistol at hand to control psychotic men or to prevent the theft of precious drugs. All of these challenges were learning experiences, and, when the war was over, women had not only new confidence and new skills, but also new national networks that could be used for political action.

But for the duration, direct political action became taboo, a ban that was imposed by the women's rights advocates themselves. Not only were most of them devoted abolitionists whose time had finally come, but also the leaders understood that winning the war and ending slavery were themselves huge challenges, and they knew they would be criticized if they diverted time and energy elsewhere. As women had done for centuries, suffragists put aside their own interests for those of others. In a clear and conscious way, the leadership of the movement accepted a suspension of activity during the war, and there would be no more women's rights conventions until the year following its end.

And yet women's needs were still real. Even though the nation was in crisis, personal lives could be in crisis too, and this point was brought painfully home to Susan B. Anthony soon after Lincoln's election. She was in Albany in December of 1860 when a woman wearing heavy veils appeared in the dark of night, begging for help. The stranger explained that her husband was a Massachusetts state senator, Dr. Charles Abner Phelps, and she was fleeing from him. She had made the mistake of confronting her husband with evidence

of his infidelity, and he had responded by declaring her insane and having her committed to an asylum. For a year and a half, she endured the hellhole that such institutions were at that time until her brother—a prominent political person in his own right—finally intervened on her behalf. But her husband, of course, retained absolute rights over their children, and she was trying to get a 13-year-old daughter away from him.

On Christmas Day, Anthony helped Phelps and her daughter disguise themselves, and the three took a train to New York City. Arriving late at night, they tramped through snow to several hotels that refused to rent them a room. The taboo against women traveling alone was still sufficiently strong that hotel managers routinely assumed that unescorted women were prostitutes or guilty of other criminal behavior; in fact, this was the case, for the senator had reported his wife's criminal desertion and "kidnapping," and the police were looking for them. Finally, Anthony found shelter at the home of Abby Hopper Gibbons, a Quaker accustomed to shielding escaped slaves from the law.

Gibbons was also the person who had seconded Wendell Phillips's motion to kill the controversial divorce resolutions at the last women's rights convention. In hiding the Phelpses, however, she demonstrated an understanding of the reality of women's lives that escaped Phillips and other well-intentioned men. As soon as Anthony returned to Albany, Phillips and other male colleagues besieged her, urging her to turn over the fugitives to the authorities. Even William Lloyd Garrison, usually the most empathetic to women, pleaded with Anthony to reconsider what he deemed her "hasty and ill judged" decision to harbor a woman from her lawful husband.

The men feared the harm this would do to their anti-slavery cause. They did not wish to offend the senator; they could not see the woman's problem as anything except personal. They argued that Anthony was violating the law in refusing to surrender her and never appeared to see the illogic of their position: they had argued exactly the opposite in the analogous case of the Fugitive Slave Law. The same men who firmly believed that conscience should override law when the victim was an escaped slave insisted, in the case of a fugitive woman, that the law must be obeyed.

It was another lesson that Anthony never forgot. She stood firm against their inconsistent sense of logic and justice, and despite pressure from many old friends, from the law, and from both of the families involved—even Mrs. Phelps's own powerful family wanted her returned—Anthony never told where

she took the fugitives that night. She maintained her silence for more than a year, but eventually the senator's detectives found the daughter and kidnapped her from Sunday school. A network of women, however, protected Phelps from extradition to Massachusetts. She moved in with Elizabeth Ellet, a historian and author of sufficient repute that the senator finally decided to leave his wife in peace.

As Elizabeth Cady Stanton summarized, "All with whom Mrs. P. came in contact for years afterward expressed the opinion that she was perfectly sane and always had been." The whole episode, of course, raised still another troubling issue for the movement to tackle: "Could the dark secrets of these insane asylums be brought to light," Stanton said, "we should be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters, and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to...barbarous laws made by men for women."

Mrs. Phelps demonstrated not only her sanity, but also a keen intelligence; even the fact that this Massachusetts woman managed to track down Susan B. Anthony in Albany was impressive. Perhaps she reasoned out from the newspapers where supportive women might be found, for Anthony was in the state capital to work on the issue of divorce—a subject of tremendous importance to Phelps. Anthony was staying with Lydia Mott, whom Elizabeth Cady Stanton described as "a dignified, judicious Quaker woman." A cousin to James Mott, she was the unmarried head of a home that was "one of the depots of the underground railroad, where slaves escaping to Canada were warmed and fed." Her home also was a gathering place for political men. "Leaders from opposite political parties...met at Miss Mott's dinner-table," said Stanton, and it was through these connections that the women managed to get a divorce bill introduced in January 1861.

Once again, women's rights advocates showed their admirable ability to separate abstract issues of justice from their own experience. Lucretia Mott encouraged her husband's cousin in this effort, even though neither of them had any personal need for divorce reform. In the same letter in which she said that she and James "had a delightful golden wedding [anniversary], with all our children and children's children present," Lucretia Mott also argued for the right to dissolve an oppressive marriage. Although she used pious Quaker language, her views were radically feminist: "I have wished ever since parting with thee...to send thee a line," she said, and then went on to enthusiastically echo views she had read of during a British debate on divorce. One member

of Parliament expressed Mott's opinion exactly when he said that women needed not only change in marital codes, but also "a total reconstruction of the whole system."

The proposed act was far from total reconstruction. It required anyone filing for divorce to have lived in the state of New York for a minimum of five years and then allowed only two grounds: at least three years of desertion or "cruel and inhuman treatment so great as to...render it unsafe to live with the guilty party." Even with these restrictions, however, the idea was still too radical, and the bill went nowhere.

In connection with their hearing on the divorce bill, New York women also held a state Woman's Rights Convention in Albany on February 7 and 8, 1861—but the war began two months later, and life would never be the same. "Those who had been specially engaged in the Woman's Suffrage Movement," reports Volume Two of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, "suspended their Conventions during the war and gave their time and thought wholly to the vital issues of the hour. Seeing the political significance of the war, they urged the emancipation of the slaves.... To this end, they organized a National League."

Once again, they began by meeting. In March 1863, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* published a lengthy "Appeal to the Women of the Republic," which was later issued in tract form. Signed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, it invited "the Loyal Women of the Nation to meet in the Church of the Puritans" in New York on May 14. Again, when the appointed day came, "an immense audience, mostly women, representing a large number of the States, crowded the house at an early hour." Anthony called the meeting to order, and Lucy Stone was elected president. The other 15 officers elected were all women, and they came from eight Northern states ranging from Maine to California. Most were familiar names, such as Amy Post, who led the effort to elect a woman as president at the second woman's rights convention in 1848, but some, especially Massachusetts's Mary H. L. Cabot, were important new additions.

Decisions were made by debating a set of resolutions. Susan B. Anthony introduced them, beginning by addressing the still-hot issue of whether the Civil War would be fought for the union or against slavery. "There is great fear expressed on all sides," Anthony said, "lest this war shall be made a war for the negro. I am willing that it should be." She stuck to the accepted strategy of

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petition, urging Congress to so amend the Constitution as to prohibit... slavery,” and they literally rolled up the returned petitions by state, sealing the yellow paper “with the regulation red tape.” The first 100,000 were collected in less than a year, and Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner formally presented them to his congressional colleagues on February 9, 1864. The Loyal League carefully tabulated them by state and, within each state, by gender: women accounted for 65,601 signatures, while 34,399 men signed. The greatest number came from New York, Illinois, and Massachusetts, but even 36 U.S. citizens living in New Brunswick, Canada, signed. Collecting the signatures was not easy. According to an executive committee report, “many refused to sign because they believed slavery a divine institution,” while others objected to women circulating petitions at all. At the same time that the league had to fight such attitudes on the right, some of their former colleagues on the left also disparaged the petition-gathering effort. “Old Abolitionists,” said the report, “told us that petitioning...had become obsolete.”

The Loyal League had a second national meeting in 1864 at the same time and place, but by the following May, the war was over. According to the count kept by Senator Sumner’s office, 265,314 petition signatures had been sent by December 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment that formally banned slavery was officially added to the Constitution. Many of the petitions had been collected at great personal cost: a “poor, infirm” Wisconsin woman, for example, who lost her husband and all of her sons in the war, was so dedicated to making their deaths meaningful by ending slavery that she “traveled on foot over *one hundred miles* in gathering *two thousand* names.”

Knowing where to find such committed idealists is crucial to successful implementation of innovative ideas, and by the end of this process, the league had established a 2,000-member network of petition gatherers. Although the names and addresses of the hundreds of thousands of signers ended up in Congress and, later, at the National Archives, Anthony and Stanton kept other valuable records. They had “on file all the letters received from the thousands with whom we have been in correspondence,” and they were politically astute enough to understand what a treasure trove that was for the future.

Even in the North, the war was so devastatingly disruptive that it was a year after its end before women organized another national meeting. The call for the Eleventh National Woman’s Rights Convention announced a gathering at

New York's Church of the Puritans on May 10, 1866, and promised speeches by Ernestine Rose, Frances Dana Gage, Wendell Phillips, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Anna Dickinson, and Theodore Tilton, the editor of an influential journal, *The Independent*. The meeting was held in conjunction with the now unnecessary American Anti-Slavery Society. Because most of the activists were members of both groups, they formally renamed themselves "The American Equal Rights Association" and announced their intention to "include both classes of disenfranchised citizens."

Although the merger was supported by most, Wendell Phillips hinted of unhappy times to come when he argued against it. He was president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and lost his position at its dissolution, while the ever-popular, but aging, Lucretia Mott was elected president of the new association. Probably realizing that she was the best choice to blend the two groups, Mott accepted, but also made it clear that "feebleness unfitted her" and that she would lean heavily on the others. Therefore, when the group elected Elizabeth Cady Stanton as first vice president, they had reason to believe that she might well, in effect, head the organization.

Susan B. Anthony presented several resolutions that called upon Congress and the states to amend their constitutions "to secure the right of suffrage to every citizen, without distinction of race, color or sex." Including Congress was a new development, for, as Anthony said, "up to this hour, we have looked to State action." The war, however, had changed all that, and Anthony turned the conservatives' own argument against them: they had argued that the war was for the union, not against slavery, and had insisted that states had no right to secede from that union. Now Anthony followed that reasoning to its logical conclusion: "by the results of the war, the whole question of suffrage reverts back to the Congress and the U.S. Constitution." It was a major change of philosophy, and most of her listeners appeared not to grasp her quickly made point—especially when Anthony immediately went on to discuss her own state's upcoming constitutional convention. The resolutions were adopted without clear explication of Anthony's reasoning, and the seeds for misunderstanding were laid.

Attention went instead to the meeting's highlight, the presence of newcomer Rev. Henry Ward Beecher. The era's most popular preacher and the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Beecher caused jubilation by unequivocally proclaiming himself in favor of the vote for women. In a portion of his hour-

long speech, he said: “I declare that woman has more interest in legislation than man, because she is the sufferer and the home-staying, ruined victim. The household, about which we hear so much as being woman’s sphere, is safe only as the community around it is safe.”

Another progressive presence on the platform was Frances Watkins Harper, although Beecher’s words were recorded with much more care than



Abolitionist and suffragist, Frances Watkins Harper.
(Wikimedia/State Library of North Carolina)

hers. A black woman born free in Baltimore, she had built a successful career as an author and lecturer during the 1850s. Briefly married and widowed, she would take her young daughter with her when she embarked on a four-year lecture tour of the South, where she rallied her newly freed sisters. Harper would be one of the cofounders, in 1895, of the National Association of Colored Women.

This first meeting of the American Equal Rights Association closed with Lucretia Mott reminding the audience of how far they had

come, especially on the issue of slavery. “Let us remember,” she said, “in our trials and discouragement, that if our lives are true, we walk with angels.” As she spoke, the sun shone through the stained glass of the Church of the Puritans, and Theodore Tilton expressed the feelings of many when he said, “This closing meeting of the Convention was one of the most beautiful...which any of its participants ever enjoyed.”

A Boston follow-up was held later in the month. Lucretia Mott did not make the trip, but sent her sister, Martha C. Wright, to preside. The only other leaders who went a second time were Wendell Phillips and Susan B. Anthony, who tangled again. For the first time, Phillips used the phrase that Anthony would come to abhor: “this hour,” he said, “is preeminently the property of the negro.” For the next decade, he and others would continually ask women to set aside their own interests for “the Negro’s Hour.” By that, of course, they actually meant black men: black women were of so little account, even

among these liberals, that their exclusion from “the Negro’s Hour” was taken as a given.

In a letter to the *Anti-Slavery Standard*—which was still in business long after the Thirteenth Amendment banned slavery—Frances Dana Gage expressed her outrage with Phillips’s view:

When the war-cry was heard in 1861, the advance-guard of the Woman’s Rights party cried “halt!” And for five years we have stood waiting.... Not as idle spectators, but as the busiest and most unwearied actors.... We have, as our manly men assert, fought half the battle.... To save the four million negroes of the South, or rather to save the Republican party, seventeen millions of women...are proclaimed a disfranchised class.... Let us never forget his [the black man’s] claim, but strengthen it, by not neglecting our own.

The issue became increasingly serious throughout 1866 and 1867, as Congress moved to add the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The intention of its sponsors was to ensure citizenship and civil rights to ex-slaves, but by then, women were making their case loudly enough that its drafters decided that the word “male” had to be included to make their intentions clear. It was a new thing: as New Hampshire abolitionist Parker Pillsbury said, “The word ‘male’ is unknown to the Federal Constitution.” The point merited attention: the Constitution, especially in its First Amendment, spelled out important liberties such as free speech, free press, and the right to petition, without regard to gender. Everyone from Supreme Court justices to the lowliest female citizen assumed that these rights were not gender specific—as women had, in fact, demonstrated by signing hundreds of thousands of petitions. But many English nouns and pronouns are purposefully vague, with “man” and “human” and similar words applying or not applying to women as the interpreter chooses. What made voting different from these other constitutionally protected rights was that the Constitution allowed states to define their voters. Prior to the Jacksonian democracy of the 1830s, for example, states not only disenfranchised women and blacks, but also many white men on the basis of religion, property ownership, or other qualifications. What changed, as Susan B. Anthony

had pointed out, was that the Civil War created a stronger federal role. The Thirteenth Amendment set an especially important precedent when the U.S. government, in effect, overruled state governments and banned slavery.

Now, in the discussion of the Fourteenth Amendment, the issue was enlarged: the federal government was about to define voters—a privilege heretofore reserved to the states—and insist that former (male) slaves be allowed to vote. That its sponsors felt forced to spell out women's exclusion by inserting "male" was in itself an ironic sort of progress, but it was far from satisfactory. The highest priority of the American Equal Rights Association for the next two years was keeping this four-letter word out of the U.S. Constitution.

The association met again in 1867, once more at the Church of the Puritans, and Lucretia Mott made an important symbolic gesture when she several times turned the gavel over to Robert Purvis, a black man. Mott also introduced "the venerable" Sojourner Truth, whose speech was so popular that the audience "called for her" twice more during the convention. A tremendous amount of progress had been made on racial attitudes in the 17 years since Frances Dana Gage overruled her audience and allowed Truth to speak, and it was Gage who followed up her points at this meeting. "Sojourner Truth gave us the whole truth in about fifteen words. 'If I am responsible for my deeds the same as the white male citizen is, I have a right to all the rights he has.' "

Gage went on to give examples of women's need for political independence based on her experience in the South during and after the war. Black women had told her, she said, "You give us a nominal freedom, but you leave us under the heel of our husbands, who are tyrants almost equal to our masters." She reported that black men—following the legal example of white men—had insisted on collecting their wives' income from the Freedman's Aid Society. "Men came to me," Gage added, "and wanted to be married because they said if they were married, they could manage the women and take care of their money...but the women came to me and said, 'We don't want to be married because our husbands will...whip us.' "

Charles Remond, the brother of Boston's Sarah Remond, also supported the women. Speaking as a black man, he objected to Wendell Phillips's "negro hour" strategy and said powerfully, "I repudiate the idea of expediency. All I ask for myself, I claim for my wife and sister. Let our action be based on everlasting principle. No class of citizens in this country can be deprived of the ballot

without injuring every other class.” That was the point of view the association adopted in a memorial they sent to Congress. It was signed by Lucretia Mott as president and Susan B. Anthony as secretary, as well as by three vice presidents who demonstrated the group’s commitment to gender and racial unity: they were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Theodore Tilton, a white man, and Frederick Douglass, a black man.

Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell missed the 1867 convention because they were hard at work in Kansas. This new state was different from any other, for many of its residents had moved there in the 1850s as idealists who intended to stop the expansion of slavery into the western territories. It was reasonable, therefore, to hope that such committedly liberal men could see that the women who shared their pioneer difficulties also deserved to vote. So hopeful were some Eastern suffragists that Kansas would become their heaven on earth that some “even made arrangements for future homes...where at last [they] were to stand equal.” The state already had sent one encouraging signal: during the first year of the war, Kansas women won the right to vote—but only in school elections. Limited though this was, it was the first suffrage success of the era, and it offered realistic hope that the precedent for full equality would be achieved here in the country’s heartland.

While women’s rights leaders played defense on the national level, trying to keep the word “male” out of the U.S. Constitution, they played offense in Kansas: the object was to remove “white” and “male” from its constitution. Twelve Kansas women had led the way by organizing themselves into a Woman’s Rights Society in 1858. Vermont suffragist Clarina Howard Nichols, who moved to prewar Kansas, offered her experienced leadership, and after nearly a decade of letter-writing and petitioning, the women had some prestigious allies. The first governor after statehood, Charles Robinson, and other elected officials were strong supporters and successfully carried the women’s argument in the January legislative session. The legislature put referenda on the ballot for the fall: the male electorate could choose to delete “white” or “male” or neither or both. While black men were more likely than women to win their enfranchisement, experienced activists agreed that Kansas might be the first state to grant women full voting rights. The chance seemed real enough to Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell that they headed out to the springtime prairies. In a series of letters back East, the two displayed