

Preserving Women's Rights History

On two warm days in July 1848, 300 people gathered in a small church to discuss the “social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women.” On the second day, 100 men and women signed a “Declaration of Sentiments,” demanding for women “all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States.” Local papers reported that the meeting was “marked by great order and decorum,” and that “some of the speeches were very able.” Even so, the convention was “novel in its character” because “the doctrines broached in it are startling to those who are wedded to the present usages and laws of society.”¹

That small church, the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, along with the Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Jane Hunt, and MaryAnn M’Clintock Houses, form the core of Women’s Rights National Historical Park created in 1980. The park opened its first visitor center in 1982, the restored remains of the Stanton House in 1985, and the preserved remnant of the historic fabric of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in 1993. The M’Clintock House is scheduled to open in July 1998 as part of the sesquicentennial celebration of the First Women’s Rights Convention. The park’s legislation authorizes cooperative preservation and interpretation with the owners of the Hunt House.

Later amendments removed the Bloomer House, which had only minor significance to the park story. The 17-year history of the park is a good case study of changing cultural resource management practices based on research providing new understandings of the past.

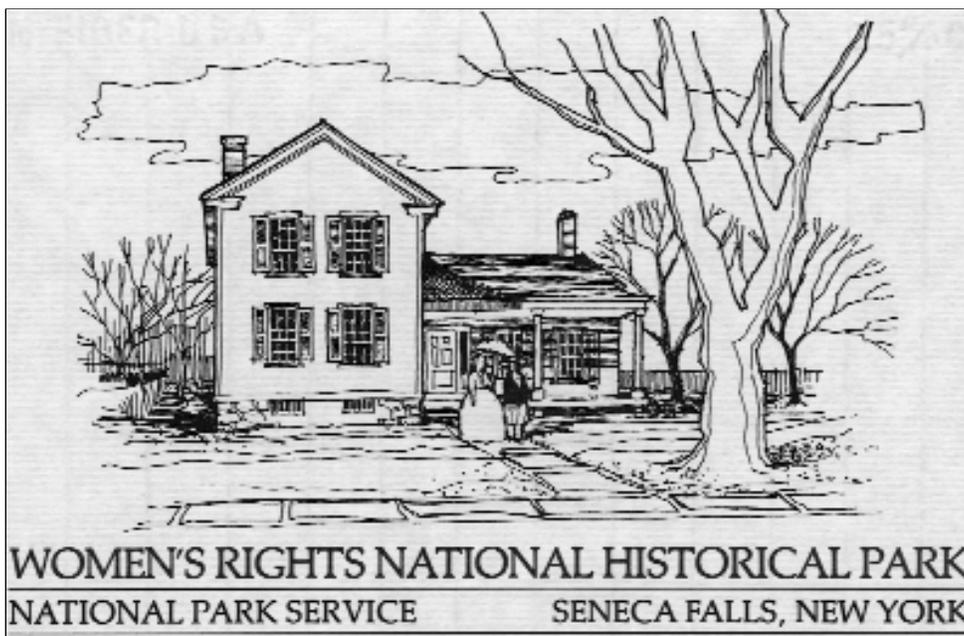
Creation of the Park

Women’s Rights National Historical Park was created, in part, to fill a perceived gap in the representation of social and humanitarian movements. Under the old NPS “thematic framework,” the category included one line for the women’s rights movements. In 1978, no NPS units preserved and interpreted the resources associated with the women’s rights movement in the United States. The convention held in Seneca Falls marked the beginning of the movement—wide-ranging in its demands and impact on American life—that waged a 72-year campaign for women’s suffrage culminating in the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment.²

Interest in the history of the women’s rights movement coincided with the formation of “the new social history” as a sub-field of U.S. history. This sub-field, sometimes characterized as “history from the bottom up,” stressed the economic and political relationships among groups of people. Urban studies, labor history, and the history of social movements focused on networks of ordinary

people. In this framework, the women’s rights movement was the result of a combination of economic, political, religious, and social forces: growing industrialization, the burgeoning middle class, enfranchisement of unpropertied males during the Jacksonian period, religious revivalism, and the separation of women’s and men’s work.³

Using this model of scholarship, Women’s Rights NHP included a combination of sites that could adequately explain the relationship among the groups and forces that precipitated this movement. The Elizabeth Cady Stanton home demonstrated Stanton’s growing discontent with her position as a woman in the



1840s and her work as theorist and agitator. Wesleyan Chapel, whose congregation was open to all kinds of reform speakers, illustrated the religious revivalism and other social movements that fed and coexisted with the early women's rights movement. Hunt House in nearby Waterloo, NY, where Jane Hunt hosted the tea party that led to the convention, represented the reform interests of the rising middle class—exemplified by her husband, Richard Hunt, a wealthy woolen mill proprietor, landowner, and town booster. M'Clintock House, home of a Waterloo Quaker family involved in abolition, spiritualism, health reform, and educational reform, was where the "Declaration of Sentiments," the convention's manifesto directly based on the Declaration of Independence, was drafted.⁴ The Bloomer home embodied the contribution of Amelia Bloomer, who published the first self-consciously women's reform magazine, *Lily*.

Attempts to pass the legislation establishing the park coincided with the creation of a historic district by the Village of Seneca Falls and the designation of Seneca Falls as an Urban Cultural Park in the New York State Heritage Areas system. The historic district protected the streetscape and some of the homes and businesses associated with their 19th-century owners who had signed the "Declaration of Sentiments." Emphasizing the themes of industrialization and social reform, the Urban Cultural Park visitor center, the wayside exhibits, and the walking tours were coordinated to explain development along the Seneca-Cayuga canal, local background to the First Women's Rights Convention, and architecture preserved in the historic district. The creation of the historic district, the state park, and the national park reflected the scholarship of the period. By themselves, none of these non-contiguous sites—spread through two towns and over 10 miles—could have explained the origins of the women's rights movement.⁵

Exhibits in the first park visitor center, opened in 1982, also rested on this scholarship; Judith Wellman and Nancy S. Hewitt served on the park staff in that summer. Their work on Stanton and the community participants in the First Women's Rights Convention and on women's reform efforts in Rochester informed exhibits that explained the convention in terms of industrialization, religious revivalism, and community activism.⁶

Preserving the Home of the (lost) Leader

Efforts to understand women's roles and participation in society have included discussions of prescriptive literature and women's roles, economic and community history, and a search for "great women." Susan B. Anthony was already

well-known as the author of the federal amendment giving women the right to vote. She had joined Elizabeth Cady Stanton in organizing for women's rights in 1851. The home she shared with her sister, Mary, in nearby Rochester, New York, was already preserved and included her collections from the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Unlike the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, the Stanton House, or the other houses associated with the First Women's Rights Convention, Anthony's home was preserved by the suffrage leaders she trained and nurtured through the NAWSA. "Aunt Susan" never married, dedicating her life to the cause of woman suffrage and to training the young women who supported suffrage work through the NAWSA. The home and its furnishings, owned by the Susan B. Anthony Memorial, had been open to the public for decades.⁷

Local interest in the Women's Rights National Park also reflected a need to commemorate "great women" leaders. The Elizabeth Cady Stanton Foundation, host to the first visits of NPS personnel to Seneca Falls, incorporated to save Elizabeth Cady Stanton's home. Although "marked" in 1934 by the New York State Department of Education, the home had remained in private hands. Between 1847 and 1862 when they moved to New York, Stanton raised children and planned campaigns with various co-agitators on the issues of abolition, married women's property rights, temperance reform, and access to education and to work. Her life-long friendship with Susan B. Anthony was cemented in this house. Anthony regularly came to help with childcare and to report various reform meetings.

During her residence in the house in Seneca Falls, Stanton and her allies organized her first convention, published her first articles, and gave her first addresses before national women's rights and anti-slavery conventions and before the New York State Legislature. With Anthony, she developed the "arguments that have stood unshaken through the storms of long years" and the strategies to pursue women's rights in property, in marriage, in child custody, in education and employment, and in suffrage.⁸

After receiving the house from the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Foundation, the National Park Service restored the remaining structure, which includes two parlors, a dining room, and three upstairs rooms. NPS policy did not support conjectural restoration of the house's two missing wings, although footprints, architectural evidence, and one later exterior image were available. Grey paint on the house exterior "ghosts" the missing north and east wings. Unfortunately, these missing portions of the house carry two interpretive stories

essential to understanding Stanton's early involvement in the women's rights movement—the assistance of her housekeeper of 30 years, Amelia Willard, and the visits from reformers and supporters, including Anthony and the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott.⁹

Partly because very little was known about the historic furnishings, the house opened in 1985 with Stanton's piano, some china and books, and a chaise longue. Research by Foundation President Corinne Guntzel, Wellman, and Elisabeth Griffith shaped an interpretative program that focused on the relationship between Stanton's reform activities and her childrearing and housekeeping practices. Stanton shared many characteristics with other middle-class wives—including a husband absent 6-10 months a year and seven children in 17 years. Her children were boarded at schools when they reached appropriate ages. She had the devoted services of Amelia Willard from 1851 on, and many other temporary helpers. But Stanton also differed in her willingness to experiment with new methods of diet, dress, childrearing, education, and household management. During her residence in Seneca Falls, she became equally willing to propose social experiments to increase women's rights—often years ahead of even her most vocal supporters. In Seneca Falls, Stanton learned to lead.¹⁰

M'Clintock House

Between 1836 and 1856, MaryAnn and Thomas M'Clintock and their family leased this Waterloo home from his brother-in-law, Richard Hunt. The elder M'Clintocks were active Friends (Quakers), serving on women's and men's committees for "Indian Concerns," drafting petitions to

Congress against slavery, and writing to other Quaker meetings. They helped found the new Congregational Friends of Human Progress in June 1848, when they left their Friends' meeting over religious practice and political action. Thomas M'Clintock co-wrote and published their defense, *The Basis of Religious Association*.¹¹

In addition to being active in Quaker meetings and reform, the M'Clintocks operated a drug-store in the Hunt block of buildings directly behind their home. Thomas M'Clintock, with help from daughter Elizabeth and son Charles, offered books and nostrums of all sorts, including Vaughn's Vegetable Lithontriptic Mixture and Phelph's Tomato Pills, and "free produce" (products not made by slave labor). They also hosted lectures and temperance meetings in the classroom above the store. Although Elizabeth M'Clintock had worked in the store for years before her younger brother joined her, her brother opened a branch store in Seneca Falls as "M'Clintock and Son" in the early 1850s. After searching for opportunities to open stores in Rochester and Syracuse in the mid-1850s, the M'Clintocks returned to Pennsylvania in 1856.¹²

Elizabeth M'Clintock sought entrepreneurial opportunities of her own. As the only woman listed in the Waterloo 1850 census who claimed an occupation, she had been assisting or organizing fund-raising "fairs" for anti-slavery societies in western New York for seven years, in addition to her work in the family store. A member of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, she met and worked with white and African-American abolitionists like Abby Kelley Foster, Amy Post, Frederick Douglass, and William Nell. Elizabeth M'Clintock delivered speeches before the First Women's Rights Convention and worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton between the convention and 1851, co-authoring letters to editors, editorials, and appeals for women's rights. Her special concern was equal access to work opportunities and equal pay. Her marriage in 1852 removed her from her father's store, but not from involvement in regional, state, and national women's rights conventions. The importance of access to equal work for women came up again when her husband died in a fall in 1854.¹³

The 1848 M'Clintock House was a simple brick structure. The back door leading to the drug-store was moved in 1852 when the M'Clintocks added a new wing for their growing family. When the park acquired the building, the wing had already been destroyed by fire. Initial NPS plans included restoring the 1848 exterior and parts of the first floor of the interior, emphasizing the front parlor where the "Declaration of Sentiments" was likely written. The pantry and an adjoining small

The Thomas and MaryAnn M'Clintock House, Waterloo, New York. Photo courtesy Women's Rights National Historical Park.



room, probably the bedroom of two free African Americans living with the M'Clintocks in 1850, would become a bathroom. Upstairs rooms would become offices and storage space.¹⁴

New research about the M'Clintocks demonstrates the close connection between their work for abolition, their religious practices, and their support of women's rights. Frederick Douglass attended the First Women's Rights Convention; African-American reformers were invited to Elizabeth M'Clintock's wedding; African Americans lived in their home. When the Congregational Friends formed, they eliminated separate committees for women and men to allow them to work together as equals. Large numbers of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Association and the Congregational Friends attended the First Women's Rights Convention.

These stories were already embodied in the M'Clintock House. The small room and the upstairs rooms gave evidence of many visitors and of the abolitionist fervor of the M'Clintocks. The rear door leading directly to the M'Clintock store tied economic hopes to their religious belief in equality. New research showed that altering the interior of the 1848 structure would impair the ability to explain the integral importance of the M'Clintocks to the First Women's Rights Convention and the early women's movement. Thanks to new research on Elizabeth M'Clintock, the interpretive focus at the M'Clintock House has been widened from the day the "Declaration of Sentiments" was drafted to include the entire period of residency. New park plans include the reconstruction of the missing M'Clintock House wing for use as office space and restrooms, while the interior will be restored in its entirety.

Much of the research that impacted interpretive and preservation decisions at the Stanton and M'Clintock Houses has been done since the creation of the park. The relatively general explanation of the causes of the Convention—waves of social reform, industrialization, religious revivalism—which informed the creation of the park are gradually giving away to sharper, more detailed explanations based on new research. As this research is used to make preservation and interpretation decisions, the park story is enriched.

Notes

- ¹ *Seneca County Courier*, July 12, 21, 1848.
- ² Department of Interior, National Park Service, *Women's Rights Historic Sites: Study of Alternatives* (October 1979).
- ³ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), looks at the "scattered beginnings" of the

19th-century woman's rights movement; Ellen Carol Dubois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) marked Seneca Falls as the birthplace of women's rights in the U.S.

- ⁴ *Women's Rights Historic Sites*.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Judith M. Wellman, "Women's Rights National Historical Park Interpretive Concepts," (September 1982) and "The Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention: A Study in Social Networks," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (Spring 1991), p. 9-37.
- ⁷ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Dubois, ed. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence. Writings. Speeches* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).
- ⁸ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815-1897* (1898, rep. ed. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993) 166.
- ⁹ NPS-28 (*Cultural Resource Management Guideline*).
- ¹⁰ Corinne Guntzel and Paul Grebinger, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Domestic Economy," in G. David Brumberg, Margaret H. John, and William Zeisel, eds., *History for the Public* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) 119-129; Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- ¹¹ Sarah Fatherly, "Survey of Research Collections: The M'Clintocks, The Hunts, and the; Progressive Friends of Waterloo," Research Files, Women's Rights NHP.
- ¹² *Seneca County Courier* July 14, 21, 1848; Andrea Constantine Hawkes, "Feeling A Strong :Desire to Tread A Broader Road to Fortune: The Ante-bellum Evolution of Elizabeth Wilson McClintock's Entrepreneurial Consciousness," Master's Thesis, University of Maine, 1995.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Department of Interior, National Park Service, *General Management Plan: Women's Rights National Historical Park* (March, 1986).
- ¹⁵ Hawkes, "Feeling a Strong Desire;" *Seneca County Courier*, August 4, 1848.

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