Women's Rights National Historical Park: where 'rights' are our mission

Vivien Ellen Rose

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Martha Wright and Jane Hunt were no ordinary middle-class American housewives, and the Women's Rights National Historical Park in the United States commemorates their activism. Vivien Ellen Rose, historian at the park, is responsible for the historical content of exhibits and programmes. The stated goal of the park is to 'inspire and educate visitors about the struggle of women for their equal rights', and this article presents some of the recent activities aimed at attaining those ends.

In Seneca Falls, an industrial town in the Finger Lakes region of New York State, a determined group of women and men met in July 1848 to reconsider the Declaration of Independence, the founding document of the United States. Two days later, they had amended it into a 'Declaration of Sentiments', claiming that 'all men and women are created equal' and demanding for women 'immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States'. The sixty-eight women and thirty-two men who signed intended to 'use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object', including employing agents, circulating tracts, petitioning state and national legislatures for changes in laws, and gaining support from the press and the pulpit.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's home, the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, whose congregation hosted the 1848 convention, and the Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock Home, where the 1848 convention was planned, constitute the Women's Rights National Historical Park. Created by the US Congress in 1980 'to preserve for the inspiration and education of future generations the significant sites associated with the struggle of women for their equal rights', the park has developed over the past twenty years. Included is the restored home where Elizabeth Cady Stanton entertained husband, family, friends and reformers, raised children and laid plots for social change. It opened to the public in 1985, focusing the main message on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's remarkable leadership of a growing movement while she experimented with the co-educational rearing of her family of seven.

In 1993, the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and adjacent visitor centre opened, adding the important national and international contexts in which the American women's rights movement took shape and the impact of the women's rights movement on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 1995 opening of the *Lily* printshop further enriched the park with a demonstration press and school programmes for 11- and 12-year-olds on the US constitutional guarantee of the freedom of the press, activists' actual access to the press, and the origins of a US women's press with the *Lily* in Seneca Falls in 1849.

Now the park is restoring the Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock House, where the main thrust will be to interpret the importance of Quaker reform efforts for the pre-American Civil War women's rights movement. Each park site allows an expansion of the central educational purpose of the park, as defined by Congress in legislation to inspire and educate visitors about 'the struggle of women for their equal rights'.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Martha Wright and Jane Hunt understood fully the implications of their activism. Four were Quakers, leaders in Indian rights, poor relief, prison reform, and anti-slavery activism. Mott and M'Clintock, founding members of the first interracial women's anti-slavery association in the United States, had already confronted angry mobs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the newcomer to a hive of reform activity kept humming by the work of these women Quakers, had met Mott in London eight years before at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention. In their anti-slavery efforts, the organizers encountered opposition and in some cases physical threats. Anticipating 'no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule', they determined to put into action their plan for expansion of citizenship rights for women.

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From this beginning, Elizabeth Cady Stanton developed the political acumen to become one of the most important leaders of the nineteenth-century movement for women's rights in the United States. Guided through the 1870s by Quaker activists, Stanton none the less developed her own brand of organizing. With her life-long friend and co-agitator, Susan B. Anthony, she created suffrage organizations, edited women's rights newspapers, petitioned the US Congress for an immediate end to slavery, challenged property laws denying married women access to land or to wages, demanded reform of marriage laws that allowed husbands to confine or chastise wives, and advocated women's equal access to education, the professions, the Church, and the state. In her final appearance before the US Congress, she argued that men assumed responsibility for the development of women's souls at their own peril, since no one could stand at the doors of death or judgement for another. Still later, convinced that religious intolerance limited women's own belief in their right to self-development, she wrote commentaries on the Bible. Her last letters, written shortly before her death in 1902, urged President Theodore Roosevelt and First Lady Edith Roosevelt to support the passage of an amendment to the US Constitution giving women the right to vote.

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton Home.

Programmed for social change

The restored buildings allow visitors to walk in the footsteps of giants and the interactive exhibits and programmes engage them in dialogue. *The First Wave*, a bronze statue grouping of nine known participants of the 1848 convention and thirteen unknowns (who represent the roughly 200 attendees who did not sign the Declaration of Sentiments) greets visitors on their entrance to the visitor centre. Though some recognize Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass or Lucretia Mott, few can identify all nine signatories of the Declaration of Sentiments. Visitors are introduced to each of the convention planners and important male supporters, and invited to think about whether, 150 years from now, they themselves will be known activists or unknown supporters of a current movement for social change. The statues are full of the details of everyday life: fans, purses, parasols, handkerchiefs, pockets and hats. The grouping is the favourite photo in the park: visitors delight in placing themselves among the figures and having photographs taken as they stand in the 'first wave' of the women's rights movement.

Running down the centre of the main exhibits is a timeline. Designed to include all the important facts of history, it also expands visitor knowledge by including the achievements of little known but

The First Wave *statue group, visitor centre.*

nationally significant women. This timeline has been left unfinished. At the end, a blank bulletin board poses the question, 'What will it be like when men and women are truly equal?' Visitors respond with various visions. Some expect dystopias, where men and women war with each other, ignoring children, human relations, art, culture and society. Others believe equal rights will bring world peace, social justice and racial harmony. Still others argue that men and women have never been and never will be equal. Often, visitors respond to each others' comments with arrows and rebuttals or affirmations.

In 'Viewpoints', a series of interactive videos in each exhibit area, visitors express opinions about a current issue. In an education section, for instance, a teacher and student disagree about whether same-sex schools provide a better education for girls and women than co-educational schools. At each interactive area, the debate stops suddenly with a request for the opinion of the bystander – the visitor. Whether a visitor agrees or not, the opposing point of view is immediately offered, with more information to buttress the argument. After a few rounds of argument, visitors are asked a final question, and then shown the percentage of visitors to date who agree with their perspective.

The printshop

At the *Lily* printshop, an early-twentieth-century platen press takes the place of the *Lily* press, run by Amelia Bloomer in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Bloomer,

whose husband Dexter edited the county newspaper, founded the *Lily* when the ladies' temperance society decided to publish a newspaper dedicated to ending alcoholism. The *Lily* swiftly attracted a national subscription base, and became Elizabeth Cady Stanton's outlet for opinion pieces, editorials and educational columns. In it, Bloomer published the pattern for an outfit credited to Stanton's cousin, Elizabeth Smith Miller, consisting of a knee-length skirt and long trousers. Named 'the Bloomer Costume' in the popular press, the outfit was worn by women's rights advocates in the early 1850s, earning them universal abuse.

The park's most popular educational programme is the printshop programme. The New York State curriculum requires fourth and fifth graders (children 11–12 years of age) to complete a local history course. In the printshop, students learn to apply lessons of the past to the present. They discuss issues that they face, decide on a message that they want to publicize, set type, and print a 'broadside' or a poster to take back to the classroom with them. As they learn to set type, they also learn about the US constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press. Students occasionally learn the history of the press itself: in the 1970s and 1980s, it was Helaine Victoria Press, a small concern that provided educational materials about the history of women in the United States when such materials were not commonly available.

The effectiveness of the printshop programme in provoking participation in current events can be judged by its impact on students. In the second year of the programme, a fourth-grade class applied the lesson of the printshop to a situation at school. Students wrote letters to the editor of the local paper, put posters around the school, and petitioned the school principal for equal access to playing fields dominated by older schoolchildren. Teachers reported that the skills used by the students in their successful attempt to gain access to playing fields were first introduced to them in the printshop.

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At work in the Lily *printshop.*

Demand for programmes demonstrates a public desire for continued operational support, an important consideration for a historic site run by a federal agency. Educated and inspired by the historic sites and programmes associated with the struggle for equal rights for women, visitors are reminded of the contentious debates in which the country first took shape. Finally, they remember that the organizers of the 1848 convention exercised freedom of speech to take an unpopular position in defence of rights. This legacy is honoured in educational programmes that encourage visitors to stand among agitators, envision the future, choose sides in reasoned debates, and express views on current issues.

'Honor the Past, Imagine the Future'

1998 marked the sesquicentennial of the Seneca Falls women's rights convention and a year-long celebration at local, regional and national levels. The anniversary offered an important opportunity to explain the importance of the struggle of women for their equal rights to audiences far beyond Seneca Falls. New York State created a gubernatorial commission honouring the achievements of women, the United States Congress passed legislation instituting a congressional commission on women's rights history, and the President of the United States established the President's Commission on the Celebration of Women in American History.

Mrs Hillary Rodham Clinton gave the keynote address at the sesquicentennial observances in Seneca Falls, after meeting with descendants of the signers of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. In that address, she summed up the historical importance of the 1848 women's rights convention. A new 'Honor the Past, Imagine the Future' badge for the Girl Scouts [Girl Guides – Ed.] encoded the basic interpretive message of the park. The participants of the 1848 convention had honoured the past by re-examining the 1776 Declaration of Independence, and had imagined a new future of equal rights for women in their own Declaration of Sentiments. Girl Scouts who earn the badge must honour the past and imagine a future that includes important historical lessons.

Effects of the sesquicentennial are still being felt. A presidential challenge grant to support the restoration of the M'Clintock House followed from Mrs Clinton's visit to their home. The number of visitors in 1999 equalled the 1998 crowds, up over 100 per cent from 1997. These facts indicate that the core educational mission of the park is important not only to women's rights activists, but is becoming increasingly important to other segments of society. This is good news for the programmes of the park, for the citizens of the nation, and for the organizers of the 1848 convention. ■

Note

The Women's Rights National Historical Park website is www.nps.gov:wori