

## Suffragist and Reformer

### Elizabeth Cady Stanton



**Imagine this:** It's the early nineteenth century and women have few legal rights. Married women can not own property and their wages belong to their husbands. Women have no right of inheritance, and women have no right to the guardianship of their children. You know the laws are unfair, but as a young woman yourself, what can you do?



"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton  
(1815–1902)

Your name is Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and you believe that the right to vote is the key to women's equality. You spend your life fighting for women's rights, and you are later given credit by many for being the architect and founder of the Women's Rights Movement itself.

Elizabeth was born November 12, 1815, in Johns-



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town, New York, one of six children of Margaret Livingston and Daniel Cady, the town's most prominent citizens. Her father was a judge and had served in the New York state legislature in Albany.

Elizabeth disliked her restrictive clothing: the long skirts; the red stockings; the heavy, red, flannel dresses with starched ruffles at the throat that scratched her skin; and the black aprons.

Indeed, she disliked restriction of any kind, and Elizabeth and her younger sister Margaret took a vow together to defy parental authority and to act as they chose. They were happy with their self-government and congratulated themselves, for they believed that had they obeyed all the orders and rules laid down for their guidance, they would have been "as embalmed mummies."<sup>14</sup>

Growing up she spent a lot of time in her father's law office where she saw how few legal rights women had. Married women could not own property and their wages belonged to their husbands; women had no right of inheritance, and they had no right to the guardianship of their children. A husband could apprentice their offspring without the mother's consent, and he could even appoint another guardian to raise them in the event of his death.

She was so disturbed by the unfairness of the laws that she once threatened to get scissors and cut the offending laws from the law books.

When her father realized her intent, he explained to her how laws were proposed and passed and told her the only way to get rid of old laws was to pass new ones.

As bright and feisty as his daughter Elizabeth was, her father was much more interested in his last-surviving son Eleazar whom he hoped would also become a judge. When



Eleazar was killed in an accident right after his graduation from Union College, her father was devastated.

While her father grieved for his lost son, Elizabeth did her best to be the son her father wanted. She was determined to be all that her brother had been, and to do that she believed that she had to be both educated and courageous.

She asked the Presbyterian minister next door to teach her Greek—something usually taught only to boys—and she learned to ride a horse.

She fought for and won the best possible education available to a young woman in America. She studied Greek and math and earned many academic prizes. And on horseback she could jump any fence without fear.

Despite all her accomplishments, however, her father still lamented the death of Eleazar, and the best he could do was to tell her, "Ah, you should have been a boy!"

Since colleges did not accept women, she enrolled in the Troy Female Seminary. It was the best education available to a young woman, but she knew that there was a great difference between a young men's college and even the most advanced female seminary.

After graduating from the Troy Female Seminary in 1833, she spent time in Peterboro, New York, with her cousin Gerrit Smith. While at the Smith home she was introduced to a young, escaped slave girl named Harriet who was on her way to Canada. After hearing Harriet's story, Elizabeth became a confirmed abolitionist herself.

At Peterboro she learned about racial injustice and was in constant contact with reformers of all kinds: abolitionists, temperance workers, philanthropists, and religious reformers. She felt drawn to the idea of an active life with purpose, a life that mattered.

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She also felt drawn to another of Gerrit Smith's guests, Henry B. Stanton, ten years her senior. He was an abolitionist hero, and she joined him at antislavery conventions.

In spite of her father's objections, she married Stanton in 1840 in a service with only a few friends present. Believing that she and Henry would be equal partners, she insisted that the word "obey" be dropped from her marriage vows.<sup>15</sup>

They both became involved in the abolitionist cause, but Elizabeth was angered to find that many abolitionists believed that only men should represent the cause at conventions.

She and her friend, Lucretia Mott, decided to hold a convention of their own where they would debate another burning issue, that of equal rights for women.

During the eight years it took them to organize the convention, Elizabeth was busy raising her three boys virtually by herself while her husband traveled.

The first Women's Rights Convention took place on July 19, 1848, at Seneca Falls, New York, and three hundred people gathered to hear the arguments. Elizabeth gave the first speech which shocked many people who thought it was "unladylike" for a woman to address a crowd.

She proclaimed that it was the duty of the women of this country to win the right to vote. Her speech, the "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments," called for freedom and equality for women, and she argued that women could only attain their "inalienable rights" by winning the right to vote. Her controversial, radical ideas sparked a fight that would last for seventy-two years—the struggle for women's suffrage in America.

The Declaration of Sentiments was modeled after the United States Declaration of Independence. The first sentence differed by only two words: "*and women.*"

The two-day Seneca Falls convention marked the birth of



the Women's Rights Movement, and the United States would never be the same again.

When Susan Brownell Anthony, a young Quaker woman in Massachusetts, heard about the convention, she knew that she had to meet Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and Susan became a team. Elizabeth, now the mother of six, found traveling hard, so she wrote the speeches and Susan delivered them.

Together, they set out to win property rights for married women who were not allowed to own property themselves, and in 1860, New York State passed a law allowing married women control over the money they earned and anything they inherited.

But this was only the beginning. Now Elizabeth and Susan were determined to secure for women the right to vote. The two women launched a speaking tour and gathered thousands of signatures on petitions; Elizabeth wrote pamphlets that Susan sold to raise money; they started a newspaper called *The Revolution*; and they published books on the history of the Women's Rights Movement.

In her eighties Elizabeth developed cataracts with progressive blindness, but she nevertheless continued to work for suffrage until the very end of her life. On October 25, 1902, she wrote a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt urging the complete emancipation of thirty-six million women just as Lincoln had emancipated the slaves.

It was the last of her letters. On October 26, 1902, just a few weeks short of her eighty-seventh birthday, Elizabeth Cady Stanton died.

She had been involved in a lifelong struggle to obtain equality for women. It would take another seventy-two years after the first Women's Rights Convention for women to get the vote, and Elizabeth herself was never able to vote.

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Finally on August 26, 1920, the United States passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution granting all women the right to vote. Without the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, women would not have received the right to vote as soon as they did.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton had succeeded in doing just what her father had said—replacing an old law with a new law.