

PRO-ACTIVE

History of women's activism.

July 13, 1848 marks the very beginning of the women's movement. On this day, housewife and mother, [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) (1815-1920) gathered four women, including [Lucretia Mott](#) (1793-1889) for tea. Discontented over the limitations of women in America, Stanton was the only non-Quaker in the group. The women took action! Five days later a convention was held at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, NY. Other than a small advertisement in the local newspaper, the event was barely publicized.

Stanton drafted The [Declaration of Sentiments](#). Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments stated "all men and women are created equal". The convention at Seneca Falls was held to discuss social, civil and religious rights of women; their grievances and demands, and a call to constitutionally guarantee women's rights to equality as US citizens, which included the right to vote. This began the [Suffrage movement](#). The declaration was signed by 68 women and 32 men and formalized the start of the [Women's Rights Movement](#) in the US.

Friends Susan B. Anthony (left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (right).



Stanton met [Susan B. Anthony](#) (1820-1906) in 1851. Anthony had seven brothers and sisters, and at a very young age, was inspired by the Quaker belief that everyone was equal under God. This belief was the foundation of her life's work. She became an activist, uninhibited by social rules that women shouldn't speak publicly, she passionately delivered speeches against slavery. Stanton and Anthony became friends, and spent the next 50 years fighting for women's rights. Together, they co-founded the [American Equal Rights Association](#), and in 1868, published [The Revolution](#)—a publication that promoted equality and rights for women.

Education and political rights were considered privileges of the upper class, but the voices of the movement also included non-white ordinary women. [Sojourner Truth](#), (1797 – 1883) a former slave, became the voice that bridged the ordinary with the elite. Though she couldn't read or write, she became a charismatic speaker against the evils of slavery. When she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony, she joined the women's movement delivering her famous speech: "[Ain't I a Woman](#)" where she challenged racial and gender inferiority and inequality. Temperance, abolition of slavery, and women's rights were the social issues of the time. Many courageous women became activists, taking to the lecture circuit in the 1860's and 1870's. They held popular and effective rallies. Some women activists had more than 200 [speaking](#) engagements a year. While they were focusing on suffrage, they were pushing for equal rights of women, overall. In 1866, the American Equal Rights Association ([AERA](#)) was founded to "secure Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the right of suffrage, irrespective of race, color, or sex". Lucretia Mott was AERA's president.

There wasn't always agreement, and a schism occurred over ratification of the 15th amendment. Anthony and Stanton were against it because, in giving black men the right to vote, they believed the women's right to vote should be included. They believed the two issues belonged together, and should be fought at the federal level. They formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Opponents believed the immediate expansion of citizenship rights to former slaves would be jeopardized by including voting rights to women; they believed woman's suffrage should best be achieved through amendments to individual state constitutions. They formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The first voting right victory came in 1869 when the Wyoming territory granted women the right to vote. Both women's organization celebrated the victory. Then, in 1878, the NWSA successfully lobbied the US Congress for a constitutional amendment. Though Congress formed committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate to study and debate

the issue, when the proposal reached the senate floor in 1886, it was defeated. By 1890, the two organizations merged, forming the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Their strategy was to lobby for voting rights state-by-state.

By the turn of the 20th century, four states passed voting rights to women, and women's suffrage was [gaining momentum](#). Despite the deaths of Stanton (1902) and Anthony (1806), young energy entered the movement. Stanton's daughter, [Harriot Stanton Blatch](#) (1856-1940) raised awareness with parades, pickets, and marches. [Alice Paul](#) (1885-1977) brought discipline, strategy with a militaristic style.

Unfettered, she organized marches, White House protests, and rallies. She founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (which later became the National Woman's Party); arrested several times and imprisoned at least three times, she was the key leader securing the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The 19th amendment reads: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States." This put an end to a nearly century long fight to prohibit sex discrimination in the right to vote.

Once securing the right to vote, Paul and members of the National Woman's Party decided to seek constitutional guarantees of equality by way of the Equal Rights Amendment, written by Paul and [Crystal Eastman](#) (1881-1928), and delivered to Congress in 1923. It read: "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction. In 1943, the wording was changed to the version that exists today. It reads: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

Like the disagreement on suffrage; a [bitter split](#) emerged with ERA when some of Paul's allies in suffrage, found ERA troubling. The challenge was to ensure that equal rights match women's needs. At [conflict](#), was the goal to allow women to have the same opportunities as men, while, at the same time, enabling women to be freely distinct and different from men without adverse consequences. This [challenge](#) remains today, and is why, though [ERA passed](#) Congress in 1972, the [ERA has never been ratified](#). A new wave of feminism was taking shape in the 1960's. Though woman had the right to vote, could hold public office, and have equal employment opportunities, the obvious differences between men and women were over-looked. The importance of protecting women and family, including 24 hour childcare for working families, were cast aside for a new order. The birth control pill was approved by the FDA, over-population and fear of famine, and the sexual revolution took the eye off family, with a new focus on the individual, and a belief that government would come up with all of the solutions.

A new emerging leader, Smith College graduate, [Betty Friedan](#) (1921-2006), conducted a survey among fellow college graduates for her 15 year reunion and concluded women were unhappy with their lives as housewives. In 1964, she published [The Feminine Mystique](#), which became a best seller. [Friedan](#) uncovered "the problem with no name". Though women were married with children and living in comfort, women were unhappy. Magazines, educators, and advertisers narrowly promoted the domestic sphere which was a stark contrast to the 1930's when magazines featured confident, independent career women. According to her survey, women felt they had lost their identity.

Friedan's book propelled the re-thinking of femininity and sparked the sexual revolution, spinning the women's movement in several different directions. [The National Organization for Women](#) (NOW) was organized, in 1966, and Friedan drafted the founding statement, emphasizing a women's need for identity and autonomy - women as human beings must be given a chance to develop to their full potential. At the 1967 [NOW conference](#) at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC. A clash of the liberation movement with the radical feminist movement came to a head when Betty Friedan shocked

members by pressing a vote for a full [repeal of all abortion laws](#). By the end of the meeting, one-third of NOW's members quit.

In 1969, the narrative, focus, and language shifted within the Women's Rights Movement— not by women, [but by two men](#), who co-founded, [NARAL](#) (National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Law), with the support and advocacy of Betty Friedan. [Lawrence Lader](#), a journalist and [Dr. Bernard Nathanson](#) (1926-2006), were clever.



Dr. Bernard
Nathanson

The narrative had changed, and now, Friedan advocated that legalized abortion changed and now, Friedan advocated that legalized abortion and contraception was advancing women's reproductive healthcare. The women's movement was [hijacked](#). Lader is credited as being the [founding father](#) of the abortion movement and heavily influenced the Roe V. Wade decision in 1973. Today, Abortion defines the women's movement. This is not what the pioneers of the women's movement had in mind.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton [wrote](#): **“When we consider that women are treated as property, it is degrading to women that we treat our children as property to be disposed of as we see fit.”**

Victoria Woodhull, the first women candidate for president [wrote](#): **“Every woman knows that if she were free, she would never bear an unwished for child, nor think of murdering one before its birth.”**

The first women to receive a medical degree in the US, Elizabeth Blackwell [wrote](#): **“The gross perversion and destruction of motherhood by the abortionist filled me with indignation, and awakened active antagonism.”**

Susan B Anthony's, *The Revolution*, [published a piece](#) that said *abortion was a choice that would burden both a woman's “Conscience in life and soul in death”; which ultimately is an exploitation of women.*

At Maine Right to Life, we follow our early leaders with a shared belief that the rights of mother and child are inherently linked. By getting to know our early leaders, we admire their courage, are inspired by their persistence, and we feel called to carry the torch to protect the authentic lives of women and children.