

An Era of Reform

18.1 Introduction

In 1851, a group of people gathered in a church to discuss the rights of women. A tall African American woman made her way through the crowd and sat down. Her name was Sojourner Truth. Back when she was a slave, she had learned to pay careful attention to white people. Now she listened as whites discussed whether women should have the same rights as men.

Sojourner heard one minister after another explain that women didn't need more rights because they weren't smart or strong enough to do much besides raise children. Women, they argued, needed help from men. One man summed it up by saying, "Women are weak."

With that, the former slave had heard enough. She rose slowly to her stately height of six feet and walked to the pulpit. The room grew quiet as everyone waited for her to speak.

"The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and over puddles, and have the best places everywhere," she began. "Nobody helped me into carriages or over puddles, or gives me the best place."

Her voice rose to a thunderous pitch. "And ain't I a woman? Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head [outdo] me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of 'em sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me—and ain't I a woman?"

When she finished, people applauded. Some cried. One witness said, "She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely."

As a woman and a former slave, Sojourner Truth represented two of the great reform movements in America in the 1800s. Between about 1820 and 1850, American **reformers** devoted themselves to such causes as ending slavery, promoting women's rights, and improving education. As you will read in this chapter, women like Sojourner Truth not only participated in these movements, but emerged as powerful leaders.

18.2 The Spirit of Reform

It was fitting that the meeting attended by Sojourner Truth took place in a church. New religious movements played a key role in inspiring thousands of Americans to try to remake society.

The Second Great Awakening A revival of religious feeling swept across the nation in the 1820s and 1830s. Church leaders called this period the **Second Great Awakening**. Day after day, people gathered in churches and big white tents to hear a message of hope. Preachers like Charles G. Finney, a leader of the movement, urged Christians to let themselves be "filled with the Spirit of God." Their listeners prayed, shouted, and sang hymns. Sometimes they cried for hours or fell down in frenzies.

Like the First Great Awakening during colonial days, this religious revival fired people's emotions. But the Second Great Awakening also offered something new. In the past, most Christian ministers had said that God had already decided who would be saved. Now preachers told their flocks that everyone could gain forgiveness for their sins. Many of them taught that one way to be saved was to do good works. Christians, they said, could build "heaven on Earth."

This optimistic message attracted enthusiastic followers throughout the West and North. It gave men and women alike a reason to work for the improvement of society. Charles Finney's preaching, for example, inspired many people to actively oppose slavery.

Optimistic Ideas Other optimistic ideas also inspired Americans during this time. In New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a former minister, was the central figure in a movement called **transcendentalism**. Emerson believed that every human being had unlimited potential. But to realize their godlike nature, people had to "transcend," or go beyond, purely logical thinking. They could find the answers to life's mysteries only by learning to trust their emotions and intuition.

Transcendentalists added to the spirit of reform by urging people to question society's rules and institutions. Do not conform to others' expectations, they said. If you want to find God—and your own true self—look to nature and the "God within."

Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau captured this new individualism in a famous essay. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions," wrote Thoreau, "perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears."

Thoreau practiced what he preached. In 1845, he went into the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, to live alone and as close to nature as possible. Thoreau spent more than two years in solitude, recording his thoughts in a 6,000-page journal. Once he was jailed overnight for refusing to pay taxes to support the Mexican-American War.

Model Communities While Thoreau tried to find the ideal life in solitude, other transcendentalists tried to create perfect communities. In 1841, George Ripley started a community called Brook Farm near Boston. Residents at Brook Farm tried to live in “brotherly cooperation” instead of competing with each other, as people in the larger society did. They shared the labor of supporting themselves by farming, teaching, and making clothes.

Brook Farm was only one of hundreds of model communities started by reformers in the first half of the 19th century. Most of these experiments lasted only a few years. But they were a powerful expression of the belief that people of good will could create an ideal society.

18.3 Reforming the Treatment of Prisoners and the Mentally Ill

One day in 1841, a Boston woman named Dorothea Dix agreed to teach Sunday school at a jail. What she witnessed that day changed her life forever.

Dix was horrified to see that many inmates were bound in chains and locked in cages. Children accused of minor thefts were jailed with adult criminals. Were conditions this bad everywhere?

To find out, Dix visited hundreds of jails and prisons throughout Massachusetts. She also visited debtors’ prisons, or jails for people who owed money. Most of the thousands of Americans in debtors’ prisons owed less than 20 dollars. While they were locked up, they could not earn money to repay their debts. As a result, they remained imprisoned for years.

The Plight of the Mentally Ill What shocked Dix most of all was the way mentally ill people were treated. Most people who were judged “insane” were locked away in dirty, crowded prison cells. If they misbehaved, they were whipped.

Dix and other reformers believed that the mentally ill needed treatment and care, not punishment. Massachusetts had one private asylum, or hospital for the mentally ill. But only the wealthy could afford to send a family member there. Even so, the asylum was filled to overflowing. The state needed more mental hospitals.

Campaigning for Better Conditions For two years, Dix quietly gathered firsthand information about the horrors she had seen. Then she prepared a detailed report for the Massachusetts state legislature. “I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women,” she said. “I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons, confined...in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!” Shocked by Dix’s report, the law-makers voted to create public asylums for the mentally ill.

Inspired by her success, Dix visited prisons in other states as well. After she prepared reports demanding justice for the mentally ill, those states also created special mental hospitals.

Dix continued campaigning for reform for the rest of her life. By the time she died in 1887, state governments no longer put debtors in prison. Most had created special justice systems for children in trouble. And many had outlawed cruel punishments, such as branding people with hot irons. Dix had shown that with enough courage and dedication, reformers—including women—could lead society to make significant changes.

18.4 Improving Education

A second reform movement that won support in the 1800s was the effort to make education available to more children. The man who led this movement was Horace Mann, “the father of American public schools.”

The Need for Public Schools As a boy in Massachusetts in the early 1800s, Horace Mann attended school only ten weeks a year. The rest of the time, he had to work on the family farm.

Mann was lucky to have even this limited chance to attend school. In Massachusetts, Puritans had established town schools. Few other areas had **public schools**—schools paid for by taxes. Wealthy parents sent their children to private school or hired tutors at home. On the frontier, 60 children might attend a part-time, one-room school. Their teachers had limited education and received little pay. Most children simply did not go to school at all.

In the cities, some poor children stole, destroyed property, and set fires. Reformers believed that education would help these children escape poverty and become good citizens. Influenced by its big cities, New York set up public elementary schools in every town as early as the 1820s.

Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, Horace Mann became the state’s supervisor of education. In towns and villages, he spoke out on the need for public schools. “Our means of education,” he stated, “are the grand machinery by which the ‘raw material’ of human nature can be worked up into inventors and discoverers, into skilled artisans and scientific farmers.”

Citizens in Massachusetts responded to Mann's message. They voted to pay taxes to build better schools, to pay teachers higher salaries, and to establish special training schools for teachers.

An Unfinished Reform By 1850, many states in the North and West used Mann's ideas. Soon most white children, especially boys, attended free public schools.

But America still did not offer education to everyone. Most high schools and colleges did not admit girls. States as far north as Illinois passed laws to keep African Americans out of public schools. When towns did allow African Americans to attend school, most made them go to separate schools that received less money. In the South, few girls and no African Americans could attend public schools.

Education for girls and women did make some progress. In 1837, Ohio's Oberlin College became the first college to admit women as well as men. When states started the first public universities in the 1860s, most accepted female students.

African Americans, however, had few options. When Prudence Crandall admitted an African American girl to her girls' school in Connecticut, white parents took their children out of the school. Crandall responded by having all African American students. Enraged, white people threw stones at the school and had Crandall jailed. After two years, she was forced to close her school.

Horace Mann realized that much more needed to be done to increase educational opportunity for women and African Americans. He became the first president of a new college for men and women, Antioch College in Ohio. There, he urged his students to become involved in improving society. "Be ashamed to die," he told them, "until you have won some victory for humanity."

18.5 Fighting Slavery

In 1835, a poster appeared on walls throughout Washington, D.C. The poster showed two drawings. One drawing, labeled "The Land of the Free," showed the founding fathers reading the Declaration of Independence. The other, labeled "The Home of the Oppressed," showed slaves trudging past the Capitol building, the home of Congress. The poster posed a challenging question: How could America, the "land of the free," still allow slavery? By the 1830s, growing numbers of people were asking this question. They were called **abolitionists**.

The Struggle Begins Some Americans had opposed slavery even in Revolutionary War times. Quakers stopped owning slaves in 1776. By 1792, every state as far south as Virginia had anti-slavery societies.

Once the slave trade ended in 1808, northern shipping communities had no more interest in slaves. Still, northern factory owners liked the cheap cotton that the South provided. Although slavery ended in the North by the early 1800s, many northerners still accepted southern slavery.

Unlike their neighbors, abolitionists wanted to end slavery. But they did not always agree about how to do it. Radicals tried to inspire slaves to rise up in revolt.

Others wanted to find a peaceful way to end slavery immediately. Moderates wanted to give slaveholders time to develop farming methods that didn't rely on slave labor.

From the early days, both blacks and whites worked in the abolition movement, sometimes together, sometimes separately. Black activists often maintained their independence. One African American journalist wrote, "As long as we let them think and act for us...they will outwardly treat us as men, while in their hearts they still hold us as slaves."

In 1831, a deeply religious white man, William Lloyd Garrison, started a fiery abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. Braving the disapproval of many northerners, Garrison demanded the immediate freeing of all slaves. "I will be as harsh as truth," he wrote. "I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard." Angry pro-slavery groups destroyed Garrison's printing press and burned his house.

Frederick Douglass Speaks Out One day, Garrison heard an escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, speaking to a meeting of abolitionists. Over six feet tall, Douglass spoke with a voice like thunder. When he described the cruel treatment of slave children, people cried. When he made fun of ministers who told slaves to love slavery, people laughed. When he finished, Garrison jumped up and cried, "Shall such a man be held a slave in a Christian land?" The crowd called out, "No! No! No!"

Frederick Douglass quickly became a leader in the abolitionist movement. His autobiography (the story of his life) became an instant best-seller. A brilliant, independent thinker, Douglass eventually started his own newspaper, *North Star*. Its motto read, "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the father of us all, and we are all Brethren."

Women Get Involved Many women were inspired by the religious reform movement to become involved in the fight against slavery. Like other abolitionists, they sometimes faced violence. When a young woman named Angelina Grimké spoke against slavery, an anti-abolition mob threw stones. When she kept speaking, they burned the building.

Angelina and her sister Sarah had been raised in a South Carolina slaveholding family. After traveling North and becoming Quakers, they saw slavery in a new way. The two sisters began speaking out about the poverty and pain of slavery. At first they spoke only to other women, but soon they were speaking to large groups of men and women throughout the North. The Grimkes led the way for other women to speak in public.

Some abolitionists, like Sojourner Truth, were former slaves. Truth had always been strongly spiritual and had preached throughout the North at religious meetings and on street corners. But when she met Douglass and Garrison, their enthusiasm inspired her to speak out about slavery. An outstanding speaker, Truth argued that God would end slavery peacefully.

Abolitionists were a minority, even in the North. But their efforts, and the violence directed against them, helped change northerners' attitudes toward slavery. In addition, the anti-slavery fight helped pave the way for the next great reform movement, the struggle for women's rights.

18.6 Equal Rights for Women

Women abolitionists were in a strange position. They were trying to convince lawmakers to make slavery illegal, yet they themselves could not vote or hold office. They worked to raise money for the movement, yet their own money and property were controlled by their fathers and husbands. They spoke out against slave beatings, yet their husbands could discipline them whenever they wanted.

Even wealthy women like the Grimke sisters started to see that women and slaves had much in common. "What then can woman do for the slave," asked Angelina, "when she herself is under the feet of man and shamed into silence?"

The Struggle Begins The organized movement for women's rights was sparked by the friendship between Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two women met in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. When they arrived, they were outraged to discover that women were not allowed to speak at the meeting. The men who ran the convention even made women sit in the balcony, behind a curtain!

The men's decision may have backfired, because it was in the balcony that Mott and Stanton met. At first glance, the two women seemed quite different. Mott was 47 years old, the mother of four children, and an active reformer. Inspired by the Grimke sisters and her own Quaker faith, she had preached against slavery in both white and black churches. She had also helped Prudence Crandall try to find students for her school for black girls.

Stanton was 25 years old and newly married. She had never spoken in public. As a young girl, she had overheard women beg her father, a judge, to protect them from husbands who had beaten them. He had to tell them that there was no law against it. Later, she attended Troy Female Seminary, the nation's first high school for girls. She knew from her studies in history that America did not treat women fairly. When she met Lucretia Mott in London, she readily agreed that something had to be done about the injustices suffered by women.

Unequal Treatment of Women Even a fine education like Stanton's did not assure women equal treatment. When Lucy Stone graduated from Oberlin College, the faculty invited her to write a speech. But a man would have to give the speech, since the school would not allow women to speak in public! Stone refused. After graduation, she spoke out for women's rights. Because women could not vote, she refused to pay property taxes. "Woman suffer taxation," she said, "and yet have no representation."

Stone's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Blackwell, wanted to be a doctor. She knew mathematics, science, and history. She had even been tutored by a helpful doctor. Yet she was rejected by 29 medical schools before one finally accepted her. She graduated at the top of her class, becoming the country's first female doctor. Still, no hospitals or doctors would agree to work with her.

To overcome such barriers, women would have to work together. By the time Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott left London, they had decided "to hold a convention...and form a society to advocate the rights of women."

18.7 The Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments

Eight years passed before Stanton and Mott met again. Over afternoon tea at the home of Mott's sister, they decided to send a notice to the local newspaper announcing a women's convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The organized movement for women's rights was about to begin.

The Declaration of Sentiments On July 19, 1848, almost 300 people, including 40 men, arrived for the Seneca Falls Convention. Many were abolitionists, Quakers, or other reformers. Some were local housewives, farmers, and factory workers.

The convention organizers modeled their proposal for women's rights, the **Declaration of Sentiments**, on the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," the document began, "that all men and women are created equal."

Just as the Declaration of Independence listed King George's acts of tyranny over the colonists, the new declaration listed acts of tyranny by men over women. Men did not let women vote. He did not give her property rights, even to her own wages. He did not allow her to practice professions like medicine and law.

Stanton's presentation of the declaration at the convention was her first speech. A few other women also summoned the courage to speak. One of them, Charlotte Woodward, was a 19-year-old factory worker. "Every fiber of my being," she said, "rebelled [against] all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance which, after it was earned, could never be mine."

Debate About the Right to Vote The convention passed resolutions in favor of correcting these injustices. Then Stanton proposed that women demand the right to vote. For many, this step was too big. Even Mott cried, "Thou will make us ridiculous! We must go slowly."

At this point, Stanton received powerful support from another participant at the convention, Frederick Douglass. Everyone who believed that black men should have the right to vote, Douglass argued, must also favor giving black women the right to vote. And that meant all women should have this precious right. Inspired by Douglass's speech, the convention voted narrowly to approve this last resolution.

The Legacy of Seneca Falls The Seneca Falls Convention helped to create an organized campaign for women's rights. Sojourner Truth, who would later mesmerize an audience by asking defiantly, "Ain't I a woman?" became an active campaigner in the movement.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton didn't like speaking at conventions, but she could write moving speeches. Fortunately, she made friends with Susan B. Anthony, a reformer with a flair for public speaking.

While Stanton stayed in Seneca Falls to raise her children, Anthony traveled from town to town, speaking for women's rights. Of their lifelong teamwork, Stanton said, "I forged the thunderbolts, she fired them."

Slowly, reformers for women's rights made progress. New York gave women control over their property and wages. Massachusetts and Indiana passed more liberal divorce laws. Elizabeth Blackwell started her own hospital, including a medical school to train other female doctors.

Other reforms would take decades to become reality. Of all the women who signed the declaration at Seneca Falls, just one would live to vote for president legally—Charlotte Woodward.

18.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the reform movements that swept through the United States between about 1820 and 1850. You used an illustration of a protest march to learn about these reforms.

Many reformers were inspired by the Second Great Awakening, which taught Christians to perform good works in order to be saved. Others were inspired by transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Dorothea Dix pioneered the reform of prisons and the treatment of the mentally ill. The movement to make education freely available to all was led by Horace Mann.

Inspired in part by religious revivalism, abolitionists braved violent opposition as they worked to end slavery. Women and former slaves played a key role in this movement.

The abolitionist campaign helped spark the struggle for women's rights. The organized movement for women's rights began with the Seneca Falls Convention and its Declaration of Sentiments.

These reform movements had their greatest effect in the North. In the next chapter, you will learn about the growing differences between the North and the South.