

THE MOTHER, THE COSTUME, THE VOTE

How Suffragists Created an Identity
Through Fashion

Aspen Culbertson | 2025

The American suffrage movement formally started in 1848 when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls. The women's campaign would continue into the 20th century until the 19th Amendment was passed in 1920. Concurrently, with the campaign for the right to vote, was the Dress Reform movement led by many of the same figures. Dress reform had many goals but it was influenced by health and the new role of women in the public sphere. Those suffragists created a common fashion identity through the dress reform movement to bind them together created from influences from their backgrounds and that costume would have impacts spiraling into the popular fashions of the future.



Elizabeth Cady
Stanton

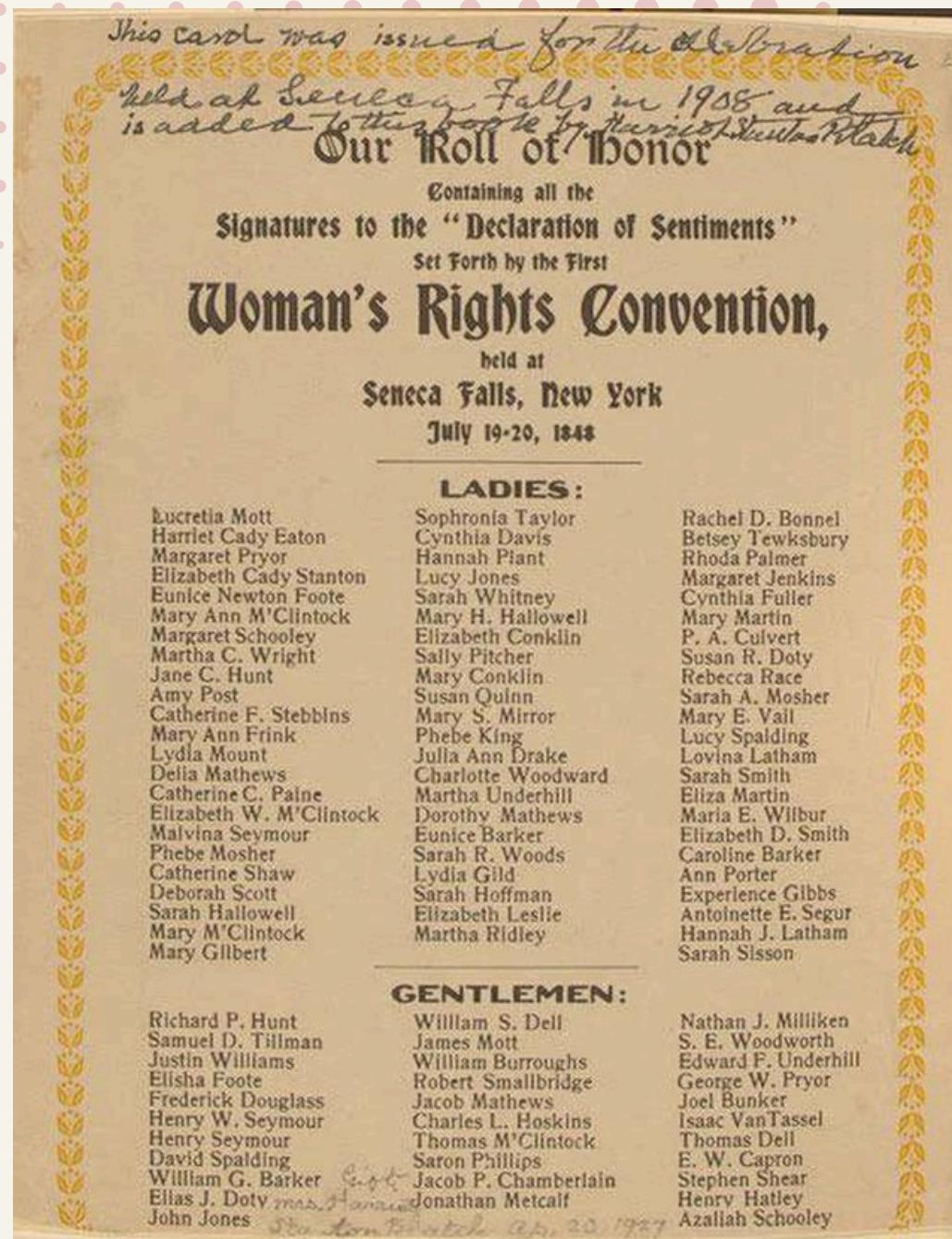


Lucretia Mott



Amelia Bloomer

In July 1848, many supporters gathered, called by two leaders of the movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Like many suffragette leaders of the , Mrs. Stanton was invested in abolition and was already filled with a “spirit of reform” and Lucretia Mott was an influential community figure, a Quaker, and a lifelong member of the Society of Friends. She was hailed for her social justice involvement with abolition, temperance, immigration, and other movements. Another figure at that first conference in 1848 was Amelia Bloomer. She was a resident of Seneca Falls and credited with a style called the Bloomer Costume which she popularized in her newspaper The Lily. The Lily was a temperance magazine for women which was an important influence on the women’s suffrage movement.



Signatures on the Declaration of Sentiments

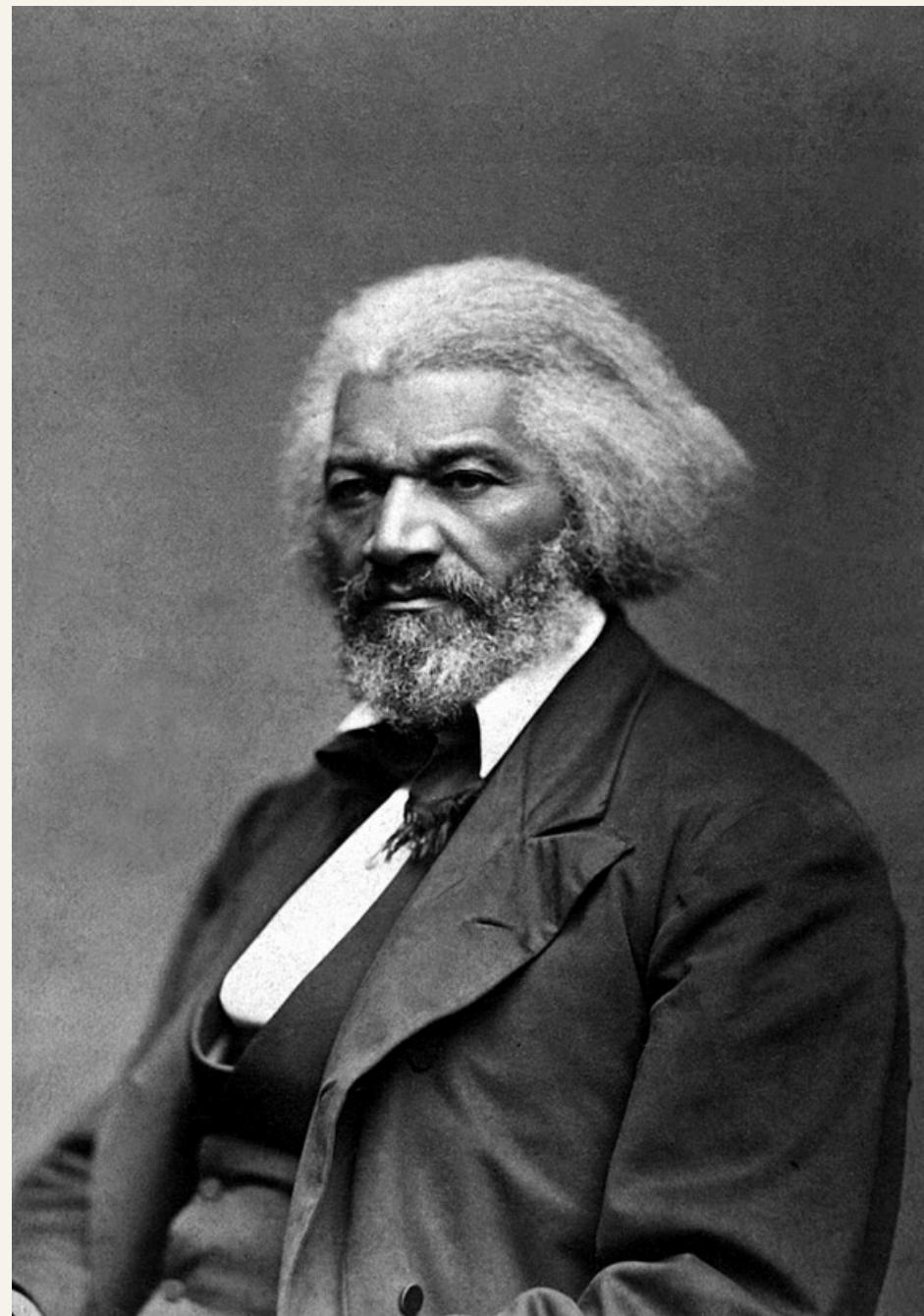
During the first conference, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton describes a crowd coming on foot, horseback, and carriage to meet. Mary Bull, a young resident of Seneca Falls and attendant at the conference, disagrees on the size of the crowd but says that the lack of numbers was more than made up for by the excitement contained in the crowd. The first day of the conference was dominated by papers read by women. At the end of the first day, the women gathered in order to write their list of grievances. Not knowing where to start, they decided to format it after

the Declaration of Independence. It began,

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the

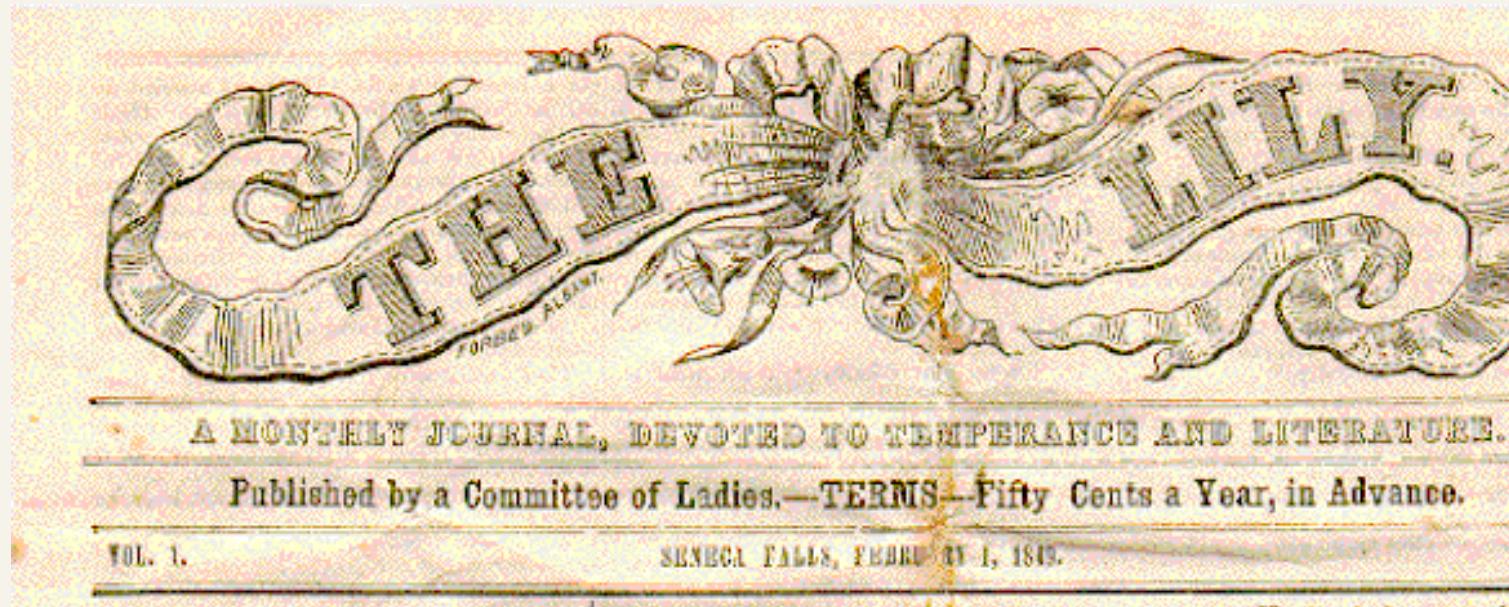
consent of the governed.” (Stanton)

They called it the Declaration of Sentiments, and they discussed how women are subservient to fathers, brothers, and husbands and are unable to hold property. It also bemoans that women were beholden to laws on which they could not voice their opinions. The declaration was signed by 32 men and 68 women.



Fredrick Douglas

The conference along with the entire women's rights movement was incredibly intersectional. The movement was started by abolitionists who were already involved in activism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was married to an abolitionist. She and Lucretia Mott met at the London Anti-Slavery Conference and this meeting bred the idea for the Seneca Falls Conference as they were not permitted to speak at that conference due to their gender. A June 1839 edition of the newspaper Voices of Freedom claims that women were some of the biggest supporters of abolition. Fredrick Douglas was at the original women's rights conference in July 1848 and was one of the signers. He was one of the first male supporters of the movement even at harm to his own reputation and was offered a seat on the board by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott.



The Lily

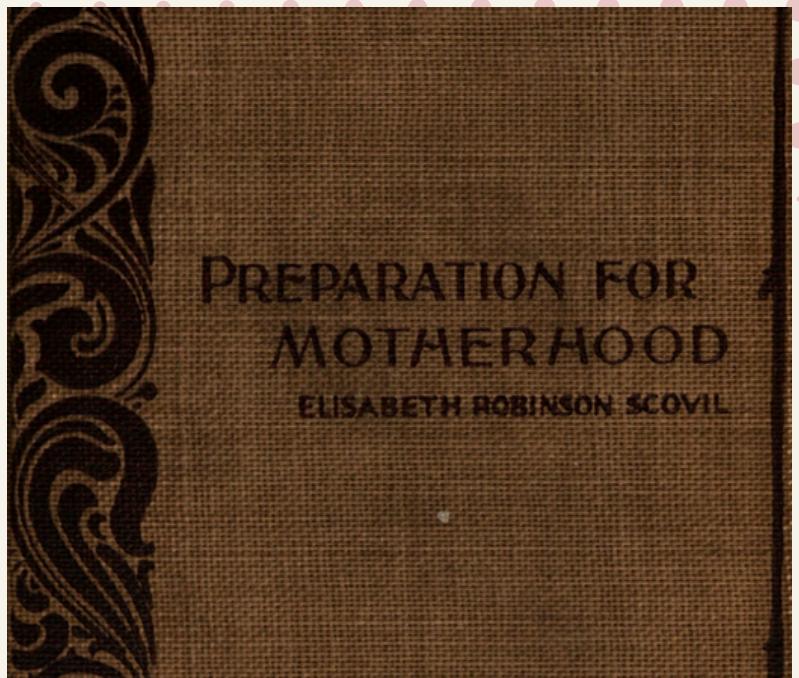
A Monthly Journal Devoted to Temperance and
Literature
Published by a Committee of Ladies -Terms-
Fifty cents a year, in advance

The Temperance Movement was also a major aspect and influence on suffragists. Amelia Bloomer was a prominent member of the Temperance movement. Her newspaper, The Lily, was primarily a temperance newspaper. In the January 1st, 1849 issue Amelia Bloomer stated that the newspaper was "created for the voices of women against the evils of alcohol". The Lily was chosen as the symbol of the movement as it was a representation of women's purity. Many of the articles written in The Lily are the perspectives of women on many issues, including their right to vote.



Lucretia Mott and other members of the Society of Friends

Another intersection of the suffrage movement was the Quakers or as they call themselves, The Society of Friends. It was a religion heavily focused on service and activism. Quakers believed that both men and women are equal under god, and being Quaker gave women more freedom both in the church and in their lives than non-quaker women. Women were even allowed to be ministers under the Society of Friends, one such minister was Lucretia Mott who used her experiences as a minister to promote her career as an activist for both abolition and women's rights.



A 19th c. Guide for
Expecting Mothers



Family Bliss
Lily Martin Spencer
1851-1852

Perceptions of what it means to be a woman influenced all aspects of female life. Women were paragons of morality in the 19th century. Their primary role as mothers was something that made them divine according to an article in the Kansas Agitator .

The woman's role in the family was as a righteous form of guidance. A mother was seen as the ultimate influence on their child and their care would affect how the child grew up. The debate at the time was much more focused on nurture than nature. It was believed that temperament, personality, and intellect all came from the teachings of the mother. Motherhood was the crowning glory of women and their moral grounding, and having them vote would bring goodness to the family.



Dress 1856
The MET



Ensemble 1855
The MET

In the 1850s fashionable women wore a chemise or a shift and pantalettes as undergarments. They wore a corset that would have come to mid-bust and reduced the waist measurement in combination with padding at the hips and bust to give the illusion of the hourglass figure. In the 1840s, it was common to wear many layers of petticoats, but by the 1850s the cage crinoline was commonly used in the states. The skirts were very round at the time and shaped like a circle. Bodices were normally closed in the center front or back and end at the natural waist. It was typical for day bodices to be covered up while night bodices showed more skin with short sleeves and lower necklines. This was a time when ornamentation was getting more popular as fashion changed from the 40s to the 50s to the 60s.



Bloomer Dress of the 1850s

The Dress Reform movement was characterized by a costume popularly called the Bloomer dress or the American Uniform. It gets its recognizable name because Amelia Bloomer popularized this form of dress in an 1851 edition of *The Lily*. Mrs. Bloomer wasn't actually the person to invent the costume, the earliest known adaptor is Elizabeth Smith Miller. The Water-Cure Journal in 1851 describes the dress:

“consisted simply of a pair of cassimere pantaloons, a frock of woolen material, loose, plain waist, and sleeves, with a skirt reaching to the knees, of decent dimensions in width, thickly lined throughout, a light cap or hat upon the head, and thick-soled, high-topped boots”

The qualities in mind during the creation of the uniform were taste, health, and comfort. The women's rights movement overlapped with health reforms of the time. People at the time believed that women's clothing was unhealthy. They thought corsets rearranged women's organs and broke ribs. They believed layers of petticoats and crinolines were tripping hazards and got in a woman's way. While this was definitely the view of the time period modern research has shown that corsets did not pose a threat to women's health and many of the images used to prove their harm were doctored. Dress Reform was also adopted to create an identity of democracy. There was a general air of anti-fashion sentiments at the time as it was associated with European aristocracy and their perceived laziness. The more austere styling not only represented the new and more democratic country but was adopted in opposition to the idea that women only cared about clothing and material possessions.



Quaker Dress
Index of American
Design



Portrait of
Elizabeth Fry

The Quakers, such as Lucretia Mott, also had a distinct form of dress that influenced the dress reform movement. The Quakers' dress was a distinct marker of their identity. They dressed plainly as an oppositional force to the traditional fashion at the time. Their quiet humility and plainness were indicative of their status as good Christians and their ability to avoid the temptation of ostentation. They had the same spirit-over-body mentality that permeated the philosophies of the century as they believed mastery of the body made one a good Christian. This fashion, in combination with Quaker ideals of women, gave the women who wore it more freedom in life.



Mother Hugging Two
Children
Between 1840-1870

The 19th-century ideals of motherhood affected how women of the time dressed. The ideas previously stated about the mother as a moral figure affected how women's bodies were perceived. As women's sentimentality and divine soul became the focus of their perception the body as a physical thing began to be ignored. With the focus on the body diminished so was the focus on materialistic clothing. This could be indicative of the plainness of the costume adopted by suffragists. With the adoption of the moral mother, there was an increased pressure on women to prevent their husbands from being immoral and there was more of a focus on repression. These things influence a focus on modesty. The health effects of fashionable women's clothes were said to do harm to women's reproductive systems and affect their ability to raise children. There is also the simple fact that wearing the Turkish pants and short skirt combination made doing the tasks motherhood required easier.



Riding Habit
1872
The MET

The combined influences of health reformer, mother, Quaker, and suffragist came together to create an identity which was elucidated through this costume. Despite this, the form of costuming did not stay prevalent for very long. The women who wore the style were subjected to harassment primarily from men and boys. One adopter of reform dress by the name of Mattie Jones reported that she would have things thrown at her and men would shout obscenities. Elizabeth Cady Stanton stopped wearing the dress as many said it made the women's empowerment movement less credible. Despite the fact that the bloomer dress in its entirety went out of style, its influences could be seen in popular fashion in the decades afterwards. In the 1870s-1880s, there was a shift toward higher necklines and more masculine silhouettes. In a letter from a woman reflecting on the movement, she discusses how she recently went to a women's college and saw a group of girls in bloomers and sweaters playing basketball, something they would never be able to do in the old fashions of the 19th c. Despite the fact that the style popularized by the Dress Reform movement did not remain in fashion, the ideas it promulgated and the identity it created informed subsequent fashion.



Women's Basketball Team
1900

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