

Meetings for Learning – Resources – History and Testimonies

Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)



Early life and background

Susan B Anthony was born in 1820 in Adams, Massachusetts. Her father was a Quaker, her mother was a Baptist. She and her siblings were raised as Quakers.

She worked as a schoolteacher until she was 29. During that time, she became involved in the Temperance movement, and worked as a temperance agent for some time. It was a difficult environment, often organized by clergy. There was resistance to women being involved, and she found herself in conflict with the movement.

Teamwork for reform

In 1852 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an American social activist, and Susan B Anthony began working as a team on a range of reform issues, including

temperance, abolition of slavery and womens rights. Cady Stanton wrote speeches and Anthony delivered them to the public. It was a very good arrangement. Stanton was obliged to remain at home with her children, but she was willing and able to prepare speeches. Anthony was an experienced teacher, and was a capable public speaker. Stanton had legal knowledge, and a logical and lively style. Anthony was an excellent organizer. They worked together for fifty years, and were completely loyal to each other.

Anthony's main lifelong focus was on getting votes for women. She saw that women's lives were limited by poverty, discrimination, economic disadvantage and exploitation, and she believed this could be changed by getting women the vote.

In her autobiography, *Eighty Years and More*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton described her domestic chaos with a houseful of young boys. In the midst of that, Susan B Anthony and herself "wrote addresses for temperance, anti-slavery, educational and womens' rights conventions. Here we forged resolutions, protests, appeals, petitions, agricultural reports and constitutional arguments; for we made it a matter of conscience to accept every invitation to speak on every question, in order to maintain woman's right to do so. Miss Anthony has been my good angel, always pushing and goading me to work, and but for her persistence, I should never have accomplished the little I have... I forged the thunderbolts, and she fired them. Her description of a body of men on any platform, complacently deciding questions in which women had an equal interest, without an equal voice, readily roused me to a determination to throw a firebrand into the midst of their assembly... false interpretations of the Bible texts; the statistics of women robbed of their property; shut out of some college; half paid for their work; the reports of some disgraceful trial; injustice enough to turn any womans thoughts from stockings and puddings. Then we would get out our pens and write articles for papers, or a petition to the legislature; write letters to the faithful, here and there; stir women up in Ohio or

Massachusetts; call on the various publications to remember our wrongs as well as those of the slave. In thought and sympathy we were one, and in the division of labour we exactly complimented one another. In writing we did better work than either could alone. She supplied the facts and statistics, I the philosophy and rhetoric, and, together, we have made arguments that have stood unshaken through the storms of long years; arguments that no one has answered. Our speeches may be considered the united products of our two brains. Night after night, by an old fashioned fireplace, we plotted and planned the coming agitation, how when and where each entering wedge could be driven, by which women might be recognized, and their rights secured. (E Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, pp. 164-165)

While Elizabeth Cady Stanton had to remain at or close to home while her seven children were young, Susan B Anthony travelled widely, addressing public meetings. Anthony had established a newspaper called ‘The Revolution’ specifically about woman’s suffrage in 1868, which she published for two years, though it was financially difficult to do so. It was the first newspaper to provide a forum for the women’s suffrage and women’s rights. Anthony and Cady Stanton had supported abolition, and felt betrayed when the fourteenth Amendment in 1868 gave the vote to all men (and apparently excluded women by implication). They set up the National Woman’s Suffrage Association in 1869. Another group, led by Lucy Stone formed the rival ‘American Woman Suffrage Association.’ Anthony thought that the only routes to suffrage were either through a federal amendment, or through the courts.

Public acts of protest

In 1872, Anthony decided to protest by voting ‘illegally.’ First she registered, and then she voted. Other women had tried this previously, but Anthony was a well know public figure. She was arrested for voting illegally on Nov 18th, 1872 and declared that she was ‘not guilty.’ She immediately engaged in an

extensive speaking tour in the county where the trial would take place, to ‘inform’ potential jurors of the circumstances and the issues. As a result, it was decided to move the trial to a neighbouring county, so she did another speaking tour in that county. The judge did not allow her to speak at her trial, or before sentencing. She was found guilty, and fined \$100, which she said she would not pay. The judge said he would not send her to jail if the fine was unpaid, and she was denied the opportunity to appeal. Her defence, which was not permitted in court, is published in the *History of Woman Suffrage*. She claimed her right to vote came from her natural rights as a person and as a citizen, which echoes some of the basis of William Penn’s claim for Religious Liberty. She further claimed that ‘Previous condition of servitude’ in the amendment granting the vote to former slaves, also applied to women, as they had experienced similar oppression.

Through much of the 1870’s, Anthony travelled widely and gave public lectures. She organized a special protest at the Centennial celebrations on the 4th July, 1876, where she handed around a written declaration of rights for women. This addressed such matters as: the right to trial by a jury of one’s peers, including women; the right to equal pay; a demand to end the double standard of morality; a complaint about taxation without representation; and a very clear demand for the right to vote.

Quaker principles in action

Anthony’s actions were motivated by her upbringing as a Quaker, and her commitment to social justice, which was a major part of her religion. She explicitly stated that Christians should quit wasting energy debating theological issues which should be left to individual consciences, and focus on the everyday acts of one’s life, adopting the plain practical principles taught by Jesus of Nazareth. She was comfortable working with people as diverse as Francis Williard, the evangelical leader of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and the anti-clerical Cady Stanton. She consistently submitted drafts for a

Federal Amendment to the Constitution to grant the vote to women.

Anthony's legacy

Anthony and Cady Stanton, together with Matilda Jocelyn Gage wrote three volumes of the *History of Woman's Suffrage*, where they collected as many documents as they could, and compiled a very important historical resource. These were published in 1881, 1882 and 1886, with an additional volume produced by Anthony in 1902. She was involved in international women's organizations from the late 1880's. In America, she was involved in bringing together the two women's suffrage movements in 1890, which she then led from 1892 to 1901. She travelled much of America, and parts of Canada promoting equality for women. Susan B Anthony died in 1906.

On her final visit to Europe, Susan B Anthony was interviewed in England by a young journalist, Christabel Pankhurst, in 1904, a few years before Anthony passed away. Christabel Pankhurst was shocked that this woman had spent 50 years campaigning for the vote, and had not seen it achieved in her lifetime. She determined to change tactics, and to win the vote; and this was one of the reasons behind the emergence of the militant suffrage movement in England. It helped that the Pankhursts were from Manchester, a more working class city, and their mother Emmaline was one of the first women poor law guardians, who had gained valuable political experience in that role. At a public lecture in Birmingham University, Christabel Pankhurst converted the visiting American Quaker Alice Paul to the suffragette campaign for votes for women, while she was studying at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in 1907. Alice Paul then took the Pankhurst's militant suffrage tactics, as a pacifist Quaker, to America, and her campaign from 1913 to 1920 for a federal amendment granting votes for women was a key factor in American women getting the vote in 1920.

Questions for small group discussion, worship sharing or journaling:

- Anthony said ‘I don’t know what religion is; I only know what work is, and that is all I can speak of, this side of the Jordan.’ What do you think Anthony meant?
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of other women published *The Womans Bible* in 1895, challenging the traditional position of religious orthodoxy that woman should be subservient to man. The book attracted a great deal of controversy and antagonism and many in the suffrage movement condemned Stanton for challenging church authority. Susan B Anthony supported her publicly. Is loyalty and the support of friends and colleagues important? Why? Can we disagree with but still support each other?
- Like the Grimké sisters who were obstructed in their work for the abolition of slavery, Anthony was obstructed in her work for temperance; they each tackled the discrimination against them directly. Have you ever been obstructed by prejudice when doing something useful for society? How have you responded?

Further reading:

Christine L Ridarsky and Mary Huth (eds), *Susan B Anthony and the Struggle for Womens Rights*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2012

Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony (6 volumes), Rutgers, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2013

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man cannot speak for her*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1989

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