



## From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

By Mike Peterson

*Illustrations by Christopher Baldwin*

### Chapter Three: A Split Among Allies

It's really not surprising that the five women who gathered at Jane Hunt's house in Waterloo, NY, to plan the Seneca Falls Convention were abolitionists.

After all, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had met at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London eight years earlier, and that was where they first began to talk about holding a convention to talk about women's rights.

And the other women there – Hunt, Martha Wright and Mary Ann McClintock – were all friends of Lucretia Mott. In fact, Martha Wright was Lucretia's little sister. Naturally, then, they shared some of the same ideas.

But maybe the fact that Frederick Douglass came to the Seneca Falls Convention, and that Sojourner Truth would start coming to women's rights conventions a few years later, tells you that people who wanted to get rid of slavery were also interested in women's rights.

To understand the history of the Women's Suffrage Movement, you must understand the history of the Abolition Movement.

You also need to know that, while they were both about giving Americans their rights and freedoms, there were times the two movements did not get along well. But first, let's talk about abolition.

For nearly the first century of our history as a nation, we argued over slavery.

Some of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves and some did not. Some of those who owned slaves during the Revolution changed their minds and freed them later, but some did not.

Even in the Northern States, where slavery was not very popular, it took many years to make it illegal. Several states passed anti-slavery laws soon after the Revolution, but most of those laws were gradual: Children born to slaves were free, but people who were already slaves had to remain slaves until much later.

For instance, New York passed such a law in 1799, but only freed its last slaves in 1827. And Connecticut outlawed slavery in 1784, but didn't make all slaves free until 1848, the same year as the Seneca Falls Convention.

The first Abolition Society was founded in Philadelphia in 1775, and, of the 10 men at that first meeting, seven were Quakers.

Lucretia Mott and the other women at Jane Hunt's house, except for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were also Quakers, but there were non-Quaker abolitionists, too, like President John Adams, his wife Abigail and their son, John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Franklin, authors Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott and many other well-known Americans.

But the Quakers were extremely active in the movement, including one of the best-known suffragists of all, Susan B. Anthony, who met Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1851.

Together, they formed the most famous team in the fight for women's suffrage and one of the most powerful political teams in American history.

But it was an abolitionist who was not a Quaker, Sojourner Truth, the former slave who traveled the country speaking out for freedom who, in 1851, made one of the most famous speeches for women's rights.

It's not clear exactly what Sojourner Truth said, or just what happened, in Akron, Ohio, that day. Like many ex-slaves, she could not read or write, so she never wrote her speeches down.

Most historians agree that a man had said that women were too delicate to have the same rights and responsibilities as men, and Truth talked about the hard life of a slave, saying she could work as hard and endure the same hardships as any man.

A few days after that convention, a newspaper published a version of her speech, but in those days, sometimes the reporter wrote a speech down as it was being made, and other times he tried to write it from memory.

Years later, someone wrote a different version of what Sojourner Truth said that day, but they made it sound as if she spoke with lots of slang and pronounced things the way Southern slaves would.

That makes no sense. She had grown up in New York State, and, until she was 10 years old, spoke Dutch like many other people in the area. Certainly, when she learned English, it wasn't the kind spoken down South.

Those later reports also said people at the meeting didn't want her to speak because she was African-American, and that doesn't seem likely either: Most of the people at the meeting were abolitionists and very friendly towards former slaves who were working to end slavery.

However, it is true that not everyone who wanted the slaves to be free also thought women should be allowed to vote, and not everyone who thought women should vote was against slavery.

More important was that many people were afraid that, if you asked for both, you wouldn't get either.

It was hard enough, some abolitionists felt, to get people to agree on the slavery issue, without making some of them angry because you also wanted women to be given the right to vote.

And some who wanted women's suffrage felt that it was hard enough to get people to agree to that without making some of them angry over slavery.

For the most part, it came down to this: It would take a lot of hard work to free the slaves, and it was also going to take a lot of hard work to get women the vote.

Most politically active people chose to concentrate their efforts on one question or the other, and the two movements became separate causes.