

Original Masters Thesis

by

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*“Now let us see what all this balderdash, clap-trap, moonshine, rant, cant, fanaticism, and blasphemy, means:” The radical egalitarian agenda of the first National Woman’s Rights Convention of 1850.*

*Why was the first National Woman’s Rights Convention swept under the rug?*

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rant, cant, fanaticism, and blasphemy, means:”

The radical egalitarian agenda of the first National Woman’s  
Rights Convention of 1850.

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“ . . . and that every party which claims to represent the humanity, civilization, and progress of the age, is bound to inscribe on its banners, Equality before the law, without distinction of sex or color.”

--from the Resolutions of the first National Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester,  
Massachusetts, October 23-24, 1850

“Now let us see what all this balderdash, clap-trap, moonshine, rant, cant, fanaticism, and blasphemy, means . . . . Their platform of principles comprises in behalf of women of color: The right to vote--the right to hold office--the right to be doctors, lawyers, professors, et cetera--the right to visit oyster houses and all other places--the right to fight when necessary--the right to do as they please.”

--James Gordon Bennett editorial, *New York Herald*, October 28, 1850

“The convention was not called to discuss the rights of color; and we think it was altogether irrelevant and unwise to introduce the question.”

--Jane Swisshelm, editorial, *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, November 2, 1850

“Color was not discussed there--it need not have been. But it was needed that the declaration be made in regard to it. That ANY women have rights, will scarcely be believed; but that colored women have rights, would never have been thought of without a specific declaration.”

--Parker Pillsbury, fanatic, response to Swisshelm, November 18, 1850

By the end of the day, October 24, 1850, the resolutions of first national women's rights convention spelled out a most radical egalitarian, anti-racist agenda for human rights. All women and men of any color, including slaves, were proclaimed to have the same rights as any white man at the pinnacle of American society. These resolutions reflect the fact that the convention had been initiated, organized and dominated by an unpopular fringe group of feminist abolitionists, including black leadership, associated with ultra-radical William Lloyd Garrison. Remaining well outside of mainstream thinking, the Garrisonian abolitionists continued to raise tough issues in applying the principles of equality and human rights. In taking up the *racial* dimensions of the women's rights issue in 1850, the Worcester convention applied these principles asserting that even black women had the same fundamental rights as white men. It was this moment that opened up to a shocked and bewildered world the interlocked structures of race and gender hierarchy. This exposure posed the greatest threat to both the mainstream as well as the more liberal-minded reformers. The level of threat can be measured in the overwhelming reaction to the radicals' willingness to push the logic of their agenda in asserting the fundamental rights of black women for the first time in such a public forum. In addition to mainstream rejection, leading white feminists and liberal abolitionists, eager to avoid a complicated notion of "woman," were reluctant to support such an extreme position. Some tried to laugh it off, while others tried to sweep it under the rug, but the moment that launched the women's rights movement in the United States could not be taken back.

There has been little exploration of the real complexity of this emergent constituency for women.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the ways in which women's rights advocates addressed or used the issues of race, racism and slavery adds a great deal to an understanding of a range of racial attitudes among Northern abolitionists and early feminist leaders. This paper will focus on the meaning of the 1850 convention resolutions' endorsement of black women's rights, exploring the racial context, and contributing an analysis of the deeply rooted issues of race and gender within the early women's rights movement. The women's rights movement would eventually split apart during Reconstruction over the issue of race, but long before the Civil War, the seeds of division had been sown over "the question of color" among organized feminists.

The most important result of the Worcester convention was its endorsement of equal rights for black women. After meeting together for two days, listening to speeches and letters read, hearing and participating in discussions, the voting members of the 1850 convention approved a set of resolutions<sup>2</sup> representing the radical egalitarian thinking of this new constituency for women. Simply, the resolutions proclaimed woman's equality with man, and demanded that "the word 'male'" be removed from all the states' constitutions. Further, they equated women's rights with human rights and declared a right to a "voice" in government for "every human being of full age, and resident for a

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<sup>1</sup> There is a great need for investigation and reassessment of the early women's rights movement that goes beyond the biased account first published in 1881 by the leaders of the National Woman Suffrage Association in their authoritative-sounding and readily accessible *History of Woman Suffrage*. Gerda Lerner has pointed out that for 100 years historians have relied too heavily on the HWS which distorts the role of feminists who were later opposed by the editors Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. See *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix A includes a list of all of the Resolutions of the 1850 Convention.

proper length of time on the soil of the nation.” Asserting that human rights applied equally to men and women regardless of race, in their most overtly anti-racist plea, they issued a charge for every humanitarian, civilized and progressive institution to recognize the principle of “Equality before the law, without distinction of sex or color.” Thus their general call for a women’s “sphere” to be determined solely by her “Powers and Capacities,” after having received an education fully “in accordance with her nature,” was meant to apply equally to all human beings. In case there might have been any question left about the meaning of their egalitarian agenda, the last resolution claims all the same “natural and civil rights” for “the million and a half slave women at the South.”<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate the boldness of this straightforward human rights agenda of these radical egalitarian feminist abolitionists, it is necessary to consider the racial context of the times. In addition to the legal institution of black slavery in many parts of the United States, feminist abolitionists at the women’s rights convention in Worcester were deeply concerned about a recently passed law which created a powerful new tool for slaveowners to apprehend fugitive slaves who had escaped. The Fugitive Slave Law, passed in the fall of 1850, was a great threat to all black people because federal agents could draft any citizen to help capture runaways, even after many years of living and working elsewhere, based on nothing more than a sworn statement of a claimant. All citizens were compelled to help capture and return fugitives or face penalties. Paid informers gave false testimony, and there was no legal recourse for black captives who were not allowed to

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<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the first National Womans Rights Convention, Worcester, Massachusetts, October 23-24, 1850* (Boston: Prentiss and Sawyer, 1851).

testify. Many people, regardless of race, openly resisted and refused to comply with this law.<sup>4</sup>

Abolitionists were not necessarily free of racial prejudice. Their emphasis on equality and human rights sets the more radical feminist abolitionists apart. Historian George M. Fredrickson explained that anti-slavery advocates held a wide range of “romantic racialist” prejudices toward black people. Some white abolitionists wanted to free all slaves and send them to live in a separate black colony somewhere. Others viewed blacks as so simple and naturally good, that a truly diverse American society could only be improved by their special gifts. Still others viewed black people as degenerate and feeble, whether due to innate causes or to poor environment, and in need of a helping hand. These views essentially represent a range of racial stereotypes that deny full humanity to black people. Significantly, Fredrickson pointed out that hard core Garrisonians’ views did not fit within this range of romantic racialist positions.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to fighting for the abolition of slavery, Garrisonians tended to support equal rights for free blacks, to urge the repeal of oppressive racial segregation laws, and to encourage social mixing among the races. This set them apart from not only the mainstream, but also from many white anti-slavery activists who worked to end an oppressive system of labor, but who nevertheless continued to believe in black inferiority. Even for free black men, political participation within white dominated institutions was extremely limited. By 1840, black men could vote on an equal legal basis

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<sup>4</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 248 and 251; Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (NY: Norton, 1996), 132-33.

with white men in only four states--Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine--whose black populations represented only 7% of all Northern Negroes.<sup>6</sup> Some black men had participated in 1843 at the national convention of the liberal abolitionist Liberty Party. The Free Soil Party which had maneuvered to repeal black laws in Ohio attracted the support of several blacks in 1849.<sup>7</sup> Massachusetts radicals had fought successfully for the repeal of laws banning inter-racial marriage in 1843. Abolitionists Wendell Phillips and Charles Remond offered bi-racial testimony before a state legislative committee arguing for the removal of segregated “jim crow” railroad cars. Radicals claimed victory when the railroads abandoned the racist segregation policies in Massachusetts in 1849<sup>8</sup> Despite the occasional success of these limited racial alliances, many so-called black laws throughout the country, (even in the “nominally” free states), continued to oppress black people in a white-dominated society that made color distinctions and excluded colored people.<sup>9</sup>

While Garrison had proclaimed back in 1831 that equal rights for free blacks was a major part of the abolitionist program, white abolitionists remained split over the issue of “social intercourse with negroes” as race mixing went against social convention.<sup>10</sup> White women’s anti-slavery groups could not agree on “negro” membership and social mixing issues, and while black women abolitionists continued to work with or without white

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<sup>5</sup> Frederickson, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Litwack, 75, 88-9.

<sup>7</sup> Litwack, 74.

<sup>8</sup> Litwack, 106-109.

<sup>9</sup> Litwack, 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> Litwack, 215-216.



participation, white “pro-mixer” women questioned the commitment of anti-mixers, referred to as “pseudo-abolitionists.”<sup>11</sup>

Both black and white supporters of the colonization and emigration movements often argued that nothing could ever be done to change white prejudice against blacks, that in effect blacks could never really become American Citizens.<sup>12</sup> In the face of these destructive social norms, the resolutions of the women’s rights convention proclaiming black equality and endorsing the rights of all colored men and women, even slaves, were clearly out of the mainstream.

The bold resolutions of 1850 were the product of the business committee, the main working committee of the women’s rights convention. Among the business committee members, including six men and eight women, were some of the most radical abolitionists, such as Garrison, Douglass, Lucretia Mott, poet Abby Price and Lucy Stone. These Garrisonians who supported women’s rights were truly radicals among radicals: not all abolitionists were egalitarians when it came to women’s rights. For example, a group of more conservative white abolitionist men, such as Lewis Tappan and Henry B. Stanton, had split with the more radical Garrisonians over the very issue of women’s participation in the movement after Abby Kelley’s controversial election to a leadership position in the Spring of 1840. They felt the group had been distracted by the

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<sup>11</sup> Litwack, 221-222.

<sup>12</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 117; Harry Reed, *Platform for Change: The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community, 1775-1865* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 200.

woman question, so they formed The Liberty Party, taking the fight against slavery into a political realm where women could be more easily excluded.<sup>13</sup>

There were liberal abolitionist feminists such as Jane Swisshelm, a Pittsburgh journalist, who endorsed the political thrust of the Liberty Party and disagreed with Garrison's anti-government stance. But Swisshelm's feminist agenda was biased and limited by her race and class; she supported married women's property rights and very limited voting rights for women. She spoke out for the interests of well-to-do, educated white women such as herself, but she did not support the general principle of women's equality, and she considered Abby Kelley, one of the organizers of the Worcester convention, a "fanatic."<sup>14</sup>

Black abolitionist groups were not always anxious for women to get out front either, as shown by the negative reaction among black men to Maria Stewart, an incendiary speaker who advocated black women's independence in the early 1830s.<sup>15</sup> However, after 1850, women's visibility and participation at national black conventions increased greatly under the leadership of Martin Delany.<sup>16</sup> Delany had been among the first black students admitted along with two other black men to Harvard Medical School in the fall of 1850, the year women's rights convention keynote speaker Harriet Hunt had

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<sup>13</sup> Blanch Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 126-127, 157, 123; Painter, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Sterling, ed. *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (NY: Norton, 19 --), 157.

<sup>16</sup> Reed, 218; Painter, 134.

also been accepted, but asked not to attend classes.<sup>17</sup> In general, (with some exceptions), activists who held a range of anti-slavery positions had no difficulty in limiting women's roles and felt comfortable ignoring women's rights, unlike the more radical egalitarian feminist abolitionists running the show at the women's rights convention in Worcester in 1850.

The women's rights agenda that emerged from the 1850 convention, like the most radical of anti-slavery positions, reflected a basic pro-human rights agenda.<sup>18</sup> In addition to being pro-women's rights, the Garrisonians tended to be anti-racist, working (sometimes successfully) to repeal discriminatory laws against blacks in Massachusetts and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> The resolutions of the 1850 convention assert the fundamental equality of all human beings while implicitly rejecting any "romantic" claim that subordination confers a degree of moral superiority or "special" dependent status due to sex or color. Such radical egalitarian views were held by only a tiny minority, well outside the mainstream of American thought and culture. Those who continually raised such issues faced vilification by the mainstream and tended to be unpopular even among the more liberal reformers who felt threatened by the exposure of such complexity and who wanted to avoid "mixing" the issues of race and gender. Historian James M. McPherson asserted that despite the dominant culture which promoted the idea of racial difference and hierarchy, "there were men and women who dared to affirm their faith in the innate

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Hersh, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Litwack, 106.

equality of all men, regardless of race.”<sup>20</sup> Even fewer believed in women’s equality, regardless of race.

Five months before the Worcester convention, standing before a large gathering of anti-slavery activists in Boston, William Lloyd Garrison had announced his support for the idea of holding a women’s rights convention. “[I] hate the law that disfranchises women,” he proclaimed. “I wish I could see one-half the members of Congress women,” he added, telling the women present, “You must rely upon yourselves.” He was greeted with “hisses in the gallery.”<sup>21</sup> Several of the “Garrisonian” women at that anti-slavery meeting, including Paulina Wright Davis, Lucy Stone and Abby Kelley Foster, were among the organizers the first National Woman’s Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts later that year. A Call was circulated, asking men and women to “give of their best thought” to the issue, emphasizing the need to include both sexes in the public discussion. There was no mention of race or color in the Call, but the whole meaning of the question of women’s rights was left open.

The structure and content of the convention proceedings reflected a desire to show a sharing of power among men and women. The convention was presided over by a woman, Paulina Wright Davis, while the other officer positions were filled by one man and one woman each. All of the standing committees listed men and women members. The three main speakers were women, including Davis, Abby Price, a founder of Hopedale, an egalitarian Christian community in southern Worcester County, and Harriet

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<sup>20</sup> James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 147.

<sup>21</sup> *The Liberator*, June 7, 1850.

Hunt, a Boston physician, but many men spoke and played important roles during the course of the proceedings. Supportive letters to the convention were alternately read from male and female writers. Men and women participated in all the discussions, and any person in attendance who wished to was invited to speak out on issues, but only members who signed the roll were allowed to vote on the resolutions. The membership was made up of both men and women, including several married couples. In the end they may have advocated a theory of equality for black people, but the convention participants meeting during the day in the middle of the week were overwhelmingly white. In addition to the well known black participants, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, one report mentioned that “several dark colored sisters were visible in the corners,” without naming them.<sup>22</sup>

The radical egalitarian resolutions of the 1850 convention did not reflect “romantic racialist” stereotypes about black people. The last resolution’s pledge on behalf of the “trampled womanhood of the plantation” referred to the situation of slave women only and does not imply any degraded essence associated with skin color. In American society, “color” was often associated with slavery, but the fact that a prior convention resolution specifically endorsed the fundamental equality of all human beings, regardless of sex or color, indicates that this later reference to “trampled womanhood” was not meant to be a characterization of black essence, but was a statement of inclusion of slave women.

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<sup>22</sup> *The New York Herald*, 25 October, 1850.

The endorsement of equal rights for black women was the most controversial aspect of the first national women's rights convention. For mainstream America, it was this aspect that pushed the radical egalitarian agenda to its most threatening extreme, upsetting racial and gender hierarchies. At the same time, some elite white feminists considered the question of color a side issue and a distraction from the main subject of women's rights.

Epitomizing the mainstream reaction in its reports and editorials of the convention, *The New York Herald* mocked the proceedings, playing on the readers' anxiety about race. At the top of their very first report of October 25, 1850, the language of one of the convention's resolutions is twisted: "That motley mingling of abolitionists, socialists, and infidels, of all sexes and colors, called the Woman's Rights Convention, assembled in this city, to-day." Zeroing in on the touchy subject of race-mixing, the report begins with a short rhyming ditty called "The Meeting," one line of which is "Mingle, mingle, mingle, mingle." The report continues with a description of the leading participants in the "convocation calculated to strike terror into the heart of the stoutest man." It is difficult to get a handle on the number of "colored" participants (other than Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth) at the convention based on published reports because, as noted previously, only the *Herald* report indicates that some number of "colored" women were present. At the end of its first report, the *Herald* mocked the resolutions of the convention by listing its version of the "objects" of the convention including one "to re-organize society upon a social platform of perfect equality, in all things, of sexes and colors," and another "to establish the most free and miscellaneous

amalgamation of sexes and colors.” The obsession over race “mingling” continued in its second day of coverage, October 26, when the *Herald* headline broadcast referred to one of the leaders, Frederick Douglass, as a fugitive slave, (although he had purchased his freedom), adding sting to the racist attacks by implying that participants were breaking the law.

The *Herald*'s October 26 report of Sojourner Truth's speech to the convention is noteworthy. This was the first time a black woman had addressed a women's rights convention. Without noting that fact, the *Herald* articulated what many might have considered the most outrageous implications of the idea of basic equality among human beings. In its overtly racist account of Sojourner Truth's speech, the *Herald* editorial comment expressed in jeering tones the sense of threat the assertion of black women's rights posed to mainstream thinking about race and gender:

Mrs. Sojourner Truth, (a lady of color, doubtless of New England origin, from the Puritanical title she has the honor to bear) next came forward. And why not? In a convention where sex and color are mingled together in the common rights of humanity, Dinah, and Burleigh [<sup>23</sup>], and Lucretia, and Frederick Douglas[s], are all spiritually of one color and one sex, and all on a perfect footing of reciprocity. Most assuredly, Dinah was well posted up on the rights of woman, and with something of the ardor and the odor of her native Africa, she contended for her right to vote, to hold office, to practice medicine and the law, and to wear the breeches with the best white man that walks upon God's earth.

Diminishing her speech as a “windfall,” the *Herald* implied that it just blew in, unbidden, like a stray leaf. This emphasized the newspaper's (mainstream) perspective

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Burleigh, a lawyer turned anti-slavery lecturer, often traveled with Abby Kelley and praised her speaking abilities. He edited the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and was somewhat less radical politically than Garrison. See Sterling, 67, 107-110, 197.

that a black woman's viewpoint was unsought, unwanted, and unnecessary--just extra entertainment. What seemed to have been most amusing to the editorialist was the idea that any black woman, referred to by the generic racist term "Dinah," would seriously "contend" for her share in "the rights of woman." But what else could be expected, the *Herald* asked rhetorically, from a "convention where sex and color are mingled together in the common rights of humanity?" Playing on mainstream fears and prejudices, the *Herald* asked readers to imagine the extremely absurd implications of this egalitarian agenda: that a black woman might someday "wear the breeches with the best white man that walks upon God's earth." It was the idea that a black woman had the same fundamental rights as a white man that was the most shocking aspect of this women's rights convention. The radical notion of black women's equality was seriously threatening mainstream assumptions about white men's privileged position in society.

In summarizing the most important aspects of the convention, the *Herald* report of October 28 put the rights of black women at the top of the list. "Now let us see what all this balderdash, clap-trap, moonshine, rant, cant, fanaticism, and blasphemy, means," the *Herald* begins. In a twisted reinterpretation of the convention's resolutions, the *Herald* informed readers: "Their platform of principles comprises in behalf of women of color: The right to vote--the right to hold office--the right to be doctors, lawyers, professors, et cetera--the right to visit oyster houses and all other places--the right to fight when necessary--the right to do as they please." The possibility of black women's equality with white men was the most threatening aspect of the 1850 convention to mainstream Americans.



Even among feminists, the focus on black women's rights was problematic. The specific endorsement of the rights of "colored" women offended liberal white abolitionist newspaper publisher Jane Swisshelm. Swisshelm, who did not attend the first National Woman's Rights Convention, had signed the Call at the request of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. After reading reports of the convention proceedings, however, she fired off an editorial, charging the organizers with a "breach of trust" for side-tracking the issue of women's rights into "the question of color." Swisshelm advocated for the interests of well-to-do, white women in calling for married women's property rights (she had sued her own husband for a share in her own mother's bequest), but strangely she had informed Stanton that she did not believe in the "principle" of women's equality with men."<sup>24</sup> Historian Nell Irvin Painter has pointed out that Swisshelm was not concerned with women's issues related to race or class. "As for colored women," she wrote, "all the interest they have in this reform is *as women*. All it can do for them is to raise them to the level of men of their own class."<sup>25</sup> She had approved of the Worcester convention's call for men and women to share in the discussion of women's rights, but objected to any discussion of class and race issues. Blasting the confusion of class distinctions, she editorialized in the pages of her Pittsburgh newspaper, the *Saturday Visiter*, "We only claim for a white wood-sawyer's wife that she is as good as a white wood-sawyer--a blacksmith's mother is as good as a blacksmith."<sup>26</sup> In opening up the whole question of women's rights, the 1850 convention exposed the complication of class, in addition to

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, 158.

<sup>25</sup> Painter, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

race and gender, into the discussions. Interestingly, the issue of a woodsawyer's wages had been introduced into the convention in a discussion of what would today be called comparable worth to contrast them to the wages of a "washerwoman," a job held by many women of color. Swisshelm seemed to dismiss the issue of black women's economic viability by turning it into a statement about her own view of the relative "goodness" of a husband and wife. Not surprisingly, Swisshelm, like other liberal abolitionists, often disagreed with Garrison.<sup>27</sup>

In response to Swisshelm's criticism, radical abolitionist Parker Pillsbury,<sup>28</sup> a member of the Worcester convention, wrote her a letter-to-the-editor defending the resolutions' specific endorsement of black women's rights. He explained that the tendency of white people to exclude people of color made it necessary to state clearly when blacks are included. Pillsbury asserted, "Nobody but abolitionists ever mean colored people, no matter how often they speak of 'the public,' or of their 'fellow citizens.'" He continued, "We have proscribed our colored brethren every way-- everywhere; and under the late Fugitive Slave Law, every colored man is to be presumed a slave, unless there is proof positive to the contrary . . ." Despite high ideals, Pillsbury admitted this general exclusion extended even to the women's rights convention "for scarcely a colored person, man or woman, appeared in it. On the large committees appointed to carry out the plans of the Convention, embracing many persons in all, not a

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, 128.

<sup>28</sup> Parker Pillsbury, a New Hampshire farmer who became a minister, left the church to work as an anti-slavery "preacher." He worked closely with Stephen Foster, and the two of them were known as "fanatics." A true radical, he became disgusted with Northern racism. For a short time, Pillsbury edited the feminist *Revolution* along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton during Reconstruction. See Sterling, 129-130; and McPherson, 382 and 439.

single colored member was placed. It is to be presumed that nobody thought of it, for we are not expected to think of colored people at all.” Pillsbury concludes with a defense of the convention resolutions’ endorsement of black women’s rights: “That ANY women have rights, will scarcely be believed; but that colored women have rights, would never have been thought of without a specific declaration.”

Widespread criticism of the 1850 convention’s endorsement of black women’s rights did not make the question of color go away. The next year at a local women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, Jane Swisshelm and Sojourner Truth stood face to face. Both spoke at the Akron convention, but while Swisshelm by all accounts was not much of an orator, the impact of Truth’s speech there was never to be forgotten. Nell Painter has pointed out that contemporary accounts of Truth’s Akron speech did not include the oft-repeated refrain “Ar’n’t I a woman,” attributed to her by Dana Frances Gage twelve years later.<sup>29</sup> This refrain seemed to imply that Truth’s presence there made this kind of statement, familiar as the old anti-slavery slogan “Am I Not a Woman?” often seen printed above an iconic picture of a kneeling slave woman--the anti-slavery societies often used such symbols to decorate ladies’ purses and stationery sets.<sup>30</sup> Over the years, liberal white feminists have tended to overlook the issue of black women’s rights, except in an emblematic way.

The resolutions of the 1850 convention endorsing black women’s rights touched a nerve. In pushing a most egalitarian agenda to such an extreme, the radical feminists’ demands seemed threatening to mainstream America, and self-defeating to more liberal

feminists. The convention resolutions had been approved unanimously by the members in Worcester, but the convention as a whole and the business committee leadership had been dominated by radical Garrisonians who represented a tiny minority. The question of color continued to be an important issue within the emergent women's rights movement, as it was for American society as a whole. The first National Woman's Rights Convention exposed the racial dimensions of the woman question in 1850, a time when such issues were explosive, in calling for black women's rights and upsetting mainstream assumptions about race and gender. Race was not directly confronted within the women's movement until after the Civil War when liberal Republicans succeeded in framing the suffrage question as an either/or choice between women's suffrage and black men's suffrage. The controversy over this issue among feminists split the women's movement, but the seeds of that division had been sown years before as shown by the negative reaction to the Worcester convention's demands for black women's equality.

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<sup>29</sup> Painter, 123-125, 282.

<sup>30</sup> Yellin, 10, 17.

## APPENDIX A

### Resolutions of the first National Woman's Rights Convention Worcester, Massachusetts, October 23-24, 1850

The **Business Committee** reported the following **Preamble** and **Resolutions**,

*Whereas*, The very contracted sphere of action prescribed for women, - arising from an unjust view of her nature, capacities, and powers, and from the infringement of her just rights as an equal with man, - is highly injurious to her physical, mental, and moral development; therefore,

*Resolved*, That we will not cease our earnest endeavors to secure for her political, legal, and social equality with man, until her proper sphere is determined, - by what alone should determine it, - her Powers and Capacities, strengthened and refined by an education in accordance with her nature.

*Resolved*, That every human being of full age, and resident for a proper length of time on the soil of the nation, who is required to obey law, is entitled to a voice in its enactments; that every such person, whose property or labor is taxed for the support of government, is entitled to a direct share in such government. Therefore,

*Resolved*, That women are clearly entitled to the right of suffrage, and to be considered eligible to office; the omission to demand which, on her part, is a palpable recreancy to duty; and the denial of which is a gross usurpation, on the part of man, no longer to be endured; and that every party which claims to represent the humanity, civilization, and progress of the age, is bound to inscribe on its banners, Equality before the law, without distinction of sex or color.

*Resolved*, That political rights acknowledge no sex, and therefore the word "male" should be stricken from every State Constitution.

*Resolved*, That the laws of property, as affecting married parties, demand a thorough revisal, so that all rights may be equal between them; - that the wife may have, during life, an equal control over the property gained by their mutual toil and sacrifices, be heir to her husband precisely to the extent that he is heir to her, and entitled, at her death, to dispose by will of the same share of the joint property as he is.

*Resolved*, That as women alone can learn by experience, and prove by works, what is their rightful sphere of duty, we recommend, as *next-steps*, that they should demand and secure:

1. *Education* in primary and high schools, universities, medical, legal, and theological institutions, as comprehensive and exact as their abilities prompt them to seek, and their capabilities fit them to receive;
2. *Partnership* in the labors, gains, risks, and remunerations of productive industry, with such limits only as are assigned by taste, intuitive judgment, or their measure of spiritual and physical vigor, as tested by experiment;
3. *A co-equal share* in the formation and administration of law, Municipal, State, and National, through legislative assemblies, courts, and executive offices;
4. Such unions as may become the guardians of pure morals and honorable manners - a high court of appeal in cases of outrage which cannot be and are not touched by civil or ecclesiastical organizations, as at present existing, and a medium for expressing the highest views of justice dictated by human conscience and sanctioned by Holy Inspiration.

***Resolved***, That a Central Committee be appointed by this Convention, empowered to enlarge their numbers: on (1) Education; (2) Industrial Avocations; (3) Civil and Political Rights and Regulations; (4) Social Relations; who shall correspond with each other and with the Central Committee, hold meetings in their respective neighborhoods, gather statistics, facts, and illustrations, raise funds for purposes of publication; and through the press, tracts, books, and through the living agent, guide public opinion upward and onward in the grand social reform of establishing woman's co-sovereignty with man.

***Resolved***, That the Central Committee be authorized to call other Conventions, at such times and places as they shall see fit; and that they hold office until the next annual Convention.

***Resolved***, That since the prospect of honorable and useful employment, in after life, for the faculties we are laboring to discipline, is the keenest stimulus to fidelity in the use of educational advantages, and since the best education is what we give ourselves in the struggles, employments, and discipline of life; therefore, it is impossible that woman should make full use of the instruction already accorded to her, or that her career should do justice to her faculties, until the avenues to the various civil and professional employments are thrown open to arouse her ambition and call forth all her nature.

***Resolved***, That every effort to educate woman, until you accord to her rights, and arouse her conscience by the weight of her responsibilities, is futile, and a waste of labor.

***Resolved***, That the cause we are met to advocate, - the claim for woman of all her natural and civil rights, - bids us remember the million and a half of slave women at the South, the

most grossly wronged and foully outraged of all women; and in every effort for an improvement in our civilization, we will bear in our heart of hearts the memory of the trampled womanhood of the plantation, and omit no effort to raise it to a share in the rights we claim for ourselves.

## APPENDIX B

First National Woman's Rights Convention  
Oct 23-24, 1850  
Worcester, Mass.

Convention Resolutions presented by **Business Committee**:

E. W. Capron	Rhode Island
W. H. Channing	Mass.
Frederick Douglass	New York
Wm. Fish	Mass.
Wm. Lloyd Garrison	Mass.
Harriet K. Hunt	Mass.
M.A.W. Johnson	Ohio
Samuel May, Jr.	Mass.
Lucretia Mott	Penn.
Anna Q. T. Parsons	Mass.
Abby H. Price	Mass.
Ernestine L. Rose	New York
Susan Sisson	Rhode Island
Lucy Stone	Mass.

Source: Proceedings of the convention (13-14)

LCC 5/3/97



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