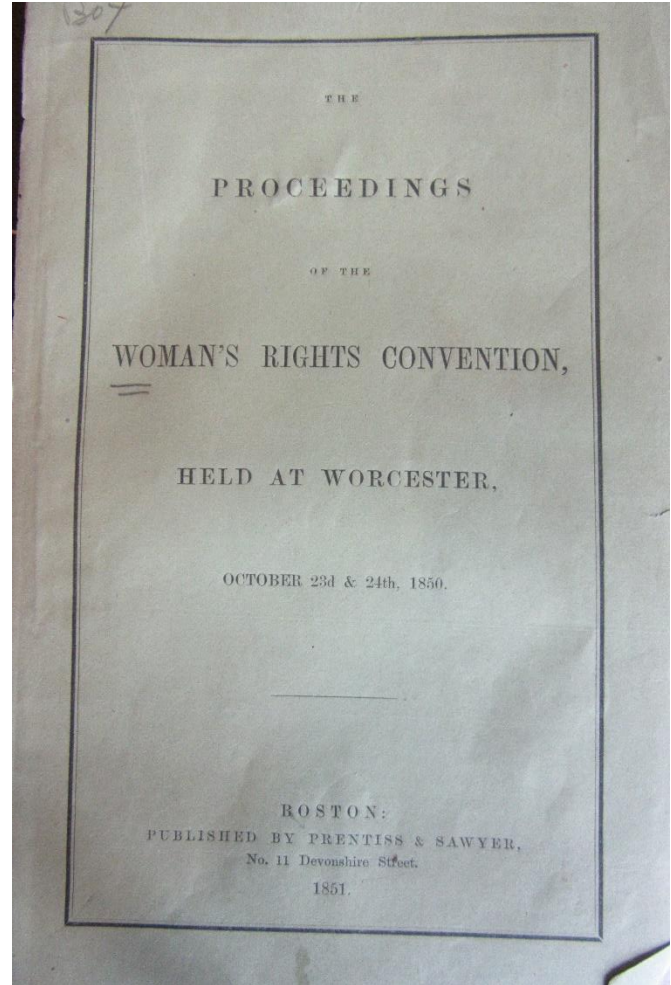


The First National Woman's Rights Convention Worcester, MA October 23-24, 1850

Held in Brinley Hall in Worcester, MA, the first national woman's rights convention commenced with a call to order delivered by the President *pro tempore*, Ms. Paulina W. Davis of Rhode Island. While the first women's rights convention in the United States had been held two years prior in Seneca Falls, NY, Worcester's convention was unique in that it invited women from all over the nation and even other nations to take part, while the convention at Seneca Falls had been more of a regional effort. In her call to order, Davis stated that those at the convention had met, "...to consider the great question of Woman's Rights, Duties, and Relations; and the Men and Women of our country who feel sufficient interest in the subject, to give an earnest thought and effective effort to its rightful adjustment, are invited to meet each other in free conference at the time and place appointed."¹ Expanding upon the convention's goals, Davis went on to state that, "Of the many points now under discussion and demanding a just settlement, the general question of Woman's Rights and Relations comprehends these: Her EDUCATION, Literacy, Scientific, and Artistic; – Her AVOCATIONS, Industrial, Commercial, and Professional; – Her INTERESTS, Pecuniary, Civil, and Political; in a word – Her RIGHTS as an Individual, and her FUNCTIONS as a Citizen."² Thus, the objectives of the convention were clearly stated to include not just an address of the necessity of extending suffrage to women, which would eventually become the focal point of the nineteenth-century women's



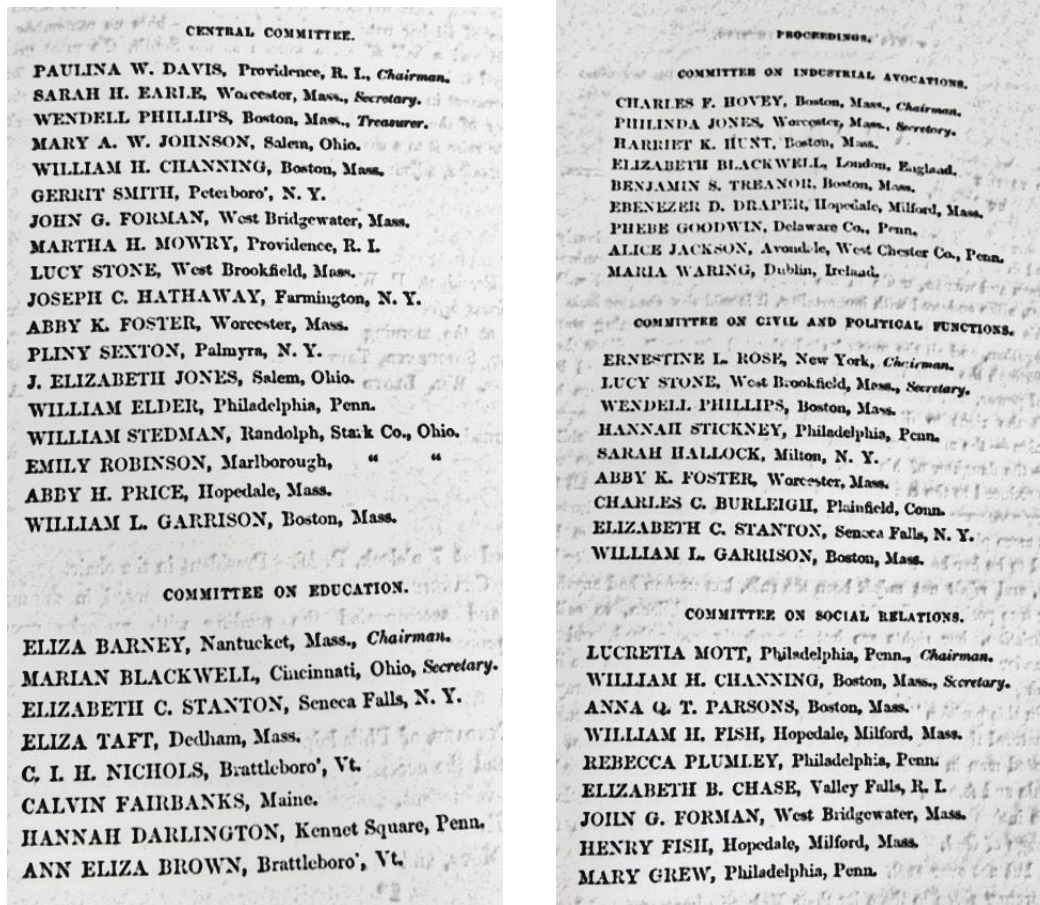
Above: Pamphlet containing the proceedings of the convention (Massachusetts Historical Society)

¹ "The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850," [unpublished pamphlet], page 3, Massachusetts Historical Society.

² *ibid*, page 4.

rights movement, but also other aspects of a woman's life, including educational and occupational opportunities.

The proceedings of the convention indicate that committees had been established to head certain aspects of the convention. Many Massachusetts women served on these committees. Below is a list of the committees and the women from Massachusetts who served on them:



Above: Complete list of committee members at the Woman's Rights Convention, 1851 (Massachusetts Historical Society)

- **Central Committee:** Sarah H. Earle (Worcester; served as secretary of committee), Lucy Stone (West Brookfield), Abby K. Foster (Worcester), Abby H. Price (Hopedale)
- **Committee on Education:** Eliza Barney (Nantucket; served as chairman of committee), Eliza Taft (Dedham)
- **Committee on Industrial Avocations:** Philinda Jones (Worcester; served as secretary of committee), Harriet K. Hunt (Boston)
- **Committee on Civil and Political Functions:** Lucy Stone (West Brookfield; served as secretary of committee), Abby K. Foster (Worcester)
- **Committee on Social Relations:** Anna Q. T. Parsons (Boston)

Once the committee members were identified, an opening address was delivered by Mrs. Abby H. Price of Hopedale, MA. She presented three propositions, which mirrored those laid out by Davis in her opening remarks:

1. That women ought to have equal opportunities with men for suitable and *well compensated* employment.
2. That women ought to have equal opportunities, privileges, and *securities* with men for rendering themselves *pecuniarily* [sic] *independent*.
3. That women ought to have equal legal and political rights, franchises, and advantages with men.³

In her lengthy address, Price spent time explaining each of her propositions. When she came to the third proposition, she asserted:

Women ought to have equal legal and political rights, franchises, and advantages with men. Why not? Our laws ought to respect and protect all their *rights*. They ought to have an equal voice in constituting government, in administering it, in making and executing laws. Why not? This follows as the climax of what we have contended for. There may be some offices more suitable to males than females, and let matters be arranged accordingly.⁴

In response to this contradiction, Price points out that there can only be two options for why women do not have political rights in political society. Either a) women are disinterested in politics or b) they are incapable of political participation due to some kind of inferior intelligence. Price disproves these arguments, providing quotes from other writers throughout, and eventually says that ancient history is rife with examples of women who were involved in political society in some way and were still able to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers; therefore, the idea that political participation will somehow distract women from their traditional responsibilities was faulty.⁵

Towards the end of her address, Price turns her attention to the overall plight in which the nineteenth-century woman found herself:

I think you must all feel that women's rights as human beings are greatly encroached upon, that they suffer a degree of tyranny the world over, unworthy the nineteenth century, that in view of their degraded position, women are called upon loudly to remonstrate, that patience has ceased to be a virtue, that it is time we demand our rights. Are we willing to be denied every post of honor and every lucrative employment – to be reckoned as the *inferior sex*, and but half paid for what we do – to feel that we are a

³ "The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850," [unpublished pamphlet], page 21, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴ "The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850," [unpublished pamphlet], page 31, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵ "The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850," [unpublished pamphlet], page 33, Massachusetts Historical Society.

proscribed caste, in all our aspirations for excellence and great and noble exertion, and to receive in return the fulsome, the sickening flattery of perverted taste – to be complimented about our shrinking delicacy, our feminine weakness, our beautiful dependence! And shall we with complacency receive and smile on such praise, bought by the sacrifice of our rights, our noblest endowments, while we know that he who thus compliments us for shrinking and dependence, is but a frail mortal like ourselves, and that to cower before man is to be recreant to God, false to our higher angel natures, and basely slaves! Is there a woman here, who is willing to be disfranchised to be taxed without representation, to feel that she has no part or lot in the Government under which she lives – that she is a mere thing!⁶

In closing her remarks, Price transitions to an appeal to the men in the audience; after all, they were the ones with the political power to actually affect change for women in society. Calling out to their familial connections to women, Price proclaims:

If the affairs of the nation demand the attention of our fathers, our husbands, and our brothers, allow us to act with them for the right, according to the dictates of our own consciences. Then we will educate our sons and our daughters as equal companions, alike interested in whatever concerns the welfare of the race. Our daughters, equally provided for the serious business of life, shall no longer be dependent upon the chances of marriage; teaching them not to live wholly in their affections, we will provide for them, as for our sons, a refuge from the storms of life, by opening to them the regions of high intellectual culture, of pecuniary independence, and of moral and political responsibilities. Parents, I appeal to you: are you willing to train your daughters with reference only to marriage? Are you willing they should be the prey of that sickly sentimentality, that effeminate weakness, which is produced by making that one idea the focus of life?"

Husbands, are you willing to urge the cowering obedience of that being whom you admit is your 'better half,' especially when you consider your own frailties, and oftentimes misguided judgment? Will you assume to be her lawgiver and ruler? Are you proud to see her bend her soul to man? Brothers, are you willing to see your sisters, whose sympathy and communion in childhood was the sweetest solace of your life, prevented from future companionship, by the threatening scowl of a narrow, and heathenish public sentiment that must blast their highest aspirations – palsy the wings of their genius – dim the crown of their womanhood, and make them slaves? Again, I say – give us an equal chance. Allow us one free choice. Talk not to us of weakness when you have so long broken our spirits by the iron hand of

⁶ Ibid, page 34.

oppression. Lift off that hand – give us our rights inalienable, and then a new era, glorious as the millennial morning, will dawn on earth, an advent only less radiant than that heralded by angles on the plans of Bethlehem.⁷

Price concluded her opening remarks with a poem by Ebenezer Elliot about the accomplishments that await women in the arts and sciences since women have not been afforded the opportunities to make such accomplishments. Other speakers at the two-day convention included men and women, from both Massachusetts and other states. But Price's involvement, like that of the female committee members, indicated that Massachusetts women were to have a prominent role in the movement for women's rights. In organizing this convention and another like it the following year, they indicated that they were willing and able to answer the call pushed forth at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York in 1848 to work towards, "the immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to [women] as citizens of the United States."⁸

Comprehension Questions: Please respond to the following in complete sentences and using your own words.

- 1) What three topics did the 1850 Woman's Rights Convention hope to address?
- 2) How many Massachusetts women took on leadership roles through their committee work?
- 3) What were the main points of Price's address? Why are her remarks important to understanding the goals of the convention?
- 4) What is the most powerful part of Price's argument? What makes it so?

⁷ "The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850," [unpublished pamphlet], page 34-35, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸ "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments," 1848.