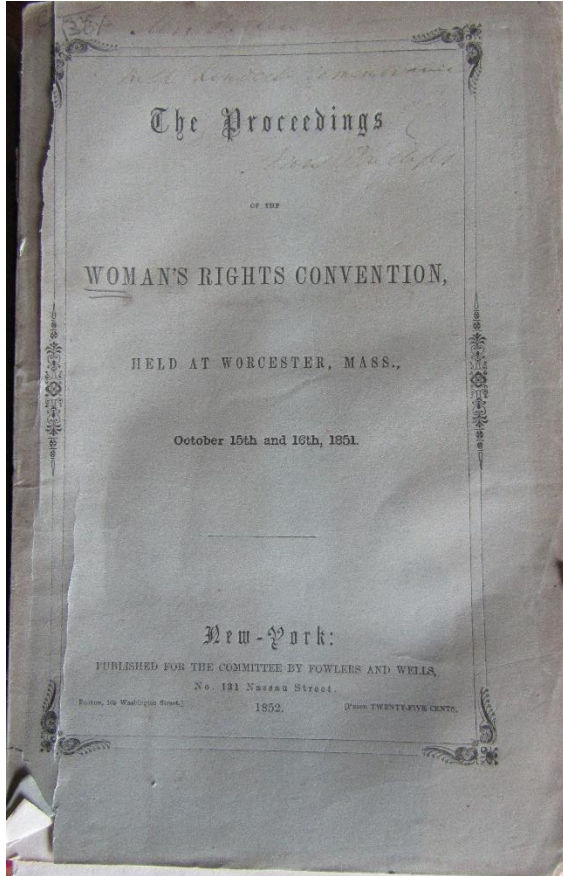


The Second National Woman's Rights Convention Worcester, MA October 15-16, 1851



One year after the first national convention, Worcester played host to the second national women's rights convention. The second convention had been planned during the first and Mrs. Paulina W. Davis served as president *pro tempore* once more. Like the first convention, this meeting addressed more than just women's suffrage, but other women's rights issues as well, including education, job training, and the need for more women in the medical field. There were eight committees in total: the Finance Committee, the Business Committee, the Central Committee, the Educational Committee, the Industrial Committee, the Committee on Civil and Political Functions, the Committee on Social Relations, and the Committee on Publications. Many Massachusetts women served on these committees, including Sarah H. Earle, Abby Kelly Foster, Abby H. Price, Harriet K. Hunt, Anna Q.T. Parsons, Lucy Stone, Eliza H. Taft, Augustine C. Taft, Eliza A. Stowell, and Eliza Blarney.

As president *pro tempore*, Davis gave an opening address yet again. She noted that at this point, the women's rights movement had gained much attention, remarkable given that it had only been a year since the first national convention. She did recognize the opposition to the movement, though, yet proudly stated:

There remains no doubt now that the discussions of our Conventions and their published proceedings have aroused, in some degree, that sort of inquiry into our doctrine of human rights which it demands. I have said *Human Rights*, not *Woman's Rights*, for the relations, wants, duties, and rights of the sexes center upon the same great truth, and are logically, as they are practically, inseparable.¹

Davis noted other examples of success, including the new schools that have been opened

¹ "The proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 15th and 16th, 1851. [unpublished pamphlet], page 7. Massachusetts Historical Society.

for women in the fields of medicine and design. Encouraged by the progress thus far, Davis concluded by proclaiming:

The limits of Woman's ambition and aspiration are enlarged; the gratings of her prison windows widen, and let in a broader light, and another choice is afforded to relieve the monotony and repugnance of her hitherto servile and restricted range of industrial pursuits. If a year or two of our history registers such advancements as these, what will not the quick-coming future bring with it? The eyes that watched tearfully for the first faint beams of this light, shall yet be filled with the brightness of its consummate glory. The success which has thus far crowned our labor may well establish our faith, and renew our hope, and confirm our zeal. In this spirit let us address ourselves to the duties that are before us.²

After Price's address, letters from those absent were read, followed by the presentation of Resolutions by Wendell Phillips. Many of these resolutions – numbering 13 in total – were directly related to women's suffrage, including the following:

2. *And whereas*, according to an acknowledged principle of this Republic, Taxation without Representation is Tyranny; and whereas the Property of Woman is taxed like that of Man; therefore, *Resolved*, That it is an act of the greatest tyranny and usurpation to deprive Woman of her Rights of being represented – of participating in the formation of the Laws, and enjoying all civil privileges in an equal degree with Man.

3. *Resolved*, That while we would not undervalue other methods, the Right of Suffrage for Women is, in our opinion, the corner-stone of this enterprise, since we do not seek to protect woman, but rather to place her in a position to protect herself.

4. *Resolved*, That it will be woman's fault, if, the ballot once in her hand, all the barbarous, demoralizing, and unequal laws, relating to marriage and property, do not speedily vanish from the statute-book; and while we acknowledge that the hope of a share in the higher professions and profitable employments of society is one of the strongest motives to intellectual culture, we know, also, that an interest in political questions is an equally powerful stimulates; and we see beside, that we do our best to insure education to an individual, when we put the ballot into the hands; it being so clearly the interest of the community that one, upon whose decisions depend its welfare and safety, should both have free access to the best means of education, and be urged to make use of them...

6. *Resolved*, That the Democrat, or Reformer, who denies suffrage to women, is a Democrat only because he was not born a noble, and one of those levelers who are willing to level only down to themselves...

13. *Resolved*, That it is as absurd to deny all women their civil rights because the cares of household and family take up all the time of some, as it would be to exclude the whole male sex from Congress, because some men are sailors, or

² "The proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 15th and 16th, 1851. [unpublished pamphlet], page 10. Massachusetts Historical Society.

soldiers, in active service, or merchants whose business requires all their attention and energies.³

Clearly, suffrage became a greater concern of the convention in the year that had passed between the first and the second. Called the “corner-stone of this enterprise,” suffrage would allow a woman to “protect herself,” through voting for laws and representatives favorable to her interests. Once achieved, suffrage would serve as an entry-point for women to attain a better station in society as a whole. The appropriate use of the right to vote would be no different for women as it was for men; both sexes had the responsibility to take advantage of such a right, and no one occupation made any person more or less capable of thoughtfully exercising that right.

In the afternoon of the first day of the convention, Mrs. Abby H. Price of Hopedale, MA found herself in the spotlight yet again, this time giving a report on behalf of the Committee on Industrial Avocations. Given this platform, her address was more focused on women’s roles in a workforce, an interesting departure from her address during the first convention. However, reflecting the new tone of the convention as a whole, Price eventually connected her argument as to the importance of women holding jobs to the value of women being involved in political society as well.⁴ After Price, Lucy Stone, now of Milford, MA, addressed those gathered at the convention. Overall, she discussed the reasons why women should be more independent and the benefits society would reap from such a development. At the end, Stone issued the most fervent (and evidently well-received) call to action either of the conventions had seen:

Friends, we are our own helpers. I want every one of you to feel that this work rests upon us. Instead of asking, ‘Give us this, or give us that,’ let us just get up and take it. (Loud cheers.) If you have a thought that seeks expression, utter it boldly. If you remember the millions of slaves as you ought to remember them, and your heart prompts you to plead for these millions, speak out fearlessly. If your taste is to sculpture, work out your bust, and let it stand there to speak for itself until it shall speak for you. No matter what it be that you wish to do, if it be high and noble, go and do it. When we can do this, our acts will be living epistles, known and read of all men. We owe it to those noble men and women who, in this country, have made themselves living sacrifices on the altar of humanity, that we have before us and around us these soul-cheering indications, - earnest men and women, gathered to take this subject into consideration. Let us not fear the cross, but take it on our own shoulders, and walk up another Calvary, knowing that the world will be saved by it. (Loud cheers)⁵

Thus, it rested on women to help themselves and take actions appropriate to their desires that would help advance the cause.

There were so many people trying to gain entry to the convention that the convention relocated to City Hall, beginning with the evening sessions on the first day. The proceedings

³ “The proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 15th and 16th, 1851. [unpublished pamphlet], pages 11-13. Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴ *ibid*, page 23.

⁵ *ibid* page 30.

note that, “The spacious City Hall was crowded long before the hour of meeting, many being unable to gain entrance.”⁶ The remaining speeches on the first day, delivered by men and women, dealt mainly with arguing in support of extending rights to women and challenged commonly held ideas at the time that women were somehow incapable of being educated, holding jobs, or participating in civic life.

The second day of the convention heard speeches from a few other Massachusetts women. Mehitable Haskell of Gloucester, MA gave a speech on what her experience as an older woman had been like and how she felt encouraged by the advances in women’s education she had observed in recent years.⁷ Another woman, Mrs. Sarah Redlon of Boston, MA, spoke of how the way women were taught religion had reinforced their thinking of what a woman’s proper place in society was. However, Redlon believed that if women listened directly to God, they would hear the call to do more with their lives, beyond any limitations set by the arbitrary expectations of society. Redlon encouraged women to meet their capabilities and to “...seek the most perfect freedom of action....”⁸

The final Massachusetts woman to speak was Mrs. Abby Kelly Foster of Worcester. Foster spoke of her happiness at seeing so much progress made even in the course of the convention, but believed that the expectations men had of women were not the only factors holding women back; instead, women were not as dedicated to the cause as they could be. To remedy this, Foster issued her own resolution:

Resolved, That in regard to most points, Woman lacks her rights because she does not feel the full weight of her responsibilities; that when she shall feel her responsibilities sufficiently to induce her to go forward and discharge them, she will inevitably obtain her rights; when she shall feel herself equally bound with her father, husband, brother and son to provide for the physical necessities and elegances of life, when she shall feel as deep responsibility as they for the intellectual culture and the moral and religious elevation of the race, she will of necessity seek out and enter those paths of Physical, Intellectual, Moral and Religious labor which are necessary to the accomplishment of her object. Let her feel the full stimulus of motive, and she will soon achieve the means.

Foster went on to passionately support the idea of women being taught to be independent so that they, too, could support themselves and a family. Foster advised women to shift their energy from blaming others for their current status to genuinely working for what they wanted; as she had learned in her own life “...toil – earnest, self-sacrificing toil” really could achieve change.⁹

⁶ “The proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Worcester, October 15th and 16th, 1851. [unpublished pamphlet], page 32, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷ *ibid*, page 95.

⁸ *ibid*, pages 96-98.

⁹ *ibid*, page 109.

Comprehension Questions: Please answer the following in complete sentences and in your own words.

- 1) What distinguished the two conventions from each other?
- 2) How would you describe Lucy Stone's address?
- 3) Contrast Foster's approach with that of the other speakers? Whose approach is more effective? Why? How can these approaches be applied to other areas of reform?