

## Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)

*Courtesy of the National Women's History Museum (Nancy Hayward, 2018), with local history additions by the McLean County Museum of History*

Champion of **temperance**, **abolition**, the rights of labor, and equal pay for equal work, Susan Brownell Anthony became one of the most visible leaders of the women's **suffrage** movement. Along with **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, she traveled around the country delivering speeches in favor of women's suffrage.

Susan B. Anthony was born on February 15, 1820 in Adams, Massachusetts. Her father, Daniel, was a farmer, and later a cotton mill owner and manager, and was raised as a **Quaker**. Her mother, Lucy, came from a family that fought in the American Revolutionary War and served in the Massachusetts state government. From an early age, Anthony was inspired by the Quaker belief that everyone was equal under God. That idea guided her throughout her life. She had seven brothers and sisters, many of whom became activists for justice and **emancipation** of enslaved people.

After many years of teaching, Anthony returned to her family who had moved to New York State. There she met **William Lloyd Garrison** and **Frederick Douglass**, who were friends of her father. Listening to them inspired Anthony to want to do more to help end slavery. She became an abolitionist, even though most people thought it was improper for women to give speeches in public. Nevertheless, Anthony made many passionate speeches against the institution of slavery.

In 1848, a group of women held a convention at Seneca Falls, New York. It was the first Women's Rights Convention in the United States, which began the Suffrage movement. Her mother and sister attended the convention, but Anthony did not. In 1851, Anthony met Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two women became good friends and worked together for over 50 years fighting for women's rights. They traveled the country and Anthony gave speeches demanding that women be given the right to vote. At times, she also risked being arrested for sharing her ideas in public.

Anthony was good at strategy. Her discipline, energy, and ability to organize made her a strong and successful leader. Anthony and Stanton co-founded the **American Equal Rights Association**. In 1868 they became editors of the Association's newspaper, *The Revolution*, which helped spread ideas of equality and rights for women. Anthony began to give lectures to raise money to keep publishing the newspaper and to support the suffrage movement. She became famous throughout the country. While many people admired her, others outright hated her ideas.

When Congress passed the 14th and 15th amendments, which gave voting rights to African American men, Anthony and Stanton were angry and opposed the legislation because it did not include the right to vote for women. Their belief led them to split from other suffragists. They thought the amendments should also have given women the right to vote. They formed the **National Woman Suffrage Association** to push for a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote.

Throughout much of her life, Anthony traveled the country to give speeches, circulate petitions, and organize women's rights organizations. On one such trip, she stopped in Bloomington, Illinois where she debated Edwin Hewett, professor of history and geography at Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University), on Friday, March 18,

1870. When Anthony stopped in Bloomington, she was in the midst of a lecture tour across Illinois, having already delivered suffrage speeches earlier that month in Peoria and Bloomington, among other communities. Several days before her debate with Hewett, *The Pantagraph* noted that Anthony “appears to be an earnest... [and] conscientious worker for the **elevation** of woman from the social and political disadvantages under which she rests.” In a similar article two days before the much-anticipated debate, *The Pantagraph* noted that Hewett was a “gentleman of high talent, and great ability, an independent thinker and a logical debater”—also making a point to mention that Hewett was an “honest, conscientious opponent of Woman Suffrage, not from mere prejudice, but from deliberate **conviction**.”

The debate took place at Schroder’s Opera House in downtown Bloomington. The topic, “Is it best for the women of America that they should vote?”—with Hewett arguing that it was *not* best. Tickets were 50 cents (which today would be the equivalent of about \$10), with reserved seating costing an extra 25 cents. The opera house was filled to capacity that evening—every seat, the aisles, galleries, and stage “were occupied by an intelligent and eager audience.” The streetcars “brought crowds of people from Normal” and the trains from various railroads brought spectators from many adjoining towns.

Anthony opened the debate stating that women were “treated as minors—and it is always demoralizing to any body[sic] to be treated as a minor or irresponsible being. The laws hold women as little better than slaves. The laws are such and the conditions of society are such that women are compelled to seek marriage as a condition of support and maintenance.” In her opinion, if women were given the right to vote, it would give “her **corresponding** power for protection.” And that if women had the vote, “long neglected issues involving prison reform and prostitution, among other things, would be given their due.”

During Hewett’s rebuttal, he argued that “women had enough to do already without the responsibility of voting. Her brain is full, her hands are full and her arms are full.” Plus, women always get what they want—“they rule by an influence that the ballot cannot equal.” In Hewett’s opinion, “there was different work for men and women to do. It was shown in every relation of life, and voting seemed to him to be peculiarly man’s work as was digging ditches, cutting wood, etc...” And, according to Hewett, a large portion of the women of the United States did not want to vote. And because they did not vote, they were “thankfully free from the corrupting influence of politics.”

Anthony **retorted** by stating that voting was, in fact, not dirty work and that it would not “contaminate women any more to vote with men than to live with them.”

By all accounts, Hewett and Anthony engaged in a lively, but exceedingly civil, two-hour long debate. Anthony closed the debate by stating that she would rather “run the risk of bad women’s votes” if they would “at least vote for honest work and honest bread.” She polled the ladies in the audience, asking them to vote whether they wished the right of suffrage. It was reported that the response was “almost unanimous in the affirmative,” with a few women “having the courage to vote that they preferred the present condition of things.” Both speakers were enthusiastically applauded by their friends.

Anthony continued to push the envelope on women’s voting rights. So much so that in 1872, Anthony was arrested for voting. She was tried and fined \$100 for her crime (which today would be an estimated \$2,100). This made many people angry and brought national attention to the suffrage movement. In 1876, Anthony led a protest at the 1876 Centennial of the United States’ independence. She gave a speech—“Declaration of Rights”—written by Stanton and another

suffragist, Matilda Joslyn Gage; saying, “Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less.”

Anthony spent her life working for women’s rights. In 1888, she helped to merge the two largest suffrage associations into one—forming the **National American Women’s Suffrage Association**. She led the group until 1900. She traveled around the country giving speeches, gathering thousands of signatures on petitions, and lobbying Congress every year for women. Unfortunately, Susan B. Anthony died on March 13, 1906, 14 years before white women achieved the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 26, 1920.