

History
UNFOLDING

“A COMPLETE EMANCIPATION”

THE BIRTH OF THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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"A Complete Emancipation"—The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement

Introduction

The Long Struggle For Women's Rights

In 1892, looking back on decades of struggle, Elizabeth Cady Stanton described the dream of the women's movement as giving women "the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition."

This spirit of complete emancipation included, of course, all of those basic rights granted legally to men under the U.S. Constitution. But it also went beyond strictly legal rights. It encompassed a vision of women freed from many self-imposed fears and other limitations as well, freed to accept all of the challenges, opportunities and responsibilities of full citizenship in a more fully democratic nation.

The 19th century is often pictured as a time of Victorian constraint and traditionalism. Yet it was a version of that same Victorian spirit that animated women's rights leaders like Stanton, along with Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Sojourner Truth and many others. Their ideals were part of their age. And yet those ideals enabled these women to transcend their times and launch a movement that would fundamentally alter the culture and society in which they lived.

The 12 visual displays in this booklet focus on some of the major factors behind the rise of the women's rights movement of the 1800s. The visuals are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

A Woman's Place in the Young Republic

The illustrations here call attention to the traditional roles women played in the young republic and to some of the forces already at work changing those roles.

An Age of Moral Uplift

The Second Great Awakening and the spirit of social reform to which it led were major factors helping to bring the women's rights movement into being. The illustrations here call attention to the various religious and secular reform movements of the day, all animated by an optimistic sense of the perfectability of the individual and society.

The Early Struggle for Equality

The reform movement that most influenced women's rights leaders was abolitionism. The relationship between anti-slavery and women's rights, and the birth of the women's rights movement itself are the focus here.

Emancipation and Its Critics

The concept of "a complete emancipation" inspired many women who saw themselves as opening a whole new chapter in human history. Their expansive vision also had its critics, who often ridiculed the women's rights movement. This tension continued for many more decades and in some respects is still with us.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*"A Complete Emancipation"—The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand the way traditional roles for women were changing in the early industrial era in America.
2. Students will discuss how these changing roles helped bring a women's movement into being.

A Woman's Place in the Young Republic

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

Most women in the early 1800s expected to carry on as their mothers and grandmothers had before them. Their lives were taken up mainly with the tasks of child rearing and household labor. Fathers and husbands had a great deal of control over them. They lacked many rights that men had in economic and political realms outside the household. But life in America often altered the older customs and beliefs of newly arriving immigrants. Carving out a new civilization in a wilderness helped foster a spirit of independence in everyone involved. This photo offers at least some idea of why that might have been so.

Illustration 2

The growth of towns and cities in the 1800s meant that more workers took jobs in shops and factories away from home. Women did have jobs in the factories, but it was mainly men who worked outside the home. This left many women at home by themselves. Scores of pamphlets and books in the 1800s offered a glowing view of this condition, a view that pictured women as far better suited than men to care for children and make the home a refuge in a harsh and competitive world. Historians often refer to this outlook as a "cult of domesticity." In different ways, both illustrations here present this ideal of women as providers of domestic comfort and moral perfection. This ideal and the reality were often far apart. The purely domestic realm could limit women's lives in many ways. On the other hand, it also gave many of them leisure to read and educate themselves. The middle class homes of many early crusaders for women's rights may well have provided the space they needed to begin the long struggle for equality.

Illustration 3

The cult of domesticity painted a rosy picture of a woman's life at home, but the cult had a harsh side as well. A woman on her own was seen as taking big risks. Widowed, divorced or single women lacked all sorts of protections they now have. A woman alone and in need might be pitied. But she was also often feared as an upsetting reminder of how uncertain life could be. Widows or elderly single women could often trigger such feelings of pity and fear. As this drawing of a schoolmistress suggests, they also often suffered ridicule or worse.

Lesson 1—A Woman's Place in the Young Republic

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. This photo shows a scene that was common in America from colonial times all the way up to the first years of the twentieth century. It shows a wagon train heading west to the frontier. What do historians mean when they talk about the American frontier?
2. What kinds of difficulties do you think the people in this wagon train would have faced along the way to their new homes? How would the trip differ from the way you might travel west across the U.S. today?
3. What special problems do you think women would have had moving west and settling on the frontier? In this photo, you can see a woman holding a bullwhip. What does this tell you about the role women played on trips west like this one?
4. In the past, women generally had fewer rights than men. But some historians say the frontier experience in America helped women win greater freedom than they would otherwise have had. Why might the frontier experience have had that effect?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Learn more about the experiences of women on the frontier in the 1800s. One source is Julie Roy Jeffrey's *Frontier Women: the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880*, Hill and Wang, 1979. As a group, read and discuss this book or others recommended by your teacher or librarian. Based on what you learn, pretend you are either the woman in the wagon shown here or a relative of this woman back east. The wagon train is on its way west sometime just after the American Civil War. As a group, make up your own route for the wagon train, and draw a map of this route. Now those who are pretending to be the woman should write several long letters back home describing experiences on the trail and thoughts about the life you have left behind and the life you expect to start once you reach your destination. Those who are the relatives should write letters back with news and advice. Post the best of these letters along with your map in a bulletin board display titled "Women and the Western Frontier."

Emancipation and Its Critics

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress