

History of Convention Days

Although the annual July celebration of Convention Days started with the 1979 opening of the National Women's Hall of Fame, that was not the first commemoration of the 1848 Women's Rights Convention. Starting with the 1979 celebration, the annual Convention Days have been held on the weekend closest to July 19-20, which were the actual July days of the 1848 convention.

The 1923 Celebration

The 1923 event, which lasted three days, may have been the largest. Women had won the right to vote three years earlier and suffrage leaders from all over the nation journeyed to Seneca Falls to honor the place where it all started. To welcome the group, the village was decorated with banners of purple, white and gold, the colors of the National Women's Party. The village hosted a reception for 500 visitors on the lawn of Trinity Episcopal Church. Local historian Matthew McKeon, who had just finished the eighth grade that year, said he remembers the event. The pageant—a production with 500 performers staged next to the church--“drew a tremendous crowd,” that filled the lawns along lower Fall Street, he recalled.

Seneca Falls resident Elizabeth Delavan and her sister, Gertrude Garnsey, were in the pageant's cast. Mrs. Delavan said her role as a Greek woman carrying water was supposed to show how difficult women's lives had been. “We thought it was wonderful,” she said of the production. “I don't know if it was or not.” One of the reasons she remembers the event is because of the pageant's director, a 20-year-old woman named Clare Booth. She later married Henry R. Luce and became a playwright and the American ambassador to Italy during the Eisenhower administration. Mrs. Delavan has kept a copy of an article about the event that ran in *The New York Times*. “It was big doings in the whole town,” she said. That didn't mean, however, participants supported the women's rights movement. “My age group wasn't interested much in women's rights,” she said. “What went on here didn't seem to be as world shaking as it seems now to be.”

It was during the 1923 event, however, that the drive for an equal rights amendment began. The proposed amendment was written by members of the National Women's Party at a series of meetings and its wording was announced by Alice Paul, the party's vice president, at the First Presbyterian Church. Outside the Presbyterian Church today is a sign indicating that it was the site of the first call for an equal rights amendment. On the last day of the 1923 event, 300 convention participants drove in 100 cars to visit the grave of Susan B. Anthony in Rochester.

The 1908 Celebration

The 1908 celebration was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch. Also attending that celebration were Mrs. Blatch's sister, Margaret Stanton Lawrence, and the Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, a sister-in-law to Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman physician. Rev. Blackwell, the first woman ordained in the United States, served a parish in the Wayne County community of South Butler.

A Methodist church publication reported later “the exercises at Seneca Falls were attended by thousands of men and women coming from different parts of the country, and a number from Europe.”

During the ceremony, a bronze plaque was placed on the former Wesleyan Chapel to mark its historic importance. The building, then the Johnson Opera House, is now the Seneca Falls Laundromat. The plaque was removed from the building before the 1923 event by the building's owner, A.B. Hilbert of Geneva. Hilbert said noting the building's age would reduce its value.

The plaque was reportedly rescued from a trash heap by *Reveille* editor Henry Stowell, and taken to the Seneca Falls Historical Society. It was on display for the 1923 celebration. The building changed hands and the League of Women Voters conducted a ceremony and put the plaque back on the building on October 26, 1928, marking the 80th anniversary of the convention. It remains on the building today.

The 1948 Celebration

Presidential candidates Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey both recognized the convention's centennial in 1948. A first day cover was issued at the Seneca Falls post office marking the occasion, and it sold nearly 1 million copies. Additional help had to be hired to get the collector's items done.

A new pageant was written by Caroline Foote Lester, who had participated in the events 20 years earlier. Her pageant, "Women Awakened," was later used by the United Nations as a radio program. The pageant, using 185 performers, was performed three times at the Strand Theater, and drew 2,300 spectators.

Donald Merriam, who was the choral director for the event, said the centennial was a major event. Merriam said he doesn't remember too much about the event, but knows "the community really went to town on it." According to the account in the *Geneva Daily Times*, the highlights of the event were the pageant, tours of historical sites, and the "mass meeting at which leaders of the movement pledged continuing efforts to achieve full equality."

Recent History

In 1968 work began on what led to the formation of the National Women's Hall of Fame a year later. In 1970, an event in San Francisco marked the role of Seneca Falls in the nation's history. "Seminars in Celebration of Seneca Falls" were conducted in July. A Woman's Day was conducted August 13, 1970, at Eisenhower College. Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the featured speaker, brought all the women he had appointed to state offices to the affair.

On August 26, 1974, the anniversary of the passage of the suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the local National Organization for Women also held a celebration.

In 1979, the opening of the National Women's Hall of Fame at 76 Fall Street began the first of what has become the annual commemoration known as Convention Days.

In 1980, federal legislation created the Women's Rights National Historical Park. Today it includes the former Wesleyan Chapel, the site of the 1848 convention, a visitor center, the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, the M'Clintock House in Waterloo, and the Richard and Jane Hunt House in Waterloo. For a few years, the WRNHP was instrumental in an annual Equality Day celebration on August 26th.

In 1998 a massive celebration was planned to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 1848 convention. It is estimated that 25,000 people heard then First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton give a keynote speech. Also prominently present were Ken Burns and his colleague Paul Barnes who were working on their PBS document "Not For Ourselves Alone."

[Note: This article has been largely taken word for word from a *Finger Lakes Times* article by Martin Toombs written in 1982.]