

Seneca County: Its Continuing Role in Women's History

Perhaps the single most famous historical event associated with Seneca County is its being the birthplace of the American women's rights movement. For many of the thirty years that I was a high school social studies teacher in the Seneca Falls School District, I could go to even a national teachers' conference and be confidently proud that when I said where I taught, virtually every one would know about that place as the site of the first women's rights convention in July 1848.

As the social studies department head in the Seneca Falls School District for several years, I would occasionally get contacted by some members of the press to find out what special things we social studies teachers, in the community that was the birthplace of the women's rights movement, would be doing to commemorate women's history month. My standard response was something like this: "Every month is women's history month. It is impossible to give students a true understanding of our nation's history without incorporating women's history into virtually every time period and topic of a U.S. history course."

According to the U.S. Census website, National Women's History Month's roots go back to March 8, 1857, when women from New York City factories staged a protest over working conditions. In 1981, the U.S. Congress established National Women's History Week to be commemorated the second week of March. In 1987, Congress expanded the week to a month. Every year since, Congress has passed a resolution for Women's History Month, and the President has issued a proclamation. The National Women's History Project, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, has "Writing Women Back into History" as its annual theme in 2010. For many years of my teaching career a typical U.S. history textbook for high school juniors would devote at most a paragraph to the Seneca Falls Convention and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and another sentence or two to Harriet Tubman. Textbooks today are doing a better job of including more aspects of women's history, but more still needs to be done.

We Finger Lakes residents, and especially those of us living in Seneca County, probably have a much greater knowledge of, and appreciation for, the richness of women's history because our area is where so much of the roots of women's history took hold. We are well aware of the Women's Rights National Historical Park with its Visitor Center as well the Elizabeth Cady Stanton home in Seneca Falls and both the M'Clintock House and the Hunt House in Waterloo. The National Park is nearing completion of its project to enclose the former Wesleyan Chapel, the site of the first women's rights convention. We know about the National Women's Hall of Fame, which was started in Seneca Falls in 1969, and is currently working on transforming the former Seneca Woolen Mills into its new home. Relocating there, in greatly enlarged facilities, is a wonderful way to continue the heritage of that mill founded in 1844 by antislavery investors. I say this because of the "women's history" in this mill. Unlike the so-called Lowell System of textile mills in Massachusetts, the Seneca Woolen Mills used local people as the labor force—local women and men both worked in this mill side-by-side. It will also provide much needed space for enhanced programming, special events, multimedia and traveling exhibits, and classrooms.

While most of us are well aware of the National Park and the National Women's Hall of Fame, I would guess that few of us could describe the specific contributions of

many of the 236 women currently honored in the National Women's Hall of Fame. Let me give you just a few examples: Ethel Percy Andrus, Annie Jump Cannon, Alice Evans, Dolores Huerta, Mary Mahoney, Katherine Siva Saubel, Chien-Shiung Wu, or Rosalyn Yalow. If you are like me, you wouldn't be able to explain their contributions! Visit the Hall or its website (www.greatwomen.org) to find out more about these remarkable women and their impact on our world.

For many years there has been a wooden sign in front of the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church noting that in 1923 the first Equal Rights Amendment was proposed there. As part of the 75th anniversary celebration of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Alice Paul called for a new constitutional amendment stating that "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." Nick-named the "Lucretia Mott Amendment," legislation for this Equal Rights Amendment was introduced in Congress that same year. Sometime this spring a new historic marker, donated by Sarah Porsch, will replace the wooden sign.

Very possibly Seneca Falls will become the home for the International Museum of Motherhood (M.O.M.). The mission of M.O.M. is to showcase the value of mothers, mother-art and mother-work around the world, while documenting the herstory of (m)others in perpetuity. Its board of directors is committed to bringing its world class museum and library to Seneca Falls.

While Seneca County will probably be known best in U.S. history as the site of the first woman's rights convention, the county continues to contribute significantly to women's history.