

Worcester Takes the Lead



The first “national” Woman’s Rights Convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850.

Answering the Call

Two years after the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention, a group of activists met in Boston and issued a “Call” for a national gathering. In October, 1850 nearly one thousand women and men from eleven states convened in Worcester’s Brinley Hall. Prominent speakers, including those pictured below, envisioned a world of equal pay and equal education, employment in all professions, the option to combine career and family, and the prospect of women voting and holding public office.

“We have heard a great deal about the Pilgrim Fathers, but who has heard of the Pilgrim Mothers?”
Ernestine L. Rose,
Worcester, 1850



Young Lucy Stone (A) was a leading organizer. Contracting typhoid fever, she was in and out of consciousness for eighteen days but recovered in time to address the convention. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Sojourner Truth (B) “contended for her right to vote, to hold office, to practice medicine and the law, and to wear the breeches with the best white man that walks upon God’s earth,” reported the *New York Herald*.

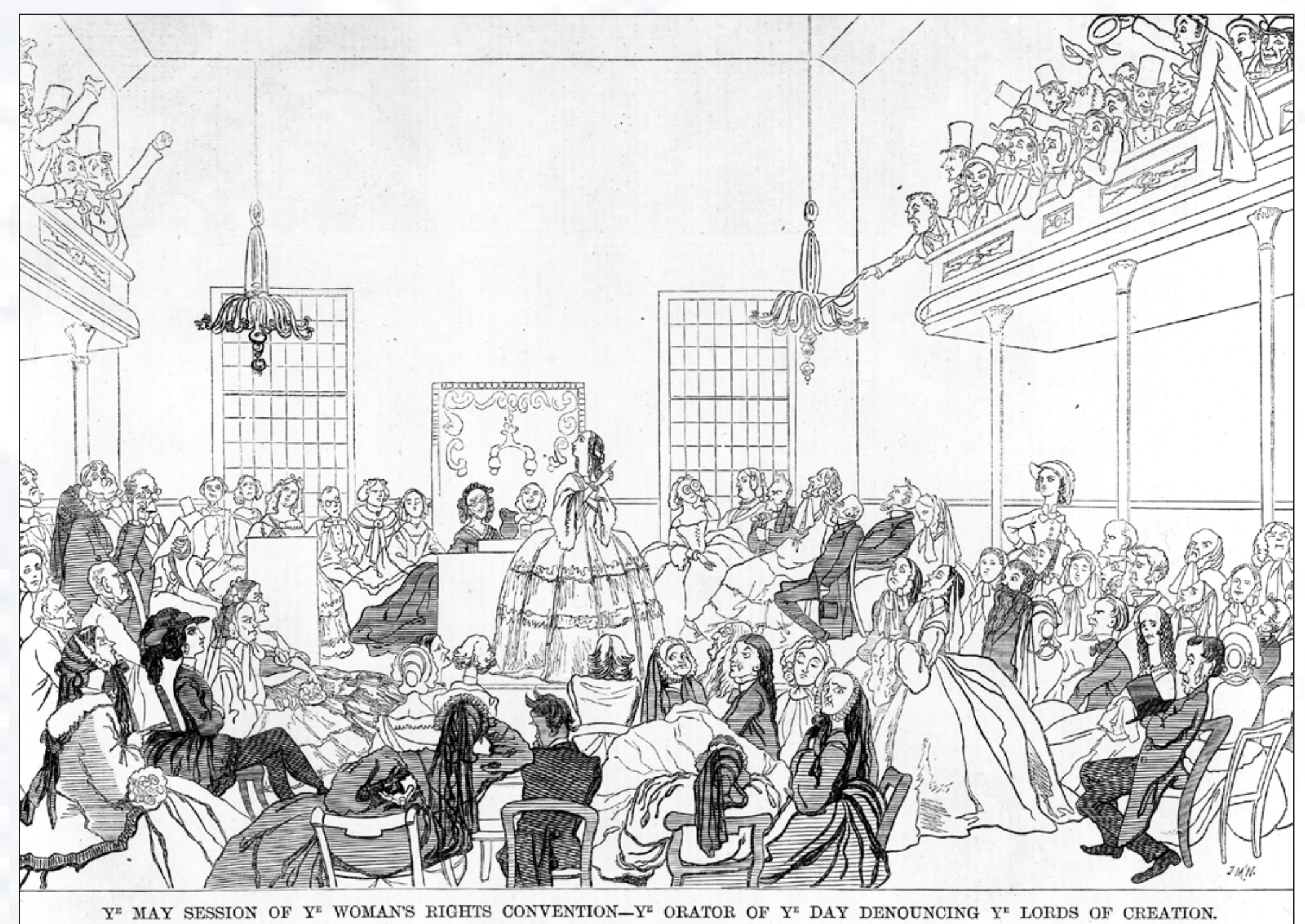
Abby Kelley Foster’s (C) fiery address was most controversial. Perhaps carried away by the moment, she spoke of the right to rise up and “cut the tyrant’s throats” as during the American Revolution.

Paulina Kellogg Wright Davis (D) spear-headed organization and presided at the convention. MANCHESTER BROTHERS.

Frederick Douglass (E) urged women to “take their rights” as he did. Despite being thrown from railroad cars and “knocked on the head” he returned and “found the continued exercise of his rights was wearing out their prejudices against color.” THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Born in Poland, Ernestine Rose (F) came to American in 1836. Her eloquence and supposed “French” accent charmed listeners at the Worcester convention. S.B. ANTHONY

Lucretia Mott (G) rejected violence but also passivity. She dismissed the idea that others were “giving us our rights, permitting us to receive them...she was in favor of demanding them.” LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



In 1851 a second national woman’s rights convention was held in Worcester and the practice became an annual event in various cities. The conventions were satirized in this 1859 cartoon which shows earnest debate on the floor and derision from the galleries. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

No Such Thing as Bad Publicity

Press coverage fueled the movement. The *New York Daily Tribune* was somewhat supportive. That granting suffrage “would improve the lot of Women may be doubtful, but we are willing to give the Democratic theory a full and fair trial” wrote Horace Greeley. The rival *New York Herald* was scathing. “The motley gathering of fanatical mongrels, of old grannies, male and female, of fugitive slaves and fugitive lunatics, called the Woman’s Rights Convention... has put forth its platform and adjourned.”

Medical Malpractice

Dr. Harriot Hunt read her rejection letter from Harvard Medical School to the convention. After an apprenticeship, she began practicing medicine and was later allowed to monitor classes at Harvard but not formally enroll. “We ask that the medical colleges may be opened to MIND, not to sex,” she urged in Worcester. In 2016 49.8% of students entering medical school in the United States were women.



Reaction in Massachusetts

After the convention two thousand petitions were submitted to the Massachusetts government. The Legislative Committee on Qualification of Voters reasoned that receiving 2,000 petitions, from a population of over 200,000 adult women in Massachusetts, gave the committee the “right to infer” that most women did not wish to vote.

