



The common school



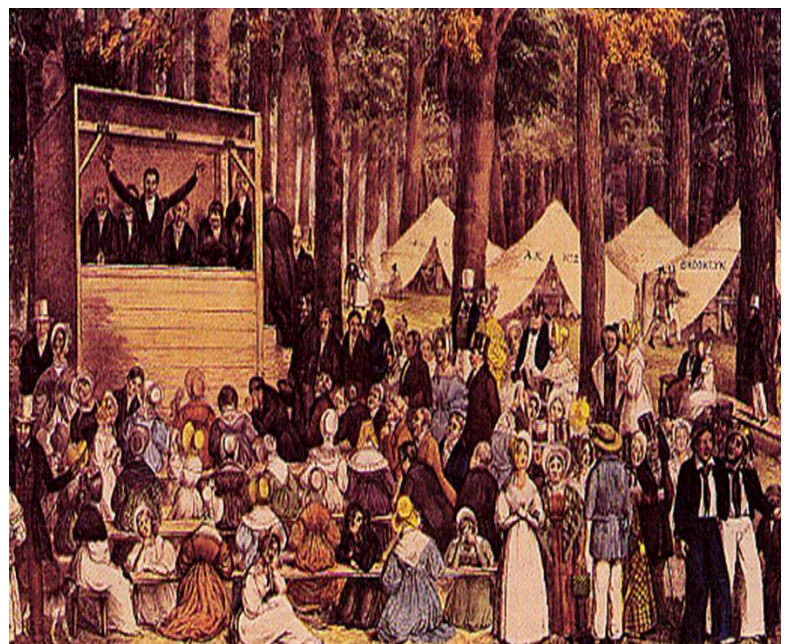
Miss Blanche Lamont with her school at Hecla, Montana, 1893  
Collection of Arthur and Sybil Kern. Library of Congress.

# UNIT 8: AN ERA OF REFORM COMPLETE TEXT

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## Mini-Unit Debrief: An Era of Reform

In this unit we will be learning about the economy and society of the North and South, including what life was like for each region's African Americans. We will also learn about efforts to reform American society, including efforts to end slavery.

### Setting the Stage – Americans in the Mid-1800s

In 1787, “in Order to form a more perfect Union,” a group of political leaders wrote the Constitution of the United States. Some 50 years later, however, some people believed that the Union was still far from perfect. Most of them were not political leaders. Instead, they were every day Americans – men and women, black and white, ministers and teachers.

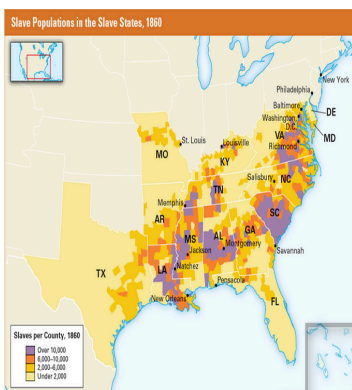
From the 1830s through the 1850s, these reformers tried to improve American society in many ways. Some of their efforts met with great resistance. One of the most controversial issues was the struggle to end slavery. Many Northerners, as well as many white Southerners, thought slavery was morally wrong. However, the South's economy depended on slave labor. Over time, the dependence grew.

The Constitution banned the importation of slaves starting in 1808. Yet, as white Southerners moved westward, the demand for slave labor increased. This demand was met by the natural growth of slave populations in older parts of the South.

Slaveholders in these areas sold slaves to buyers from other regions.

The map above shows the cities where much of the slave trade took place. It also shows how slavery spread west. The map below shows the distribution of the slave population in 1860.

In this mini-unit, you will learn about the movement to end slavery and other attempts at reform. You will also learn about Northern and Southern society, including differences in the lives of free Americans and slaves. Finally, you will learn about the economies of the North and South and why they made the end of slavery so difficult to achieve.





## An Era of Reform – Introduction

In 1851, a group of people gathered in a church in Ohio to discuss the rights of women. A tall African American woman made her way through the crowd and sat down. Her name was Sojourner Truth. A former slave, she had learned to pay careful attention to white people. Now she listened as whites discussed whether women should have the same rights as men.

Truth heard one speaker after another explain that women didn't need more rights because they weren't smart or strong enough to do much besides raise children. Women, they argued, needed help from men. One man summed it by saying, "Women are weak."

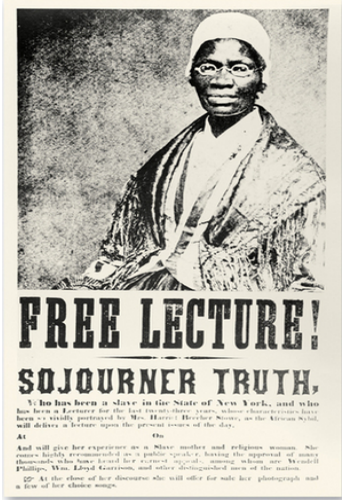
Truth had heard enough. She rose slowly to her feet and walked to the pulpit. The room grew quiet as everyone waited for her to speak.

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and have the best place everywhere," she began. "Nobody every helps me into carriages or over mud-puddles, or give me any best place!"

Her voice rose to a thunderous pitch. "And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head [outdo] me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold into slavery, and when I cried with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?"

When she finished people applauded. Some cried. One witness said, "She has taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely."

Sojourner Truth represented two of the great reform movements in America in the 1800s: the movement for women's equality and the movement to end slavery. Between about 1820 and 1850, many Americans devoted themselves to such causes as ending slavery, promoting women's rights, and improving education. In this mini-unit, we will learn to what extent these reform movements improved life for Americans.



Sojourner Truth, a former slave, gave speeches throughout the North against slavery and, later, in support of women's rights



This scrapbook page from the late 1800s contains pictures of women who led reform movements.

## The Spirit of Reform

It was fitting that the meeting attended by Sojourner Truth took place in church. New religious movements played a key role in inspiring thousands of Americans to try to **reform**<sup>1</sup> society.

**The Second Great Awakening** A revival of religious feeling swept across the nation from the 1800s to the 1840s. Church leaders called this period the **Second Great Awakening**<sup>2</sup>. Day after day, people gathered in churches and big white tents to hear messages of hope. Preachers like Charles G. Finney, a leader of the movement, urged Christians to let themselves be filled with the Spirit of God. Their listeners prayed, shouted, and sang hymns. Sometimes they cried for hours or fell down in frenzies.



Preachers at religious meetings like this one proclaimed that people could earn their salvation by doing good works. This encouraged many people to work to improve society.

Like the Great Awakening during the 1730s and 1740s, this religious revival appealed to people's emotions. But the Second Great Awakening offered something new. In the past, most Christian ministers had said that God had already decided who would be saved. Now many preachers said everyone could gain forgiveness for their sins. Many of them taught that doing good works could help them to be saved.

This optimistic message attracted enthusiastic followers throughout the West and North. It gave men and women alike to work for the improvement of society. Charles Finney's preaching, for example, inspired many people to oppose slavery.



**Optimistic Ideas** Other optimistic ideas also inspired Americans during this time. In New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a former minister was the central figure in a movement called **transcendentalism**<sup>3</sup>. Emerson believed that every human being has unlimited potential. But to realize their godlike nature, people have to transcend, or go beyond, just purely logical thinking. They can find answers to life's mysteries only by learning to trust their emotions and **intuition**<sup>4</sup>.

Transcendentalists added to the spirit of reform by urging people to question society's rules and institutions. Do not **conform**<sup>5</sup> to other's expectations, they said. If you want to find God – and your own true self – look to nature and the “God within.”

Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau captured this new **individualism**<sup>6</sup> in a famous

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, an account of living in a cabin he built near Concord, MA. There he meditated on the meaning of his life, society, nature and the human spirit.

essay. “If a man does not keep pace with his companions,” wrote Thoreau, “perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” Let him step o the music which he hears.”

Thoreau practiced what he preached. In 1845, he went into the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, to live alone and as close to nature as possible. Thoreau spent more than two yeas in solitude, recording his thoughts in a 6,000 page journal. In 1846, he was jailed over night for refusing to pay taxes because of his opposition to the government's involvement in the Mexican-American War.

<sup>1</sup> Reform: to make change in order to bring about improvement, end abuses, or correct injustices

<sup>2</sup> Second Great Awakening: a revival of religious feeling and belief from the 1800s to the 1840s

<sup>3</sup> transcendentalism: a philosophy emphasizing that people transcend, or go beyond, logical thinking to reach true understanding, with the help of emotions and intuition

<sup>4</sup> intuition: to know or understand based on feeling, not facts

<sup>5</sup> conform: to obey established rules and patterns

<sup>6</sup> individualism: to act based on one's own beliefs

**Model Communities** While Thoreau tried to find the ideal life in solitude, other transcendentalists tried to create ideal communities. In 1841, George Ripley started a community called Brook Farm near Boston. Residents at Brook Farm tried to live in “brotherly cooperation” instead of competing with each other, as people in the larger society did. They shared labor of supporting themselves by farming, teaching and making clothes.

Brook Farm was only one of hundreds of model communities started by reformers in the first half of the 1800s. Most of these experiments lasted only a few years. But they were a powerful expression of the belief that people of good will create an ideal society.

## Prison Reform

One day in 1841, a Boston woman named Dorothea Dix agreed to teach Sunday school at a jail. What she witnessed that day changed her life forever.

Dix was horrified to see that many prisoners were bound in chains and locked in cages. Children accused of minor thefts were jailed with adult criminals. Were conditions this bad everywhere?

Dix **devoted**<sup>7</sup> herself to finding out the answer to her question. She visited hundreds of jails and prisons throughout Massachusetts. She also visited debtors' prisons, or jails for people who owed money. Most of the thousands of Americans in debtors' prisons owed less than 20 dollars. While they were locked up, they could not earn money to repay their debts. As a result, they remained imprisoned for years.

**Treatment of the Mentally Ill** What shocked Dix most of all was the way mentally ill people were treated. Most were locked in dirty, crowded prison cells. If they have misbehaved, they were whipped.

Dix and other reformers believed that the mentally ill needed treatment and care, not punishment. Massachusetts had one private asylum, or hospital for the mentally ill. Only the wealthy could afford to send a family member there. Even so, the asylum was filled to overflowing.

**Campaigning for Better Conditions** For two years, Dix gathered information about the horrors she had seen. Then she prepared a detailed report for the Massachusetts state legislature. "I come as the advocate of the helpless, forgotten, insane...men and women," she said. "I proceed...to call your attention to the present state of insane persons, confined...in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!" Shocked by Dix's report, the lawmakers voted to create public asylums for the mentally ill.

Dix visited prisons in other states as well. After she prepared reports demanding humane treatment for the mentally ill, those states also created special mental hospitals.

Dix continued campaigning for prison reform for the rest of her life. By the time she died in 1887, state governments no longer put debtors in prison. Most states had created special justice systems for children in trouble. Many had outlawed cruel punishments, such as branding people with hot irons. Dix had shown that reformers could lead society to make significant changes.



Dorothea Dix worked tirelessly to improve conditions for prisoners and the mentally ill.

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<sup>7</sup> devoted: to give time, money, or effort to help a person or cause



## Educational Reform

A second reform movement that won support in the 1800s was the effort to make education available to more children. The man who would become known as “the father of American public schools,” Horace Mann, led this movement.

**The Need for Public Schools** As a boy in Massachusetts in the early 1800s, Horace Mann attended school only ten weeks a year. The rest of the time, he had to work on his family’s farm.

Mann was lucky enough to have limited time in school. In Massachusetts, Puritans had established town schools, but few other areas had public schools, or schools paid for by taxes. Wealthy parents send their children to private schools or hired tutors. 60 children might attend a part-time, one-room school. Their teachers had little education and received little pay. Most children simply did not go to school at all.

In the cities, some poor children stole, destroyed property, and set fires. Reformers believed that education would help children escape poverty and become good citizens. Influenced by the need for education in its big cities, New York set up public elementary schools in every town as early as the 1820s.

Meanwhile in Massachusetts, Mann became the state’s supervisor of education. In towns and villages, he spoke out on the need for public schools. “Our means of education,” he stated, “are the grand machinery by which the ‘raw material’ of human nature can be worked up into inventors and discoverers, into skilled artisans and scientific farmers.”

Citizens in Massachusetts responded to Mann’s message. They voted to pay taxes to build better public schools, to provide teachers with higher salaries, and to establish special training schools for teachers.

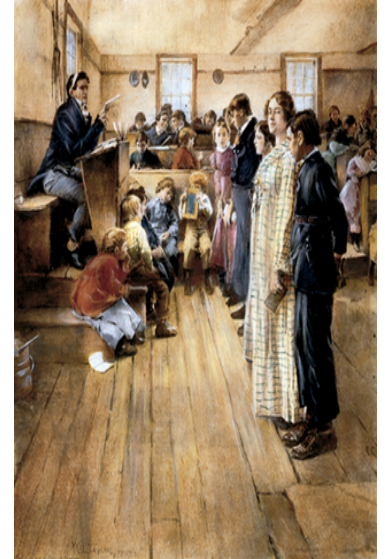
**An Unfinished Reform** By 1850, many states in the North and West used Mann’s ideas. Soon most white children, especially boys, attended free public schools.

But states still did not offer public education to everyone. Most high schools and colleges did not admit girls. States as far north as Illinois passed laws to keep African American out of public schools. When towns did allow blacks to attend school, most made them go to separate schools that received less money. In the South, few girls and no African Americans could attend public schools.

Education for girls and women did make some progress. In 1837, Oberlin College in Ohio became the first college to admit women as well as men. When states opened the first public universities in the 1860s, most accepted female students.

African Americans, however, had few options. When Prudence Crandall admitted a black student to her girls’ school in Connecticut in 1833, white parents took their children out of the school. Crandall responded by opening a school for African American girls. Angry white people threw stones at the school and had Crandall jailed. In 1834 she was forced to close her school.

Horace Mann realized that much more needed to be done to increase educational opportunities for women and African Americans. In 1853, he became the first president of a new college for men and women, Antioch College in Ohio. There, he urged his students to become involved in improving society. “Be ashamed to die,” he told them, “until you have won some victory for humanity.”



Prior to the reforms in public education led by Horace Mann, most children did not attend school. Those who did usually had to suffer overcrowded classrooms.

## The Movement to End Slavery



William Lloyd Garrison (above left) published a newspaper called *The Liberator* in the 1830s. His newspaper called for not only an end to slavery but full equality for African Americans. The abolition movement gained public attention through Garrison's articles.

In 1835, a poster appeared on walls throughout Washington, D.C. The poster showed two drawings. One drawing, labeled "The Land of the Free," showed the founding fathers reading the Declaration of Independence. The other labeled "The Home of the Oppressed," showed slaves trudging past the U.S. Capitol Building, the home of Congress. The poster posed a challenging question: How could America, the "land of the free," still allow slavery? By the 1830s, growing numbers of people began to ask this question. These people were called **abolitionists**<sup>8</sup>.

**The Struggle Begins** Some Americans had opposed slavery even before the American Revolution began. Quakers stopped owning slaves in 1776. By 1792, every state as far south as Virginia had antislavery societies.

Congress passed a law that ended the Atlantic slave trade in 1808. Once it became illegal to import slaves, northern shipping communities had no more interest in slavery. Northern textile mills, however, wanted the cheap cotton that slave labor in the South provided. Although slavery ended in the North by the early 1800s, many Northerners still accepted slavery.

Abolitionists wanted to end slavery, but they did not always agree about how to do it. Some abolitionists tried to inspire slaves to rise up in revolt. Others wanted to find a peaceful way to end slavery immediately. Still others wanted to give slaveholders time to develop farming methods that didn't rely on slave labor.

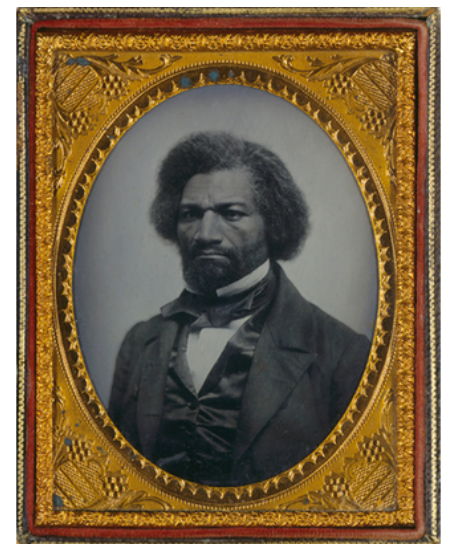
From its earliest days blacks and whites worked in the abolition movement, sometimes together, sometimes separately. Black activists often kept their distance from their white counterparts. One African American journalist remarked "As long as we let them think and act for us...they will outwardly treat us as men, while in their hearts they still hold us as slaves."

In 1831, a deeply religious white man, William Lloyd Garrison, started a fiery abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*.

Braving the disapproval of many northerners, Garrison demanded the immediate freeing of all slaves. "I will be as harsh as truth," he wrote "I will not retreat a single inch – and I will be heard!" Angry proslavery groups destroyed Garrison's printing press and burned his house.

**Frederick Douglass Speaks Out** One day, Garrison heard an escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, speaking at a meeting of abolitionists. Over six feet tall, Douglass spoke with a voice like thunder. When he described the cruel treatment of enslaved children, people cried. When he made fun of ministers who told slaves to love slavery, people laughed. When he finished, Garrison jumped up and cried, "Shall such a man be held a slave in a Christian land?" The crowd called out, "No! No! No!"

Douglass quickly became a leader in the abolitionist movement. His autobiography, published in 1845, was an instant best seller. A brilliant and independent thinking, Douglass eventually started his own newspaper, *North Star*. Its motto read, "Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Color- God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren [brothers]."



Frederick Douglass, a former slave, was an important leader in the abolitionist movement. Through his writing and speeches, he waged a fierce campaign against slavery.

<sup>8</sup> abolitionist: a person who supported abolition, or the ending of slavery



**Women Get Involved** Many women were inspired by religious reform movements to become involved in the fight against slavery. Like other abolitionists, they sometimes faced violence. When a young woman named Angelina Grimke spoke against slavery, an anti-abolition mob threw stones at her. When she kept speaking, they burned the building she was speaking in.

Angelina and her sister Sarah had been raised in a South Carolina slaveholding family. After traveling North and becoming Quakers, they slavery in a new way. In the 1830s, the two sisters began speaking out about the poverty and pain of slavery. At first, they spoke only to other women, but soon they were addressing large groups of men and women throughout the North. The Grimkes led the way for other women to speak in public.

Some abolitionists like Sojourner Truth, were former slaves. Truth had always been strongly spiritual and had preached throughout the North at religious meetings and on street corners. When she meet Douglass and Garrison, their enthusiasm inspired her to speak loudly about slavery. An outstanding speaker, Truth argued that God would end slavery peacefully.

Abolitionists were a minority, even in the North. But their efforts, and the violence directed at them, helped change Northerners' attitudes about slavery. In addition, the antislavery fight helped pave the way for the next great reform movement: the struggle for women's rights.

## Equal Rights for Women

Women abolitionists were in a strange position. They were trying to convince lawmakers to make slavery illegal, yet they themselves could not vote or hold office. They worked to raise money for the movement, yet their fathers and husbands controlled their money and property. They spoke out against slave beatings, yet their husbands could discipline them however they wanted.

Even wealthy women like the Grimke sisters, started to see that women and slaves had so much in common. “What *then* can women do for the slave,” asked Angelina Grimke, “when she herself is under the feet of a man and shamed into silence?”

**The Movement Begins** The organized women’s movement for women’s rights was sparked by the friendship between Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The two women met in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. When they arrived, they were outraged to discover that women were not allowed to speak at the meeting. The men who ran the convention made women sit in the balcony behind a curtain.

The men’s decision may have backfired, because it was in the balcony that Mott and Stanton met. At first glance, the two women seemed quite different. Mott was 47 years old, the mother of four children, and an active reformer. Inspired by the Grimke sisters and her Quaker faith, Mott had preached against slavery in both white and black churches. She had also helped Prudence Crandell try to find students for her school for black girls.

Stanton was 25 years old and newly married. She had never spoken in public. As a young girl, she had overheard women beg her father, a judge, to protect them from husbands who had beaten them. He had to tell them that there was no law against it. Later she attended Troy Female Seminary, the nation’s first high school for girls. She knew from her history studies that the United States did not treat women fairly. When she met Mott in London, she readily agreed that something had to be done about the injustices suffered by women.

**Unequal Treatment of Women** Even a fine education like Stanton’s did not mean women would receive equal treatment. When Lucy Stone graduated from Oberlin College in 1847, the faculty invited her to write a speech. But a man would have to give the speech, since the school did not allow women to speak in public. Stone refused. After graduation, she spoke out for women’s rights. Because women could not vote, she refused to pay property taxes. “Women suffer taxation,” she said “and yet have no representation.”

Stone’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Blackwell, wanted to be a doctor. She studied mathematics, science, and history. Yet she was rejected by 29 medical schools before one finally accepted her. In 1849, she graduated at the top of her class, becoming the country’s first female doctor. Still, no hospitals or doctors would agree to work with her.

To overcome such barriers women would have to work together. By the time Stanton and Mott left London, they had decided “to hold a convention...and form a society to advocate the rights of women.”

**The Seneca Falls Convention** Eight years passed before Stanton and Mott met again. Over afternoon tea at the home of Mott’s sister, they decided to send a notice to the local newspaper announcing a women’s convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The organized movement for women’s rights was about to begin.

On July 19, 1848, nearly 300 people, including 40 men, arrived for the **Seneca Falls Convention**<sup>9</sup>. Many were abolitionists, Quakers, or other reformers. Some were local housewives, farmers, and factory workers.



Lucretia Mott (on the left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (on the right) met at an antislavery convention in 1840. Their friendship helped spark the organized movement for women’s rights

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<sup>9</sup> Seneca Falls: The gathering of supporters of women’s rights in July 1848 that launched the movement for women’s right to vote.

The convention organizers modeled their proposal for women's rights, the **Declaration of Sentiments**<sup>10</sup>, on the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," the document began, "that all men and women are created equal."

Just as the Declaration of Independence listed King George's acts of tyranny over the colonists, the new declaration listed acts of tyranny by men over women. Man did not let woman vote. He did not give her the right to own property. He did not allow her to practice professions like medicine and law.

Stanton's presentation of the declaration at the convention was her first speech. A few other women also spoke. One of them, Charlotte Woodward, was a 19-year-old factory worker. "Every fiber of my being," she said, "rebelled [against] all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance [small amount of money] which, as it was earned, could never be mine."

**Debate about the Right to Vote** The convention passed the resolutions in favor of correcting the injustices listed in the Declaration of Sentiments. Then Stanton proposed that women demand the right to vote. For many, this step was too much. Even Mott cried, "Thou will make us ridiculous! We must go slowly."

At this point Stanton received powerful support from another participant at the convention: Frederick Douglass. Everyone who believed that black men should have the right to vote, Douglass argued, must also favor giving black women the right to vote. And that meant all women should have this important right. Inspired by Douglass's speech, the convention narrowly voted to approve to pass the last resolution.

**The Legacy of Seneca Falls** The Seneca Fall Convention helped to create an organized campaign for women's rights. Sojourner Truth, who would later mesmerize an audience with her "Ain't I a woman?" speech, became an active campaigner in the movement.

Stanton didn't like speaking at conventions, but she could write powerful speeches. She befriended Susan B. Anthony, a reformer with a flair for public speaking. While Stanton stayed in Seneca Falls to raise her children, Anthony traveled from town to town, speaking for women's rights. Of their lifelong teamwork, Stanton said, "I forged the thunderbolts, she fired them."

Slowly, reformers for women's rights made progress. New York gave women control over their property and wages. Massachusetts and Indiana passed more liberal divorce laws. Elizabeth Blackwell started her own hospital, which included a medical school to train other female doctors.

Other reforms, including the right to vote in all states, would take decades to become reality. Of all the women who signed the declaration at Seneca Falls, just one would live to vote for president legally: Charlotte Woodward.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (on the left) and Susan B. Anthony (on the right) worked together in the campaign for women's rights. Stanton wrote powerful speeches, which Anthony traveled from town to town to deliver.

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<sup>10</sup> Declaration of Sentiments: a formal statement of injustices suffered by women, written by the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention. Sentiments means "beliefs" or "convictions."



## Summary

**In this mini-unit, you read about the reform movements in the United States from about 1820 to 1850.**

**The Spirit of Reform** Many Americans were inspired by the Second Great Awakening, which emphasized the role of good works in the lives of Christians. Transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who urged people to question society's rules and institutions, also inspired Americans. Some transcendentalists formed communities that attempted to create an ideal society of cooperation.

**Prison Reform** Dorothea Dix pioneered the reform of prisons and the treatment of people with mental illness. Her efforts led to improvements in state prison systems and the creation of public institutions and hospitals for the mentally ill.

**Education Reform** Horace Mann led the movement to make education freely available to all. His ideas led many Northern states to establish public schools. Education reform did not improve opportunities for most girls, women, and African Americans, however.

**The Movement to End Slavery** Inspired in part by religious revivalism, abolitionists worked to end the practice of slavery. Key leaders in the movement included William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and Sojourner Truth.

**Equal Rights for Women** The women's rights movement began with the Seneca Falls Convention and its Declaration of Sentiments. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the convention. Susan B. Anthony was another key leader in the movement.