

House Bill 3114

Testimony by Nan Johnson, President Emerita, Friends of Women's Rights Park, Inc.

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.
September 11, 2008, at 10:00AM

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Nan Johnson and I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify in support of H R 3114, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish a commemorative "Votes for Women History Trail Route" in connection with the Women's Rights National Historical Park In Seneca Falls, NY. The Trail Route would link sites that are historically and thematically associated with the quest for women's suffrage in the state of New York.

I also want to thank Congresswoman Louise Slaughter for inviting me here today and for her leadership in acquiring funding for the Women's Rights National History Trail Feasibility Study whose report forms the basis for this legislation.

Although I now live in Kitty Hawk, NC, for almost 50 years I was privileged to live in Upstate New York -in Rochester. I moved there in 1955 to continue my graduate work at the University of Rochester. I stayed, married there and raised my family. I always say that I "grew up" there, because in so many ways that is what happened. Part of that "growing up" was learning about the history and legacy of the struggle to gain suffrage for women, particularly, the pride of place in that struggle owed to Upstate New York. Although I had attended a good college, done graduate work, and of course knew that woman got the vote in 1920, I had never known the real, the complete story. In Rochester, I learned that story. Not all at once, and at first, not through formal courses or study, but by being exposed to the unique history of this part of our country.

I discovered the SBA House in Rochester, where Anthony lived for fifty years, and which served as headquarters for national suffrage campaigns. It was here, in her parlor, that Anthony was arrested by a Federal Marshall in 1872.

I visited the Ontario County Courthouse in Canandaigua, where Anthony was tried for "illegal voting", found guilty and fined \$100, which she refused to pay, hoping her action would bring her case to the Supreme Court. Her attorney, unbeknownst to her, paid the fine.

Living in Rochester I also had the opportunity to learn about the ties between those working for abolition and for suffrage, like Frederick Douglas and the legendary "Moses" of her people, Harriet Tubman, whose house still stands in Auburn and who spoke thus of women's heroism on the battlefields of the Civil War: "...women were on the scene to administer to the injured, to bind up their wounds and tend them through

weary months of suffering in the Army hospitals. If those deeds do not place woman as man's equal, what do?"

My voyage of discovery soon led me, some fifty miles south on the Thruway, to Seneca Falls, to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Amelia Bloomer, Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock and the Hunts; and finally, to the Wesleyan Chapel where the first women's rights convention took place in 1848 and, in 1980, to witness the Founding of the National Women's Rights Historical Park.

In 1983 I began developing new courses and teaching part-time in the Political Science Department at the University of Rochester. As I worked on the syllabus and course content for a course on Women In Politics and Women and the Law I was led by what I had learned from living in an area rich in women's history.

I had good students and my classes were popular, but I was reminded again and again of the extent to which the struggle to achieve women's suffrage was hidden from history. I taught "Woman and the Law" for over a decade, and every year, when we considered the Trial of Susan B Anthony, at least one student would raise a hand to ask, incredulously, "You mean she really couldn't vote?" I would reply that "Yes, indeed she couldn't" and use the question as an opportunity to reinforce our discussion of the legal and social disabilities under which women lived prior to getting the vote in 1920. and why getting the vote was crucial if they were to obtain true equality.

The more I visited the new Park, in Seneca Falls, the more I learned about what had happened there, and understood its significance, the more I wanted everyone to know about it, I became convinced that the story of the Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments that it produced, is one of the compelling stories we, as Americans, have to tell. It is a story of our democracy, growing, becoming more inclusive, and we can claim it, we can tell it as uniquely ours.

The Declaration of Sentiments, written largely by Elizabeth Cady Stanton is patterned after our Declaration of Independence and takes up its call for freedom and equality in the same empowering language:

“ We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal...”

It continues with a list of grievances and proceeds to spell these out in terms of the civil law, lack of access to education or the right to retain their wages, and, of course, the prohibition “to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise”.

Neither Stanton nor her famous and revered ally, Anthony, lived to see the success of their heroic efforts in behalf of the suffrage, but that victory in 1920, has been followed by others: the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the education amendments, the pregnancy discrimination and equal credit legislation in the 70s.

And in 1998, as men and women all over the world looked forward to a new millennium, Seneca Falls celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the Convention and the Declaration. It was a wonderful celebration, bringing thousands of new visitors, from home and abroad, to Upstate New York and proving that the Declaration of Sentiments, just as its famous mother, the Declaration of Independence, continues to resonate far beyond our shores.

A lasting result of this Anniversary Celebration, the attention to and interest in the history of woman's suffrage it engendered, was the founding of the Friends of Women's Rights National Park, Inc., dedicated to supporting the mission of the Park. In addition to a cross-county national membership, there are thriving Friends Chapters in Buffalo and the Finger Lakes, with more in the offing. This year, as Friends celebrated their 10th anniversary, a Legacy Fund was established to support internships at the Park.

In addition to designating a vehicular "Votes for Women History Trail Route" in New York, HR 3114 includes two other components. The first establishes a National Women's Rights History Project National Registry which would provide for a process to nominate women's rights history properties to the National Register of Historic Places and list them on the NPS website. I find this an exciting concept. I thought immediately of Tennessee, and the young legislator who cast the determining vote in support of the suffrage amendment; of Wyoming, entering the Union as the first state with full suffrage for women in 1890; of New Jersey, where after the Revolution, for a few years, women voted if they were over 21 and owned property worth fifty pounds; of Kentucky, Kansas, Michigan and Minnesota granting women the right to vote in school elections in the 1870s and 80s.

The third component of HR 3114 establishes a National Women's Rights History Project Partnerships Network, managed through a nongovernmental entity, to provide grants and assistance in interpretive, educational, and historic preservation program development. The emphasis on cooperation and coordination among properties, on encouraging better-established sites to give a hand to new ones, is worthy and should stimulate local interest and support.

In closing, let me say that my own journey is not finished. I continue to learn, to be inspired. I urge you to pass this legislation so that generations to come will have these opportunities – in every state in our union.