



## Anthony, Susan B. (1820-1906)

by Linda Rapp

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Throughout her long life Susan B. Anthony devoted her nearly boundless energy to improving the lot of American women. Although best known for her crusade for women's suffrage, she spoke out on a range of feminist issues. Women were always at the center of both her professional and private life.

### Early Life

Susan Brownell Anthony was the second of the eight children of Daniel and Lucy Read Anthony. She was born in the farming community of Adams, Massachusetts on February 15, 1820, but her father soon moved the family to Battenville, in upstate New York, where he built a mill to produce cotton cloth.

The enterprise prospered for over a decade, but in the late 1830s Daniel Anthony's business went bankrupt, and the family lost their home. Needing to support herself and help the family, Susan Anthony, whose progressive Quaker father had seen to it that she received a good education, found jobs first as a teacher at a Quaker boarding school in New Rochelle, New York in 1839 and then, beginning in 1846, as headmistress at the Canajoharie Academy.

While living in Canajoharie, Anthony joined the Daughters of Temperance. The cause had long been one favored by her father, and it appealed to Anthony's feminist instincts because alcohol abuse by men could lead to physical abuse and other problems for their wives and children, who often had little hope of escaping the situation.

### Social Activist

Anthony's career as a social reformer began with an 1849 address to the Daughters of Temperance in which she called upon women to take the moral lead and to work for change not just in their own homes but in society at large. She promptly followed her own advice by leaving her teaching job for a life of social activism. Her family, whose economic state had by that time improved, supported her both morally and sometimes financially as she pursued her rather radical calling.

Anthony quickly became involved in the wide range of issues on the feminist agenda of the day. In addition to temperance, property and custody rights, divorce laws, and educational and employment opportunities were also matters of great concern.

As the women's movement gained steam so did the cause of ending slavery and securing full civil rights for African-Americans. Anthony became an ardent abolitionist as well as a feminist.

### Friendship with Elizabeth Cady Stanton

It was the anti-slavery movement that brought Anthony together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, with whom

she would spearhead the crusade for the franchise of women. The two first met at a lecture in 1851. Anthony said that there was an "intense attraction" between them from the start. Whether they were lovers must remain a matter of speculation, but it is clear that theirs was a particularly close and enduring friendship.

Biographer Kathleen Barry calls Anthony and Stanton "one of the great couples of nineteenth-century America." As a team in the social reform movement, the two intelligent, energetic, and determined women were a force to be reckoned with.

Their close working relationship led to a strong personal bond as well. Since Stanton was the mother of seven, her mobility was limited in the early years. Anthony spent considerable time in the Stanton home, collaborating on the work of the movement and also becoming practically a member of the Stanton family. In later life Stanton forwarded to Anthony "letters from *our* children," acknowledging Anthony's prominent part in their upbringing. For her part, Anthony described her partnership with Stanton as "a most natural union of head and heart."

### **Married Women's Property Acts**

During the decade of the 1850s Anthony worked mainly in the state of New York, lecturing on temperance, promoting the cause of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and campaigning for women's rights.

Among the rights Anthony and Stanton vigorously championed was that of married women to own and control the disposition of property. The Married Women's Property Acts giving wives in New York the right to hold property and conduct business independently from their husbands did not pass until 1860, and even then the struggle was only beginning. Portions of the legislation were subsequently repealed, and the courts could not be counted upon to give women their due.

### **Constitutional Amendments**

With the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 Anthony was among those seeing hope for a constitutional amendment ending slavery in the United States. She became one of the organizers of the Women's National Loyal League, which collected over four hundred thousand signatures in support of their position, and was gratified when Congress adopted the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

Anthony was less enthusiastic about the Fourteenth Amendment, which would grant full constitutional right to due process to African-Americans--but only to African-American men. Stanton shared her indignation that women were not included in the legislation, asking, "Do you believe the African race is composed entirely of males?"

Similarly, the Fifteenth Amendment mentioned only "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" as grounds that could not be used to deny a citizen the right to vote. Anthony was bitterly disappointed that neither of the amendments, adopted in 1868 and 1870, respectively, addressed the situation of women.

### **Women's Suffrage**

The cause of women's suffrage was by then at the center of Anthony's life. Along with Stanton and other feminists she formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1869. This organization merged in 1890 with its former rival, the American Woman Suffrage Association. Anthony, a previous president of the NWSA, became president of the combined National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1892 and served until her eightieth year.

Anthony soon began traveling extensively for the cause. Her journeys often took her west, where there was a strong effort to include voting rights for women in the constitutions of new states, as well as to promote

a federal amendment.

### **"Unsexed" Champion of Women**

Anthony's career as an activist and public speaker made her, in Barry's words, "one of the most loved and hated women in the country." Her opponents often described her as "unsexed," an unnatural creature that did not function as a "true woman," one who devoted her life to a husband.

Anthony's devotion was to women, and her compassion extended to women whom much of society scorned. She defended Hester Vaughan, an English-born servant girl who had become pregnant as a result of rape. When Vaughan gave birth alone, her child died, and she was charged with infanticide and sentenced to death. Anthony and Stanton managed to secure her a pardon and raise enough money for her to return to her homeland.

Anthony also spoke out against a case involving actress Abby Sage. Although her abusive ex-husband had shot her new fiancé and been acquitted by reason of insanity, he was still given custody of their son.

The work for suffrage made Anthony a temporary ally of Victoria Woodhull, an activist whose agenda included not only the vote for women but also the abolition of marriage in favor of "free love." Woodhull had ambitions of running for president and made a heavy-handed attempt to take over the NWSA in order to do so, at which point Anthony concluded their association.

### **Civil Disobedience**

While Anthony never ran for public office, she did vote. Along with some four dozen other women she registered in Rochester, New York on November 4, 1872, and the next day she cast her ballot.

Anthony was subsequently arrested but refused to post bail, claiming that the government did not have the right to jail her since she had committed no crime. Her lawyer, Henry Selden, put up the bail money without her knowledge because he did not want to see "a lady [he] respected" imprisoned. His misplaced gallantry deprived her of the chance to have her case heard in the Supreme Court by writ of *habeas corpus*.

At her trial in a lower court--prior to which she had voted again in a local election--the judge ordered a directed verdict of guilty, and Anthony was assessed a fine of one hundred dollars, which she refused to pay.

### **Friendship with Anna Dickinson**

The defiant act of voting was an unusual tactic for Anthony, whose more typical methods were writing, lecturing, and meeting with other feminist leaders to promote "the cause." Among the women that she met in the course of her work was Anna Dickinson, another popular speaker.

Lillian Faderman reports that the articulate and attractive Dickinson often received "billets-doux" from women. The correspondence between her and Anthony was of a distinctly romantic turn. In an 1862 letter Dickinson wrote to Anthony, "I want to see you very much indeed, to hold your hand in mine, to hear your voice, in a word, I want *you*." For her part Anthony--the woman whose detractors called "grim" and "unsexed"--responded with letters in which she addressed Dickinson as "My Dear Chicky Dicky Darlint" and invited her to share her bed, "big enough and good enough to take you in."

Anthony encouraged friendship of fellow suffragists, some of whom referred to her as Aunt Susan in affectionate recognition of her leadership role in the movement. As Faderman points out, however, the "emotional, playful, and erotic" correspondence between Anthony and Dickinson clearly indicates an intimate relationship.

## **Relationship with Emily Gross**

Another woman of importance in Anthony's life was Emily Gross, the wife of a wealthy Chicago businessman.

The two may have met when Anthony gave a speech at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The Reverend Anna Howard Shaw, the life-partner of Anthony's niece Lucy Anthony, was with them at the time and noted in her diary that she was "so thankful for the new friend for Aunt Susan." Although no letters between Anthony and Gross are known to exist, Anthony did mention Gross in correspondence with others. In an 1895 letter to another niece, Jessie Anthony, she refers to Gross as "my new *lover*."

Gross visited Anthony's Rochester, New York home shortly after the meeting in Chicago, and in following years the two often traveled together. Gross was a member of the Birthday Celebration Committee (as were Lucy Anthony and Anna Shaw) when Anthony's eightieth year was marked with a moving program of appreciation at the Lafayette Opera House in Washington, D. C. in 1900.

## **Portrait of a Female Couple**

Anthony never wrote specifically about sexuality. It is, however, interesting to note an example that she used in an 1877 speech entitled "Homes of Single Women." By "single" she can only mean "unmarried" and not "living alone," for two of the single women she profiles were certainly a couple. Mary L. Booth, an editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, was the bread-winning professional of this couple, while Mrs. Wright, formerly the wife of a ship's captain, saw to the domestic chores and advised Booth about her wardrobe.

Although Anthony does not speak of the emotional aspects of their "co-partnership," the picture that she paints is strikingly like one of a typical heterosexual marriage of the day. It is indeed a picture of--to use nineteenth-century terms--a Boston marriage between "romantic friends."

## **Her Views on Marriage**

Anthony's views on marriage were complex. On the one hand she saw it as such a sacred and inviolable bond that it transcended even death, and she was incensed when the widower of one of her sisters declared his intention to wed again.

She also recognized, however, that the law could put married women at a serious disadvantage by making them economically dependent upon their husbands and giving them little protection in abusive situations. As a practical matter she found it a great nuisance when promising suffragist women married and started having babies because their family responsibilities limited their ability to work for the cause.

## **Her Final Years and Death**

Anthony herself never flagged in her commitment, engaging in social activism until her eighty-sixth birthday. On that occasion she spoke her final public words--and possibly her most famous--"Failure is impossible."

Weak from heart disease, she died a month later on March 13, 1906.

Some twenty-five hundred people were in church for her funeral service, and several hundred more braved stormy weather outside the building.

The Reverend Anna Shaw gave a eulogy in which she said, "Her work will not be finished, nor her last word spoken, while there remains a wrong to be righted or a fettered life to be freed in all the world."

While so lofty a standard can never be attained, Anthony's cherished goal of women's suffrage was achieved with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920.

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