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The Magnetic Circle: Stanton, Anthony, Bloomer, and Douglass

The Bloomer Costume: Fashion Reform, Folly, and "Intellectual Slavery"

by Anne C. Coon





*Susan B. Anthony, 1852, from daguerreotype portrait
(Rochester Public Library, Local History Div.)*

*Cover: Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton on the porch of
the Anthony house (Susan B. Anthony House)*

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“The Magnetic Circle”

“My soul is no longer in this movement, and what is the use of my body being here?”

With these words, spoken in 1853, thirty-three-year-old Susan B. Anthony resigned from the Woman’s State Temperance Society, an organization she had founded just a year earlier. Anthony’s impassioned speech followed two days of angry debate at the Society’s convention in Corinthian Hall. Elizabeth Cady Stanton had just been defeated as president of the Society, and although Anthony had been re-elected as secretary, she followed her friend in resigning. Frederick Douglass and others pleaded with Anthony to stay on, yet some people in the audience were obviously relieved by the resignations of the two women. Still others were confused and unsettled by the events that had been taking place before them, by the angry voices and the tedium of debate. How had a meeting of the temperance society turned into a quarrel over the rights of women and of men, and what had led several of the most influential leaders in the temperance, women’s rights, and anti-slavery movements into such a public display of disharmony? Despite the tension and charged emotions of the meeting, an even greater drama had taken place in private. The youthful reformers who debated so vehemently had each come to a critical moment in their public careers: they had been forced to test and define the limits of their loyalty to the issues they supported and to one another.

The early to mid-1850s was a period of intense reform activity in Rochester, New York. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass and Amelia Bloomer were working tirelessly to gain public support for several separate reform movements: temperance, women’s rights, and anti-slavery. Writing, lecturing, addressing a few supporters or a mass convention, these individuals were shaping the strategies and public discourse of reform. In time, each of them realized the potential advantages of working together and supporting more than one cause. Often, such alliances provided practical, financial and emotional benefits, yet at other times, reconciling the different reform efforts was virtually impossible. The Woman’s State Temperance Society convention of 1853 vividly demonstrates how alliances were made and broken among members of what Elizabeth Cady Stanton later called the “magnetic circle of reformers.”¹

At the time of the 1853 convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass and Amelia Bloomer were already well-known local figures. All were born within five years of each other, and all

would die within a twelve-year span. By the time they were in their thirties, all were living in or near Rochester and making reputations for themselves. As public figures, they were organizing, writing, publishing, traveling the lecture circuit; privately, they were forming friendships and political alliances that would shape and sustain their careers. Stanton, Anthony, Bloomer and Douglass—three women and a freed slave—were also drawn together by the fact that they were all working from outside the traditional political power structure, all facing resistance and criticism.



Frederick Douglass, 1853
(University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections)

In 1847 Frederick Douglass moved to Rochester and began publishing the *North Star* in the Talman Building at 25 Buffalo Street. In the same year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton moved from Boston to Seneca Falls, where in 1848 she organized the first Women's Rights Convention. Douglass attended the convention and spoke eloquently on behalf of women's rights. He further demonstrated his commitment to the cause of women by signing the Declaration of Sentiments endorsed at the convention.

Amelia Bloomer, too, attended the first Women's Rights Convention, but was not nearly as forthcoming as Douglass. Personal modesty, shyness, and lack of experience kept her in the background during the 1848 meeting, and she did not step forward to sign the declaration. Although she was a staunch temperance advocate whose commitment took on religious fervor, Bloomer was not yet publicly committed to women's rights. She did, however, desire greater public involvement, and on January 1, 1849, began publishing a newspaper, the *Lily*, in Seneca Falls.

One of the first newspapers to be edited and published by a woman, the *Lily* was initially conceived as a temperance paper for women, but was destined to take up many other women's issues and to play a singular role in promoting women's rights.

Later in 1849, after years of teaching school in Canajoharie, Susan B. Anthony moved to Rochester to help on her family's farm. Active in the temperance and anti-slavery movements, Anthony attended meetings of both causes, guided escaping slaves as they passed through Rochester to Canada on the Underground Railroad, and visited Seneca Falls to help Bloomer compile mailing lists for the *Lily*. Coincidentally, near the end of the *Lily*'s first year of publication, Elizabeth Cady Stanton volunteered to write for the paper. Although Bloomer was at first uneasy about Stanton's influence, the *Lily* began to publish articles on healthful clothing designs, women's responsibility in raising children, women's rights in marriage, and eventually, women's right to vote. The masthead of the "little temperance paper"² eventually bore the words "dedicated to the interests of women."

In 1851, the *Lily* attracted local, then national and even international attention when Bloomer promoted a radical new style of dress for women. This shortened dress and trousers costume—a liberating alternative to the whalebone corsets, heavy petticoats, and weighted skirts that were the conventional fashion of the time—would soon become known as the "Bloomer costume." Despite the objections of her own family, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the first women to wear the new costume along with her cousin Elizabeth Smith Miller and, of course, Amelia Bloomer. Almost overnight, Bloomer herself became famous—even notorious—for her enthusiastic promotion of the innovation that bore her name. The Bloomer costume became both a symbol of women's freedom and an object of mockery and ridicule.³ For Amelia Bloomer herself, it became a mantle for reform activity. Historical accounts tell us that both Bloomer and Stanton were wearing the new costume on the spring evening in 1851 when, on a street corner in Seneca Falls, Bloomer introduced Stanton to her friend Susan B. Anthony.

The years in which the early women's movement gained momentum and public attention, however ambivalent that attention, were years in which Frederick Douglass was establishing himself and his newspaper in Rochester. A few months after Stanton and Anthony met, beginning what would become one of the most dynamic and fruitful collaborations of the time, Frederick Douglass was going through a schism with some of his oldest friends in the American Anti-Slavery Society. Douglass differed with the supporters of William Lloyd Garrison over the question of

whether the United States Constitution should be rejected or if it could, as Douglass argued, be used to support emancipation. When the Anti-Slavery Society refused to support newspapers that did not condemn the Constitution, Douglass went his own way and in June 1851, "flushed with this new assertion of independence," re-christened the *North Star* in his own name as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.⁴

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Between 1847 and 1852 Stanton, Anthony, Bloomer and Douglass all struggled to define for themselves the social, moral, and political issues embodied in the temperance, anti-slavery, and women's rights movements. Not surprisingly, there were areas in which support given to one cause easily benefited another. Douglass' early endorsement of women's rights is a good example of this: both he and Stanton benefited from his participation in the 1848 Women's Rights Convention. Other efforts to create alliances among the movements, however, met with greater resistance. This was the case with temperance. Women temperance workers knew well the problems intemperate use of alcohol created for women and their families, and many early feminists—including Amelia Bloomer—came to believe that temperance could only be secured if women had the vote. Yet male temperance workers often refused to give an equal voice to their "sisters" in the cause. At temperance conventions, men shouted down women delegates and refused to allow them to speak. Finally, after suffering a public rebuke at the Sons of Temperance meeting held in Albany in January 1852, Susan B. Anthony committed herself to the creation of a *women's* temperance society.

The *History of Woman Suffrage* documents that Anthony attended the Albany meeting with other Daughters of Temperance and that when Anthony attempted to speak, they were told that "the ladies were invited to listen, and not to take part in the proceedings."⁵ Anthony and her supporters later held a separate meeting, open to men and women alike, but Anthony resolved to create an organization where women's voices could not be silenced. Within three months, the Woman's State Temperance Society was born.

In April 1852, over five hundred women from throughout New York State responded to the call issued by Susan B. Anthony and others to join in a temperance meeting at Corinthian Hall in Rochester. Touted as "spacious, commodious and elegant," Corinthian Hall was not only used for literary lectures, formal banquets, and performances by popular entertainers such as Jenny Lind, but it was also the site of numerous "con-

ventions." These sometimes boisterous, even contentious, mass meetings served several important purposes. They created a forum for discussing public issues, provided opportunities to refine the rhetoric and strategies of the various reform movements, and served the essential function of attracting to these movements much-needed human and financial support.

Susan B. Anthony's call for the April 1852 meeting emphasized that "addresses and communications from both ladies and gentlemen..." were welcome.⁶ In fact, the convention's morning session was open only to women, but men were admitted in the afternoon. In advertising the convention, Anthony was careful to mention that speakers would appear in the Bloomer costume. This attempt to attract interest in the convention—women wearing the Bloomer costume were objects of great curiosity—may inadvertently have fueled the controversy that divided the organization a year later. Even Frederick Douglass, a supporter of Anthony, commented on the "adroit" announcement and pointed out that advertising the Bloomer costume would have three effects: "to attract, to repel, and to make the Convention notorious."⁷



Amelia Bloomer, from the Lily, September 1851

Douglass' account of the convention reports that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as chair, and Anthony, as secretary, began the business of the meeting somewhat awkwardly, but, "fully convinced that they were there at the call of duty, they soon plied themselves to the work...." Douglass enthusiastically declares the meeting "worthy of high commendation," and describes Stanton's keynote address, in which she argued that drunkenness should be considered grounds for divorce, as "a brilliant production."⁸

Not surprisingly, another local account of the convention, published in the *Daily Advertiser*, is much less sympathetic to the women's efforts and refers sardonically to applause evoked by the speeches of Amelia Bloomer and Mary C. Vaughan, "especially those parts which let the lash fall on the sore places found on the backs and heads of the 'lords of creation.'" This same account mentions the distraction created by men in the audience who "evinced a great itching to lug in abolition."⁹

The *Daily Advertiser* was not alone in criticizing speakers who strayed from the subject of temperance. Indeed, many attending the convention believed the issues of women's rights and abolition were not appropriate concerns for a temperance organization. This fledgling organization would not easily resolve the questions of whether and how to include women's rights and anti-slavery issues in its platform, and the debate over women's rights in particular led within a year to a dramatic and painful split within the Society.

Nonetheless, in the spring of 1852, a mood of independence and optimism characterized the meeting. In contrast to the hostility they had encountered at previous temperance meetings, women were enjoying equal and uncensored opportunities to speak. The enthusiasm generated by the new organization encouraged those women who were just emerging as public speakers, including Amelia Bloomer, for whom the meeting was an important turning point. Until then, Bloomer had restricted her reform efforts to editing and publishing the *Lily*; now she agreed to speak publicly and delivered her first address. She wore the Bloomer costume with unflappable pride and no longer shied away from controversial issues, boldly echoing Stanton's claim that women should be allowed to divorce drunken husbands.

Reports on the meeting in the Rochester press ranged from enthusiastic to skeptical to openly hostile. The *Rochester Daily Advertiser* gave lukewarm support to the divorce proposal, but unequivocally rejected the question of women's right to vote. The writer of the local news column could envision no circumstance under which a woman should be allowed to "unsex herself" by voting. "Therefore, we are in the opposition, strong, and shall not give it up...."¹⁰

Despite the resistance to women's rights, the Woman's State Temperance Society was officially born at this 1852 meeting. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was elected president; Mary C. Vaughan, Olivia Frazier, Mrs. George A. Avery, Rhoda DeGarmo, Sarah D. Fish, and Mrs. D.C. Alling were elected vice-presidents; and Anthony and Bloomer were elected secretaries. In what would become the single most important position taken by the organization, the women founders agreed that men could become members, but they would not be allowed to serve as officers in the Society.

The women's temperance society may have had a somewhat shaky beginning, but in the year that followed, its membership grew to 2,000, the Society published 50,000 pages of temperance tracts, and as an agent for the Society, Susan B. Anthony traveled across the state, holding meetings and raising funds. Within a year, the Society's treasury held \$1761.¹¹

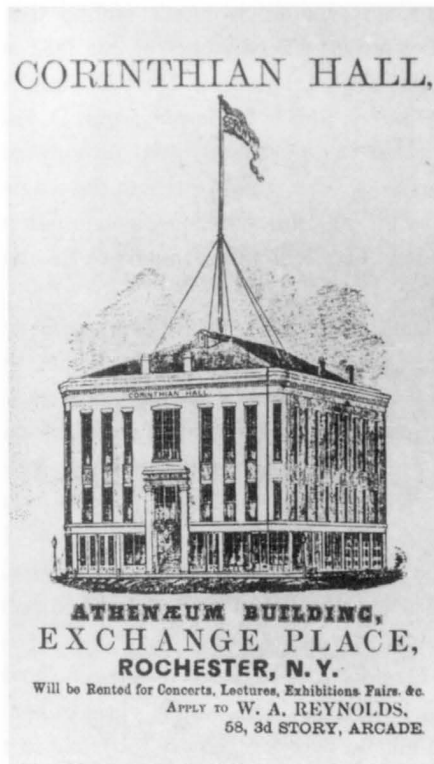
Bloomer also traveled and lectured widely that year, including two trips to New York City with the Reverend Antoinette Brown and Susan B. Anthony. The women were entertained by Horace Greeley, who published in the *Tribune* the text of Bloomer's Metropolitan Hall speech, along with a detailed description of the "Bloomer costume" she wore. Meanwhile, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton awaited the birth of her fifth child in Seneca Falls, she became increasingly vocal in her call for women's rights to predominate over temperance.¹² Unable to attend in person, Stanton wrote a powerful speech for Anthony to deliver at the Third National Women's Rights Convention. When the child, her first daughter, was born in October, Stanton flew a white flag in celebration.¹³

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Stanton's use of the Woman's State Temperance Society to advance a women's rights agenda had begun to create friction within the organization. The continued hostility directed toward the "Bloomer costume" and its flouting of convention also helped set the stage for controversy. On the first two days of June, 1853, the Society met again in Corinthian Hall for what was intended to be its first annual meeting. The call, issued this time by Stanton, is full of confidence and enthusiasm:

It will, we think, be an occasion of both interest and profit, as many of the great and good who have long labored in this cause have promised to be there to cheer us by their presence, inspire us by their eloquence, aid us by their counsels, and strengthen us by their wisdom.¹⁴

Since the Society's organizational meeting, Stanton had given serious



Corinthian Hall, exterior view (Rochester Historical Society)

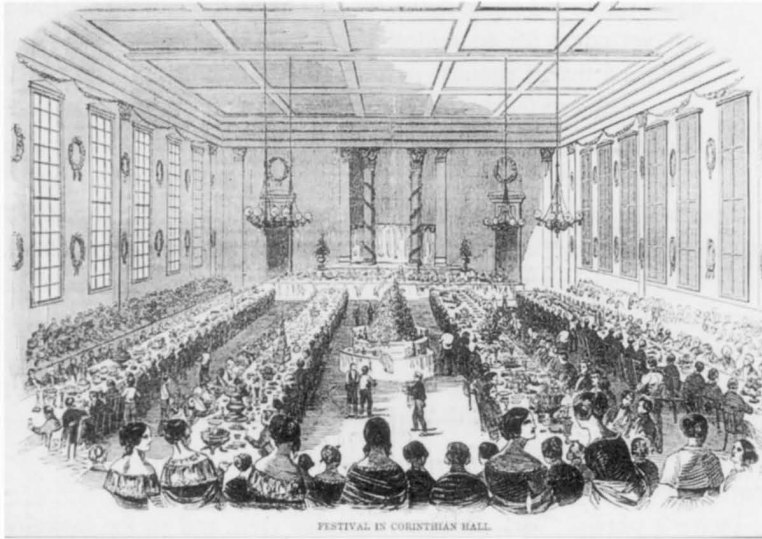
thought to the prohibition against allowing men to serve as officers. Beginning with her opening remarks, she made it clear that she and her supporters, including Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, advocated opening the organization's offices to men. She based her position on both philosophical and practical concerns. The Society's original position would not only make it vulnerable to charges of bias, but would also severely limit the participation—and, thus, the financial contributions—of men.

In her opening address to the convention, Stanton explained the philosophical position of the "radical and liberal" founders who originally limited the participation of men, and she broached the idea of now giving men a larger role.

[A]ll are alike welcome here without regard to sect, sex, color, or caste. There have been, however, many objections made to one feature in our Constitution, and that is, that although we admit men as members with equal right to speak in our meetings, we claim the offices for women alone.... It was, however, a temporary

expedient, and as that seeming violation of man's rights prevents some true friends of the cause from becoming members of our Society, and as the officers are now well skilled in the practical business of getting up meetings, raising funds, etc., and have fairly learned how to stand and walk alone, it may perhaps be safe to raise man to an entire equality with ourselves....¹⁵

Stanton's remarks suggest that the growing competence and confidence



Corinthian Hall, interior view
(University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections)

of women officers have now made it "safe" for men to have an equal role in the Society. That Stanton's claims for women's leadership skills may have been premature is obvious from Douglass' account of the parliamentary chaos of the convention. Nonetheless, there were other, sound reasons behind Stanton's effort to change the Society's constitution. Despite the rhetoric she used in calling for the change, Stanton's motive arose primarily from her desire to broaden the base of the organization, to bring in more workers and more money. The Reverend Antoinette Brown made the rationale for this position clear early in the convention, by explaining her own objections to a temperance society that limited the involvement of men, "We need their money, their aid and countenance."¹⁶

Many of those who heard Elizabeth Cady Stanton's opening address were not persuaded by her argument. Amelia Bloomer, for one, certainly did *not* support allowing men to hold office in the Woman's State Temperance Society. In the *Lily* of June 1, 1853, Bloomer asserts, "It is because we are an advocate of *woman's* rights that we object to yielding

up the rights we have gained to men.”¹⁷ An anecdotal account of the 1853 convention, written by Bloomer’s husband Dexter, records the divergence between the two women on this issue:

It was agreed that, as both sexes were equally interested in the work, they should all bear an equal responsibility in guiding the doings and sharing in the labor of the society. Those who took this view insisted that it should be placed on the broad grounds of equal rights and equal duties for all. Others thought the time had not yet come for so radical a change in the constitution, but preferred that it should continue to be an exclusively feminine organization. Mrs. Bloomer took this view and so the majority decided, with the result that Mrs. Stanton declined a reelection as president and Miss Anthony also declined a reelection as secretary.¹⁸

The Society’s original commitment to leadership by women appealed to Amelia Bloomer. She had by this time almost single-handedly written, edited and published the *Lily* for four years and was fiercely proud of her success. But Bloomer’s personal experience only partly explains her resolute position. She had become an unqualified supporter of women and women’s rights, and could not imagine why women should relinquish the control they had originally established in the organization. From her perspective, an organization that supported women’s rights should support their *exclusive* right to leadership.

Dexter’s phrase, “Mrs. Bloomer took this view and so the majority decided,” seems to indicate that the “women only” faction prevailed. If this is true, how can Dexter’s account be reconciled with accounts of others, including Stanton,¹⁹ that her side “won” and that the by-laws were changed? In fact, it seems the vote on the by-law change was never taken.

Frederick Douglass’ Paper describes in detail the process by which the amendment allowing men to hold office in the Society was proposed, sent to committee, and eventually tabled until the next annual meeting, on a motion made by Douglass himself.²⁰ In an analysis of the convention published in the same issue, Douglass castigates those who clung to the original “women only” restriction.

Mrs. Stanton was willing to have the Constitution made consistent with the principle of human equality; and standing firmly by her, was Miss Susan B. Anthony, an agent of the Society, whose executive ability has been immensely serviceable to the cause during the past year.—These ladies, and others, were anxious to put the Society in harmony with principle.—On the other hand, strange to say, Mrs. Bloomer, the world-renowned Mrs. Bloomer, whose

name has been supposed to represent the most ultra ideas of the equality of the sexes, was for keeping the men out of office.

Douglass continues by suggesting Bloomer's position is an embarrassment to those she claims to support.

Their position was a painful admission that woman cannot act to advantage in benevolent movements, unless she is secured in the possession of office by previous arrangements....What is this but saying that we, the women, hold on to office in the Society, although we know that the offices would be better filled by men? Of course, we do not admit that the apprehensions of these ladies are well founded, but it is not the less humiliating that a woman like Mrs. Bloomer should share them.²¹

With these words, Douglass turns Amelia Bloomer's view that the Society should be "exclusively feminine" into a criticism of Bloomer and her supporters, charging that they lack confidence in women's abilities. If women won't allow men to serve as officers, Douglass asserts, it's because they must believe that the men will do a better job.

While Douglass is criticizing Bloomer, another Rochester newspaper is accusing Douglass and other unnamed men of displaying, "an anxious desire to worm themselves into the Women's [sic] Society, as officers."²² Douglass' public reprimand of Amelia Bloomer is ironic, not so much because he might have had a personal interest in the outcome of the convention, but because he is ridiculing Bloomer for holding a strict "women only" position against the often more radical Stanton. Why, after Bloomer has become an enthusiastic supporter of women's rights, are she and Stanton in opposing camps?

The explanation lies in Stanton's increasing commitment to women's political power and leadership, a commitment that went well beyond her role in the temperance movement and recognized the need for certain "expedients." Unlike Bloomer and Anthony, who began as temperance advocates and then extended their personal commitment as reformers to include the more radical cause of women's rights, Stanton seemed to understand from the beginning of her career that the temperance movement could be *useful* to women's rights. Elisabeth Griffith, when tracing Stanton's evolution as a leader, describes how Stanton consciously used the temperance platform to advance women's rights in the early 1850s by attending temperance meetings and writing for a temperance journal.²³ In addition to the ready forum temperance meetings provided for discussing women's rights, the movement provided other practical benefits. Temperance was an acceptable reform field in which many women were already active, and its meetings and organizational structures provided

access to a membership of men and women already interested in social reform.

Susan B. Anthony was not prepared for the turmoil that resulted from Stanton's use of the Woman's State Temperance Society to promote women's rights. Anthony had been largely responsible for the creation of the Society, and she now watched as Stanton attempted to maneuver the organization in such a way as to attract like-minded supporters, male and female, who would be advocates of women's rights. Neither of them anticipated how Stanton's political maneuvering might backfire.

The by-law change was bitterly opposed by an alliance between those individuals who supported "women only" leadership and those who wanted to focus the Society's efforts on temperance. Stanton and Anthony also proposed that the word "Woman's" be dropped from the organization's name and that the Society be re-christened the "People's Temperance League." Although Stanton and Anthony's intention was to adopt a name reflective of a society in which women and men participated equally, many people interpreted the proposed change as a loss to women. This proposed name change, like the by-law change, forced those at the convention to consider difficult questions. For instance, would women gain or lose power and identity in a "people's" organization? The position of the "women-only" faction was laid out in a minority report presented by John Stebbins, who argued vociferously against the proposed changes, charging, "No one would suspect that the Society was at all in the hands of Woman. A People's Society conveys the idea that the men take the lead.... You are not what you propose to be."²⁴ Susan B. Anthony easily recognized the irony of having the "women-only" argument put forth by a man and observed that, "the whole thing showed that the men were trying to drive women from their own Society."²⁵

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Frederick Douglass records the uneasy mood of the meeting and the drama of the elections. According to Douglass' account, Anthony had hoped the debate would not take up the entire evening, but many individuals who had traveled to Rochester from the country returned to their chores before they had heard a single word on temperance. When the time to vote finally came, a point of order was raised over whether a man's hat could be used to collect the ballots; someone suggested using a lady's bonnet, or even "the hat of a Bloomer."²⁶ Finally, after debate that ranged from the philosophical to the trivial, the vote was taken and

the election results announced. Elizabeth Cady Stanton lost to Mary Vaughan for president, but Anthony was elected as recording secretary. Stanton refused to be nominated for vice-president, and she and Anthony both immediately resigned from the Society.

Those who opposed Stanton had unquestionably thwarted her attempt to use the Society to promote women's rights and had ousted her from control. Although the parliamentary wrangling on the convention floor was at times disorganized, with ten or more people clamoring to speak at once, the effort to force Stanton out of the organization's leadership seems, by contrast, to have been very well planned. The convention debate demonstrated that there was no single "male position" among those present; rather, there were men who supported both sides of the debate, and neither group hesitated to enter the business of the meeting. Douglass—both a participant in and a recorder of the meetings—reported that the election of the anti-Stanton slate of officers was facilitated by men distributing prepared tickets with the names of "certain favorites" printed on them.²⁷ After observing the caucusing and politicking that was taking place, Douglass remarked that he, "was afraid, also, that some man, who was opposed to having men have anything to do with the action of the Society, had got these tickets printed." The audience responded to Douglass' jibe with laughter, and the *Daily Democrat* noted that Dexter Bloomer, "who appeared to be hit" by this remark, responded by saying he "hoped no one would vote the printed ticket unless they liked it."²⁸

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Although later accounts of the convention refer to the adoption of the by-law change proposed by Stanton, it seems clear from the newspapers of the day that the vote was never actually taken. Instead, by electing a slate of conservative women officers and driving Stanton and her supporters out, the temperance-supporting male faction, operating behind the scenes, had *de facto* secured "equal rights" within the organization.

Following Stanton's defeat, Susan B. Anthony resigned from the Woman's State Temperance Society with sadness and disappointment. She regrets, "the vote of the Society showed that the Society would not adopt Woman's Rights as a principle." Douglass and others attempted to convince Anthony to stay on. However, as soon as Dexter Bloomer began to speak, Anthony interrupted him and, "requested the gentleman not to waste words....'My soul is no longer in this movement, and what is the use of my body being here?'"²⁹ Heartfelt, even intimate, Anthony's

words reveal the pain and loss she feels. Her feelings spill out even more forcefully when later she asks Stanton if she is “plunged in grief” at what has happened. Stanton’s response is far from grief-stricken, “I accomplished at Rochester all I desired by having the divorce question brought up and so eloquently supported.... Now, Susan, I do beg of you to let the past be past, and to waste no powder on the Woman’s State Temperance Society. We have other and bigger fish to fry.”³⁰

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The events of the Woman’s State Temperance Society convention of 1853 could be interpreted as a loss for the women involved. Stanton’s position on the full participation of men was supported by many. Nonetheless, she was ousted as president just as she was maneuvering the organization into a position of greater political influence. Anthony was unavoidably forced to withdraw from a society she had struggled to build and bitterly suffered what Alma Lutz has referred to as her “first experience with intrigue and her first rebuff by women whom she had sincerely tried to serve.”³¹ Amelia Bloomer held firmly to what she believed was a women’s rights position only to be charged with self-delusion by Frederick Douglass. However, in spite of their individual disappointments, all three women remained more devoted than ever to the cause of women’s rights. In fact, the responses of all four reformers—Stanton, Anthony, Bloomer and Douglass—to the events surrounding the 1853 convention reveal a great deal about their behavior at other times in their public careers.

In attacking Amelia Bloomer, Frederick Douglass was creating a public issue of the status of men’s rights within the State Temperance Society. He strengthened his alliance with Stanton, and he eagerly supported her new position on the involvement of men while making the debate a very public “equal rights” issue. For Douglass, this was a practical and political move that kept him, the most prominent Black Abolitionist in the country, aligned both with the leaders of the women’s movement and with the more liberal-minded men in the temperance movement. Douglass’ position was carefully calculated. Denigrating the “women-only” faction was, to borrow Stanton’s phrase, a necessary “expedient.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s skillful crafting of language, both at the time of the convention and in later recollections of the events, was as calculated as Douglass’ public positioning. The two homespun idioms she uses to reassure and cheer Anthony are especially revealing. She cautions Anthony to “waste no powder” on the Society, adding that the two of

them have “bigger fish to fry.” Stanton is not discouraged by her rejection at the convention, which Douglass characterized as “[n]either just, courteous or grateful.”³² Rather than suffering from the humiliation she experienced, Stanton gathers her strength and looks ahead, knowing instinctively that she and Anthony will go on to play a much larger role, in a much larger arena for women’s rights. In many ways, these early events provide both women with the experience necessary for participating in more complex, more politicized debates in the future.

Although Amelia Bloomer’s “women only” position had been criticized as unenlightened, it was actually a reflection of the single-mindedness of the commitment she made when supporting a cause. Often seeing issues as simple questions of right and wrong, she sometimes overlooked their complexities. She had been slow to endorse women’s rights publicly, but once she made that commitment, and once her own identity as a reformer was established through her public lectures and the “Bloomer costume,” she became the most adamant of women’s rights supporters. In responding to the Temperance Society debate, Bloomer ignored the political subtleties of Stanton’s position and clung to what she felt was the correct “women’s rights” position. She was undoubtedly stung by Douglass’ criticism, but Bloomer’s commitment to the movement was unshaken, and she continued until late in her life to be an outspoken advocate of women’s rights.

And finally, what of Susan B. Anthony’s response to the “comeuppance” she and Stanton experienced at the convention? When she asks if Stanton is “plunged in grief” at their defeat, we sense Anthony’s own loss at having to withdraw from an organization to which she had made so heartfelt a commitment. Above all, her behavior at the convention signals her increasing loyalty to Stanton. Anthony withdrew from the Society because of its rejection of Stanton and the women’s rights agenda. In doing so, Anthony chose to ally herself with Stanton’s vision and leadership, rather than the particular organization.

No single account of this event provides a definitive explanation of what happened on the speakers’ platform or behind the scenes. However, the various accounts—some written the same week, some written years later—illustrate that four intelligent, earnest individuals, four of the “magnetic circle,” came together with a much larger purpose in mind than to discuss the by-laws of a new temperance organization. For all four of the reformers, this meeting serves as a quietly defining moment. The events of the 1853 Woman’s State Temperance Society Convention forced Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass and Amelia Bloomer to clarify and defend the public and personal allegiances that would thereafter shape their lives and their work.

The Bloomer Costume

In 1851, several women in Seneca Falls, New York, shortened their dresses, which had swept along the street with a fashionable disregard for hygiene, removed the whalebone stays from their bodices, and donned pantaloons. The new costume they created, a short dress with a loosened, “natural” waist, worn over trousers, quickly and unexpectedly spawned a fad of national—and even international—proportions. And then, almost as quickly as it had appeared, the costume disappeared.

With her usual candor and a hint of sarcasm, Amelia Bloomer first speculated in the *Lily* about the advantages women would enjoy if they adopted a new style of dress.

Really ladies, will it not be nice? We shall no longer have our dresses drabbled in the mud, or half the depth of them wet with snow. In getting in and out of carriages we need have no fears of the wheels, and we can even sit down in a puddle of tobacco-juice without endangering our Sunday suit....Small waists and whalebones can be dispensed with, and we shall be allowed breathing room; and our forms will be what nature made them. We are so thankful that men are beginning to undo some of the mischief they have done us.¹

Bloomer was writing in response to a challenge posed—probably in jest—by her fellow Seneca Falls newspaper editor, Isaac Fuller.² Fuller’s challenge to Bloomer and her friends was fortuitous, coming at a time when Elizabeth Smith Miller, who had worn a trouser costume in Europe, was visiting her cousin Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

A few days after Mrs. Miller’s arrival in Seneca Falls Mrs. Stanton came out in a dress made in Mrs. Miller’s style. She walked our streets in a skirt that came a little above the knees, and trousers of the same material—black satin.³

A powerful combination of factors led to the almost immediate notoriety of the new costume. First, women were wearing the costume on the streets of a town already associated with the women’s rights movement. Other newspapers picked up the story of Fuller’s challenge and the women’s response, and eagerly continued the debate. Soon, newspapers throughout the state were reporting sightings of women in the new dress. Additionally, the success of the *Lily*, by now well-established and committed to women’s issues, gave Bloomer and Stanton a ready means of promoting and reporting on the new fashion. Bloomer offered patterns for the new costume with each subscription to the *Lily*. She also filled the paper’s pages with letters from women who had adopted the costume,

fashion plates showing seasonal variations, and endorsements from physicians describing its healthful benefits. Before long, the shortened dress and pantaloons were dubbed the "Bloomer costume."

Conventional dress for women was anything but comfortable or healthy. The cumbersome, restrictive combination of heavy skirts and whalebone corsets created serious physical problems. A physician writing to the *Lily* described these problems in detail,



"Our Fashion Plate" from the Lily, January 1852

[T]he skirts now worn are multiplied greatly in number, besides being a heavy material, weighing—though it may astonish some of my lady readers themselves when I say it—10, 12, and 13 pounds! All this weight is supported by the hips alone, producing two serious evils: First, the drawing strings around the waist have to be very tight...and thus a compression is produced and continually kept up, which must embarrass the organs within the exercise of their functions. But besides this source of trouble, the weight of the skirt is continually operating to force downwards the organs within, only covered by partially resistant but pliant walls of the abdomen.⁴

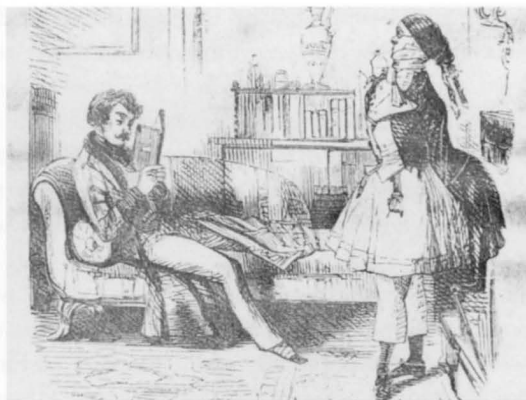
Since it freed women's waists and allowed them to walk with greater ease, the Bloomer costume was very appealing to those who were brave enough to wear it. As the popularity of the Bloomer costume spread, eventually reaching many areas of the United States, as well as some Canadian and European cities, the woman whose newspaper had inadvertently begun the "craze" became an object of great attention. When

Amelia Bloomer gave her first public address at the founding meeting of the Woman's State Temperance Society, her clothing drew as much interest as her words. The *Rochester Daily Democrat* described the costumes worn by both Bloomer and Stanton:



"A 'Bloomer' (in the Leap Year)"
from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1852

Mrs. Bloomer appeared in the costume which bears her own name. Her dress and trousers were of "silver gray" silk, the prevailing color relieved by a lighter figure. She wore a sort of turban. In the street she wears a white beaver hat, in the "flat" style, and her appearance is very neat, as well as unique. We may as well say here, that the President, Mrs. Stanton, was also clad in the new costume. Her dress was of black satin, her hair, which is slightly silvered, was cut short and "shingled," which, together with the close fitting dress, gave her a rather masculine appearance.⁵



"Strong-Minded 'Bloomer,'"
from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1852



*"Mr. Booby delivering his lecture in and upon the New Costume for Males"
from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1852*



"Winter Fashions" from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1852

Sometimes respectful, often mocking, the press kept an eye on women wearing the new costume. In cartoons from *Punch* published in the January 1852 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, women in the Bloomer costume were portrayed as wearing masculine clothing and

usurping masculine roles. One “Bloomer,” as the women were sometimes called, proposed marriage to a bashful young man, and another admonished her reclining husband to put down his “foolish novel.” A third cartoon parodied the dress reform and temperance movements, in “Mr. Booby’s lecture on the New Costume for Males.” (See illustrations on pages 20 and 21).



*Child in pantaloons (circa 1850) photographer: J. Garnier
(George Eastman House)*

Fashion plates in the same issue of *Harper's* featured demure, corseted women. These images provided an effective visual and emotional contrast to the masculine-looking women in the cartoons. The appearance of women in trousers was so unsettling that the serious issues behind dress reform were forgotten, and women were openly denigrated as being “mannish” and “unsexed.” Although children also wore short dresses over pantaloons, in costumes that closely resembled the Bloomer, it’s not surprising that women in trousers were seldom simply dismissed as “childish.”⁶

While the costume was criticized by many, it also proved to have commercial appeal. Many plays, musical pieces, and dances capitalized on the popularity of the Bloomer costume, sometimes altering the image to make it more stylized and feminine. The cover illustration of the “Bloomer Waltz,” for example, shows a softened, dainty-looking costume, with a nipped-in waist much like those Bloomer and the others had rejected. The Currier and Ives representation is also a graceful, very feminine image.



"The Bloomer Waltz"
 (University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections)



"The Bloomer Costume" by Currier and Ives (Rochester Public Library)

Eventually most of the women wearing the Bloomer costume realized their attempt at dress reform had begun to impede rather than promote the cause of women's rights. In Susan B. Anthony's words, the costume had become an "intellectual slavery; one could never get rid of thinking of herself, and the important thing is to forget self. The attention of my audiences was fixed upon my clothes instead of my words."⁷

Elizabeth Cady Stanton understood well the humiliation and distractions the costume was causing for Anthony. Stanton herself had already gone back to wearing conventional dress when she wrote, "I hope, Susan, you have let down a dress and a petticoat. The cup of ridicule is greater than you can bear. It is not wise...to use up so much energy in that way."⁸

Although others abandoned the costume, Amelia Bloomer continued to wear it for several years, still proud of what it represented.

When I saw what a furor I had raised, I determined that I would not be frightened from my position, but would stand my ground and wear the dress when and where I pleased, till all excitement on the subject had died away. And I did so.⁹

However brief its appearance, the Bloomer costume was an important step in the evolution of women's fashion. Today the word "bloomers" has come to suggest an "unmentionable" undergarment or an ill-fitting athletic suit, but the costume should be remembered as more than a caricature. The Bloomer costume offered women an opportunity to breathe and walk with a freedom and confidence they had seldom known, and it continues to be an enduring symbol of the early women's rights movement.

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End Notes for "The Magnetic Circle"

Abbreviations:

FDP	<i>Frederick Douglass' Paper</i> [Originally the <i>North Star</i>]
RDA	<i>Rochester Daily Advertiser</i>
RDD	<i>Rochester Daily Democrat</i>
RDU	<i>Rochester Daily Union</i>
HWS	Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Gage. <i>History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 1.</i> (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881; Reprint Arno and the <i>New York Times</i> , 1969)

1. "We had quite a magnetic circle of reformers in Central New York, that kept the missives flying. At Rochester, were William H. Channing, Frederick Douglass, the Anthonys, the Posts, the Hollowells, the Stebbins, some grand Quaker families in Farmington, and Waterloo; Mrs. Bloomer and her sprightly weekly called *The Lily*, at Seneca Falls...." (HWS I, p. 465).
2. Dexter Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*. (Boston: Arena Pub. Co., 1895; Reprint Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1976) p. 40.
3. Women wearing the Bloomer costume were pelted with mud on the street and mocked in cartoons and editorials as being unfeminine and immoral. However, the costume inspired admiration in others. The Bloomer Institute, founded by factory girls in Lowell, Massachusetts, was dedicated to "*Mutual Improvement* - in Literature, Science and Morals; [and] *Emancipation* from the thralldom of that dictatorial French goddess *Fashion*." (E. Douglas Branch, "The Lily & The Bloomer," *The Colophon* Part 12, Dec. 1932, [10]). The Bloomer costume also inspired numerous theatrical productions and dances.
4. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991, p. 169.
5. HWS I, p. 476.

6. RDA, April 16, 1852.
7. FDP, April 22, 1852.
8. Ibid.
9. RDA, April 22, 1852.
10. RDA, April 24, 1852.
11. FDP, June 10, 1853.
12. HWS I, p. 485.
13. Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 78.
14. RDD, May 31, 1853.
15. HWS I, p. 494.
16. RDD, June 2, 1853.
17. Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York 1822-1872*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984, p. 165.
18. Dexter Bloomer, p. 121.
19. Almost thirty years later, when Stanton reflects on the Society's history in the *History of Woman Suffrage*, she says, "...as the justice of such discrimination on the ground of sex was questionable, and some women and many men refused to unite with a Society thus proscriptive, the Constitution was amended, and the men admitted to full membership" (p. 493). Later historians (among them Alma Lutz, *Susan B. Anthony: Rebel, Crusader, Humanitarian*. Washington, D.C.: Zenger Pub. Co., 1959, p. 35; and *Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*. New York: Octagon Books, 1974, p. 83; Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights*. Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1976, p. 17; Griffith, p. 77; and Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*. New York: Ballantine, 1988, p. 70) have referred to a change having been made in the Society's constitution. However, accounts of the convention in the Rochester newspapers state that the proposed amendment was tabled, but never passed. Nancy Hewitt, in *Women's Activism and Social Change*, indicates that even though the constitution was not changed, the Society could not set aside the debate created by the proposed amendment. "The arguments of Amy Post,

Mary Hallowell, and Susan B. Anthony could not convince the members to accept Stanton's resolution, but they were forceful enough to forestall its defeat, postponing a decision to the following year. Yet just as the issue seemed to be laid to rest, the election of officers refueled the dissent" (p. 165).

20. *FDP*, June 10, 1853. *The Rochester Daily Democrat* also records that, "the main question, it is true, was not disposed of, but laid upon the table; still the evident satisfaction with which the election of the leader of the opposing party was hailed by her friends, gave an unmistakable sign to the defeated side, that their cause was for the time lost" (June 4, 1853). On June 5, the *RDD* repeats the report that Douglass' motion to table "the question of amending the Constitution, so far as relating to change of name and eligibility to office" was carried.
21. *FDP*, June 10, 1853.
22. *RDD*, June 5, 1853. *The Rochester Daily Union* is similarly contemptuous of the men who supported Stanton's proposal, saying, "The 'men' who are hankering for these offices, have not enough masculinity to hurt themselves nor any body else.—Why then, should they be ineligible to office, in a society of women!" (June 2, 1853).
23. Griffith, p. 77.
24. *FDP*, June 10, 1853.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *RDD*, June 5, 1853.
29. *FDP*, June 10, 1853.
30. Ellen Carol DuBois, ed. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches*. New York: Schocken, 1981, pp. 56-57.
31. Lutz, *Susan B. Anthony*, p. 36.
32. *FDP*, June 10, 1853.

End Notes for "The Bloomer Costume"

1. *Lily*, February 1851.
2. Isaac Fuller, editor of the *Seneca County Courier*, was both a friend and rival of Bloomer. His friendship with Amelia and Dexter Bloomer is recorded by Dexter, in *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*. Fuller hosted the Bloomers' wedding reception in Seneca Falls and years later published a warm and respectful tribute to Amelia Bloomer and the *Lily* when the Bloomers left Seneca Falls to move to Mount Vernon, Ohio, in 1854. Nonetheless, Fuller was not a supporter of women's rights and used the *Courier* to respond to and challenge Bloomer's views.
3. Dexter Bloomer, p. 67-68. In this recollection of the origins of the Bloomer costume, Amelia Bloomer recounts her surprise at the "furor I had unwittingly caused," and describes her attempts to disclaim any right to having invented the costume.
4. *Lily*, September 1851.
5. *RDD*, April 21, 1852.
6. In a letter to the *Lily* published in August 1851, Lui Lundie describes how much she has enjoyed wearing the new costume, "For several weeks I have worn the short loose dress--and beg leave to give testimony in favor of its ease, comfort and convenience. Thus attired, it is a pleasure to walk, run, or work; and I can accomplish far more, with less fatigue....[those who disapprove] say I 'ought to vote,' 'hold office,' 'be a minister'...[C]hanging their mode of attack, they say I 'look childish,' shall 'lose dignity'...just as though true dignity of character was found in flowing skirts and short bodices."
7. Quoted by Kathleen Barry, in *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*. New York: Ballantine, 1988. p. 82.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Dexter Bloomer, p. 73.