



The Trial of Susan B. Anthony

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The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which articulated the rights of citizens and the principle of equal protection before the law, was ratified by the states in 1868. Not surprisingly, activists working for women’s suffrage interpreted the amendment as an implicit guarantee of a woman’s right to vote. Four years later, fifty women in Rochester led by Susan B. Anthony attempted to vote in the 1872 Presidential election. Fourteen of them managed to cast their ballots. On November 18, all were arrested on the charge of casting illegal ballots, as were the election officials who had received their votes. Charges against fourteen were held pending the outcome of the trial of their leader, Miss Anthony. Expecting a trial in Monroe County, Anthony spoke about the matter in all 29 towns. The prosecution arranged for the trial to be moved to the federal circuit court sitting in Ontario County, and again Anthony spoke in every village. The case was assigned to Justice Ward Hunt, a man with no trial experience. The trial began on June 17, 1873. Miss Anthony was not allowed to speak on her behalf until after the verdict. After two days of testimony Judge Hunt directed the jury deliver a guilty verdict. The next day he asked Miss Anthony if she had anything to say. She responded with “the most famous speech ever given in the history of the agitation for women’s suffrage”, refusing his orders to stop and sit down. When the sentence of a fine of \$100 was delivered, she said “I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty”, and she never did. The proceedings of that trial, a turning point in American history, including her famous speech, are transcribed and read here by Maria Kaspar.

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Susan Brownell Anthony (February 15, 1820 – March 13, 1906) was an American women’s rights activist and perhaps the best known leader of the women’s suffrage. She was born into a Quaker family active in social justice advocacy and believed men and women should be equally educated and self-supporting. When her schooling was interrupted by financial crisis in the Panic of 1837, she taught at a Quaker boarding school and became headmistress at Canajoharie Academy in 1846, leaving to run the family farm in 1849. She met Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1851 who would be her partner in social reform activities for much of her life, beginning with establishment of the New York Women’s State Temperance Society in 1852. Their talents were complementary: Stanton was the theorist and Anthony the organizer. They founded the National Loyal Women’s League in 1863, which conducted the largest petition drive in U.S. history, collected nearly 400,000 signatures in favor of abolition of slavery. They initiated the American Equal Rights Association in 1866, started a women’s rights newspaper in 1868, and founded the American Woman Suffrage Association. Anthony traveled and spoke constantly, delivering as many as 100 speeches per year and often donating the fees to the support of the movement. She never married, which enabled her to borrow money and enter into contracts on behalf of the organizations, which were prohibited for married women. Often ridiculed and castigated at the beginning of her activism, public opinion changed greatly during her life; President McKinley invited her to celebrate her 80th birthday at the White house.