

LUCY STONE AND COY'S HILL

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Lucy Stone was an American original. Born in 1818 on a hillside farm in West Brookfield, Massachusetts, she would rise from humble, rural roots to join the ranks of great Americans. As an abolitionist orator, her silvery voice held crowds of three and four thousand spellbound. Stone's lasting fame, however, came as the "morning star" of the movement for women's rights. As a lobbyist, political organizer, orator, strategist, and publicist, she was without peer. For almost fifty years – from 1847 to 1893 – Stone rode at the fore of the movement for increased civil rights for women and blacks.

Although she would rise to sit among the powerful elites of the century, Lucy Stone never lost sight of her rural roots. As often as she could, she would return to the family farmhouse on Coy's Hill. There amidst birch and maple groves, or on the pathways that led to the crest of the hill overlooking the valley, or sitting beside Coy's Brook, Lucy Stone would renew the singularity of purpose that emboldened her to strike out on paths where no woman had gone before.

Almost forty years after Lucy Stone's death in 1893, a New York Tribune writer would ask how it was "that this particular country girl...left the ranks, to ride almost alone at the head of the shock troops" of the movement for women's rights? The story of that remarkable ascent is linked to the land that nurtured her. Brookfield, New Braintree, Worcester, Ware – these central Massachusetts towns sent a disproportionate share of men to fight in the Revolutionary War. Among these was Lucy Stone's grandfather, Francis Stone. After the war, the region where freedom's forge glowed brightly gave rise to Shays's Rebellion.

For Lucy Stone, a precocious child living in the stone and frame house on Coy's Hill, the desire and will to change the world manifested itself early. Hearing about the unjust treatment of a neighbor woman at the hands of the law, Stone turned to her mother and asked, "If the law can meddle with the woman, why should not the woman meddle with the law?" To her father's scornful amusement, the child announced that she would



Lucy Stone (Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College)

attend college. (At the time, no college in the world admitted women.) Her father refused to buy her a textbook, and Stone later recalled how she "went to the woods, with my little bare toes, and gathered chestnuts, and sold them for money enough to buy the book." She ended the reminiscence by saying, "I felt a prouder sense of triumph than I have ever known since."

In 1837, Oberlin College opened its college degree program to women. After years of teaching school and saving money, Stone entered the Ohio college in the autumn of 1843. Following her graduation in 1847, she delivered the first-ever speech devoted solely to women's rights in nearby Gardner. In 1848, she began her career as a paid antislavery lecturer. Unable to keep women's rights out of her orations, she was soon dividing her time between woman's rights and abolition, often speaking in as many as fourteen cities and towns in a single week. By 1854, Stone's fame as an orator able to draw and hold audiences of two and three thousand had grown so widespread that P.T. Barnum sought to become her lecture agent.

In 1850, Lucy Stone was instrumental in organizing the first National Woman's Rights Convention, a widely attended and internationally publicized event held in Worcester, Massachusetts. Stone also became a skilled lobbyist, repeatedly addressing legislatures throughout the United States and Canada on behalf of increased legal and political rights for women. Perhaps Stone's most powerful and enduring legacy to women was in the field of political organizing. Beginning in the 1840s, she set up education committees in cities, towns, and rural hamlets, using her lecture proceeds to print and distribute woman's rights propaganda. These committees would later form the backbone of the organizational support that led eventually to passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment enfranchising women.



The farmhouse on Coy's Hill: Stone's birthplace, childhood home, and site of her marriage to Henry Blackwell. The farmhouse burned in 1950. (Library of Congress)

Lucy Stone used the occasion of her 1855 marriage to Henry Blackwell at the farmhouse on Coy's Hill to launch a widely-publicized public protest against women's legal disabilities in marriage. Throughout her life, she kept her own birth name, refusing to be known as Mrs. Blackwell. Marriage and motherhood did little to slow Stone's activity; the only true hiatus came during the years of the Civil War.

Immediately after the Civil War, women's exclusion from the proposed Fifteenth Amendment enfranchising African-American freedmen led a small minority of suffrage leaders to campaign against its passage. Stone led the overwhelming majority of suffragists in resisting such racially divisive and politically damaging tactics. A schism developed in 1869, and Lucy Stone became the leader of the American Woman Suffrage Association, the larger and more politically-organized of the two wings to emerge from the break. In 1870, she began publication of The Woman's Journal. For the next sixty years, it chronicled women's progress. It provides an invaluable archive to those wishing to do research in women's history.

The other "wing," however, would write the History of Woman Suffrage in which Stone's extraordinary contribution was marginalized. This exclusion has led many to overlook Stone's place in history. In her lifetime and for decades following her death, Stone's name was widely known and revered. Her death called out the greatest outpouring of grief that any American woman had yet commanded. Newspapers throughout the nation and the world placed the notice of Lucy Stone's death in bold type on the front page. Thousands lined the streets of Boston to catch a last glimpse of this most beloved leader as her funeral cortege passed by.

Stone's near-exclusion from the History of Woman Suffrage would eventually take its toll; until recently, her name was all but lost to history. Recent historians have displayed a renewed interest in Lucy Stone and in her enormous contribution to the movement for political equality. As women's history comes of age, its pioneers will rise to take their place in the pantheon of great Americans, and when that happens, Lucy Stone's name will stand among the first. Seneca Falls has become a tourist Mecca to women seeking their political roots. The Lucy Stone homesite in West Brookfield will provide another heritage tourism treasure for the women of America and the world.

Suggested further reading:

Alice Stone Blackwell, Lucy Stone: Pioneer of Woman's Rights (1930; 2001 by the University Press of Virginia)

Andrea Moore Kerr, Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality (1992, Rutgers University Press)

-----, "White Women's Rights, Black Men's Wrongs" in One Woman, One Vote (1995, NewSage Press)

Carol Lasser and Marlene Merrill, eds., Friends and Sisters: Letters Between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-1893 (1987, University of Illinois Press)

Leslie Wheeler, ed., Loving Warriors: Selected Letters of Lucy Stone and Henry B. Blackwell, 1853-1893 (1981, The Dial Press)