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Lessons about Reform from “A Very Dangerous Woman”

*Sherry H. Penney and
James D. Livingston*

We discuss reform in antebellum America through the life of Martha Coffin Wright, an activist in the abolition and early women’s rights movements. Consideration of her motivations for reform; the obstacles faced by these movements; their methods, successes, and failures, may offer guidelines for reformers of today.

Public policy evolves in response to the balance between two competing forces: reformers agitating for change and defenders of the status quo. This competition becomes particularly fierce when the proposed changes threaten not only the financial and political powers of entrenched interests but also the inertia of “tradition,” often understood and expressed in terms of basic religious beliefs. The problems and progress of two major reform movements of nineteenth-century America, abolition and women’s rights, may offer some insights relevant to modern reform movements. We examine abolition and women’s rights through the life of an active participant in both, Martha Coffin Wright (1806–75), whose story has only recently been told.¹ Because the reform movements Martha supported represented a direct assault on the status quo of society, her conservative neighbors in Auburn, New York, labeled her “a very dangerous woman.”

Martha Wright and Abolition

Perhaps the first basic question is what makes a reformer. Agitating for social change is not easy, and strong motivation is required to enable a reformer to continue her efforts over the many years usually required to effect major change. Martha Coffin’s hatred of the institution of slavery was instilled in her both by her Quaker family and by her Quaker schools.

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Although Martha was born in Boston, her siblings, parents, and generations of her ancestors were all born on Nantucket, where the dominant religion was that of the Society of Friends. The Quaker religion places a strong emphasis on the individual and holds that each person, white or black, male or female, has an Inner Light that shows the way of God. For most Quakers, this led to an early recognition that one human should not be the possession of another, and to an early embrace of antislavery. One of the teachers at the Pennsylvania Quaker boarding school Martha attended as a teen, Enoch Lewis, published one of the first abolitionist newsletters in the United States, the *African Observer*.

Like most women of her time, Martha's energies in her early adult years were focused primarily on marriage and the raising of children. Her first husband died after the birth of her first child and after only a year and a half of marriage. In 1829, she married again, and had six more children with her second husband, David Wright. The early years of her marriage were difficult, caring for her husband and growing family in a small house in the tiny village of Aurora, New York, on the very limited income of an aspiring lawyer. Martha had little time or energy for reform. Although she had no direct exposure to the evils of slavery in the South, her adult experiences began to build on her antislavery beliefs formed in her childhood. In Aurora, she saw the scars a neighbor's cook retained on her back from the many whippings she had endured when she was a slave. (Slavery in New York was not formally abolished until 1827.) Her older sister Lucretia Mott, a Quaker preacher in Philadelphia, began to preach against slavery, and in 1833, Martha visited Lucretia and met a group of Lucretia's abolitionist friends, many of whom were freed blacks.

It was on this 1833 visit to Lucretia's home in Philadelphia that Martha also met William Lloyd Garrison, who became one of the best-known leaders of the abolitionist movement. Prior to the 1830s, much of the anti-slavery activity in the United States was centered in the American Colonization Society, which was formed in 1816 with the goal of financing the purchase of slaves from their owners and the emigration of freed blacks to a colony in West Africa that later became the colony of Liberia. But Garrison and others became convinced that the only solution to the problem of slavery was abolition — the immediate emancipation of all slaves. He initiated publication of the *Liberator*, an uncompromising weekly journal devoted to promoting abolition. In Boston in 1832, Garrison formed the New England Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1833 chose Quaker Philadelphia as the site for the formation of a national society. The founding meeting of his American Anti-Slavery Society coincided with Martha's visit to Lucretia, and the two sisters were among the very few women who attended this first meeting. Here Martha was exposed to debates over the relative merits of colonization and abolition, and she was particularly impressed with the fact that most of the freed blacks she met in Philadelphia were firmly against

colonization. They had no interest in being transported to Africa. It was then and there that Martha became firmly committed to the abolitionist cause. Her basic antislavery beliefs, developed in childhood, were strongly reinforced by her adult experiences, in particular her exposure to the arguments of leaders in the early abolition movement, including William Lloyd Garrison and her own sister, Lucretia Mott.



Martha Wright, ca. 1840. Courtesy of the Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Once committed, what could Martha, at first largely confined to her home by family responsibilities, contribute to the cause? Martha and David began subscribing to the *Liberator*, and Martha wrote articles in support of abolition for the *Liberator* and local newspapers. She also knitted and sewed clothing to be sold at fundraising antislavery fairs, the money from which supported publication of antislavery pamphlets. While some abolitionists attempted to work through political parties, Garrison and the antislavery societies focused on widespread distribution of their arguments about the evils of slavery, hoping to move public opinion through moral suasion. As David's law business grew, the Wright family moved from Aurora to a larger home in Auburn, the nearby county seat. Although

Martha's responsibilities to David and her many children limited her opportunities for travel, there was another significant contribution she could make to the abolitionist cause without leaving home. She allowed her Auburn home to become a station on the Underground Railroad. One of her 1843 letters to Lucretia described the overnight stay of a fugitive slave from Maryland, who was provided dinner and breakfast, a kitchen settee to sleep on, and warm clothes and money for his further travel. Unlike Martha's other activities for the cause, assisting fugitive slaves carried risk because it was illegal.

Few of Martha's Auburn neighbors were aware of her Underground Railroad activities, but she made no attempt to hide other black household guests. She had become acquainted with Frederick Douglass, a freed slave who was well educated and became a well-known lecturer on abolition and related issues. When Douglass lectured in Auburn in the 1840s and 1850s, he, sometimes accompanied by other blacks, often dined and stayed overnight at the Wright's home. Since his race made Douglass unwelcome at the hotels and most homes in conservative Auburn, such visits attracted considerable attention. One neighbor asked with considerable curiosity whether the visiting blacks had eaten at the table with them. Another approached Martha at a neighborhood party and wished to be informed whether the blacks had been given the best bedroom. Martha told him "certainly," and added, "in conversing with a man of superior intellect one forgot whether he was black or white." Martha's personal behavior in opening her home to Douglass and other blacks was consistent with the views she promoted in the antislavery pamphlets she handed to visitors to her home, and was a means of swaying local opinion through example. Her open challenge to current social standards with regard to blacks was one of the reasons that one of Martha's neighbors, at a local gathering, labeled Martha "a very dangerous woman."

Martha's neighbors also considered her an "infidel" because she seldom attended church and was openly critical of organized religion. Most leaders of orthodox Christian churches at the time were relatively silent on the controversial subject of slavery, and some that defended slavery, especially in the South, often used quotations from the Bible to justify their position. To Martha, the most important moral issue of the time was slavery, and she had respect only for ministers who actively preached against it. Garrison and several other antislavery leaders, disappointed in the lack of support from orthodox churches, worked mostly outside the church and were labeled "infidel" and "irreligious" by orthodox ministers and church leaders. In a fiery 1847 letter to the *Liberator*, Martha argued that abolitionists "who are doing practically, with all their might, so much for Humanity's sake, are emphatically Christians," and added, "Mankind are beginning to see the folly of relying on the church for instruction in the simple precepts of Jesus of Nazareth."

Abolitionists were, of course, hated throughout the South, where the economy depended on slavery. But they also were extremely unpopular in the North. Belief in black inferiority was widespread, Northern business was very dependent on trade with the South, and even Northerners who were troubled by slavery feared that calling for its abolition would break up the Union. The fugitive slave act of 1850 led to an increase in the number of slave hunters traveling to Northern states to capture escaped slaves, and to a number of incidents where abolitionists took action to rescue the slaves. The feelings of both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists became more intense. The act also inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a popular novel that greatly widened public support for abolition. People who were not reached by abstract discussions of the evils of slavery, or by evils happening in distant places to people they did not know, were moved by the lives of fictional characters that they felt they came to know.

By the 1850s, Martha's children had grown, and she had more opportunity to travel and participate in antislavery meetings, which were often disrupted by attacks of anti-abolitionist mobs. In 1859, Martha and Lucretia attended a gathering in Philadelphia, with a mixed audience of black and white, which was called "to resolve that no slave should ever be taken from Philadelphia." The meeting drew a large mob of angry anti-abolitionists that entered the hall, temporarily took over the platform, and resolved that they "would not associate with niggers." Order was restored only with the arrival of the police. The election of Lincoln in 1860 further increased the tension in both North and South. When Martha and her abolitionist colleagues in upstate New York scheduled a series of antislavery meetings in early 1861, angry mobs attempted to disrupt them. A meeting chaired by Martha in a public hall in Auburn was broken up by a mob, and could be completed only when the speakers and a few supporters moved the meeting to the Wright's home. A few days later, Martha chaired an antislavery meeting in Albany. Here mob violence was largely held in check by a large and conspicuous police presence and the mayor himself appearing on stage with a loaded gun visible in his lap. After the meeting, Martha and the other participants went to their hotel under the protection of a police guard, who kept the threatening mob at bay. Most reformers can expect to be exposed to criticism and ridicule from their neighbors, the press, and the pulpit. But for reform movements as radical and threatening to the stability of society as abolition, participants were often exposed to physical danger as well. The moral suasion of Northern abolitionists did eventually produce a political response in the form of the election of Lincoln and a Republican party openly opposed to the spread of slavery. But the response of the South was secession, and the institution of slavery was finally defeated only through the bloodiest war in the nation's history.

During the war, Martha's attention was largely focused on the battles of the Army of the Potomac, since one of her sons had entered the Union army

as an artillery officer. She wrote him that she was proud he was fighting “in this holy war between Liberty and Slavery.” She wrote her husband, “I open the paper every day with fear & trembling,” but added, despite her fears for her son, “I cannot say that I wish it to end, till Slavery is abolished.” Through her first husband, a Kentuckian, Martha also had many relatives fighting for the Confederacy, including six nephews. One nephew, John Pelham, whom she met with in early 1861 on his way to the South from West Point to take up arms against the Union, became a skilled artillery officer in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and faced her son across several bloody battlefields, including Antietam and Fredericksburg. Her nephew became famed across the South as “gallant Pelham” shortly before he was killed in battle in March 1863. A few months later, her son was seriously wounded at Gettysburg, but he survived.

Martha also continued to participate in the American Anti-Slavery Society, and became an officer in a new organization, the Women’s National Loyal League. The league was in existence only a little more than a year, but in that time members collected four hundred thousand signatures supporting emancipation. Congress later used these petitions as evidence of nationwide support for the Thirteenth Amendment, which in 1865 finally abolished slavery. Martha continued to be active in the American Anti-Slavery Society for several years after the war, when the organization worked for passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, giving blacks citizenship and voting rights. Controversy over the Fifteenth Amendment, however, would lead to a split in the other reform movement to which Martha was deeply committed, the movement for women’s rights.

Martha Wright and Women’s Rights

Martha made many contributions to the abolition movement, but she played a more central role in the early movement for women’s rights. Her basic Quaker teaching that all people, black and white, man and woman, had within them the Inner Light of God motivated her interest in both causes. But her interest in women’s rights was more connected to her personal experiences and concerns. She wasn’t herself a slave, or black, but she was a woman — and so were her daughters, for whom she wished the same rights and opportunities available to her sons. Reformers motivated both by basic beliefs and by self-interest are doubly motivated.

Martha’s father, Thomas Coffin, had been a ship captain sailing out of Nantucket. Like many other Nantucket men, he was often away on long voyages during which his wife Anna, like other Nantucket women, maintained the household on her own and generated income through operation of a shop on a street that became known as Petticoat Row. She became an independent, self-reliant woman, and her children grew up with the belief that a woman need not be a helpless, subordinate creature, permanently

dependent on the care and protection of a man. Thomas later became a merchant, and the family moved to Boston and later Philadelphia. But Thomas contracted typhus and died in 1815, shortly after his business failed and he went into debt. Anna Coffin once again became a shopkeeper, and vowed to pay off her husband's debts. Once again, she operated as an independent, self-reliant woman, generating an income and supporting her family on her own, later turning her home into a boardinghouse. From the age of eight, Martha Coffin grew up in a home in which a woman was head of the family, and her views on woman's role in society began to crystallize. Martha herself was widowed at nineteen, and was required to support herself and her first child for over three years until her second marriage. Those hard years, during which she taught at a Quaker girls' school, were important in developing Martha's own strength and confidence in her own abilities.

From childhood, Martha had another strong female role model in her sister Lucretia Coffin Mott, fourteen years her senior. In Quaker meetings, Lucretia had gradually found the courage to break the silence and stand up to express her views whenever the spirit moved her. Her wide reading enabled her to support her thoughts with telling quotations, and the members of her meeting became more and more impressed with her calm, clear voice, her simple, unassuming manner, and the spiritual power of her words. In January 1821 she was inaugurated into the ministry of the Society of Friends, an unusual honor for a woman of only twenty-six. Lucretia's reputation as a speaker spread, and she became widely known as a Quaker preacher who spoke publicly against slavery. She later added organizational action to her antislavery activities. Shortly after Garrison organized the American Anti-Slavery Society, Lucretia was instrumental in forming the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1837 she traveled to New York City for the First Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. Two years later the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society voted to accept women members, and in 1840 Lucretia traveled to London as one of their delegates to the first World Anti-Slavery Convention. But the male delegates in London refused seating to her and other female delegates. This convinced Lucretia and a young woman she met there, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that after their return to the United States, they should hold a convention to advocate the rights of women. Eight years later at Seneca Falls, New York, Martha would play an important role in seeing this accomplished.

In the 1840s, Martha still had many small children at home, but in her letters to Lucretia, she began to express increasing criticism of the legal and financial status of women. In those days, a married woman had essentially no legal rights; she couldn't sign a contract, make a will, or sue in a court of law. Furthermore, she legally owned nothing. Any money or property she had brought into the marriage, any salary she earned, any personal belongings, even her jewelry and her clothes, everything was legally the property

of her husband. All could be sold by him or claimed by his creditors if he went into debt. In the rare case of divorce, the father automatically received custody of the children. In many respects, a married woman was essentially the property of her husband. Many of the women who fought for abolition felt that their own position in society was in many ways like that of slaves in the South. In March 1841, Martha praised a state legislator who “introduced a bill ‘to establish and protect the right of private property of married women, and in the event of separation, to establish the rights of parents to the guardianship of children.’” She reported disagreement with her husband over these issues and later over the issue of wage differences based on gender. By 1846, their improving financial situation had enabled them to afford to hire both a seamstress, Miss Soule, to help in the home and a hired hand, Thomas, for outdoor work. She wrote to Lucretia:

I told D. [David] this morning I would tell him how I should like to do if I was rich. . . . It would be to pay Miss Soule exactly as much as we pay Thomas. . . . Steady sewing is as injurious to the health as active labor and I don’t see why a woman should not have the chances of laying up something against the age of rheumatism and poor sight, as a man. David said such a plan would be a curse to the community, “why so.” Why it would raise the price of labor and set people by the ears. I asked him why people were not set by the ears when Thomas had six or seven shillings a day. “Why, a man had a family to support.” But half the laboring men’s wives support the family and their husbands beside — by taking in washing, &c. David went off to hoe his corn or cut asparagus and wouldn’t hear any more such nonsense.

In the years to come, David would hear much more “such nonsense” from Martha. Unconstrained by traditional roles for boys and girls, Martha taught two of her young sons to knit. She wrote a friend that one son had “made a bag to put his marbles in, not sewed exactly like a thread case, but sufficiently neat for a beginning, and quite marvelous considering the *slow perceptions* of the sterner sex.” When one son was five and another seven, and there was no convenient school for boys near her home, she entered her two sons as day scholars in the Auburn Female Seminary. The school catalog for 1849 lists 246 students, with her sons the only boys. When her children reached their teens and were away at boarding schools, she challenged her youngest daughter to “prove the equality of men and women,” and asked a son, “how is it with your classes, do you find your sex so very superior as some of you imagine?” She clearly became unhappy that her daughters would not have the same opportunities for education and the professions as her sons. She once wrote that her second daughter would have been a good lawyer “if she had only been a boy.” When her third daughter went away to boarding school, she wrote her, “Find out if you can, what occupation your genius best suits you for, qualify yourself for that by earnest study and effort. . . . Why should it not be just as much a girl’s study

as a boy's how she can best secure her own independence," and later urged her to "learn as fast as possible to prepare yourself for such college as we decide upon you." But there were few opportunities for women to attend college at that time, and Martha's husband David was not convinced that a college education was useful even for boys. When Martha eventually convinced David to send one of their sons to Harvard, she wrote, "To me, it seemed as if he were entering Paradise. . . . I envy a young man this privilege more than almost any other." Martha's formal education had ended at fifteen, and although she continued to broaden her knowledge with wide reading throughout her life, she greatly envied her son's opportunity to enter college.

Martha's various concerns about the limited rights and opportunities of women would finally find an outlet starting in 1848. The fiery young woman whom Lucretia had met in London in 1840, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had moved in 1847 to Seneca Falls, close to Auburn and Martha's home. When Lucretia and her husband James Mott visited Martha the following summer, the stage was set for a historic event. The Boston Tea Party of 1773 ignited the movement toward American freedom from domination by England, and seventy-five years later, another tea party would ignite the movement toward women's freedom from domination by men. Progress in the second movement would proceed much more slowly than in the first, but the eventual changes in the relationship between the sexes would be profound.

It started with an invitation to Lucretia and Martha to attend a July tea party in the home of Jane Hunt in the nearby town of Waterloo. Also invited were Mary Ann M'Clintock, like Jane Hunt, a Quaker abolitionist, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Conversation over the teacups led back to the discussion that Stanton and Lucretia had had in London eight years earlier, and by the end of the afternoon the five women had drafted a call they sent to the *Seneca County Courier*. It was published on Tuesday, July 11, 1848:

Women's Rights Convention

A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women, will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, New York, on Wednesday and Thursday, the 19th and 20th of July, current; commencing at 10 o'clock A.M. During the first day the meeting will be exclusively for women, who are earnestly invited to attend. The public generally are invited to be present on the second day, when Lucretia Mott, of Philadelphia, and other ladies and gentlemen, will address the convention²

A call published the week before a scheduled meeting is very short notice, but the word spread rapidly among Quakers and abolitionists in western New York. Lucretia Mott was a good drawing card, and the topic of the convention was novel. Based on discussions at the tea party, Stanton drafted a Declaration of Sentiments and a series of resolutions to present at the convention. Approximately three hundred people attended, and sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the Declaration of Sentiments, based on Jefferson's Declaration of 1776 and opening with "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The insertion of "and women" in his famous phrase would have sounded very revolutionary to Jefferson himself. After the preamble, the declaration presented a list of the wrongs imposed on woman by man, including:

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education — all colleges being closed to her.

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God.

He has endeavored in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

After much discussion and a few small changes, the declaration and a series of related resolutions were approved. The convention received considerable press coverage and led to many more women's rights conventions in various parts of the United States. In 1980, Congress formally recognized the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls as the formal start of the women's rights movement in the United States with the establishment there of the Women's Rights National Historical Park. The park's Visitor Center today features a group of life-size bronze statues representing key participants in the convention, and one of the statues is highly unusual; it is of a woman who is obviously pregnant. It is a statue of Martha Wright, one of the planners of the convention, who at the time was forty-one years old and six months pregnant with her seventh child. It stands as testimony for the ages

that the bearing of children does not necessarily preclude women from making important public contributions to society.

Discussions at the convention were mostly very serious, but the official convention report notes at least one light moment: "LUCRETIA MOTT read a humorous article from a newspaper, written by MARTHA C. WRIGHT." The article was Martha's "Hints for Wives," first published two years earlier in the *United States Gazette*, a Philadelphia daily newspaper, and reprinted soon after the convention in Frederick Douglass's *North Star*. Douglass, believed to be the only black in attendance at Seneca Falls, presumably had enjoyed hearing Martha's article read at the convention. By the 1840s, Martha had developed the habit of responding in print to newspaper articles that angered her. "Hints" was her response to an article that advised wives that "obedience is a very small part of conjugal duty," and that to please her husband much more was required, including "unremitting kindness" and a "cheerful smile." The wife must do all these things "as means of perpetuating her attractions and giving permanence to his affections." Martha's forceful response to what she called these "valuable hints on the duties of wives to their lords" ended with her description of the typical day of a married couple:

Compare for a moment the lot of Husband and Wife, in what is called a "well regulated family." The former takes his seat at the breakfast table, where his taste and comfort have been silently consulted, as far as is practicable — on his wife devolves the care of preparing the "nine small children" to take their seats there also, and in some degree of regulating their conduct. Breakfast ended, the husband goes forth to the workshop, his counter, his counting-house or his office, greets pleasantly his acquaintances by the way, and passes the day among the ever-varying scenes of every-day business life. The wife, meanwhile, amid incessant clamor, must renew the treadmill task of yesterday — must wash the same faces, make the same beds, sweep the same rooms; must settle disputes in the kitchen, and quarrels among the nine fallen little sons and daughters of *her Adam*; and amid all these occupations, must find occasional moments to "stitch-stitch-stitch" the innumerable garments needed in a family.

Let her look to it, according to the sapient and oft-reiterated advice above alluded to, that she gets through this in time to clothe her harrassed and care-worn visage in those "wreathed smiles" so indispensable toward maintaining the good humor of her liege lord. He too has had troubles to encounter, for from trouble no one is exempt; but not of that petty, harrassing kind that are wearing away the spirits and the life of the partner he has chosen.

Night comes — the husband finds the repose so much needed to enable him to meet the unavoidable cares of tomorrow, and sleeps as quietly as

“the babes in the wood,” while the wife starts at the slightest noise, to minister to the comfort of the restless inmates of the trunnel bed and the crib, all of whom are sure to be astir at the earliest dawn, and demanding the immediate care of the mother, who rises weary and unrefreshed, again to go through the same routine — truly, she *should* smile! Whether she always can, is a debatable question. I insist, therefore, that the husband should have a full share of the advice so lavishly bestowed on the wife.

Until a better state of things can be brought about, I am firmly resolved to continue

AN OLD MAID

Hints on the duty of Obedience shall appear hereafter.³

Like many of Martha’s published writings, “Hints for Wives” appeared over a pseudonym. Martha was not “an old maid,” nor did she have “nine small children.” But she had three, plus three no longer small, and by the time of the convention a seventh child was on the way. She was very familiar with the “incessant clamor” of children, the “treadmill tasks” of a housewife, and many hours of “stitch-stitch-stitch.” This article and many of Martha’s letters to Lucretia make it clear that her personal experiences in raising children and running a household were a major contributor to her interest in women’s rights. She, like the other women at Seneca Falls and those who worked in the women’s movement in the years to come, was motivated by the things she didn’t have — property and other legal rights, access to college and the professions, and the right to vote. But she was also strongly motivated by the unpleasant aspects of what she did have — the responsibility to stay home to do the “treadmill tasks” of housework and to raise her children. Such issues were raised again in the next century in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the book that helped to inspire the “Second Wave” of the women’s movement of the 1960s.⁴ Reformers can be motivated both by what they want and don’t have and by what they have and don’t want.

The Declaration of Sentiments presented and signed at Seneca Falls, and at a succeeding convention at Rochester, accurately predicted that the call for women’s rights would produce “no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule.” One newspaper report headlined “Women out of Their Latitude” described the “outlandish demands” of the “women who attend these meetings, no doubt at the expense of their more appropriate duties” and that “it requires no argument to prove that this is all wrong.” Another ridiculed “the reign of petticoats” whose “great effort seemed to be to bring out some new, impracticable, absurd, and ridiculous proposition, and the greater the absurdity the better.” Many more women’s

rights conventions followed. After a convention held in Syracuse in 1852, one newspaper labeled it the "Tomfoolery Convention" and another referred to "the mass of corruption, heresies, ridiculous nonsense, and reeking vulgarities which these bad women have vomited forth for the past three days." Reformers must develop hard skins to deal with such virulent attacks, particularly in the early stages of a movement. Some press coverage was guardedly positive, but even negative press coverage raised public awareness that many women, and some supportive men, were now challenging the traditional role of women in American society.

Some of the strongest opposition to the early women's movement came from the churches. Ministers came to the conventions to read biblical injunctions directing subordination of women, such as St. Paul's message to the Ephesians (5:22): "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" and to Titus (2:5), in which he urges wives to be "obedient to their own husbands." Paul told men to "let your women keep silence in the churches" (1 Corinthians 14:34) and the Old Testament instructed women, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16). In defense, the women found quotations offering biblical authority for the equality of men and women, such as "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). However, Lucretia Mott, Martha, and others opposed the use of biblical quotations, noting that at antislavery conventions one side quoted from the Bible to prove that God opposed slavery, while the other side quoted from it to prove that God approved of slavery, and much time had been wasted. With regard to women's rights, they argued that advice given by apostles to women of their day was no longer applicable in the present, more enlightened times.

In her support of women's rights, as in her support of abolition, Martha was in a small minority in conservative Auburn. But she maintained strength for her convictions and emotional support from the network of friends she developed in both movements. In Auburn, she spent much time visiting with a handful of like-minded women friends, including Frances Seward, wife of prominent antislavery politician William Henry Seward. Martha often traveled to nearby Seneca Falls to meet with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Stanton and Susan B. Anthony visited Martha, and the women maintained contact through frequent correspondence. Martha's visits to her sister Lucretia in Philadelphia and her attendance at conventions kept her in touch with a wider network of reformers. Although she and her reformist colleagues were a minority, they were not alone.

Martha served as secretary to national women's rights conventions in Syracuse and Cleveland and vice president at the fifth national convention held in 1854 in Philadelphia. The first convention at which she served as president was a state convention held in Saratoga, New York, in August

1855. "I had many misgivings as to the part assigned me," she wrote a friend, "and felt somewhat like the minister who went to meeting out of *curiosity* to know what he *was going* to say." The convention went well and her colleagues in the movement felt that Martha, despite her misgivings, had done well as president. She later presided over numerous conventions, including national women's rights conventions held in Cincinnati and New York City. At the latter, held in 1860, Elizabeth Cady Stanton stirred up controversy with a speech urging liberalization of divorce laws. At the time, many considered marriage indissoluble, and support of liberalized divorce seemed little different from support of "free love," a topic that had been alluded to by one radical speaker at an earlier convention. Press coverage was very negative, and tensions began to develop between the conservative and more radical wings of the movement.

Although Susan B. Anthony wanted to continue women's rights conventions during the war years, Martha wrote her, "it would be very unwise, at this time, when the nation's whole heart and soul are engrossed with this momentous crisis . . . it is useless to speak if nobody will listen." Her argument carried, and during the war, the women concentrated instead on carrying petitions for emancipation. The women met next after the war and attempted to merge the issues of black and woman suffrage by reincorporating as the American Equal Rights Association. But male abolitionist leaders declared that this was "the Negro's hour" and that woman suffrage would have to wait. Anthony and Stanton were enraged, and opposed passage of the Fifteenth Amendment without an accompanying amendment for woman suffrage. In 1869, the controversy split the women's movement, with Anthony and Stanton forming the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and Lucy Stone and others who argued for black suffrage now, woman suffrage later, forming the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Martha and Lucretia had close friends in both camps but sided with the NWSA, and Martha was elected president of their New York auxiliary. As the names imply, the women's rights movement began to focus more and more on woman suffrage and less on the other demands expressed at Seneca Falls. But Martha and many of her NWSA colleagues continued to urge a broader agenda. She declared, "I for one have always gloried in the name of Woman's Rights, and pitied those of my sex who ignobly declared they had all the rights they wanted."

Martha continued to communicate with AWSA leaders in an attempt to heal the breach in the women's movement, but without success. In 1874, shortly after being elected president of the NWSA, Martha went to Boston to attend a meeting of the AWSA and urge reconciliation. That December she wrote to Lucy Stone, "I only wish, as I told you last spring, that we could all meet together, as of old, in a cause that we all have equally at heart, and are trying to forward by the same means, but I fear with doubtful success, until we are once more united." Martha died in January 1875, and

the split in the women's movement was not healed until fifteen years later. The Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage was finally passed in 1920, not in time for Martha and most of her colleagues in the early women's movement, but in time for one of her daughters and most of her granddaughters.

Summary

According to Ronald G. Walters, author of *American Reformers 1815–1860*, "American reform has come in waves, with a decade or more of intense activity followed by periods of relative apathy about social problems."⁵ His study focused on the antebellum period that included the abolition and early women's rights movements, but he identified several later reform periods: the Progressive era of the early twentieth century that, among other things, finally led to woman suffrage, the New Deal era of the 1930s, and the 1960s, when the civil rights and women's liberation movements reawakened the struggle for equality for blacks and women that Martha Wright and her colleagues fought for over a century earlier. Today, although much progress has been made, these groups still await full wage parity and equal access to boardrooms and CEO positions.

In the antebellum period, many reformers, like Martha Wright, were active in both the abolition and women's rights movements. Abolition leaders like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass supported women's rights, and women's rights leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked for abolition. Such reformers saw both movements as aimed at freedom from domination by others and at equality of rights and opportunities for all. Both movements called for the "inalienable rights" promised in the Declaration of Independence. But not all reformers had the same priorities. The abolition movement split in 1840 over, among other things, the issue of women's rights, and the women's movement split in 1869 over, among other things, the competing claims of black suffrage and woman suffrage. Many scholars have put forth explanations of the basic source of such splits in reform movements, but none is better and more succinct than Martha's: "The large endowment of combativeness needed to make a reformer."

Reformers need combativeness to enable them to continue through the many years required to effect major change despite all the ridicule and hostility they face from established groups that resist change, and despite their frustrations with the inertia of the general public and the weight of the political process. Like Martha, reformers are usually motivated by basic beliefs ingrained from childhood by family, schools, and church, subsequently strengthened by adult experiences. They can be doubly motivated when their basic beliefs are reinforced by self-interest, by things they want

and don't have and things they have and don't want. Resisters to change are similarly motivated, but their cause is strengthened by the inertia of society, by the mass of people who are busy with their own lives and problems and relatively indifferent to the reform issues.

The challenge to reformers is to persuade, through communication, enough of the public and their political representatives to effect change. Reformers of the antebellum period did not have telephones, radios, televisions, motion pictures, or the Internet with which to communicate. They relied on the mailing and personal distribution of pamphlets, on petitions to legislators, on articles submitted to newspapers and journals, on public lectures, on speeches at conventions, and on the publicity that followed conventions. Attending regular conventions also strengthened their resolve by bringing them together with like-minded people to maintain and build their networks, and by exposing them to the charisma of dynamic leaders.

Media coverage can have an important effect on public opinion, and coverage of reform is often drawn to controversial issues that may be peripheral to the movement. Martha found that press coverage of the women's rights conventions became particularly negative when one or more of the speakers raised a controversial issue like liberalized divorce or a related topic interpreted by some as advocating "free love." Although the controversial topic may have occupied only a few minutes of a convention that lasted several days, it usually led the newspaper story and appeared in the headlines, hurting the public's support for woman suffrage and other mainstream issues. Reformers usually desire media coverage of their cause, but they cannot dictate what aspects of their discussions will be emphasized in the media. Radical reform movements often attract extremists who hurt the public image of the cause.

The social problems of today are different from those of the antebellum period, but study of the problems and progress of earlier reforms and reformers can be a useful guide to reformers of today. Progress may be very slow and gradual, and major reforms will face intense resistance to change. George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." (He would probably accept the addition of "or woman.") As in the past, the success of future reform will depend on the persistent and courageous efforts of many "unreasonable" and "very dangerous" workers like Martha Coffin Wright.

Notes

1. Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston, *A Very Dangerous Woman: Martha Wright and Women's Rights* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004). Various quotations from Martha Wright in this article are taken from her letters preserved in the Garrison Family Papers in the Sophia Smith Collection of Smith College and are fully cited in this biography. See also Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston, "Expectant at Seneca Falls," *New York History*, Winter 2003, 32–49.
2. Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). This recent book is now the most complete and authoritative source on the Seneca Falls women's rights convention, its origins and results. The convention is also discussed in reference 1.
3. Martha Wright's article "Hints for Wives" is reproduced in its entirety in Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston, "Hints for Wives — and Husbands," *Journal of Women's History* 15 (Summer 2003) 180–187.
4. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).
5. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

