

With this universal view of women in place, one might wonder how Stanton and other early feminists were inspired to imagine the possibility of a more equal society. That inspiration came from contemporary women who in fact lived very different lives from theirs, the women of the six Iroquois nations-Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora--the Haudenosaunee, as they called themselves.

Lucretia Mott saw this world in practice when she and her husband visited the Seneca in the summer of 1848. She watched women who had equal responsibilities with men in all aspects of their lives -- family, spiritual, government, economic. At this time the Seneca women were deeply involved in the decision of whether or not to drop their traditional clan system of government and adopt the constitutional form insisted upon by the Quakers. While the Cattaraugus Seneca finally did accept the United States model, they refused to accept the element of male dominance. They placed in their constitution that no treaty would be valid without the approval of three-fourths of the “mothers of the nation.”

With this in mind, Mott traveled to visit friends in western New York where they planned, and held, the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls. Beyond equal suffrage, Stanton marveled that “the wom-

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Clanmother Audrey Shenandoah (on right) with daughters Jeanne Shenandoah and Rochelle Brown.

Photo: Tabo Pato Tucker

en were the great power among the clan,” and “the original nomination of the chiefs also always rested with the women.” The clan mother had the authority to nominate, hold in office and remove the representative of her clan, Stanton explained.

Matilda Joslyn Gage, Stanton’s equally brilliant contemporary, described the governmental structure in more detail. “Division of power between the sexes in this Indian republic was nearly equal. Although the principal chief of the confederacy was a man, descent ran through the female line, the sister of the chief possessing the power of nominating his successor.”

Gage wrote that the U.S. form of government was borrowed from that of the Six Nations, and thus “the modern world [is] indebted for its first conception of inherent rights, natural equality of condition, and the establishment of a civilized government upon this basis” to the Iroquois.

The movement theoreticians, Stanton and Gage, came to believe that every existing institution of western “civilization”—family, capitalism, church and state—rested on the



oppression of women, and each would have to be destroyed in their existing form before women would be free. They knew these institutions were neither inherent nor natural, for they had seen an alternative in action.

While “civilized” women pledged to obey their husbands upon marriage, among Haudenosaunee women “usually the females ruled the house,” Stanton wrote. “The stores were in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children, or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pick up his blanket and budge; and

after such an order it would not be healthful for him to attempt to disobey . . . and unless saved by the intercession of some aunt or grandmother, he must retreat to his own clan, or go and start a new matrimonial alliance in some other [clan].”

Divorce, Iroquois style, must have looked like a vision to Stanton, who had been called a heretic for arguing that women should have the right to leave loveless or dangerous marriages. Women had no right to their children under the laws of patriarchal Christianity, while “among the greater number of the American aborigines the descent of property and children were in the female line,” Stanton wrote.

This model, of indigenous women living in a world in which they had status, authority, and dignity, gave our feminist foremothers a vision of how they could transform their world, along with the sure knowledge that it could be done without upsetting either nature or God.

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Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, a program of the Syracuse Peace Council, is a grassroots organization of Central New Yorkers. We support the sovereignty of the Onondaga Nation’s traditional government and their Land Rights Action. We join in their call for justice, reconciliation, and healing. We believe that we, and the wider community, have a great deal to learn from the Onondagas about living more peacefully with one another and more harmoniously with the Earth.

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HAUDENOSAUNEE- U.S. HISTORY – ③ Iroquois Women Inspire 19th Century Feminists



by Sally Roesch Wagner

How did our 19th century foremothers get the vision and courage to demand a better life when they were surrounded by voices telling them the stifling existence they led was the only one possible? Woman was created to be subordinate to man, the church thundered, and science nodded its approval that God’s way was nature’s way as well.

Common law based itself upon church law, and “the two shall become one and the one is the man” of Christianity became the non-existence of married women under the law. Women could not vote, own property, control their own wages, or have any say over their bodies or the children they birthed. Unmarried women were unnatural since they were not under the control of a husband, and fared no better under their fathers’ authority.

“The assertion that women have always been physically inferior to men, and consequently have always been held in a subject condition, has been universally believed,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote. “This view has furnished the opponents to woman’s emancipation their chief arguments for holding her in bondage...”