# Declaration of Sentiments Transcript

[00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting,

[00:00:04] The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states.

[00:00:17] To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:26] One of the things that I like about the Declaration of Independence, though, the more we visited, the more problematic things we find in it. But one thing I can say I like about it is its directness.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:36] Yeah, it does a lot in only 1300 words.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:39] It's an argument. It's a solid argument in four parts. First, the preamble saying what the document is, then a statement of human rights, and the claim that when a government doesn't give you those rights, it's your job to alter or abolish it. And then we got the grievances and finally the action: because of the above, we're ending this relationship.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:58] And throughout this series, we [00:01:00] have talked about the immediate criticism and accusations of hypocrisy in it. And yet it lives on. It lives on as this core of our American identity. So what if you didn't just criticize it or call it to task? What if you used its power of argument as a tool to fight inequality?

**Laura Free:** [00:01:20] Right. In 1848 in America, probably every schoolchild was forced to memorize this document. Everyone knew the words. They all knew the rhythm, the cadence. It would have been a deeply familiar text to them.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:35] I'm Nick Capodice

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:36] I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:37] And this is Civics 101. Today is our third and final revisit to the Declaration of Independence, and we're exploring the Declaration of Sentiments, the document at the heart of the women's rights movement. And we spoke with Laura Free. She's a professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and she's also the host of Amended, a new wonderful podcast about the myths and realities of the long fight for women's suffrage.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:59] So we should [00:02:00] start with what the Declaration of Sentiments actually is.

**Laura Free:** [00:02:03] Yeah, so the Declaration of Sentiments is essentially the central manifesto of the early women's rights movement. It was a text that was created by a group of women, one of whom was Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Seneca Falls in 1848 in upstate New York.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:23] Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an activist and one of the first leaders of the women's rights movement. She helped organize the Seneca Falls convention and wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, which was an extremely influential document at the time. Judith Welman, she's a historian of the convention at Seneca Falls, she called it the single most important factor in spreading news of the women's rights movement around the country. Quick side note. When Laura was referencing the Declaration of Sentiments in the interview, she was reading from this massive reproduction of it.

**Laura Free:** [00:02:55] I have this in front of me and you're going to laugh because this was a gift to me [00:03:00] from a student. And for Halloween, when my my kid was seven, maybe, she wanted to be Eliza-witch Cady Stanton. So she wore a witch hat and with the declaration of sentiments around her neck,

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:13] That's adorable. Of course, if you're the daughter of Laura Free that's how you're gonna go. But why 1848? And what makes them think that this is the way to go?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:24] Well, starting in the early 1800s, a small number of women begin to group up and push back against societal restrictions against them. And in 1840, Stanton goes to London for an antislavery convention. And on the boat ride back, she befriends abolitionist activist and Quaker Lucretia Coffin Mott and the two of them on the boat start to plan their own convention, one to further the cause of women's rights. In 1848, Mott and others put an announcement in the Seneca County Courier, calling a convention to discuss the social, [00:04:00] civil and religious conditions and rights of women.

**Laura Free:** [00:04:03] And so that goes out just to sort of the locals. And so they sit around and they start talking and they're like, well, what are we going to do at this meeting? We've never had a women's rights meeting before. Or maybe we should, you know, have something that people should talk about and maybe even vote on. Stanton herself claims credit for this, but it's not clear that that she's the one who came up with the idea. But someone said, you know what, if we used the Declaration of Independence as a model, what if that was our guide? And I'm sure everyone went, oh, yeah. So Stanton does do a lot of the work of making of writing this. And so she she takes the original declaration. She goes home and she says, OK, let's let's let's fix this. Right. Let's fix this for women. And, you know, the of course, the best line is that is that the first one of the second [00:05:00] paragraph where she says, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal. Right. Like that right there would have signaled to everyone who saw it, who listened to it, who heard it read be read out loud. Whoa, wait, something's different. Something's different here. And perhaps, you know, at that point, a lot of people would have accepted the term men to. All humans without thinking about it, right, it was it was often a term used to mean people generally, but the fact that she put in women, there was a wake up call in some ways for for the people listening.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:43] The original declaration says all men are created equal. And as we've said in several episodes, women, people of color, enslaved Americans, Native Americans and white non landowners were not included in the declaration of sentiments is even shorter than the Declaration [00:06:00] of Independence. It's under a thousand words, but it uses that same powerful four part argument.

**Laura Free:** [00:06:06] And the other thing that Stanton does in the Declaration of Sentiments that really parallels well to the original. As you know, the whole declaration is in some ways a wake up letter to the king, right. Like Yo King, here's what you've done. And Stanton takes that format and she applies it to men and women. So she's like, yo, men, here's what you've done that have have made all of the women in America unequal. She's, you know, calling them out here.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:32] And it's an exhaustive list. It's got 16 grievances against "He" the first of which is he has not ever permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:46] He has never permitted her to vote. And that one, that's the first one. It was the most controversial at the time.

**Laura Free:** [00:06:53] Stanton read them this draft version of the Declaration of Sentiments. And Lucretia Mott says to her in her in her lovely [00:07:00] Quaker 19th century language, she says, Lizzy, thee will make us ridiculous. That the right to vote, the demand for the right to vote was so was so radical. It's going to be problematic. Now, there are some issues with that. There are lots of people prior to this moment who had been asking for the right to vote. Right. Women voted in New Jersey until 1807. There were women in colonial Massachusetts that we know who voted. So, you know, it's not it's not completely unheard of, but it was fairly radical. And so when the meeting takes place, everyone all of these ideas are raised and people are like, yeah, yeah, sure, sure. And then they get they get they get to voting rights and the convention. You can you can kind of imagine maybe like took a kind of a deep breath, like, OK, what are we gonna do with this one. And and Stanton herself, it was her first time speaking in public and she professed to being very nervous and felt like she didn't do a good job defending defending this provision. And so she turns [00:08:00] to Frederick Douglass.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:01] Douglass, who escaped slavery just 10 years earlier, became one of the most influential abolitionists in American history. He gave speeches around the world advocating for equality and ending slavery, and he attended the convention in Seneca Falls.

**Laura Free:** [00:08:15] He says something along the lines of without the ballot. None of these other changes are going to be possible because women have to have sufficient power to make these other things stick, essentially, and that the vote is is the way to do that.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:32] I find it really interesting that the question of getting women the right to vote was the most controversial because there are some grievances in there that are quite advanced for the time.

**Laura Free:** [00:08:42] Yeah, the declaration asks for equal pay, for equal work for women. Right. You know, something that still is not achieved in America today.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:51] I mean, equal pay women only earned the right to sue their employers for unequal pay in 2010.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:58] Yeah, and another grievance Stanton [00:09:00] accuses men of playing God.

**Laura Free:** [00:09:02] You know, the language she used. She says 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. So basically, she's saying men put themselves above God by trying to tell women what they can and can't do. And so in some ways, she's using religion to indict men further for their bad behavior. So it's not just that men tell women what to do. Men are trying to take over and become God. And so that, I think, gives it a degree of of power for her listeners or her or her listeners, her readers or whoever would see this. They they would they maybe would resonate with that and say, wow, nobody should get in between somebody and God.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:53] Oh, it's so interesting because that's that's kind of the best bit of the Magna Carta, right. That no one is above God or the law. [00:10:00] Not even the rulers. Not even kings. Give me just one more grievance.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:04] Oh, you got it. Here's one. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself as a teacher of theology, medicine or the law. She is not known. Women couldn't become doctors or lawyers, so they weren't permitted to attend medical school or law school. The first woman lawyer Arabella Mansfield was admitted to the Iowa bar in 1869.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:31] All right. So there is one grievance. I do think that we need to address the third one, an accusation that I know that Laura and other scholars have explored in their work. And this one says he has withheld her from rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men, both natives and foreigners.

**Laura Free:** [00:10:53] Yeah, yeah. You know, that's the that's the one that's a signal to [00:11:00] me that that the women's rights movement is not going to take up the cause of equality for all people. It's going to argue and and Stanton herself is the flag bearer for this aspect of the movement. But it's going to argue essentially that white women should have the same rights as white men, not necessarily that all people should have should all be equal. Stanton is particularly unhappy at this point, and she becomes increasingly so over the next 20 years that there are men that she believes to be her own personal inferior, who have more power and more rights in American society than she does. And that's that's her signal there about who who she feels that she's better than. And by the 1866 becomes fully blown racist language and arguments. And she's letting her [00:12:00] baggage show here in a way. Right, that that she use she considers herself better than other people. And she's going to put that right front and center of the women's rights movement.

**Laura Free:** [00:12:16] And nobody really calls her on that bit. You know, they accept they vote on all of the provisions of the declaration and no one says, hey, at least we don't have a record of anyone saying in the meeting, hey, you know, maybe that's not the nicest thing you could be saying here when we're in a movement at a meeting for people who are, you know, looking for equality, let's not also retrench race and class, you know, inequalities in our movement.Yeah. We don't we don't see that.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:12:47] This is something that we cannot separate from the movement. And Stanton, specifically. That these women divorce women's suffrage from other issues of equality. It's the ugly truth that the best known suffragists [00:13:00] actively opposed the 15th Amendment, which gave black American men the right to vote.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:13:07] Yeah, this document mimics the Declaration of Independence in its words and in its format. But there's one contrast that I wanted to ask Laura about. It's the action, the conclusion, the action in 1776 was. And therefore, because of this, we're done with You England. We're done with the he and all of those grievances.This isn't the case with the Declaration of Sentiments. 68 women signed it, but so did 32 men.

**Laura Free:** [00:13:34] Most of their the people are these are married people. These are people who live in close relationship with each other.There are men present at the convention. They don't want to get rid of men in the same way that Americans wanted to get rid of the king. They just want men to behave better. They want they want the laws to be framed more equally. They want they want a seat at the table, [00:14:00] essentially. And so in some ways, they're not they're not saying goodbye. They're asking to say hello.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:14:06] As we've revisited the Declaration of Independence and all of these episodes, one theme that struck me again and again was that the declaration has unending reverberations. It's got bad echoes in the case of the anti Native American language that made its way into Supreme Court decisions and good ones. It's used to incite change, to advocate for equality.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:14:31] Yeah, I asked Laura what the declaration of sentiments can teach us.

**Laura Free:** [00:14:37] I think what I would point to isn't anything inherent in the declaration or in the movement or in the women's rights movement itself. But is just the persistence, right? This is 1848 when the Declaration of Sentiments is is raised. It's not until 1920 that the 19th Amendment is passed that denies states the right [00:15:00] to discriminate on the basis of sex. But it's not even until the present moment that all women have the right to vote in a secure way. So it takes a really long time to make change in America. And it's so exciting right now to be living through this moment of of profound, hopefully, transformation. But I think it's it's going to be a marathon, not a sprint. And perhaps the women who met in 1848 knew that. Perhaps they did not. I don't know if they understood how long it was going to be before women's equality would be granted, that it's still not even right at this moment. But nevertheless, they persisted. And I think that's the message that I try to carry, is just to keep persisting.

[00:15:54] Rah, rah, rah.

[00:16:02] Well, [00:16:00] that is a wrap, folks, on the Declaration of Sentiments, as well as our whole series on revisiting the declaration, a new civics episode will be out soon. Today's episode is produced by Mina Kennedy Jr. with You Hannah McCarthy and help from Jackie Foltyn.

[00:16:15] Erica Janick is our executive producer.

[00:16:17] And where's the declaration of sentiments around her neck, even when it's not Halloween music in this episode by Made in the Grand Affair Azura and that new twist on an old classic, Chris Zabriskie.

[00:16:27] Every two weeks, Nick and I pore through the lesser known ephemera related to our episodes. The interesting trivia that gets cut from them. And we write about it in Extra Credit, our biweekly newsletter. It's free, it's fun, and we just want you to read it. If you're interested. Check it out at our website, Civics 101.

[00:16:44] Podcast Dog is Begal Button Thankachan right there, Civics 101, supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and is a production of NPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.