

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

## **Early Life**

Born Elizabeth Cady

1815-1902

7<sup>th</sup> child born to Judge Daniel Cady and Margaret Livingston in Johnstown, NY

Elizabeth's mother was 16 when she married Daniel Cady. She was 12 years younger and several inches taller than he was. She was also a formidable, strong woman. Daniel Cady had "married up." He came to his position because of his wife's family's wealth. He became a lawyer and then a judge. He was a strict Presbyterian who worried about his salvation. The couple had a total of 11 children, 5 boys and 6 girls. Six died before adulthood, and no more than 6 were alive at one time.

In 1814 two of their sons died. Of Cady's five sons, four died in childhood. One survived to adulthood, graduated from college, then died after a short illness at age 20. Daniel Cady was devastated. From *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* by Elisabeth Griffith: "Only Eleazar reached manhood. As Elizabeth recalled, her brother was 'a fine manly fellow, the very apple of my father's eye.' He graduated from Union College in 1826. A few weeks later, after a short illness, he died. He was twenty years old. The whole family was stunned. Judge Cady, who had been away from home, returned to find Eleazar dead. Heartbroken at the loss of his last son, the grief-stricken father kept an uninterrupted vigil by the casket. After the funeral he made daily, tearful visits to the grave. 'It was easily seen,' Elizabeth wrote later, 'that while my father was kind to us all, the one son filled a larger place in his affections and future plans than the five daughters together.' Not yet eleven years old when her only brother died, Elizabeth remembered the event vividly. Eleazar's death became the centerpiece of her childhood. 'I still recall...going into the large, darkened parlor to see my brother and finding the casket, mirrors, and pictures all draped in white, and my father, seated by his side, pale and immovable. As he took no notice of me, after standing a long while, I climbed upon his knee, when he mechanically put his arm about me and, with my head resting against his beating heart, we both sat in silence, he thinking of the wreck of all his hopes in the loss of a dear son, and I wondering what could be said or done to fill the void in this breast. At length he heaved a sigh and said: 'oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!' Throwing my arms about his neck I replied, 'I will try to be all my brother was!'" (6-8).

Elizabeth later recalled another childhood incident involving her father that had a profound effect on her: "Sitting in her father's office, Elizabeth heard the complaints of many weeping women. Her father had a client named Flora Campbell, who supplied the family with farm produce. When her husband died, his property passed to their son, who then treated his mother unkindly. Judge Cady had no remedy. Despite her tears, Mrs. Campbell's situation was neither illegal nor

uncommon. Elizabeth realized ‘the cruelty of the laws’; ‘they kept me in a constant condition of wrath.’ She decided to get a scissors and cut every law unfair to women out of her father’s statute books. When he discovered her plan, Judge Cady had to explain that such laws could only be changed by the legislature” (11).

Her mother, who was by then over 40 and hadn’t been pregnant in seven years, bore another son—naming him Eleazar after the last son who died. This son died before he reached age one. Margaret withdrew into a depression, Daniel into anger. Raising the rest of the children was left to Elizabeth’s older sister Tryphena and her husband Edward Bayard.

While Daniel Cady had been encouraging of Elizabeth when she was young, he became reluctant to encourage or support her the more she accomplished (like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s father). “Judge Cady’s reaction to Elizabeth’s academic and athletic achievements changed as she grew older. Initially permissive, he allowed her to undertake masculine activities. He did not forbid her to spend hours in the library or in his law office, to attend court sessions, or to ride any horse in the stable. On occasion he actually encouraged her to compete and perform, and he took pride in the outcome. Interrupting her watercolors or embroidery, he brought her lawbooks to study so that she would be able to participate in dinner table debates with his law clerks or guests. Yet when she won the Greek Prize, her father’s only reaction was to reiterate his disappointment that she was not a boy... He allowed Elizabeth to go away to finishing school, but forbade college.... Within five years his permissiveness changed to prohibition. For the rest of his life he would criticize as unseemly behavior he had initially tolerated. As Elizabeth would recount to her friend Susan Anthony in 1855, ‘To think that all in me of which my father would have felt a proper pride had I been a man is deeply mortifying to him because I am a woman.’” (8-9). While her mother was always very encouraging (except for the time she withdrew from the family amid her depression), Elizabeth never gave her adequate credit for her influence.

A neighbor, Reverend Hosack, tutored her in Greek, and her brother-in-law taught her philosophy and how to be an accomplished equestrian. He was also influential in talking her parents into letting her attend Troy Seminary at age 15. This was her only educational option. She didn’t care for it, but she did respect the woman who was head of the school.

While at Troy, she and her friends fell under the influence of a revival theologian, who played a part in ruining her health and convincing her that she was damned: “Every day for six weeks she subjected herself to his preaching, until she found herself on the ‘anxious bench.’ Finally she confessed her sins and experienced ‘conversion.’ The result was not reassuring. Revival sapped her self-esteem and made her feel bad instead of good. She became ill and went home to Johnstown. As she recalled in her autobiography: ‘Fear of judgment seized my soul. Visions of the lost haunted my dreams. Mental anguish prostrated my health... Returning home, I often at night roused my father from his slumber to pray for me, lest I should be cast into the bottomless pit before morning’” (21). This experience caused her to become very skeptical of all religious authority.

## Adulthood

In 1838 her brother-in-law broke her trust by admitting he had fallen in love with her. He asked her to marry him and suggested that they run away together. She refused. Seeking a different male role model, she turned to her cousin Gerrit Smith, an abolitionist, who introduced her to Henry Stanton. They met in 1839. He was 10 years older than Elizabeth. He proposed when she was about to turn 24. He thought she would join him in his life's work as an abolitionist (like Romney from *Aurora Leigh*). He knew she was incredibly intelligent, and wanted to see her use her talents. They became engaged after knowing each other less than a month.

Her father opposed the marriage. She temporarily broke off the engagement, then, when Henry became a delegate to the World Anti-Slavery Convention and would be abroad for eight months, she insisted they marry. Her father threatened to disinherit her, but unlike Mr. Barrett, he didn't follow through with his threats. When they eloped, Elizabeth insisted that the word "obey" be dropped from the marriage vows. She was 24—he was 35.

Attending the anti-slavery convention was a key event in Elizabeth's life. It's where she met Lucretia Mott (who was 22 years older than Elizabeth—and an ardent suffragist). "Mrs. Mott was to me an entire new revelation of womanhood. I sought every opportunity to be at her side, and continually plied her with questions. . . . She had told me of the doctrines and divisions among 'Friends,' of the inward light, of Mary Wollstonecraft, her social theories, and her demands of equality for women. I had been reading Combe's 'Constitution of Man' and 'Moral Philosophy,' Channing's works, and Mary Wollstonecraft, though all tabooed by orthodox teachers, but I had never heard a woman talk what, as a Scotch Presbyterian, I had scarcely dared to think" (38). Henry grew a bit uncomfortable with his wife's growing independence. When they returned home, he began clerking for his father-in-law's law office.

Between 1842-1845, Elizabeth gave birth to three sons. Henry decided to practice law in Boston. They moved in 1844, and her father bought them a house. In 1847, Henry decided to move again, this time to Seneca Falls, NY. They moved to a farm her father gave them. She felt very isolated there after city life in Boston: "My duties were too numerous and varied and none sufficiently exhilarating or intellectual to bring into play my higher faculties. I suffered with mental hunger, which, like an empty stomach, is very depressing. I had books, but no stimulating companionship. Cleanliness, order, the love of the beautiful and artistic all faded away in the struggle to accomplish what was absolutely necessary from hour to hour" (50).

She got together with Lucretia Mott and a few other feminists, and decided to hold a convention "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." Elizabeth wrote *A Declaration of Sentiments* and prepared to read it at the convention (her first time speaking in public). Henry grew very uncomfortable with the whole idea and left town. Her father rushed to Seneca Falls to see if she had lost her mind. They chose a man (Lucretia's husband) to preside over the meeting (they knew they wouldn't be taken seriously otherwise). After heated

discussion, particularly over women seeking the right to vote, one hundred people signed the Declaration—68 women and 32 men.

In 1851 her fourth son was born. She began wearing “bloomers” (pants underneath a knee length skirt) in order to be more comfortable chasing after four boys. During this year she also met Susan B. Anthony, a Quaker teacher (female teachers at that time earned ¼ what male teachers earned). They formed a partnership that would last through old age. Stanton provided the ideas, rhetoric and strategies, and Anthony delivered speeches, circulated petitions, and rented the halls.

In 1852, the Woman’s State Temperance Society elected Elizabeth president and Susan B. Anthony secretary. (One of their goals was to get drunkenness approved as grounds for divorce.)

Her fifth child, and first daughter, was born in 1852. She suffered post-partum depression after this birth, and felt she was not supported by her husband or father: “Men and angels, give me patience! I am at the boiling point! If I do not find some day the use of my tongue on this question, I shall die of intellectual repression, a women’s rights convulsion! ...How much I long to be free of housekeeping and children, so as to have time to think and read and write!” (79).

### **Later life**

She stayed away from public life for some time, and had no free time to do serious work. In 1854 she spoke before the legislators in Albany, and then stayed home for the next 6 years under mounting family pressure. She turned to writing.

She had two late unplanned pregnancies. Her last pregnancy was in 1858—which gave her a total of seven children. Her last son was born in 1859 when she was 43. She was depressed for most of that year and physically worn out. In 1860 she finally started speaking engagements again. She was asked to speak at the annual American anti-slavery society, and spoke her views of marriage as a type of slavery: “A man marrying gives up no right, but a woman, every right, even the most sacred of all, the right to her own person....So long as our present false marriage relation continues, which in most cases is nothing more or less than legalized prostitution, women can have no self respect and of course man will have none for her, for the world estimates us according to the value we put upon ourselves. Personal freedom is the first right to be proclaimed, and that does not and cannot now belong to the relation of wife, to the mistress of the isolated home, to the financial dependent” (103). She also wanted women to have the right to divorce.

The Civil War put women’s rights on the back burner. Elizabeth lived in NY during Civil War years (1861-1865). Post-Civil War, she engaged in a battle over the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, granting black males suffrage. She wanted black and white women to be included. Others in the women’s movement disagreed. Stanton was accused of racism and broke with the movement. She started her own group, the Woman Suffrage Association. Eventually she even split with Anthony, although they reconciled before her death.

By 1870, she and Henry were living apart. She was financially and socially independent. During the 1870's, she spent five months on the lecture circuit, then returned home for the summer—then spent three more months lecturing, returning home for the holidays. She was widowed in 1887. She wrote her autobiography and the *Woman's Bible*. In 1892 she delivered *The Solitude of Self* three times during a three day period. “It was presented first, in written form, to the House Committee on the Judiciary on the morning of January 18, 1892. That afternoon Stanton delivered it as her valedictory address to the National American Association and received a standing ovation. Two days later she repeated the speech at a hearing of the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage” (203-204). She was 76 years old, and it would be her last appearance before Congress. She died in 1902 of heart failure, 18 years before women would win the right to vote.