3: Portraits as Politics

Born around 1797, Isabella Baumfree grew up enslaved in Ulster County, New York. She endured separation from her parents at age thirteen, multiple different owners, and an incident that resulted in the loss of part of her finger. In 1826, she freed herself by running away to New York City. She became a follower of the Prophet Matthias, a religious leader who claimed the Holy Spirit spoke through him.¹ Isabella did not attain the spiritual enlightenment she hoped for in 1836, the year Matthias had predicted the world would end. Instead, she fashioned her own fresh start. In 1843, at the age of about forty-six, she adopted the name Sojourner Truth and became an itinerant preacher. She moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, joined a network of reformers, and eventually became a traveling lecturer.²

In 1850, Truth began to sell a book, with her story and portrait, to introduce herself to a broader public. Five years earlier, Frederick Douglass, who had also freed himself from slavery, had published his own autobiography. His book’s success inspired Truth to publish the Narrative of Sojourner Truth, which similarly recounted slavery’s horrors in order to win antislavery supporters. Truth printed her book seven times through 1884. She sold the work through the mail and at her lectures.³ Both publications featured their author’s engraved portrait as the frontispiece. Truth’s depicts her almost fully facing forward, with her head tilted (figure 3.1). She wears a determined expression and meets the viewer’s eyes. Her face conveys a toughness rare in women’s portraits. A white cloth, which she often wore in her pictures, covers her hair. The head wrap, as well as her plain dress, alludes to her former enslavement and her continued status as a working woman.⁴

Portraits of Truth and Douglass signal a significant difference between the two: Douglass could read and write, but Truth had neither skill. Her amanuensis, fellow antislavery activist Olive Gilbert, had transcribed the book for her.⁵ Douglass’s picture also appealed to well-known associations between masculinity, visibility, and power. The two have similar poses and expressions, but Douglass’s carefully coiffed hair, elegant suit and tie, and crisply pressed white shirt suggest that he is among the educated elite.
(figure 3.2).⁶ Douglass, who cultivated his public image throughout his life, also hired an engraver with much finer skills than the artist of Truth’s portrait.⁷ In contrast to the harsh lines and blocky clothes in Truth’s portrait, the fine, delicate marks that compose Douglass’s contribute to the impression of his higher status. More than seventy-five years after the publication of Phillis Wheatley’s portrait, Truth was still one of the few women—one of even fewer women of color—whose portrait reached a
wider public. While Wheatley’s portrait emphasizes her authorship (figure 1.1 on p. 10), Truth’s accentuates her status as a worker and downplays her work as a lecturer. By emphasizing their subjects’ individuality and humanity, portraits like these challenged popular racist stereotypes.

Photographic portraits became essential political tools in reform movements and presidential campaigns in the 1860s. By then, the distribution of cheap photographs had become possible. Portraits became extensions of activists themselves, acting as agents for causes across the United States. Americans associated the medium with truthfulness, so photographs provided evidence that engravings, with their visible marks of an artist’s hand, did not. Unlike the variable performances of traveling lecturers, photographs conveyed a consistently poignant message. Douglass and Truth enlisted photographs to define their public image and spread their messages to the widest possible audience. However, engravings still dominated publications because photographs could not yet be reproduced alongside text. Photography still transformed these engravings. For example, artists sometimes copied photographs to produce engraved images. To capitalize on the association between photography and truth, captions to these images often noted that the artist had based the engraving on a specific photograph.

Truth modeled strategies for using photographic portraits to change the way people understood race and public, political women. Her portraits countered racist cartoons as well as sexist ones that envisioned political women as threats to society. She started to develop her public image during the antislavery movement and brought it with her to the later women’s rights and civil rights movements. Leaders of the new suffrage organizations, founded in 1869, integrated strategies forged by Truth and fellow antislavery reformers as well as presidential campaigns. By the 1870s, suffragists circulated photographic portraits to challenge the popular cartoons and cultivate a public image for their increasingly cohesive movement. During this era, antisuffrage imagery still dominated, but gradually suffragists turned their nascent visual campaign into a formidable weapon.

**A VISUAL CAMPAIGN AGAINST SLAVERY**

By the time Douglass and Truth published their books, antislavery advocates had been distributing imagery to win supporters for over fifty years. The mature movement was armed with numerous organizations, international conventions, and powerful leaders. Supporters enlisted imagery to
convey two ideas: the cruelty of slavery and the humanity of those enslaved. Initially, they employed engravings to spread their message, but reformers soon integrated photographs into their campaigns. Reformers who began their careers in the antislavery movement learned from these strategies and incorporated visual politics into the women’s rights movement.

Advocates who supported early women’s rights efforts sometimes based their pictures on existing antislavery imagery. Originally, the seal adopted by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, Am I Not a Man and Brother?, became an antislavery icon. Josiah Wedgwood sold a medallion based on the seal, which became popular in England and its former colonies. Benjamin Franklin, head of the Pennsylvania Anti-slavery Society, thanked Wedgwood for his work and wrote, “I am persuaded it [the medallion] may have an Effect equal to that of the best written Pamphlet, in procuring Favour to those oppressed People.” Decades later, the 1837 antislavery book Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Woman and Domestic Society featured an enslaved woman in the place of the man in Wedgwood’s design (figure 3.3). In Am I Not a Woman and Sister?, the enslaved woman wears a flowing pant as she kneels in chains to plead for assistance. Her face appeals to the era’s physiognomic and phrenological ideals to signal her humanity. Deprived of civilized femininity, the artist shows her baring her chest to stress her sexuality and vulnerability to rape. The book’s author, George Bourne, argued that slavery created an immoral society, “one vast brothel,” in which enslaved women could not fulfill their feminine duty to care for their own families. Furthermore, the engraving subtly asked viewers to consider the shackles that bound every American woman. As women’s rights gained momentum, the supplicating enslaved woman appeared on more printed materials.

Angelina Grimké, a women’s rights and antislavery activist, recognized the importance of these pictures. Born to a slave-owning family in Charleston, South Carolina, Grimké became the first southern white woman to speak out against slavery. In her 1836 Appeal to the Christian Women of the South, she wrote that “they [antislavery images] are powerful appeals and have invariably done the work they were designed to do, and we cannot consent to abandon the use of these until the realities no longer exist.” Pictures of chained people made the practice real. She wrote, “Until the pictures of the slave’s sufferings were drawn and held up to public gaze, no Northerner had any idea of the cruelty of the system, it never entered their minds that such abominations could exist in Christian, Republican America.” The following year, the first Antislavery Convention
of American Women passed a resolution that endorsed the use of images in their work.¹⁹

Antislavery pictures that encouraged empathy for people of color challenged racist images that dominated the visual sphere. American imagery, still largely produced by white men, often illustrated the perceived dangers of freed black people that white consumers feared. Prints depicted black men marrying white women, and white men acting as their servants. Others signaled that, no matter how hard they tried, black people would never integrate into American society. For example, in the late 1820s, Philadelphia engraver Edward Clay printed a series of cartoons called Life in Philadelphia to respond to anxieties about the city’s growing freed black population (figure 3.4).²⁰ In plate 4 of the series, Clay depicts a black man standing before a black woman, both dressed in outlandish, frivolous versions of fashionable clothes. He sports an oddly proportioned jacket, while
she wears puffy sleeves and an oversized hat covered with ribbons and flowers. The man asks, “How you find yourself dis hot weather Miss Chloe?” She responds, “Pretty well Mr. Cesar only I aspire too much!” The cartoon suggested that they could aspire to be respectable and middle-class but would never achieve this goal. Their faces do not reflect physiognomic ideals seen in *Am I Not a Woman and Sister?*, and their language stresses their lack of education. Engravers in New York and London copied the prints and added their own to the series, which demonstrates the shared fears about slavery’s end. Pictures that caricatured women’s rights entrenched the patriarchy, while racist cartoons reinforced white supremacy. As women’s rights activists knew, some cartoons did both.

In 1861, Frederick Douglass argued that visual politics could do more than prompt pity for enslaved people: images could advance racial equality. He delivered one of his lectures, entitled “Pictures and Progress,” in Syracuse and Boston.²¹ His speeches and publications attracted supporters and people curious to hear the eminent African American. In Boston’s Tremont
Temple, he asserted: “The picture making faculty … is a mighty power—and the side to which it goes has achieved a wondrous conquest.”²² If activists harnessed this “power” for their cause, they would likely succeed. Even “the dullest vision can see and comprehend at a glance the full effect of a point,” Douglass argued.²³ Images required cultural literacy rather than formal education for viewers to understand them. Douglass continued: “The picture plays an important part in our politics and often explodes political shams more effectively, than any other agency.”²⁴ Portraits of a refined black man like him challenged racist stereotypes.

Pictures had power because they reached the masses. Douglass told his audience that “the great cheapness, and universality of pictures must exert a powerful though silent influence, upon the ideas and sentiment of present [and] future generations.”²⁵ Technological innovations made this visual conversation possible. Improvements in electrotyping expedited the printing process and facilitated higher print runs of engraved material. Pictorial publications like Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper became widespread.²⁶ Between 1860 and 1880, the number of engraving operations in the United States nearly doubled. Engravings dominated because printers could reproduce them alongside text. As in other industries, the labor of engravers became increasingly subdivided. An engraving would once have been a week-long project for one person, but now workers each completed only a small section of a picture. Together, they finished full-page illustrations in about eight hours.²⁷

Engravings became cheaper, and the new visual medium of photography provided reformers new opportunities to counter stereotypes with an image that looked like proof. In the mid-1850s, photographers started to expose their images onto glass plates that became photographic negatives. Professional studios implemented this wet-plate process, which allowed them to reprint photographs from glass negatives as long as they remained intact. Photographs could not yet be printed in newspapers or books, but they could be reproduced as prints and sold in great numbers for the first time. By the early 1860s, cheap photographs became staples in American households. Photographs, which artists also copied to create engravings for publications, made the faces of prominent figures recognizable to the largest audience ever.

Douglass employed photographs to counter racism. He regularly sat for them and became the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, claiming the visibility expected of leading men.²⁸ The reformer represented himself as a well-dressed, educated, and respected man. Around 1862, Douglass delivered a lecture on the importance of photographs,
which he lauded for their “faithfulness … in delineating the human face and form.” The truthfulness of photographs helped reformers to defy damaging stereotypes. Unlike an engraver, a photographer could not add stereotypical features to a subject’s face. However, as Douglass probably knew well, photographs did not actually capture truths. Instead, photographs made truths. Douglass appeared intelligent and well groomed, and this performance made him so. He told his audience, “The portrait makes our president. The political gathering begins the work and the picture gallery ends it.”²⁹ A portrait made a man like Abraham Lincoln into a respected president. Without his inclusion in galleries filled with pictures of important leaders, Lincoln could never have held a prominent place in the American mind.

The Civil War made photographs an essential part of American life.³⁰ The conflict prompted a need for this transportable, realistic, and inexpensive form of remembrance. Before they left home to fight or nurse the wounded, men and women flocked to photographers to capture their likenesses for loved ones. In 1862, a writer for a professional photography journal noted that “America swarms with the members of the mighty tribe of cameristas, and the civil war has developed their business in the same way that it has given an impetus to the manufacturers of metallic air-tight coffins and embalmers of the dead.”³¹ Photographers pitched makeshift studio tents next to army camps and were “thronged from morning to night.”³²

By the end of the war, purchasing and exchanging portraits became an established practice across social classes. Urban consumers bought prints and photographs from studios, printshops, bookstores, and newspaper offices. Mail-order catalogs and itinerant agents sold pictures, and newspapers published notices about prints and photographs available for purchase. The postal service helped photographs reach even rural areas.³³ Cartes de visite photographs especially set off a craze.³⁴ This type of print was small, roughly two by three and a half inches. They were sturdy, transportable, and, most important, cheap. They cost two to three dollars per dozen, or less than twenty-five cents per photograph, about the price of two copies of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper.³⁵ In 1863, author and scholar Oliver Wendell Holmes noted their popularity in the Atlantic Monthly. He wrote, “card-portraits … as everybody knows, have become the social currency, the sentimental ‘green-backs’ of civilization.”³⁶ Like greenbacks, the new national currency, cartes de visite distributed valuable information and indicated cultural capital.

Consumers collected the faces of people they found noteworthy and
added them to albums that held the portraits of prominent figures and loved ones.⁵⁷ Even Northerners wanted a picture of Confederate President Jefferson Davis so that they could see what he looked like.⁵⁸ Consumers created their own collections of important people, and their albums demonstrated their cultural authority. The range of albums made them accessible to many families. Small ones cost as little thirty-seven and a half cents, while others were larger and finer.⁵⁹ An 1864 article in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the magazine with the highest circulation before the Civil War, called albums “a necessity for the people.”⁶⁰ The “trifling expense of photographs,” the author wrote, “put within reach of the public the faces of all those we love, all we esteem, and all we admire and revere of our own family, of great men; the hero, the patriot, the sage, the divine.” The author concluded, “The American family would be poor indeed who could not afford a photograph album.”⁶¹

Photographs became important sources of information because, to nineteenth-century Americans, they resembled science more than art.⁶² Illustrated newspapers, for example, noted when artists had copied photographs, to convince readers of the accuracy of their engravings. In 1859, a writer for the abolitionist newspaper *National Era* wrote of photographs: “[There] is no allowance to be made for the imagination of the artist. They are facts. The sun is a faithful biographer…. He gives us men as he saw them.”⁶³ The emotional experience of seeing photographs differed as well. An 1862 *New York Times* article affirmed that photographer Mathew Brady’s Civil War photographs made the war feel immediate. The author wrote, “We [Northerners] recognize the battle-field as a reality, but it stands as a remote one.” Photographs destroyed the distance. The article continued, “Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of the war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it.”⁶⁴

Reformers employed this new realistic medium to spread their message about slavery’s brutality. The widely reproduced photograph entitled *The Scourged Back or A Map of Slavery* highlights the raised scars on the bare back of a man named Gordon (figure 3.5). Viewers see his face in profile, but his features lack definition. The picture represents the scars that mark his body and asks the viewer to imagine the torture that produced them. A writer for the *New York Independent* declared that the “Card Photograph should be multiplied by the 100,000 and scattered over the states. It tells a story in a way that even Mrs. [Harriet Beecher] Stowe cannot approach because it tells the story to the eye.”⁶⁵ Photographs could convince more people of slavery’s horrors than even the most popular book of the period,
3.5: Overseer Artayou Carrier Whipped Me. I Was Two Months in Bed Sore from the Whipping. My Master Come after I Was Whipped; He Discharged the Overseer. The Very Words of Poor Peter, Taken as He Sat for His Picture. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1863, carte de visite photograph, Photographic Prints in John Taylor Album, compiled ca. 1861–ca. 1865. National Archives photo no. 533232 (Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860–1952).

*Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Engravers copied the photograph for publication in *Harper’s Weekly* and other illustrated papers. 

Political parties quickly integrated imagery into their campaigns too.
Likely well aware of antislavery imagery, Abraham Lincoln became the first presidential candidate to circulate his portrait to build his public image. When Lincoln ran for president in 1860, few voters knew about the Illinois lawyer, and even fewer could recognize his face. So when the newly established Republican Party announced his nomination, they distributed numerous engravings of their candidate to introduce him to voters across the expanding nation.⁴⁷ One of Lincoln’s most famous campaign photographs captured him on the day of his speech at the Cooper Union in New York on February 27, 1860.⁴⁸ Photographers paid famous subjects—politicians, actors, military leaders, and authors—to sit for them so that they could sell their portraits. Lincoln stopped by Mathew Brady’s New York studio to pose.⁴⁹ In this photograph, he stands erect and looks at the viewer (figure 3.6). He places his right hand on two books that reference his education and experience as a lawyer to emphasize his preparedness.
for high office. His clothes appear wrinkled and his hair tousled from travel. Still, Lincoln’s jaw is firmly set, and he has an air of confidence, even arrogance, that he can achieve the position he seeks. Having already posed for dozens of photographs and seen portraits of other presidents, he had an idea of how he wanted to look to convince voters that he possessed the character for the job. Brady sold the portrait as a carte de visite, and artists copied it on campaign materials and for newspapers. By the time Lincoln died in 1865, he probably had the most recognizable face in America. Brady reported that Lincoln had told him that his Cooper Union speech and this portrait had won him the presidency.

Even without the funds and organizations available to political parties, individual women could distribute portraits to enter the public sphere and influence their image on a limited scale. Many suffragists started out as antislavery activists. Before mainstream publications like *Harper’s Weekly* started printed antislavery imagery, the movement relied on enterprising individuals to distribute much of its visual propaganda. Female leaders had added antislavery icons to stationery and seen the value of having a famous face, and they started to incorporate these strategies into the suffrage movement. They could have their photograph taken, but, like antislavery activists, they needed to distribute imagery on their own. In comparison to portraits of famous men, Brady’s studio sold few images of women. Women rarely occupied the high-profile positions that made selling their portraits lucrative.

Lucretia Mott was among the earliest women’s rights and antislavery advocates to distribute her public image. Born in 1793, Mott was a well-known Quaker preacher in Philadelphia. Like Angelina Grimké, she was criticized for delivering lectures to mixed audiences of men and women in the 1830s. Mott presented herself as a serious, dedicated, and respectable advocate. She cared more about winning supporters than privacy and domesticity. Regardless of the medium, she represented herself with similar expression, pose, and clothing throughout her life. In 1851, Marcus Root took one of Mott’s earliest photographs (figure 3.7). By that time, she was a leading reformer, yet Mott projected an image of herself as a woman who preferred simplicity and feminine modesty. She sits, arms crossed, with her face positioned in a three-quarter view. She wears a plain Quaker dress with a shawl and bonnet. Since this daguerreotype could not be reproduced, Mott likely intended it for family and close friends, or she could have sent it to engravers to copy. In 1865, she portrayed herself in a similar manner (figure 3.8). In the later portrait, she looks more directly
at the viewer but wears the same stern expression. Her age, in combination with her plain, unfashionable attire, endows her with a sense of wisdom.

Mott’s portraits helped viewers picture her a respectable reformer, not a masculine shrew. Root understood the familiar visual conventions for representing gender. In 1864, he wrote about them in his book *The Camera*...

and the Pencil. He quoted a painter named Barry, probably the eighteenth-century Irish painter James Barry, who noted “the female form . . . gives the idea of something rather passive than active” and with “softer, milder qualities.” In contrast, the “male form . . . indicates an aptness and propensity to action, vigorous exertion, and power.”⁵³ Though Lincoln’s portrait conveys a sense of excitement about the path ahead, Mott appears to be waiting.

Mott allowed her portraits to reach large audiences, but she never promoted them as Sojourner Truth did. In 1863, two articles made Truth famous to a wider public. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the wildly popular Uncle Tom’s Cabin, wrote an article about Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” in the Atlantic Monthly.⁵⁴ Stowe represented Truth as a vibrant woman whose “conversation” was “strong, simple, shrewd.” But her article, based on one meeting with Truth a decade earlier, incorrectly stated that Truth was from Africa and that she had recently died.⁵⁵ Later that month, women’s rights activist Frances Dana Gage praised Truth’s speaking gifts in the New York Independent.⁵⁶ She wrote that in 1851 Truth’s “magical influence”
had “turned the whole tide” in favor of women’s rights at one of the first conventions.⁵⁷

Stowe and Gage had fashioned mythical versions of the preacher, and Truth wanted to popularize her own truth. She took advantage of her new fame and sat for the first photograph that she would sell.⁵⁸ Her photographs made her appear modest and intelligent as they emphasized her blackness. A year after her first sittings, she selected a preferred pose and props.⁵⁹ In one photo, at around age 67, Truth sits next to a table with her knitting needles and work in her left hand (figure 3.9). Her right hand (with the scarred finger) grips the tail of her yarn, which snakes down her skirt as if the photographer had interrupted her midstitch. Knitting implied feminine domesticity but also represented a vital, practical skill for any working woman who sought to keep her family warm. The bouquet of flowers and table imply a domestic setting, while her book and wire-rimmed glasses (a “novelty,” according to a contemporary) reference her intelligence and inclusion in elite, educated circles.⁶⁰ Her signature white head wrap, simple dark-colored dress, and modest shawl resemble Mott’s Quaker attire.⁶¹ The blank background in combination with her white head wrap and shawl draw the eye to her face. The light shining on her dark skin illuminates her serious expression. This Truth is no myth; she has survived by relying on her own strength of character. Truth had her portrait taken at least seven times between 1863 and 1875, resulting in at least fourteen different versions.⁶² The poses vary slightly, but she consistently composed herself according to conventions for representing middle-class women who never thought of selling their portraits.⁶³ The pictures implied that she subscribed to mainstream notions of femininity, even though her political speeches suggested no such thing.

In 1873, Truth replaced the old portrait of her as a laborer with one based on the above photograph in new editions of Narrative of Sojourner Truth (figure 3.10). The old portrait remained in her book, but closer to the end. The artist simplified the composition of the new engraving, taking out props like knitting needles and flowers. Truth’s expression is even gentler than the one in her photograph. Both the engraved and photographed versions demonstrate a black woman embodying a feminine, domestic ideal. In the context of contemporaneous imagery that represented black women as unintelligent servants, curiosities, and scientific specimens, Truth’s portrait provides a different vision of blackness in America.⁶⁴

Truth personally managed her public image. Rather than selling rights to a photographer, she sold her own photographs and managed the profits. Most unusual, she copyrighted her portrait, allowing her to maintain full
control over it. In a letter to the New York World, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that Truth always brought her photographs when she traveled, instead of clothes or rations. She said that Truth told her, “I don’t want my shadow even to be dogging about here and there and everywhere, so I keep it in this bag.” While she sold some of her photographs in the larger cabinet size, most were smaller cartes de visite. Purchasers added her portrait to their albums or private collections. She appeared alongside portraits of family members, politicians, and favorite actors.

Just as he inspired her Narrative, Frederick Douglass might have sparked Truth’s interest in photography. Truth explicitly associated her portraits with her causes. Backing cards for her photographs included the text “I sell the shadow to support the substance.” The term “shadow” was a common term for a photograph, since sunlight created the image on the glass plate. The phrase referred to the selling of her portrait to support her “substance,” meaning her physical self and the substantial reforms she advanced. The Revolution, a newspaper run by Susan B. Anthony and
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, printed an article noting that Truth had said “some might like to see her shadow after she had gone.” The “shadow” was an extension of Truth, the “substance.” Her portrait traveled far beyond her hands to share her message. The Revolution writer added, “As the substance had often been sold, it was quite a pleasure for her to sell the shadow herself.”

Fellow reformers paid for Truth’s first photographs, and friends helped her sell them. Purchasing Truth’s portrait associated the buyer with her causes. Papers like the National Antislavery Standard and Antislavery Bugle ran sale announcements. Prominent reformers, such as the lecturer Anna Dickinson, urged supporters to purchase them and sent Truth the proceeds. Advertisements for Truth’s lectures noted that attendees could purchase her portrait at the event. At one talk in Detroit, Truth made twenty-one dollars from sales. She could more easily travel the lecture circuit with hundreds of photographs than hundreds of books. Furthermore, if she sold all of her portraits, she could have new prints made at a local studio.

Portraits of Mott and Truth stand out because most white female reformers never sold their likenesses to the public. The style of feminine politics associated with idealized versions of Martha Washington and other elite white women, which focused on their support of their husband’s ventures, still dominated American culture. Female reformers kept their likenesses private to maintain their respectability in a society that frowned upon public, political women. Truth did not have the same inherent respectability that a middle-class white woman had, but she carried out her own personal visual campaign that illuminated a positive vision for women of color and won her respect that continues to this day. Phillis Wheatley’s patrons commissioned her portrait to claim Wheatley’s education and refinement, while Truth chose to claim this power for herself. Mott and Truth chose to look like women who acquiesced to a place in the public eye, critical to displays of visual femininity. Unlike popular racist and sexist caricatures of women in elaborate costumes, they wore plain clothing and stern expressions. Both women composed their portraits in similar manners throughout their lives.

During the 1860s and 1870s, portrait photographs became essential tools to define—and win—political power. The antislavery movement’s powerful pictures helped to secure support to end slavery. Having learned from that campaign, presidential candidates and reformers integrated pictures into their own efforts. Printed portraits acted as extensions of the individuals and their ideas. However, popular illustrations still pro-
vided no positive models for women who wanted to vote or run for office. Women’s rights advocates who had distributed antislavery imagery, and perhaps Lincoln’s likeness as well, started to integrate pictures into their own movement. They could circulate their portraits to establish their own models and counter negative stereotypes. Female reformers did not have the coordination or funds to compete with mainstream publications, but they could use the power of photography for their own advantage.

FROM PORTRAITS TO SUFFRAGE ICONS

Mott and Truth modeled strategies to define the public image of the women’s rights movement. Initially, Truth became so valuable that even when the suffragists split in 1869, she participated in efforts on both sides. In response to decades of cartoons that lampooned political women, suffrage leaders embraced new visual technology—photographic portraits—to present an appealing face for their cause. Activists did not need funding to distribute cheap pictures to eager supporters. Their portraits defined them as leaders and demonstrated that they were not cartoonish, masculine shrews.

In August 1865, Susan B. Anthony employed images to win support for newly freed people. She stood before a meeting of the Women’s Loyal National League, which she had founded two years earlier to support the abolition of slavery. Anthony “held up two photographs to the view of the audience.” One featured “the bare back of a Louisiana slave,” while the other depicted Truth. According to a report in the National Antislavery Standard, “Many of the audience were affected to tears.” They saw that “the Louisiana slave’s back bore scars of whipping,” and the paper incorrectly noted that Truth had lost three fingers while enslaved. After holding up the portraits, each perhaps no larger than a roughly four-by-six-inch cabinet card, Anthony might have passed them around for a closer look. The newspaper recounted that she pleaded with her audience, telling “every one [sic] to suppose that woman was her mother, and that man her father.” Rather than relying on Reconstruction-era politics to dictate the fates of formerly enslaved people, she wanted to raise money to support them. Anthony and others had spoken in favor of this motion earlier in the meeting without success. Immediately after the group saw the photographs, however, fundraising resolutions “were at once unanimously passed.”

Anthony hoped to touch the hearts of those in her audience, and she chose her pictures well. The exact prints she selected remain unknown. The descriptions, though, offer enough detail to be matched with popular
images. The “Louisiana slave” was likely Gordon, pictured in *The Scourged Back*, who was enslaved in Baton Rouge (figure 3.5 on p. 62). Similarly, Truth’s portraits remained remarkably consistent and likely resembled her 1864 carte de visite (figure 3.9). As a freed woman, she had more power over her likeness than Gordon did over his. Truth’s photographs referred to her past, but, unlike Gordon’s, they also represented her claim on an entirely different future.

Anthony displayed these photographs to raise awareness and money, and she brought these visual strategies to a new phase of the suffrage movement. After the Civil War, women received some recognition for their work, but not enough to win the vote. In 1866, activists founded the American Equal Rights Association to advocate for universal suffrage. The following year, the Republican Party prioritized the ballot for black men. Some women, including Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, felt furious. They made racist arguments that black men should not have the vote before white women.⁷⁴ When Kansas called for a referendum on women’s and black men’s suffrage later that year, the pair campaigned to win the ballot for women, but not black men. Both measures failed, mostly due to Republican infighting and a lack of funds, but reformers blamed Anthony and Stanton because of their refusal to campaign for black male suffrage.⁷⁵

In 1869, the conflict over the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted the vote regardless of race or previous enslavement, prompted the collapse of the American Equal Rights Association and the end of the universal suffrage campaign. Instead, women founded the first national groups focused on women’s suffrage. Angered by the enfranchisement of black men and women’s exclusion, Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association. In response, longtime civil rights and women’s rights leader Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Brown Blackwell, founded the American Woman Suffrage Association. The group attracted those who supported the amendment and wanted to ensure that women would vote next.⁷⁶

At first, the leaders considered a truce. As months and years wore on, though, they developed platforms in opposition to each other. Stone’s American Association advocated for local organizations to win the ballot for women in each state. In contrast, Anthony and Stanton’s National Association wanted to coordinate a campaign to secure a constitutional amendment that forbade sex-based voting restrictions. The American Association made Boston its headquarters, but the National Association had offices in New York City. The American Association selected Reverend Henry Ward Beecher as the first president, and men made up half of the
group's officers.⁷⁷ In contrast, the National Association wanted only female leaders. Local suffrage groups from across the country allied themselves with these umbrella organizations.

Each association founded a publication to outline organizational structures and goals, articulate strategies for large audiences, and establish leaders. The *Revolution*, created by Anthony and Stanton in 1868, served as a “mouthpiece of women.”⁷⁸ Though the paper only lasted through 1872, the *Revolution*, as the title suggests, argued for swift, sweeping—and often controversial—improvements. In addition to suffrage, the paper discussed religion, race, financial reforms, dress, and labor. The National Association did not have enough money or supporters to introduce portraits of its leaders to the public, but it could do so for supporters. The paper reprinted writings by forerunners like Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, whose portraits the organization also sold to honor them as the movement's founders. Daily newspapers still printed few engravings, if any. Illustrated papers like *Harper's Weekly* remained distinct from text-based papers. Instead, suffrage newspapers advertised the sale of their leaders' portraits, offered them as benefits for subscribers, and described their display at events.

Printed in New York, the *Revolution* circulated widely. Press notices and letters to the editor reveal that people read the paper from Maine to California, from South Carolina to Minnesota. Its peak of three thousand subscribers, however, did not make up for the paper's $10,000 debt.⁷⁹ In May 1870, Anthony sold the paper, and the content immediately became more moderate. The new editor still discussed women's rights, but puzzles, children's stories, and household tips crept into the pages. The National Association, however, kept its controversial platform.

The American Association's *Woman's Journal*, which began publication in January 1870, also prompted the *Revolution*'s demise. Established by Stone, Henry Brown Blackwell, Julia Ward Howe, Mary Livermore, William Lloyd Garrison, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the *Woman's Journal* became the voice for more measured activists. The paper entered the divide between the *Revolution* and traditional ladies' magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*. Editors focused on “woman's legal and political equality,” rather than the range of gender inequalities discussed in the *Revolution*, to attract as many supporters as possible.⁸⁰ Anthony was not impressed. She complained that the *Revolution* (under its new management) and the *Woman's Journal* were “dull” and “absolutely dead, dead, dead.” Though Anthony detested it, the moderate tone of the *Woman's Journal* made it far more successful.⁸¹ From its debut, the *Journal* had stable financial backers.
and attracted a longer subscriber list. Editors printed updates from state organizations, political tracts, and letters from all over the country that reflected the paper’s reach.

Now in charge of an organized social movement, Stanton and Anthony challenged the status quo with their own vision of political power. Perhaps inspired by Truth, they started by promoting portraits of the movement’s founding mothers and of themselves. On August 19, 1870, Stanton and Anthony went to Napoleon Sarony’s photography studio in New York City. Anthony wrote in her journal that they “sat for pictures in all forms & positions.” Their session resulted in a series of individual portraits and photographs of the pair. In several versions, the two sit at a small circular table, a studio prop with elaborate twin cast iron legs and a book open atop it. In one of the portraits, Anthony sits on the left and Stanton sits on the right (figure 3.11). Stanton’s stare (or glare?) directly at the viewer is the most striking detail. Perhaps she is impatient for the session to end, but that is unlikely since she would have known the importance of the portraits. Anthony looks at the viewer as well. Both women lean intently—perhaps aggressively—on the table. In an 1868 book about female reformers, one writer commented that “they often stimulate each
other’s aggressiveness…. I know of no two more pertinacious incendiaries in the whole country! Nor will they themselves deny the charge.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the women look formidable. They wear dark dresses, not the bloomers that cartoonists still portrayed them in. Dark lace floats atop Stanton’s white, delicately curled hair and shrouds her shoulders. Long necklaces loop around her neck, one with a large cross pendant weighing against her chest. Anthony wears a cameo pinned to her white collar. An open book affirms their participation in educated circles.

To modern eyes, Stanton and Anthony look like ordinary women dressed up for the camera, but these portraits constituted a statement about their friendship and agenda. The pair’s choice to take multiple portraits together was unusual. Photographs of unrelated women posing together—suffragists or not—was not common. Instead, friends like Stanton and Anthony would have exchanged photographs. Popular public photographs rarely depict prominent men with political partners.⁸⁶ Representations of Lincoln’s cabinet circulated, for example, but as engravings rather than photographs. Stanton and Anthony’s portrait represented their movement.

The pair rejected gendered visual conventions to present a fresh, positive image of political women. They knew that they flouted traditional representations. Stanton, for example, had posed many times before with various combinations of her seven children, just as other mothers did. In
a reproduction of a daguerreotype originally made in 1856, Stanton sits with her infant daughter and future suffragist, Harriot (figure 3.12). She pulls Harriot close, partially out of motherly love but also in effort to still the baby during the long exposure time. The composition recalls Christian representations of the Madonna and Child. In a frilly bonnet and an elaborate dress, Stanton offers a closemouthed smile. Later generations could reproduce daguerreotypes, but she could not have had circulation in mind when she sat for the intimate photograph. Stanton could have been pictured with her children in the 1870 portrait to reiterate her status as a wife and mother, but Anthony, who remained single and without children, could make no such claim.

When Stanton and Anthony approached this session, they knew their likenesses would be public. If they did not already have a deal to sell their pictures, they made one quickly after their session. Sarony printed cartes de visite and cabinet cards following their sitting. Though cartes de visite photographs often lack dates, extant prints have backing cards with a variety of Sarony’s addresses and partners from over the years. Some photographs were printed starting during his affiliation with Campbell, which only lasted until early 1871.⁸⁷ The large collection of portraits from this session suggests that Sarony found them profitable enough to reprint for a long time.

Mott and Truth cloaked their public, political personas behind more traditional feminine modesty, but Anthony and Stanton displayed their revolutionary vision of female political leadership. In 1869, a year before this portrait session, Stanton wrote that the press had once called suffragists, “old, and ugly, and badly dressed. . . . So we dried up our tears, schooled our dolorous facial muscles to express cheerfulness and content, and polished up our words and wardrobes.”⁸⁸ Even so, papers continued to ridicule them. These portraits suggest that the two reformers decided not to try to appease critics anymore. The photographs depict two women emanating confidence about themselves and their work.

The book *Eminent Women of the Age* illustrates the complicated combination of images and rhetoric that the heads of suffrage groups espoused as they established their leaders for the public. First published in 1868, the book consisted of forty-seven biographies and fourteen engraved portraits of white women. Stories of singer Jenny Lind, sculptor Harriet Hosmer, and actress Adelaide Ristori mingled with those of nurse Florence Nightingale, philosopher Margaret Fuller, and lecturers Anna Dickinson and Stanton.

Women were rarely, if ever, eminent at that time, so the book presented the possibilities open to a rising generation. The authors wanted an “au-
authentic and attractive record” that would “make an impression for good upon the young women of our land, and upon the whole American public.” Like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), they argued that society, not biological differences, limited women’s potential. *Eminent Women* “will tend to develop and strengthen correct ideas respecting the influence of woman, and her share in the privileges and responsibilities of human life.”⁸⁹  The subjects, after all, were eminent women, not ladies. Ladies did not write theory like Margaret Fuller or travel the country to lecture like Anna Dickinson. The book (along with similar reform-minded publications) redefined the term “woman”—and the women’s rights movement associated with it—as empowering rather than degrading.

*Eminent Women of the Age* complicated ideals of womanhood with its portraits. In the nearly profile engraving of Stanton, her eyes look away from the reader (figure 3.13). She wears a brooch on her dark dress, and her white hair curls like a crown around her head. Supporters often emphasized the similarities in the appearances of Stanton and Martha Washington. *Eminent Women* noted: “Mrs. Stanton’s face is thought to
resemble Martha Washington’s, but is less regular and more animated.”⁹⁰ Similarly, a Chicago Evening Post article, reprinted in the Revolution, wrote about the “beautiful presence of Mrs. Stanton, who looks as though she had stepped out of a picture painted in the days of Martha Washington” with her “matronly face, beautiful even now, when she has passed her half century of life.”⁹¹

The idealized Washington remained among the most visible American women, but Stanton wanted to present a new vision for political womanhood. She wanted the public to see that these prominent white women cared for families even as they led political movements. The strategy continued to emphasize that political power should be reserved for elite, white Americans, but it challenged the entrenched idea that women should not participate in politics. Stanton’s biography in Eminent Women, by her friend and fellow reformer Theodore Tilton, labeled her “aggressive” and “incendiary.”⁹² But he also affirmed her familiarity with the “sacred lore of motherhood.” He asserted, “Pity is her chief vice; charity, her besetting sin.”⁹³ She was not just a leader; she was a mother with womanly virtues. In the fifteen biographies of women’s rights “champions” that Stanton authored for the book, she, too, balanced descriptions of their activism with dominant cultural expectations for white women.

Eminent Women of the Age hoped future generations would follow this path. The book reached a wide audience and went through six printings between 1868 and 1879. Companies in Hartford, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco published the work, and hired agents to sell it. Two advertisements in Godey’s Lady’s Book from January 1871, for example, called for agents (“male or female”) and claimed the work had sold forty thousand copies.⁹⁴ The Revolution promoted the book and boasted of its “excellent engravings.” An article noted, “Every woman in the country should give this volume a place in her library.”⁹⁵ The Revolution printed excerpts and sold copies of the portraits from Eminent Women.⁹⁶ Anyone who recruited ten subscribers received Mott’s likeness. The editors wrote of her portrait, “It is a wonderful likeness of our great leader. It should be a household picture in every family—favoring Woman Suffrage.”⁹⁷ The print did not just represent Mott; it symbolized support for the movement.

A letter penned to a cousin and reprinted in the Revolution and the Woman’s Journal demonstrates the book’s reach. The teenage son and clerk of Esther Morris, a recently appointed justice of the peace in Wyoming, wrote that the book gave him hope for the future. In comparison to the female activists in the past who “had to endure public ridicule and much worse, were sometimes scorned, hissed at and mobbed,” he thought that
“the way for their followers now seems comparatively very smooth.” He was overly optimistic.

Similarly, in 1870, a new artist updated the 1857 print Representative Women (figure 2.13 on p. 50) to reflect the updated vision for white female leadership (figure 3.14). Only Lucretia Mott and Lydia Maria Child made it onto the revised print. Mott appears at the top, while Stanton, Mary Livermore (an editor of the Woman’s Journal), Child, Susan B. Anthony, and writer Grace Greenwood circle Anna Dickinson. Only Mott and Livermore engage the viewer, while four of the seven women did in the earlier version. The others avert their gaze and appear to contemplate their plans
for the future. Their three-quarter-view portraits resemble those of male politicians. Their long hair (pulled back and curled according to the day’s styles), cameos, necklaces, and frills emphasize their femininity. Even Anthony, who generally disdained frivolity, wears a lacy hairpiece like Stanton’s.

The print excludes black women and members of the American Association, reflecting the divisions among suffragists. Representative Women, following the cues of suffragists, erases black female leaders in favor of white ones to win support for the cause. Additionally, the print features National Association leaders Stanton, Anthony, and Mott but excludes Lucy Stone, founder of the American Association, who appeared in the 1857 version. Though Livermore, who is present in the later print, also helped lead the American Association, the Boston-based print publisher, Louis Prang and Company, might have insisted on representing the local leader and author of the famed Civil War song “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Prang surely would have been aware of the omission of Stone, another local. The firm sold many popular lithographs, which suggests they believed they would profit from this print. A contingent of suffragists might have worked with Prang to compose this piece, or the publisher could have chosen the grouping on their own. Stone might even have refused to be included.

Suffragists hung prints like this one to highlight their movement’s leaders. The large size of this print—over nineteen and a half by almost seventeen inches—implies that Prang and Company intended for purchasers to display it. Visitors to the Revolution’s headquarters noted the many portraits. One letter to the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette noted that “engravings and photographs hung thickly.” The walls featured portraits like that of “Mary Wollstonecraft’s looking into futurity with earnest eyes” and “Lucretia Mott’s saintly face, beautiful with eternal youth.” After holding an open house for reporters in 1870, the Revolution reprinted seven articles from local papers like the New York Tribune, World, and Herald. Five articles mentioned the “fine, appropriate engravings” and photographs of women that hung in the Revolution’s offices. The Brooklyn Daily Union, however, ignored the women portrayed and mentioned only the men, such as Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Theodore Tilton, whose likenesses illustrated their support for the cause.

Stanton and Anthony’s National Association eagerly distributed portraits of female leaders, but the American Association did not. Livermore’s portrait appeared in Representative Women, but leader Lucy Stone circulated
few likenesses of herself. Several portraits of Stone, printed as cartes de visite and larger cabinet sizes, came from a session at a Boston photography studio between 1875 and 1885. In one, Stone wears a plain (for Victorian dress) dark jacket over a white blouse with a circular pin (figure 3.15). She averts her gaze from the camera with a pensive expression. Unlike Truth, with her abundant references to domesticity, Stone makes no effort to appeal to feminine ideals. She almost seems to dare the viewer to bother her with frivolous fashions. Her portrait suggests a different truth: a white woman did not need to work as hard to claim femininity in her portrait. In comparison to most white suffragists, Truth exaggerated her domesticity and respectability. The Woman’s Journal criticized suffrage opponents who preferred for women to “shrink from the notoriety of the public eye” because they felt “restrained by that modesty,” which they believed was their “chiefest ornament.”¹⁰² Yet the American Association chose not to present their
own vision of suffrage leadership by selling portraits of Stone. As a result, the portraits promoted by the National Association dominated.¹⁰³ Stone’s face never became as familiar as Anthony’s.

These pictures represent the earliest efforts to promote a suffrage iconography. The National Association distributed portraits to define the movement’s founders and contemporary leaders and normalize women as public, political leaders. The fact that they put their limited resources behind such efforts demonstrated that they needed a new vision of political womanhood to win support for their cause. Their pictures did not have the same reach as Harper’s Weekly’s cartoons, but they represented a wave of resistance to those damaging illustrations. The American Association had no such strategy, so Stanton and Anthony defined the movement’s vision of female political leadership. They portrayed suffragists as white middle- and upper-class women. Gradually, they erased Sojourner Truth, who had modeled strategies for winning supporters and money, from the leadership. Neither association advertised her portraits. Suffrage portraits made it clear that these associations focused on securing the ballot for white women.

BACKLASH

The 1872 election marked a turning point in the movement’s visual campaign. As organized political women became visible and ambitious, attacks by opponents became more incisive. Leading up to the election, suffragists encountered unprecedented opportunities. In 1869 and 1870, women in the territories of Wyoming and Utah gained the vote. The fledgling suffrage organizations had not waged campaigns to win these laws, but they counted them as positive signs.¹⁰⁴ In 1872, the Republican Party platform became the first to include a women’s rights plank. The support, however, remained vague. Republicans belatedly recognized women’s efforts during the Civil War and stated that women’s “admission to wider fields of usefulness is viewed with satisfaction, and the honest demand of any class of citizens for additional rights should be treated with respectful consideration.”¹⁰⁵ The platform did not endorse any specific legislation, suggesting that the party wanted to attract reformers without losing votes.

Taking advantage of this momentum, the National Association articulated a strategy called the “New Departure.” They argued that the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, already enfranchised women. The amendment guaranteed the rights of citizens, and—they argued—all citizens had the right to vote. Although Sojourner Truth preferred to work
with the American Association, she liked this strategy. In 1872, Truth, along with hundreds of women across the nation, attempted to register to vote and cast a ballot.¹⁰⁶

Three white women secured more fame than Truth during the presidential election. Victoria Woodhull became the first woman to run for president. When she announced her decision, she declared: “While others of my sex devoted themselves to a crusade against the laws that shackle the women of the country, I asserted my individual independence ... and proved [men and women's equality] by successfully engaging in business.”¹⁰⁷ While many suffragists banded together, Woodhull worked for herself. She did not seek to change dominant ideals of womanhood; she ignored them. Her photographic portraits even emphasize a masculine aesthetic, borrowing tropes from caricatures of political women (figure I.2 on p. 4). Woodhull confirmed the fears of Americans concerned that political women challenged the accepted social order.

Even before Woodhull ran for president, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had become disgusted with attacks on Woodhull for her disregard for feminine norms. In 1871, Stanton wrote to Lucretia Mott, “We have had women enough sacrificed to this sentimental, hypocritical prating about purity. This is one of man's most effective engines for our division and subjugation.” Stanton continued, “He creates the public sentiment, builds the gallows, and then makes us the hangman for our sex.”¹⁰⁸ Stanton wanted women to stop holding each other to men’s ideals for women. She concluded, “If Victoria Woodhull must be crucified, let men drive the spikes and plait the crown of thorns.”¹⁰⁹

Though Woodhull briefly aligned herself with Stanton and Anthony, she refused to fall in line behind them.¹¹⁰ In 1872, just before the presidential election, she brought scandal to the cause when she named the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher an adulterer. She publicized his affair with Elizabeth Tilton, wife of prominent reformer and editor Theodore Tilton, in her paper, Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly.¹¹¹ Beecher had been president of the American Association, and Tilton frequently wrote in support of suffrage. The public scrutinized Woodhull and fellow suffragists in the wake of her revelation, so the National Association shunned her. For Stanton and Anthony, the time for individual suffragists who worked outside of organizations—especially theirs—had passed. The National Association thought they wanted revolution, but their rejection of Woodhull signified their limits. They needed to moderate their demands to win public support.

The 1872 election also spotlighted Susan B. Anthony, the most famous
woman to cast her ballot. Unlike many of her counterparts, she was allowed by officials to vote. Soon afterward, though, she was arrested, and her national fame guaranteed publicity. A judge found Anthony guilty of voting illegally and fined her $100 plus the costs of the trial. She refused to pay it. In 1873, a couple of weeks before her trial, the *Daily Graphic* featured a cartoon of Anthony on its front page (figure 3.16). The caption identified her as *The Woman Who Dared*. In earlier decades, cartoonists had caricatured nameless activists. By the 1870s, portraits had made the movement’s leading women familiar. Artists assumed viewers could identify Anthony. Her hairstyle, a center part with her hair pulled back, and her lacy collar and cameo copied the photographs from her 1870 session with Stanton (figure 3.11 on p. 74). A star-spangled hat resembling Uncle Sam’s sits askew on her head. Anthony’s face, unlike her hair, is barely recognizable with its furrowed brow and exaggerated frown. The artist, Thomas Wust, even illustrated how one of Anthony’s eyes sometimes moved from her point of focus, which she often hid by sitting for profile portraits. Her expression offers anger rather than feminine passivity. She stands with a fist on her hip and an umbrella at the ready, like a man with a sword. Her short dress shows off her boots and spurs. Anthony wears her shawl like a classical toga, referencing her belief that she led a democratic movement. On the left, a policewoman surveys the scene. Eight women speak from a raised stage (decorated with a banner reading “We favor Union to a Man”) to a female audience. The cartoon suggests that these political women forced men into domesticity: on the right, one man clasps an upset child, while the other carries a basket of groceries.

Suffragists were making efforts to improve their public image, but negative portrayals like this one prevailed. Engraver Thomas Wust and many other artists—still a male-dominated group—relied on old tropes of swapped gender roles to prompt laughter at these women. Even photographers incorporated these themes to sell their work.¹¹² But by then, suffragists had actually participated in the scenes that earlier cartoonists had only imagined. Pictorial papers featured engravings of Woodhull casting a ballot and Stanton speaking to the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections.¹¹³ Suffragists did not yet orchestrate such public demonstrations as the rally in *The Woman Who Dared*, but viewers likely feared these protests might be next. Modern viewers might see the women in the picture as feminist precursors to twenty-first-century female protestors, but the scene appeared dystopian to Wust and his viewers.

While Anthony could not appeal her case to a higher court, one National Association leader, Virginia Minor, did. After being prevented from
registering to vote in Missouri by a county registrar named Reese Happersett, Minor took her case to the Supreme Court. In 1875, in Minor v. Happersett, the Supreme Court ruled that voting was not a right of citizenship. Therefore, the Fourteenth Amendment had not granted women the ballot. The case clarified the legal relationship between citizenship and voting rights that continues into the present. Suffragists would be forced to choose a new strategy: take on the monumental task of lobbying for a constitutional amendment, or divide their limited resources among state-level campaigns.

White suffrage leaders continued to refuse to feature black women in their imagery, even though black suffragists also led the movement. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a National Association member, also attempted to register to vote as part of the New Departure strategy. Unlike Sojourner Truth, Cary, born to a free black family, had an elite education, having attended law school at Howard University. In 1872 she addressed the Judiciary Committee alongside Stanton and Anthony. Cary argued that during the Civil War, black women had “fed, and sheltered, and guided in safety the prisoner soldiers of the Union.” They had shown their patriotism and wanted to “be governed by their own consent.”¹¹⁴ Yet her words were not published with the testimony of her fellow white suffragists.¹¹⁵ Eight years later, Cary established the Colored Women’s Professional Franchise Association with a range of demands: the ballot, education for black children, and financial institutions that made loans to both sexes. Her group advocated for the needs of black women more than the National Association or American Association did.

Until she died in 1883, Sojourner Truth worked to win rights for women and people of color. Upon her death, Frederick Douglass praised her “independence and courageous self-assertion” that made her “an object of respect and admiration to social reformers everywhere.”¹¹⁶ Despite her work alongside leading suffragists, they had already started to erase her from their movement’s iconography. Their choice signified their shift away from the cause of universal suffrage, with its implicit aim to enfranchise women of color. They separated women’s rights from racial equality because they believed they might win support for white women’s votes. Suffrage imagery promoted by Stanton and Anthony presented a vision of elite, white political women to the public. Despite their efforts—or perhaps because of them—black activists later made Truth’s portrait into the icon that it is today.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the growing popularity of images gradually created a national visual language of recognizable people, places, events,
and symbols, establishing a shared consciousness. The combination of cheap illustrated newspapers, photographs, and prints gave suffragists opportunities to experiment with visual politics, but it gave their opponents opportunities as well. Suffragists started to implement this visual language to define a fresh conception of political women. But they could not circulate their portraits as widely as Abraham Lincoln’s. Furthermore, while antislavery pictures had documented horrific conditions and provoked sympathy, suffragists lacked a consistent, compelling message. Comparatively, the women’s rights movement was young, and their fledgling organizations did not have the apparatus or funds to coordinate a visual campaign. Conflict prevented suffragists from creating a unified narrative.

Stanton and Anthony deployed pictures to win more supporters and model their idea of female political leadership. The Woodhull episode and the backlash against voting women, however, stressed the power of the press. Suffragists needed to appeal to the public, not give them fodder for ridicule. The National Association leaders enlisted controversial politics and imagery in the early 1870s, but they quickly realized that they needed a vision with wider appeal to win backers. Suffragists also needed their vision to reach beyond their supporters to a broader public. They learned much from their initial efforts to create a visual campaign, and these experiences formed the foundation for the campaign they gradually built.