In the 1800’s Frederick Douglass played a pivotal role in the debate about women’s right to vote.

“I believe no man, however gifted... can voice the wrongs and present the demands of women with the skill and effect, with the power and authority of woman herself.”

Frederick Douglass, 1888

Frederick Douglass at Seneca Falls

Frederick Douglass’s lifelong commitment to women’s rights reflected a belief that rights should be universal, not limited by race or gender. He believed that disenfranchised groups should support each other. Douglass played a critical role in the 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention. Debating a number of issues, some delegates thought that a resolution on women’s suffrage was too radical, beyond reach in nineteenth century America. Speaking forcefully, Douglass helped secure approval for a suffrage resolution.

Conflict Among Allies

In 1869, the proposed Fifteenth Amendment provided voting rights for black men, but not women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton objected, “Surely there is no greater monopoly than that of all men in denying to all women a voice in the laws they are compelled to obey.” Frederick Douglass favored ratifying the Amendment, arguing that voting rights for black men were a matter of life and death, while also supporting a separate amendment for women’s suffrage.