NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

Ellen DuBois on the Revolutionary Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Visit our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary to see a list of resources mentioned throughout this program, listen to the episode, and more.

[00:00:00.1] Thomas Donnelly: From the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, this is We the People.

[music]

[00:00:07.3] Thomas Donnelly: I'm Tom Donnelly, lead scholar at the National Constitution Center. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. In celebration of Women's History Month, we're sharing a recent conversation with the author and award-winning historian Ellen DuBois. We discussed her latest book, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Revolutionary Life*, and explored the life, ideas, and legacy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the decades-long struggle for women's suffrage. Frankly, most of what I know about women's suffrage, I've learned from Professor DuBois and her scholarship. So I'm absolutely thrilled to welcome her back to the National Constitution Center. It is great to have you. I can't wait to talk about your extraordinary book on Elizabeth Cady Stanton. And maybe just to get us started, why don't you tell us a little bit about why you chose to write this book and why to write it now?

[00:01:07.2] Ellen DuBois: Okay. Well, I've been living with this woman since I was in graduate school. So that's... I'm almost her age when she wrote her autobiography. So I've been with her a long time. I've met her from many different angles. I think the most interesting one is I wrote a biography of her daughter who followed her. But the reason I wrote it now, I say is two reasons. One is because she has not fared very well in contemporary attitudes towards her because of racist outbursts that she had, particularly in the high point of the Reconstruction period with respect to the 15th Amendment. I was just talking to somebody who knows this material very well, and I came up with a lot of ways to explain it. Her background, her frustration. But he said, most interesting, he said these people all... His word was "marinated" in racist culture. All of them, including the people who fought to end slavery. And the thing that was distinguished about... Distinguished Elizabeth, is that as she said in her autobiography, very early on, when told to behave as a child, she said she was determined to reject all of the, what she called the "no, no, no's". So if anybody told her not to do something, she did it. So she was outspoken in a way that other people who may have felt similarly were more restrained. I think that's my best answer. But anyhow, I wanted to restore her great range: 50 years, many more issues than the right to vote. I wanted them back on the table.

[00:03:04.8] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And I mean, I look forward to walking through the different periods of her really quite long and obviously distinguished and active life. But maybe give our audience, just to set the stage, give our audience a sense if they were to meet Elizabeth Cady Stanton while she was in her prime, what would that experience have been like? What was she just like as a human being?

[00:03:25.3] Ellen DuBois: Well, virtually everyone, certainly of her generation was completely charmed by her. She was funny, she was witty, she was a great raconteur. And despite the fact that, on controversial issues, she didn't hold back, she didn't like face-to-face conflicts. And she used her extraordinary intellectual and personal skills to be liked. And she was... And she... Okay, so she also, she was very pretty, but also a little roly-poly. And she was known as a mother. She had seven children who lived to full adulthood. And this made her... Made even her most radical ideas easy to take. She knew how to present them to an audience, and she was very successful.

[00:04:34.1] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And I mean, one thing that you frame at the outset of the book is, you know, one of the things that distinguishes Stanton as a whole is what you call, "the sheer length of her career as a women's rights philosopher and activist." Maybe just give us, before we dig into her biography and tick through the different phases of her life, give us a sense of her vision that she's pushing for through the course of her life and areas of where she, you know, stays the same and maybe some areas where she changes over time.

[00:05:00.9] Ellen DuBois: All right. What is consistent is complete commitment to women's freedom in the broadest way possible, not limited to political and civil rights, but to things that we as 21st-century people concerned with women's rights pay attention to, the body and all of that, sexual and reproductive freedom, to the degree she could see it in the 19th century. But she was also a completely dedicated liberal. By that, I mean what it really means, which is she was dedicated to individual liberty. Liberty resided in the individual, and liberty meant, for the most part, freedom. Although she understood that there were people who needed public assistance, help, she learned that during Reconstruction. So she wasn't somebody who was afraid of government at all. But she was concerned that the people, most certainly including women, were there to hold the government to its most advanced and democratic possibilities.

[00:06:22.1] Thomas Donnelly: Okay, so you've given us a good frame for how to think about Elizabeth Cady Stanton's thought. Maybe let's talk about her life. And you beautifully walk all the way through from her childhood, all the way to her latest years. Maybe talk just briefly, we could take a beat on her childhood and sort of...

[00:06:39.8] Ellen DuBois: Okay. Okay. She was born in 1815, and it's important to realize it was really within the memory of the Revolution, in particular she was born on the western edge of white settlement in New York. This is in 1815, before the Erie Canal. So this is just a little bit north and west of Albany. And there was a lot about that history that's far away from us, but very recent to her. Her grandfather, her maternal grandfather, was a Patriot soldier. Interestingly, though, he lived in Montreal. So he was part of a movement that we've lost touch with for making Canada what they called the 14th colony. And so he led Patriot-supporting Canadians first to aid the Patriot assault on Montreal, which I believe was successful. But then when they moved to Quebec, they couldn't get through the walls. It's a walled city. And that attempt failed, and he and his people had to leave Canada and he moved back to the United States. He was appreciated and rewarded by Patriot leaders, including Washington. The other part of the history that was very rich to her is, the man who founded her hometown, Johnstown, was very, very influential among the Iroquois people in upstate New York.

[00:08:21.3] Ellen DuBois: She used to talk about how there were cuts in the banisters of the hallways where she could see the Indians, whatchamacallit, hatchets, axes. So the Revolution and particularly the belief in individual liberty is very real for her. But it's... I've come to see that she was also part of another moment, not just the Enlightenment of Jefferson and Washington, but she was part of American romanticism. Somebody asked me why the founding event was called the Declaration of Sentiments and not the Declaration of Independence. And it's because she was part of a generation that was newly appreciative of emotions and not just reason. And I think that had everything to do with the fact that she was a woman, issues of marriage and childbearing were crucial to her. As I've sort of indicated, her mother was part of a very old, very... A major Dutch-American family, the Livingstons, but she was not part of the richest. It was already a big family. Her father came from a much more humble background, but he became a lawyer and eventually, even by the time she was born, a very widely respected judge in the New York court system. His specialty was in figuring... In solving the complex conflicts over land ownership. And in doing that, he himself became a landowner of some wealth. So he was... They were among the wealthier people in their town. But let's not think that this is Gilded Age wealth. It's not. I guess I should say one other thing, which is slavery didn't end in New York until the 1820s. And so Elizabeth grew up with Black people, Black servants in her family, who, at least at the beginning of her life, were most likely to be slaves.

[00:10:44.2] Thomas Donnelly: Maybe take just one more quick beat. I know her father, Daniel, exerted an influence on her life. Maybe talk a little bit about their relationship and what influence it had on her?

[00:10:58.2] Ellen DuBois: Well, when you read her very charming autobiography, she stresses her conflicts with her father and particularly her father telling her when his only living son died. Oh, dear, if you'd only been a boy. So he recognized her extreme, her great intelligence and curiosity. Now, that's come to be the major explanation of their relationship. I think it was more complex than that. She certainly absorbed her reverence for the law and for the courts and the law and justice, although she was more intent on changing the law than on merely obeying it as it was. He was... I think he was... I think... I can only say I think she inherited his intelligence. He was considered a very modest man, despite his high standing, almost humble. And that wasn't the case with her. And that may have been something she picked up from her mother, who was over 6 feet tall and by all accounts a very imposing woman.

[00:12:22.8] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And, you know, maybe moving beyond her childhood. And before we get to a lot of her public life, talk a little bit about, you know, both her marriage and her role as mother and how much that sort of shaped her views and shaped her life?

[00:12:40.4] Ellen DuBois: I'm going to start with the mother and then go back to the marriage.

[00:12:43.4] Thomas Donnelly: Okay.

[00:12:43.5] Ellen DuBois: I knew when I started this book that I wanted to pay attention not just to her motherhood, but to the interactions, or, best said, the way that she did something that was not only unknown then, but it was virtually... It's virtually unknown for us, which is she raised one, two, three, four, five, six, seven children confined in her home in a relatively small town, and had some of her earliest radical insights at this time. She was... I think the... I think my emphasis on her motherhood came in part from writing this book about her daughter. She was, I think I've seen a lot of responses from her children, it's hard to believe, but I don't think she had any real conflicts with any of her children. She did... She had four boys before she could have a girl, and she wasn't going to stop until that happened. So her fifth and sixth children were girls, including Elizabeth. She was the sixth, and then the seventh was a boy. She was playful. She had been raised with a very severe Presbyterian upbringing, and she was determined to be a better, an easier mother.

[00:14:24.4] Ellen DuBois: I'm going to tell you a quick story about how she found a way to get her children to do the right thing. So she had four boys, hellions, as she called them. I mean, if any of you have two boys or three boys, four boys. And they had pretty much the free rein of this town. They would go up to the Erie Canal. They once put their baby brother on a raft in the canal. I mean, they did all kinds of crazy things. So when they were, let's say, 10 and 11, the two oldest, they, like boys always do, they picked up cursing, and they started to say, damn this and damn that. And Elizabeth wanted to stop them, but she didn't want to say, don't you say that anymore. So her dear friend, the Quaker Lucretia Mott, was visiting, and they came up with a scheme. And they said... Lucretia started to say, pass me the damn salt. And the boys were so horrified that that took care of that. So that's the story of her children. And she was close to all of them. She lived at one time or another with almost all of them, all seven.

[00:15:46.8] Ellen DuBois: Her marriage has been more controversial, but she was married for 50 years, although in the second half of her marriage, they either lived apart or lived very separate lives. When they started, he was among the most revered abolitionists. Frederick Douglass said he was the first abolitionist he ever heard speak. But by the end of the Civil War, she was a much... She was increasingly well-known. So at some point, he became Elizabeth Cady Stanton's husband. I've been the beneficiary of a wonderful study by a woman named Linda Frank of their marriage, which makes it clear that it was a very respectful mutual marriage. Somebody once said, never were there two... Never was there a couple in whom intellectual capacity was so equally distributed. There's no evidence... He didn't cheat on her, which other men in her community did on their wives. And he never distanced himself from her work, but always supported it. So they went their separate ways, but they were connected by their love of their children, very much by their engagement with politics. And they lived relatively close to each other. He in Manhattan, she on the New Jersey side of the Hudson.

[00:17:23.1] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. You know, maybe we'll flash forward ahead just a little bit, and, you know, let's dig right into the... I love that. That's a great mug.

[00:17:33.1] Ellen DuBois: Okay. Just wanted you to see it.

[00:17:35.2] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah. No, terrific. Maybe we'll dig into the Seneca Falls Convention. And so flashing ahead to 1848, maybe give us a sense to set the table here of where did any sort of women's rights movement stand at that point, and what were the origins of this specific gathering?

[00:17:56.5] Ellen DuBois: Okay, this woman I already mentioned, Lucretia Mott, was Elizabeth's senior. She was the sort of dean of the women abolitionists. And she was steeped in the background of British radical democracy and feminism. And she taught Elizabeth and exposed her to the writings of the late 18th century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, and also to the Revolutionary-era radical Tom Paine, and also to a very interesting woman who... A Scottish radical, upper-class woman, who came to the United States in the 1810s, a woman named Frances Wright. And so Elizabeth learned about all of those predecessors. But I think what was more... What was at least as important for her is 1848 was quite a year. And not just in this country. It was a year in this country, it was the end of the Mexican American War. United States had expanded, the war had put the question of slavery much more forward on the political... On the table. In 1848, her husband was among those who began to try and establish political parties that could bring the abolition of slavery into politics. And eventually, less than a decade later, six years later, something called the Republican Party was formed.

[00:19:49.0] Ellen DuBois: And this is very different from our Republican Party. And it was the party that brought the issue of slavery onto the table. So I've been talking about what was going on in the United States and I know that Elizabeth and her friends were very alert to the politics of that age. And they were determined to... They couldn't bear being kept away from these history-changing politics. Meanwhile, if anything, 1848 was an even more spectacular year internationally. There were revolutions all over Europe called the Revolutions of 1848, from France to Italy. And these were often revolutions, or mostly they were failed. But the revolutionaries were determined to bring really democracy, the people's vote to their governments, their... Often their monarchical governments. Now, the United States already had almost universal white male enfranchisement, putting it way ahead of any other country in the world. But of course, the two major groups that are missing from that are enslaved men. Some places African American men who were free, could vote, but not a lot, and women. And so that spirit of revolutionary expansion that brought working class men into the streets of Europe, excited women, American women, and they constituted the democratic revolution on this side of the ocean.

[00:21:47.6] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. Maybe talk a little bit about Seneca Falls itself and what that gathering was like, and also sort of what issues they placed on the agenda. And with that, anything you think that's worth our audience knowing about, something you already mentioned earlier, which is that magnificent document, the Declaration of Sentiments.

[00:22:09.6] Ellen DuBois: Okay, so Seneca Falls was on Lake Seneca. It's like if you could throw a stone very far, you'd hit Ithaca on the other side of the lake. It was in upstate New York, which has been labeled by historians, the burned-over district. This was not because there were a lot of wildfires. It was because evangelical religious movements spread independent of religious authority, traveling itinerant lecturers, stuff like that spread through upstate New York and laid the groundwork for a greater... These religious movements were more democratic. They were... We're talking about the Methodists and, for instance. And they created an atmosphere that was very open to challenges to secular government. And so upstate New York was... It was a strong abolitionist center. Not so much in Seneca Falls, but in nearby towns called Geneva and Aurora, a little bit further away. But in other kinds of radical movements, all over that area, there were, we call them communes, radical communities of people who were trying to live independent of private ownership and nuclear families in ways that the hippies of the 1960s would find very familiar. So those are all over. And other movements, for instance, one that really took place in

Seneca Falls that Elizabeth's brother-in-law was involved in, were challenges to orthodox medicine.

[00:24:14.6] Ellen DuBois: At this point, if you went to an orthodox doctor, a regular doctor, all that person could do was cut you and give you pills. And Elizabeth followed her brother-in-law, who was a founder of American homeopathy. So we still do a little homeopathic stuff. I myself take homeopathic medicines when I want to try and sleep better. And vaccines themselves have homeopathic origins because the premise of homeopathy was that your body could take care of itself. So one could really say the greatest benefit of homeopathy is it did less damage than orthodox physicians. Elizabeth was very insistent on going her own way. When she had her babies, she was blessed with relatively easy parturition. And when doctors told her to bind her babies tightly, she wouldn't do it. So she was... I guess I would say, when she was a family doctor, she looked at experience. She didn't look at what the rules said. She tried things and if they worked, she trusted her own judgment. So that's Seneca Falls.

[00:25:44.3] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah, excellent. And just I want to sort of go from Seneca Falls up to the next transformational point, which is sort of the Reconstruction Amendments and Stanton's relationship to them. But before we do that, maybe just very quickly, what did Seneca Falls convention... What were the big issues of women's rights that it sort of placed on the agenda and put front and center? I'd like to get those on the table and then we can sort of dig into the Reconstruction Amendments.

[00:26:10.7] Ellen DuBois: Okay. I advise people to read, not the Declaration, which is quite wonderful and follows the Declaration of Independence, but the grievances and resolutions, many of which are still quite timely. Interestingly, the most controversial issue was having the right to vote. And she had opposition from some of the radical Quakers who were in her audience because they thought, and this should be familiar to all of us, that politics were too corrupt and too soiled. But Elizabeth felt if we were going to be ruled by government, we should make sure that the best people were in it. When we read the grievances and resolutions. When you go to a July 4th celebration, nobody ever reads the grievances and resolutions. They're like, we don't want the king to quarter his soldiers in our houses. But the Declaration of Sentiments is full of things like equality in education, in the professions, a challenge to the idea that women must be held to a higher moral standard than men; and my favorite, which is to teach women to have full self regard and self respect and to fight against those forces in the society, male dominance in particular, that lessened women's beliefs in themselves. So the whole range of things is there and still moving to us.

[00:27:52.8] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And so, yeah, again we have Seneca Falls. And then Stanton and her allies are very much at the center of a lot of the activity after the Civil War, as we're framing, ratifying a series of transformational amendments, the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, the 14th Amendment doing a ton of different things, but promoting... Promising freedom and equality. The 15th Amendment promising to end racial discrimination in voting, maybe beginning with the 13th Amendment itself, talk a little bit about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her involvement in the abolitionist movement. And with that, bring in sort of her partner in reform, Susan B. Anthony, who is obviously such an important figure in her life. And the two of them complemented each other in such interesting ways.

[00:28:43.7] Ellen DuBois: Well, Susan was, as a single woman who was free to move about, was more openly active in abolition. But Elizabeth was married to a major abolitionist. And in 1859 and 1860, when everyone paying any attention could see that the issues were reaching a boiling point point, she broke out of her domestic confinement. She still had an infant, and went touring all over upstate New York to call for the... Actually, it was 1860, the recently elected Republican president to take a more forceful stand on abolition. So let me jump forward. I shouldn't. I mean, the Civil War is a big thing, but I'm going to jump over it. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery constitutionally. It was the first... First of all, it was only the third amendment after the Bill of Rights, which it was already almost three quarters of a century after the Constitution had been passed. And it was the first amendment to have a popular movement pushing it. And most remarkably, that movement, which was organized by Stanton and Anthony, was a movement of women. And they were used to collecting signatures on petitions. They'd done it for their own state rights, but now they collected many, 300,000 to 400,000 signatures on petitions, and they funneled them through Charles Sumner, and they played a major role in pressing forward the 13th Amendment.

[00:30:38.5] Ellen DuBois: There were some people who tried to argue that the abolition of slavery involved... That marriage involved slavery. But I'm going to jump over that. The 14th Amendment, as you quite rightly say, is the most consequential part of the Constitution, even after the Bill of Rights and maybe even more than the Bill of Rights. So two points about this. One is that for the first time, because there was a women's rights movement, it became necessary for the authors of the 14th Amendment to specify that they didn't mean women when it came to figuring out how to sort of advance the political rights of, you said to prohibit racial discrimination in the vote. Of course, that only applied to men because it was only men who would have had the vote without racial discrimination. So she said to Susan, it's going to take us a half-century to get that word "male" out. Okay? But the other thing about the 14th Amendment, which most people who know about this period don't realize and seems extremely important for us today is, when the 15th Amendment, which was a much more forceful approach to getting the vote for Black men, was passed, it was very careful.

[00:32:09.9] Ellen DuBois: All it said is that states couldn't discriminate on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. That meant, first of all, that the states continued to have control over voting. And may I remind your audience, they still have control over voting. So the suffragists wanted a change, a constitutional change that elevated the right to vote to the national government to protect, and also that was connected explicitly as a right of citizenship. They went all the way to the Supreme Court, and in 1874, their case was met with the first important women's rights decision in the Court's history. And it was dismissed on the grounds that voting was a privilege, not a right. But it was the 15th Amendment which got Elizabeth and Susan into real trouble, because they opposed it. The 15th Amendment, as I said was limited, was meant to bring formerly enslaved men into the voting, and it did. Many of you may know that there were Black men in Congress, even in the Senate, for several decades after this period, but it ignored... They wanted it to say that it would prohibit discrimination by the states on the basis of race, color, previous condition of servitude, which it did, and sex.

[00:33:54.0] Ellen DuBois: Which it took the 19th Amendment. The 19th Amendment is worded exactly after the 15th Amendment, although it was passed 50 years later. And all it does is it adds prohibitions against discrimination on sex to those other prohibitions. They... I think they understood, I know Elizabeth did, that contrary to what their Republican allies were telling them, once formerly enslaved men were brought into the political system and could vote as it was hoped, for the radical Republican Party that emancipated them, that would be the end of Reconstruction. And it was. And as I said, that's the 14th Amendment. The 15th, 16th, 17th... No. 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th amendments, are not passed 'till the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. So constitutional amendments are grouped and passed in periods of relatively radical social change and not at other times.

[00:35:06.0] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah, absolutely. And by design, with the Article Five amendment process, it's designed to have a very high threshold. And so it's no accident that it's those early critics of the Constitution, the Anti-Federalists, that help inspire the Bill of Rights. The Reconstruction Amendments happen after the Civil War in that time of great change. And 16th through 19th, in many ways associated with the rise of the progressive movement in the 20th century. You know, I wanna dig...

[00:35:32.6] Ellen DuBois: Right you are Tom. Right you are. *[laughter]*

[00:35:36.3] Thomas Donnelly: And, you know, just digging a little bit more into the, you know, the critique of the 15th Amendment by Stanton and her allies and its aftermath, which, you know, two things I'd like you to say just a little bit about are, you know, one, a key figure, a key relationship she has for decades is with the great Frederick Douglass. And so, you know, we see a moment of tension and conflict between them there, but maybe talk a little bit about their relationship over time. But importantly, the 15th Amendment also represents this moment where we see a split in the women's suffrage movement itself. And so maybe say a little bit about that as well?

[00:36:12.8] Ellen DuBois: Okay. Thank you.

[00:36:13.6] Thomas Donnelly: Or a lot about each of them. *[laughter]* Those are two big things.

[00:36:16.5] Ellen DuBois: You're a very good reader, Tom. I really appreciate it. Let me start with the second. Well, they're both, they're related to each other. Most of her allies, certainly her white allies, male and female, including other suffrage activists, women's rights activists objected to Stanton and Anthony taking a position that was contrary to the Republican Party. The Republican Party had placed all of its marbles in the 15th Amendment. As the great Wendell Phillips said to Elizabeth's incomprehension and then rage, this was the Negro's hour. After that would come the women's hour, which didn't come for a long time. So the suffrage movement splits and one wing of it becomes led by, in particular Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell. Situated in New England, it remained very attached to the Republican Party through the rest of the century until the two wings reconnected in the 1890s. The Douglass relationship is very interesting. Douglass, of course, was the one man at Seneca Falls who couldn't vote because he didn't have the $250 worth of property that was required for a Black man, not a white man, to vote. So Elizabeth had always honored him for what she thought was a kind of support that helped her get the suffrage resolution through the Seneca Falls convention.

[00:38:05.9] Ellen DuBois: He, for his part, always honored her for treating him... He was really recently out of slavery when they met, treating him like a man who could understand the most complex issues and helping him to understand women's rights. Now, Douglass's life was a little complicated, as is that of most men. So they had a split, which was unpleasant for both of them in about 1870. Once Reconstruction was completed, by about 1876, their relationship became closer. And I put a lot of emphasis on the fact that when Douglass, his first wife, who was Black, having died, announced he would marry a white woman, both Black and white reformers went wacky. It was a period in which it was generally accepted as scientific truth that Black... That racial mixture was bad for the human race. But Elizabeth was, as I've said, very, very dedicated to individual rights, including, and at times most importantly, the rights of people to what she called self-sovereignty, to use their bodies, their sexuality and their reproduction to have individual control over that. So she believed that no one had the right to tell Frederick Douglass who he would marry. She also felt very close to him because she thought of herself as a superior person and he thought of himself as a superior person. And when she couldn't get her support for his marriage published in any newspaper or magazine, she sent it to him. And he was incredibly grateful for it. And in his home, which is a national site in Washington, D.C., there's a picture of her on the wall.

[00:40:14.3] Thomas Donnelly: Oh, amazing. Amazing. I've never been there. We've sort of gotten through the Reconstruction Amendments. Maybe we mentioned her briefly earlier, but you know, a lot of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's activities from, you know, the 1870s onward, she's sort of working together with Susan B. Anthony as a key ally. And, you know, obviously they have certain similarities. They have many ways in which they're different. Maybe give us a sense of their working relationship and some of those similarities and differences. And even if there are any, you know, nice and memorable stories between them that can help give us a sense of that relationship.

[00:40:57.0] Ellen DuBois: Oh, it's a great story, I could take another hour for it. I call it a marriage because it lasted as long as Stanton's marriage. It wasn't a sexual relationship, but in the way that the kind of marriages that survive do so because people can work out their differences. And the two of them had differences, which I'll talk about in a minute. But there's a story that Elizabeth's first daughter, Margaret, tells. In the 1880s, after reconstruction was set aside, they began to do something remarkable, which is to write the history of their movement, even when it was still way far from being completed. And Margaret says she watches them sit down at the table and have an enormous fight. And they... One of them or the other stalks out of the house, and the other one comes out, and she thinks to herself, this is the end. Their relationship will not survive. And an hour later, they walk back in arm-in-arm and start going back to their work. The differences were in the last, I would say, 20 years of their collaboration in the '80s and '90s, where the suffrage movement was growing, but it was becoming more conservative, as were American politics in general.

[00:42:30.4] Ellen DuBois: And in particular, the major character that was bringing the suffrage movement into really a big tent was Frances Willard, the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Susan saw this as her heart's desire, which is bringing in as many women as possible and creating an enormous movement for women's suffrage. Elizabeth saw it quite differently because she had always thought women getting into politics would make them better for women and better for democracy. And when the leading force coming into the suffrage movement wants to constitutionalize Christianity, she changes her mind. So towards the end of their lives together, Elizabeth stakes out new ground of challenging Christian orthodoxy, and Susan hates that, but it doesn't split them, and they disagree profoundly. But when Elizabeth dies four years before Susan, she is completely devastated.

[00:43:42.1] Thomas Donnelly: Maybe talk a little bit more about that last phase of Stanton's reform life, where she turns to religion and her critique of orthodox religion and undertakes this project that it seemed like everyone else told her not to do, which was *The Woman's Bible* and maybe talk about that project and how it fits within the story of her later years?

[00:44:04.8] Ellen DuBois: Well, as I think I suggested, she's a critic of clerical orthodoxy from very early years and she's always paying attention to that. And I want to make clear I don't like to say the word religious conservatism. It's Christian and in particular Protestant conservatism.

She's raised in a conservative Presbyterian environment, and to the degree that we can see her exposed a little bit to some kind of Catholicism and a little bit to some kind of Judaism, she's open to it. Although she has her prejudices against the Catholic and Jewish immigrants that are flooding into the country at the end of the century. But now that she feels that the biggest threat to women's suffrage isn't from the outside but from the inside, she gathers a small group of colleagues to do this project called *The Woman's Bible*. Now, people then, and people now will be very disappointed to see it isn't a Bible. It is what's called a concordance. So they literally cut up Bibles, cut out the portions, removed the portions that had anything to do with women, pasted them in a notebook and wrote their commentary about these, their critical commentary. I think Elizabeth wanted to have what she called a censored Bible.

[00:45:47.2] Ellen DuBois: By the way, in writing this concordance, she followed, Jefferson had done the same thing. I don't know if she knew it, but he had. But *The Woman's Bible* really got her literally thrown out of her own movement. And in the mid-1890s, she's censored by the suffrage organization that she helped to start. And even Susan's intense defense of her doesn't make any difference. And by the end of her years, she's sort of a lone figure, which is why we have inherited as a popular understanding, an understanding of suffrage that elevates Susan B. Anthony, whose face alone is on a dollar bill and has pushed Elizabeth into the shadows of this history. And that was, I guess, to go back to your first question, what inspired me.

[00:46:49.4] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah, no, I think that's excellent. And maybe returning to a point you made at the beginning about Stanton and public memory, you had mentioned some of the controversies around her statements about race, you know, during Reconstruction. Another thing you highlight in the book is, you know, a turn to more nativist and anti-immigrant language in the late 19th century. Maybe just take an extra beat in, you know, giving us a sense of her views there and, you know, as best you can, sort of place them in context in how we should think about them in the 21st century in light of the sort of fullness of her thinking and of her life?

[00:47:27.5] Ellen DuBois: This is the biggest problem or the biggest challenge I had in this book because, as I said, generations younger than me have basically canceled her. When I tried to get this book published, I was told by a publisher that I had a lot of experience with that she was too toxic. Now, to thread my way between... I don't know, Cesar Chavez is in my head right now, right, to thread my way between historical figures of great note, taking stands that are very, very difficult for us to, I would even say stomach, is a real challenge. But these prejudices, these elite prejudices, only characterized certain parts of her time. Her range was very much greater. And I think some people may find this excessively defensive of her. But other members of her... Other people like her who had gone through abolition and women's rights may have harbored similar opinions, but they never were as outspoken as she was. When she was angry, that was it. When she was enraged, nothing could silence her. So I can even hear in my own voice, I'm a little overprotective of her, but there's something about her that makes her still the most interesting and controversial suffragist of the movement.

[00:49:11.1] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. I mean, again, between Stanton and Anthony, they have such wide influence and they live such long lives and remain active. I can't fathom one, how much Stanton achieved while she was raising her kids. It makes me feel like a completely inadequate loser in a lot of ways. And then to think of how active they are all the way up until the later stages of their life, give us a sense as they're passing from this life, what had they achieved within the women's suffrage movement? Where was the women's suffrage movement at that point? And sort of, who are they handing... What are they handing off to the next generation? Give us just that situation of where things stand at the end of their lives.

[00:50:00.7] Ellen DuBois: They really... I don't think they could know this, except maybe Elizabeth could see it through her own daughter. But the suffrage movement was on the verge of being taken up by a younger generation which could do things, could see things that Elizabeth and Susan and even the most radical people around them could not see. One was the importance of what was now a large and mobilized working class, including a substantial portion of women, the importance of those women to the suffrage movement. And once you get 10 years after Elizabeth's death, you see her daughter leading a massive protest on the streets of New York, where many of the protesters are carrying their union signs. So the other thing is some people, including Elizabeth's daughter, were able to break through the racism of their parents' generation. And Harriet, her daughter, did her best to bring Black women, some Black women, closer to the suffrage movement. That was a very difficult thing to do and couldn't really be achieved. But they... And then I guess the other thing to say is, okay, she dies in 1902. It's a minute later, the birth control movement breaks out. Margaret Sanger. So, as the idea of public equality begins to be more and more widely accepted, the notion of personal freedom is coming onto the table for the feminist movement and will be increasingly central to it for the next 100 years.

[00:51:54.1] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. And we're rounding towards the end of our time together here, Ellen, and I can't help but just, you know, you've already reflected a few different times in our conversation about Stanton and public memory around her. And we're obviously going through a year in which we're doing a lot of thinking about American history in light of the 250th anniversary of America's birthday. So maybe leave our audience with a sense of how do you think we should think about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her legacy within the broader American story?

[00:52:25.9] Ellen DuBois: Well, I think of her as a prophet, and a prophet of two things. One is, I do believe her elitism notwithstanding, she believed deeply in American democracy. When her friends came over from England... She spent a lot of time in England with her grandchildren. When her friends come over, she just wanted them to see the glory of the American republic, of republican democracy. The other thing is showing us that the question of women's rights was not... Was... Needed to... Women needed to have the right to vote. And we have certainly, in the last period, experienced what they can do both for their rights and for democracy. But women's freedom only had its beginning with the right to vote, not its termination. And that's really important because I do think we tend to see women's suffrage as something that ends something, and it doesn't, it really begins something.

[00:53:35.9] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. So beautifully put. And so, Ellen Carol DuBois, thank you for sharing the legacy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and all of its richness with us and helping us celebrate Women's History Month. Thank you so much. It's been great to talk to you.

[00:53:49.4] Ellen DuBois: Tom, you are a great raconteur. She would have liked you a lot.

[00:53:52.9] Thomas Donnelly: Thank you very much, Ellen.

[00:53:53.9] Ellen DuBois: Okay, bye.

[music]

[00:54:00.3] Thomas Donnelly: This program was streamed live on March 23, 2026, as a part of the NCC's America's Town Hall Series. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs and register to join us virtually at constitutioncenter.org. This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock, with production support from Charles Sahm and Scott Bomboy. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore, Trey Sullivan, and Tristan Worsham. Please recommend We the People to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. And always, remember that the National Constitution Center is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit, and we rely on your generosity, passion and engagement for all of our programming, including this podcast. Please consider donating today at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tom Donnelly.