



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

***"I ask the rights to pursue
happiness by having a
voice in that government
to which I am accountable."***

Victoria Woodhull

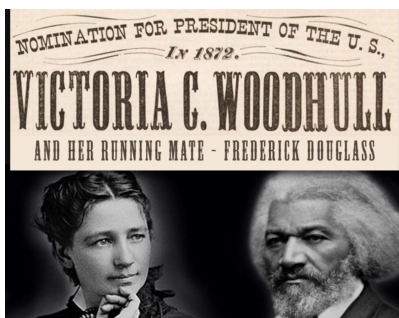
First Woman to Run for President, 1872



Photo: Matthew Brady

With the upcoming Presidential election, I wanted to learn more about the women who paved the way. The first [two women](#) to run for their party's nomination were abolitionists [Lydia Maria Child](#) and [Lucretia Coffin Mott](#) (relative of Mary Ware Dennett!). They each received one vote at the [Liberty Party's](#) convention in 1847 which ended their aspirations for the office. Nearly 30 years later, Victoria Woodhull won her party's nomination and launched a formal campaign becoming the first woman to do so. Next month, I'll feature a story about who followed in Woodhull's shoes! Stay tuned...

Victoria Woodhull: First Woman to Run for President



Nearly 150 years before Kamala Harris and Hilary Clinton, in 1872 [Victoria Claflin Woodhull](#) became the first woman to win her party's nomination as candidate for President of the United States. Running on a platform of universal suffrage, equal rights, and equal pay, Woodhull selected renowned civil rights activist [Frederick Douglass](#) as her running mate making him the first African American candidate for Vice President.

A co-founder of the [Equal Rights Party](#), Woodhull was also the first woman to own a brokerage firm on Wall Street. She was a newspaper and magazine publisher, suffragist, and free love activist who fought for her beliefs, regardless of the consequences.

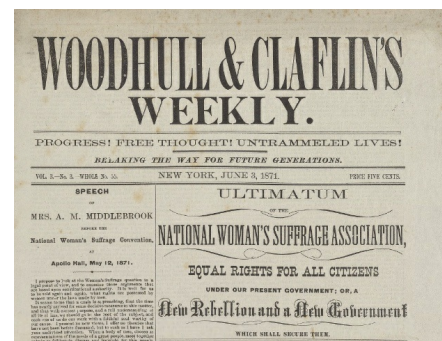
[Born](#) into poverty in 1838 in Homer, Ohio, Woodhull received little formal education. As a child, her father was suspected of torching his business to collect insurance money, so her family took to the road as traveling fortune tellers and healers who also made and sold home remedies.

In 1853, at the age of 15, Woodhull married and had two children. When the marriage fell apart soon after, Woodhull was forced to take odd jobs as a clerk, seamstress, and an actress to support herself and her children. After a time, she reunited with her younger sister, Tennessee Claflin, and together they resumed the family business and the Gypsy lifestyle.

Declaring herself a [“free lover,”](#) that is, a believer that women and men should be able to choose and change romantic partners at will, she divorced in 1865. Free Lovers also sought to destigmatize social taboos surrounding divorce for women and also make it easier for them to leave abusive husbands.

While the sisters promoted themselves as medical mediums and spiritualists, Woodhull remarried in 1866 and settled in New York. Rather than regarded as social pariahs, the two women were regaled as colorful personalities by the rich and famous including the young railroad titan, Cornelius Vanderbilt who hired them as his personal spiritualists.

Vanderbilt advised the women on financial matters and in 1870 funded the start up of their brokerage firm, [Woodhull, Claflin, and Company](#). Within six weeks, they amassed a fortune of nearly [\\$700,000](#)—about \$17 million in 2024 dollars. As the first female owned brokerage, the press dubbed them “the Bewitching Brokers” and the “Queens of Finance.” But they were determined to use their fortune to further causes they believed in. They launched [Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly](#) to promote their politics and cultural views on women's suffrage, racism, poverty, and harsh labor conditions.



Thomas Nast, Harper's Weekly

Never one to shy away from controversy, in 1871 Woodhull published the first English translation of [Karl Marx's](#), *The Communist Manifesto*. She also ran a [story](#) about an affair between Henry Ward Beecher, one of the most renowned religious leaders of the era, and a female parishioner. The article led to Woodhull's [arrest](#) under the [Comstock Laws](#) on grounds of obscenity. Dubbing Woodhull, “Mrs. Satan,” the anti-vice crusader, [Anthony Comstock](#), had the sisters arrested eight times in six months. Woodhull spent election night in a New York jail.

As a suffragist, Woodhull's oratory skills catapulted her into leadership roles at suffrage conventions. Alongside

Susan B. Anthony and Isabella Beecher Hooker, Woodhull made history in 1871 as the [first](#) woman to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives. She argued that the Constitution didn't deny women the vote.

Although she was rebuffed, in 1872, at age 34, Woodhull won the nomination of the [Equal Rights Party](#) to run for President making her the first female candidate in history. The nomination pitted her against incumbent [Ulysses S. Grant](#).

In a [letter](#) to the *New York Herald*, Woodhull wrote: "While others argued the equality of woman with man, I proved it by successfully engaging in business; while others sought to show that there was no valid reason why woman should be treated socially and politically as a being inferior to man, I boldly entered the arena of politics and business and exercised the rights I already possessed."



Not surprisingly, Woodhull's campaign failed to gain traction. It would be nearly 50 years before women won the right to vote and her arrest over the article on Henry Beecher's affair, ensnared her in costly and lengthy legal battles. Further, Comstock's continual harassment tarnished Woodhull's reputation even among suffrage leaders who viewed her as too radical. Eventually, Woodhull and her sister were forced to stop publishing their newspaper.

By 1877 Woodhull was on the edge of financial ruin. Divorced from her second husband, she and her sister [moved](#) to England where Woodhull became active in the British suffrage movement. There, she resumed her role as a publisher from 1892 to 1901, when she and her daughter launched [Humanitarian](#), a journal to promote eugenics or selective reproduction. In its early stages, [eugenics](#) was a popular idea embraced by many as a way of improving humanity's lot by eliminating mental and physical illness, and disease. The movement soon devolved into the abhorrent notion of ridding the population of "undesirable" people through forced sterilization.

Woodhull [died](#) in England in 1927. She was 88 years-old. Although Woodhull has been the subject of biographies and scholarly papers, there is only one monument in the U.S. honoring this groundbreaking pioneer: a clocktower at the [Robbins Hunter Museum](#) in Ohio, near her birthplace.



Robbins Hunter Museum, Ohio

Ask a Friend: Why are ground-breaking women so often vilified?

Ask Yourself: What will change that?

Victoria Woodhull Mugs Available!

[Check out](#)

Mugs, Book Bags, Aprons

& More...



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Please share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com



Sharon Spaulding | 40 Wanderwood Way | Sandy, UT 84092 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)