

Controversy over the Fourteenth Amendment

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When the American Civil War ended, several legal challenges faced the newly-reunited nation. One was how to define a citizen so that former slaves, and other African Americans, were included. During the Civil War, the developing women's rights movement had largely put their agenda on hold, with most of the women's rights advocates supporting the Union efforts. Many of the women's rights advocates had been abolitionists as well, and so they eagerly supported the war which they believed would end slavery.

When the Civil War ended, women's rights advocates expected to take up their cause once again, joined by the male abolitionists whose cause had been won. But with the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution (proposed on June 13, 1866, and ratified July 28, 1868), a split developed in the women's rights movement over whether to support it as a means of finishing the job of establishing full citizenship for the freed slaves and other African Americans.

Why was the Fourteenth Amendment controversial in women's rights circles? This is because, for the first time, the proposed Amendment added the word "male" into the US Constitution. Section 2, which dealt explicitly with voting rights, used the term "male." And women's rights advocates, especially those who were promoting woman suffrage or the granting of the vote to women, were outraged.

Some women's rights supporters, including Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Frederick Douglass, supported the Fourteenth Amendment as essential to guaranteeing black equality and full citizenship, even though it was flawed in only applying voting rights to males. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the efforts of some women's suffrage supporters to defeat both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, because the Fourteenth Amendment included the offensive focus on male voters. When the Amendment was ratified, they advocated, without success, for a universal suffrage amendment.

Each side of this controversy saw the others as betraying basic principles of equality: supporters of the 14th Amendment saw the opponents as betraying efforts for racial equality, and opponents saw the supporters as betraying efforts for the equality of the sexes. Stone and Howe founded the American Woman Suffrage Association and a paper, the *Woman's Journal*. Anthony and Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association and began publishing the *Revolution*.

The rift would not be healed until, in the late years of the 19th century, the two organizations merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association.