

The women's rights movement after the Civil War, 1866

Introduction

The fight for women's rights that had begun in earnest with the convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, diminished in the 1850s and 1860s as reformers focused on the abolition of slavery and the Civil War, but the movement did not die. Mary E. Tillotson (fl. 1850–1898) was one of those women who championed equal rights both before and after the Civil War.

Tillotson was born in upstate New York, married a distant cousin, had a son, and soon divorced her husband. She and her son, Ray, moved in 1864 to Vineland, New Jersey, where she bought land, built a house, and raised her child without the support of a husband or family—a rarity in the mid-nineteenth century. Tillotson was a vocal supporter of women's rights and a proponent of dress reform who wore “scientific costume”—trousers and a long jacket—rather than the long, full, heavy dresses typical of the day. In Vineland, founded in 1861 as a utopian town based on temperance and progressive thinking, she was able to pursue her interests and live as a single mother without the social and economic difficulties she might have encountered elsewhere.

In this letter, Tillotson tried to convince her sister to move to Vineland, citing the many social activities available as well as the growth of the settlement. She wrote with enthusiasm about the “woman's right union” she belonged to and their anticipated attendance at the Women's Rights Convention in New York on May 10, 1866—the first women's rights convention held since the Civil War:

no end to reformers—the best speakers—& so many good entertainments, (something every night) that I cant go to a tenth of them. I think there will be a good theatre ere many years. We've a “woman's right union” & you may believe we talk large things. Very many are in principle dress reformers, & dress right at home, & are beginning to feel that they shall go out in it soon. The Union are going to send representatives to the Womans Right Convention in N.Y. May 10th, & open correspondence with Mrs. Stanton, Lucy Stone &c We are discussing the right of suffrage in earnest.

Excerpt

You'd be surprised to look at my place & know that it was bought wild last Oct. Should not think of asking less than 2000 for it. The settlement is going on fast as ever, & [illegible] generally hoping for permanent prosperity: but some come with little means, managed poorly, & get discouraged. If I had bought when I first came, should have saved, or made, hundreds. Most of the lecturers who come here, like it so well, that they settle. no end to reformers—the best speakers—& so many good entertainments, (something every night) that I cant go to a tenth of them. I think there will be a good theatre ere many years. We've a “woman's right union” & you may believe we talk large things. Very many are in principle dress reformers, & dress right at home, & are beginning to feel that they shall go out in it soon. The Union are going to send

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study Mary Tillotson's letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history and evidence from the letter to answer the following questions:

1. Note the date of the letter. Why did the campaign for women's suffrage resume at that time? Base your response on your knowledge of the era and the contents of the letter.
2. How did Tillotson depict life in Vineland? What kinds of opportunities and freedoms did she and other women have in that community?
3. Why would Tillotson be considered "progressive" for her time?
4. What topics do you think Tillotson indicated when she said that at meetings of the Woman's Right[s] Union, "we talk large things"?

Transcript

Vineland, N.J.

Apr. 12th 186[6]

Dear Sister,

Yours came last eve, & I conclude if you resolve to come here to spend next winter you ought to know it soon, hence will write now. Am very glad to hear from you—had been wondering if I must write you again, & tell you so. Tho' I visit you in spirit—& often seem to know just how it is with you, & all the rest of our folks, my seemings are not quite clear enough to answer for all communications. Glad to hear from mother & father, George & Nelson. Edwin had written that George had another son, but I dont know yet as that is all they have had since losing little Lucy. Please tell me. I promised Libby I'd write her, but have waited for my photograph to send. I've had it taken, or others have had it, but I was feeling so poorly that it was only true to my worst moods. Am feeling tolerably well now, & perhaps ought to get it ere I do much gardening & break down again. The breaking in of spring brought me partially to life, & I've been out & set my yard, walks, flower beds &c. in order. They look well: have got in some flower roots—set 5 weeping willow sprouts, a few shrubs &c. The garden is ploughed, stumps out, roots pretty well out, & one hundred strawberry plants set,—mean to set several hundred, some raspberries & black berries, & a few grapes & dwarf pear & peaches, but they are costly &

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Vineyard, N.J. Apr. 12th 1866.

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Mary Tillotson to her sister, April 12, 1866, p. 1 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04558.173)

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Mary Tillotson to her sister, April 12, 1866, p. 2 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04558.173)