

The Highlights - Re-Claiming Susan B. Anthony

"Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less."

- Susan B. Anthony

It is not hard to imagine why the Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum, located on a small road in the post-industrial town of Adams, MA, is not well attended. A search for the museum on Google maps sends me to the right street address, but in the wrong state, just over the border in Vermont. (If you are interested, the owner of the abandoned dairy processing plant at that address is looking to sell.) You might also mistake the SBA Birthplace Museum in Adams with another museum in Anthony's name - The Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, New York (1). Their monikers are nearly the same and their branding strikingly similar, yet upon closer inspection, their agenda could not be more at odds. On the Susan B. Anthony House website, if you click on the tab entitled "We're not THAT Susan B. Anthony," the distinction between these institutions is made clear:

"This Susan B. Anthony House is a non-partisan Museum and learning center in Rochester, New York, that strives to be an authentic witness to the life and work of Susan B. Anthony. Please do not confuse us with any other organization bearing the 'Susan B. Anthony' name. In particular, please don't confuse us with the political action group, the Susan B. Anthony List, that claims to 'support pro-life leadership' and apparently has a lot of money to leverage."



Brian, the twentysomething guide at the Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum, insists that during the summer "peak season" tourists do indeed find their way to this unassuming house, but today I am going to get a private tour. Brian is the kind of docent who delivers his tour

with an enthusiasm that begs you to believe you are his first, but his studied performance reeks of the eagerness of a thespian-cum-museum educator. He starts the tour in a small room that chronicles the local appreciation of the museum; framed letters on quasi-official letterhead and an array of certificates and awards flank the walls. There is an album with blurry 4" x 6" photos documenting the well-funded (over a quarter of a million dollars in total) "restoration" of our most illustrious suffragette's birthplace. This proud documentation of the renovation ultimately belies any claim to historical authenticity; this tiny house has been gutted, save for a token remnant of horse-hair plaster exposed on one interior wall, preserved and on display.

Susan B. Anthony, the Quaker American pioneer of the women's suffrage movement, was in fact born in the house in which I stand. She lived here until her sixth birthday, after which the property changed hands many times. In 1926, The Society of Friends Descendants established a small museum dedicated to Anthony's legacy, but it only remained open to the public until 1949. In 2006, the property was sold to the town's own Miss Carol Crossed, a noted Christian political activist (2). With the help of private donations, she was able to convert the house into The Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum, and so, the "restoration" began.

Stepping into the kitchen/parlor room, I ask Brian how they managed to preserve the Anthony family's various domestic artifacts on display before us. Wooden spoons, cast-iron pans, and antique table linens are all neatly arranged on a long, rustic dining table. He unabashedly concedes that these things were simply "found at tag sales around town." There is a rather eerily rendered painting of Susan B. Anthony as a pig-tailed child, donated by a local artist, on display above the hearth. The colors are so crisp it almost reads as a cartoon.

I follow Brian into the next space: the "sitting room by day, and the master bed by night, at least during Lucy's five pregnancies - five out of six occurred in this very room." We pause here as Brian spins a yarn about Anthony's Quaker upbringing and her mother Lucy's extended periods of gestation. Stacks of early American quilts are folded in the cupboard, a wooden cradle sits on the floor, a bedpan underneath the mattress, and again, the walls are adorned with artistic interpretations by local artists. The wall text reads, "Susan came into the world in a cold, dreary season. The event was looked forward to with dread by the mother, but when the little one arrived, she received a warm and loving welcome."



Once inside the reconstructed dry goods store that Daniel Anthony, Susan's father, operated from their home, Brian takes a place behind the counter. He tells me of Daniel's business practices and their collective involvement in the temperance movement, the

nineteenth-century effort to encourage moderation in the consumption of alcohol. As Quakers, it makes sense that the Anthony family took an active role in this movement. Aside from those whose sobriety was a religious conviction, most proponents of temperance were women, many of whom had suffered the effects of their husbands' unbridled drinking. Though Brian paints a vivid picture, the vitrines, with faux-aged photos and generic "archival documents" fail in their theatrical attempt to transport us back in time. And finally, we stumble upon a tabletop glass case containing five or six 2" ceramic shards that appear to be the bounty from an archeological dig. The label reads, "Pieces found in the renovation of the birthplace during the 2008 renovation."

It is not until we enter the last room of the tour that we find the meat of the exhibition: a wraparound vinyl wall presentation that covers the history of Anthony's political career: the temperance movement, civil rights, women's suffrage, and ultimately - "Opposition to Restellism." Brian breezes through this last section, but notes in passing that "Restellism" was the nineteenth-century term for abortion, derived from the name of a noted abortionist of the time, Mme. Restell. Brian expounds on this French pseudonym (her given name was Anne Trow Lohman), explaining that, "in the nineteenth century if you wanted to sell anything related to sex, you claimed you were French. It gave you a great deal of cachet." The wall text introduces this profiteer, "a New York City abortionist who advertised her services in *The New York Times*." Because *The Revolution* (3), Susan B. Anthony's feminist newspaper, "refused to advertise abortion services and suffered financially for this moral stand," the conclusion is drawn that Anthony herself was indeed, "the first anti-abortion feminist." But, as Brian points out, abortion was a primitive and dangerous practice at the time, and Anthony's reasons for barring advertising of this nature in her newspaper are never made abundantly clear. It is possible that Anthony simply did not wish to divert attention from her primary cause - women's suffrage. Given the right to vote, women might be able to affect legislative change on such issues as reproductive rights for themselves.



Brian is notably less animated in this part of the museum; with all that writing on the wall, there is less room to wax poetic. He insists that his personal politics are irrelevant in this sticky matter, but admits that the museum would not exist without funding from pro-life

Democrat and pro-life Republican groups. His boss would "have [his] head" for speaking so freely on the topic, but if you stop to read the names on the small donor plaque by the front door, Friends Witness for a Pro-Life Peace Testimony, Chiaroscuro Foundation, and Susan B. Anthony List Education Fund are clearly engraved in gold. Their causes include barring sex education in New York City schools and blocking Planned Parenthood from receiving federal funding. The Susan B. Anthony List is the key lobby group fighting against abortion rights today; Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin are counted among their ranks, and the organization lays unequivocal claim to Anthony's legacy:

"Courageous women leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognized that authentic women's rights could never be built upon the broken rights of innocent unborn children. They believed that abortion was just a tool of oppression used against women."

Upon her death on March 13, 1906, Anthony requested a simple wreath of violets be placed on the door of her home in Rochester in lieu of the ceremonial mourning customary of the time. Susan B. Anthony is a canonized American icon, yet her legacy is oddly slippery. How is it that this beloved leader of the suffrage movement could become a mascot for Feminists for Life, a group that claims it "seeks to preserve the legacy of early suffragists who fought for women and children - born and unborn"? It is difficult to imagine becoming the face of a controversial political group 106 years after your death. As a deceased historical figure, neither the left nor the right can accurately project where Anthony's allegiance would lie with regard to present day debates over reproductive rights. Although abortion was indeed a topic of discussion at the close of the nineteenth century, the surrounding politics cannot be compared to those of the today.

Remember the "Susie B." dollar coin, minted in 1979? Me neither, but it marked Anthony as the first woman to be represented on U.S. currency. Its already meager production was canceled in 1999 (it was replaced with the far more popular Sacagawea coin). Though they are no longer minted, "Susie B." coins are still in circulation.

If you happen to acquire any of these Susan B. Anthony dollar coins, please consider donating them to your local Planned Parenthood. I hear they are in need of financial support.

NOTES

1. The Susan B. Anthony House became a public institution in 1945. The SBA Birthplace Museum was created in 2007.
2. Carol Crossed is a member of the Board of Directors of Feminists for Life of New York, and she is a pro-life Democrat. She has been arrested 19 times for civil disobedience. Crossed bought Anthony's birthplace at auction for \$164,000 in 2006.

3. The Revolution was a weekly newspaper produced entirely by a female staff. Anthony trained women to run the printing press, in the hopes that they would go on to be accepted in the industry and to work for other publications of the time.