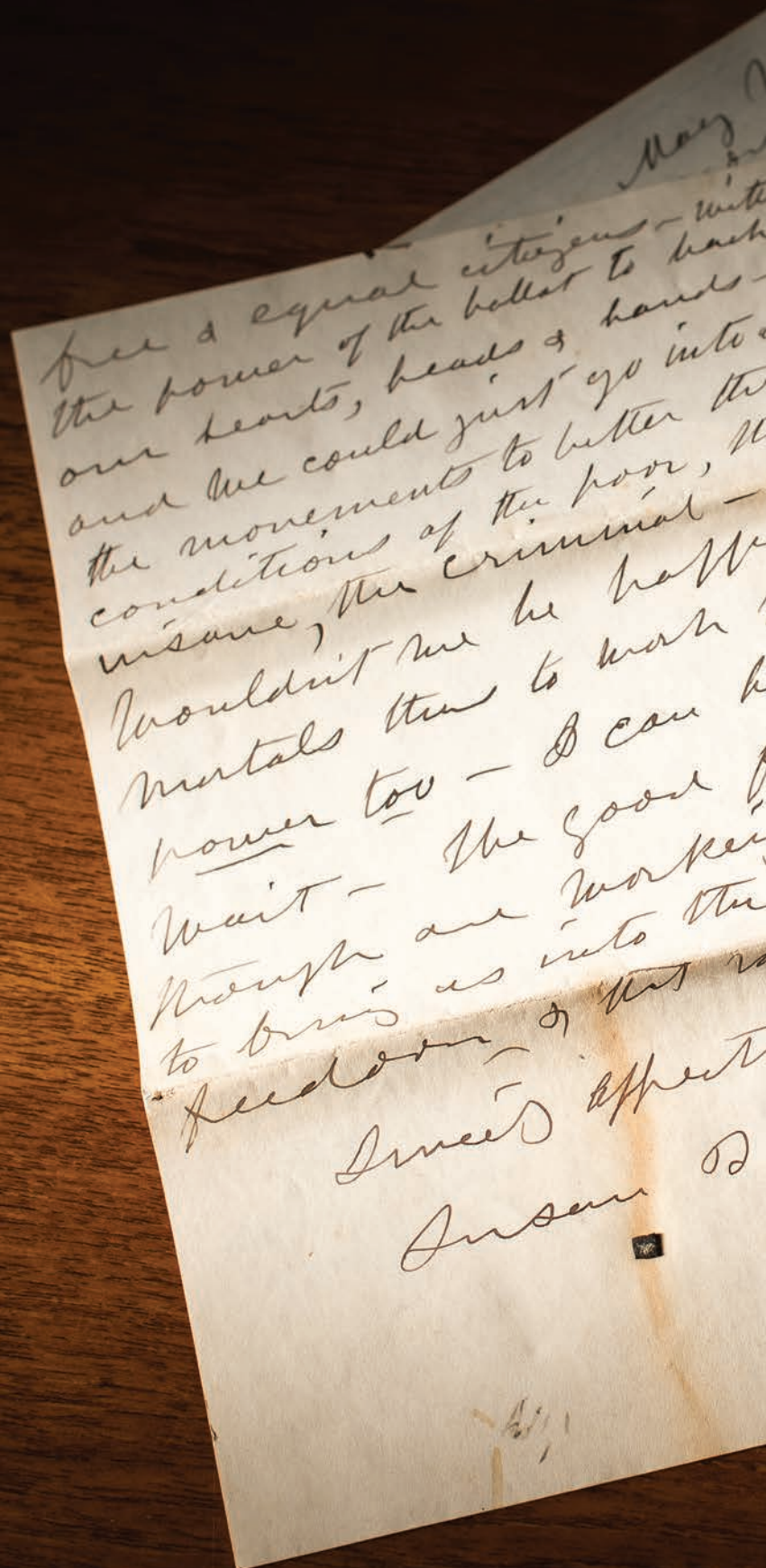


# Signed, Susan B. Anthony

A 'stunning discovery' adds to Rochester's rich history as home to the women's suffrage movement.

By Sandra Knispel

**HISTORIC FIND:** Hundreds of documents owned by suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker and now held by the University offer new perspectives on the suffrage movement, through materials like letters (this page) from Susan B. Anthony.





meeting is not  
her presence  
now, & that  
disappointment  
appear to be - but  
could not go - it would  
mean that we could  
not see  
with us - Let's see -  
Brown, Mr. Gage, Mr.  
Bourgeois, Miss Gage -  
so many lesser lights -  
think there is no doubt but  
that they will spend for us -  
of good men might be  
a me must get them  
do you think would be the  
desirable? -  
Conn. has gone Democratic -  
I am glad to have the Repub.  
taken in their streets - &  
Ohio Temperance tickets all beaten.  
that is good too - will open the  
women's eyes to see the hall at





T

he picture most people know of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the women's suffrage movement in America is one painted in broad strokes and grand designs. Beyond the vision, grit, and heroism, however, the workaday details of how the movement was actually run—the backroom negotiations, convention planning, and grassroots organizing—have been less understood.

That may soon change.

A recently discovered trove of letters, speeches, petitions, photographs, and pamphlets—forgotten for a century in attics and barns, and on porches—has opened a window

onto the quotidian details of that historic movement. Originally owned by suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker, the collection, acquired by the University late last year, includes dozens of letters from fellow movement leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Part of a notable family of reformers, Hooker was the daughter of the Reverend Lyman Beecher and a half-sister of social reformer and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, educator Catharine Beecher, and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe.

The documents were written and collected between 1869 and 1880. "It's an incredibly critical period in this movement," says Lori Birrell, a special collections librarian who organized the collection for the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation.

With the 14th Amendment just passed, newly enshrining a host of citizenship rights, and the debate raging over granting black men the right to vote, the time was very contentious. The suffragists saw their chances of being included in the 15th Amendment quickly slipping away. Reading Anthony's missives makes clear that she considered Hooker her confidant and friend.

Hooker, it appears, had become a central mediator among many strong personalities. At times, the leaders were fiercely at odds with each other over how best to proceed. The letters map the nuances of the internal politics of the movement.

"Something that I've been really struck by is just how exhausting it must have been to try to keep going for this long," says Birrell. "You get to this period in the 1870s and they've tried everything—state, national, they tried voting and then got gotten arrested for it in 1872. They've tried all of these things and they just kept at it. To read that year after year in these letters is simply amazing."

The story of their discovery sounds like something straight out of PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. George and Libbie Merrow were cleaning out their Bloomfield, Connecticut, home last year when they came across an open wooden crate among family detritus and some antiques.

It was "mixed in with old magazines, old funny tools, all sorts of things," Libbie Merrow recalls. Inside the roughly two-by-one-and-a-half-foot box, they found stacks of letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs, all sprinkled liberally with mouse droppings. Dusty and probably undisturbed for decades, the small crate had survived two prior moves over a span of about 70 years, having been passed down through the Merrow family twice.

In 1895, George Merrow's grandfather, also named George, purchased the former Beecher Hooker house at 34 Forest Street in Hartford, Connecticut. Evidently, the Hookers had left their personal papers behind in the attic when the big, elegant home they had built for themselves became too costly, forcing them to sell it. The new owners, just like their famous predecessors, stored their family's personal and business papers in the attic.

After the elder Merrow died in 1943, the papers moved with his son Paul Gurley Merrow to his farm in Mansfield, Connecticut. When Paul died in 1973,

his nephew—Libbie's husband, George—inherited the property.

In 2010, the couple sold the last of the buildings—the big barn. As part of the deal, the new owner had given the Merrows five years to clean out its contents. Stuffed to the brim with old furniture, tools, two boats, wagons, farm equipment, books, and magazines, the barn was a hiding spot for the Beecher Hooker papers.

That is, until the five-year grace period was up and the family began to clean out in earnest. Having climbed through a broken window into a small side room of the barn in order to open the door that was stuck shut, they discovered a wooden crate with wedding invitations to the marriage of the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Hooker. Nothing clicked. Nevertheless, the Merrows decided to keep the box.

"I don't think that we attached anywhere near the significance to that collection at that time," says George Merrow. A family of "pack rats" is how Libbie Merrow describes the habit of "never throwing away anything that could be kept."

The Merrows took the musty crate with them to their home in Bloomfield, and left it for a year under a tarp on their large porch. When the couple got ready to sell



**MEDIATING INFLUENCE:** Isabella Beecher Hooker (opposite) played a central and sometimes mediating role in the suffrage movement at a time when its storied leaders—Elizabeth Cady Stanton (above left) and Susan B. Anthony (right)—and others were mapping out the internal politics of the movement.

their own home in 2016, they finally brought it into their kitchen for closer inspection. At that point, they had reached out to rare book and manuscript dealers Bob Seymour and Adrienne Horowitz Kitts, with whom they had worked in the past. The dealers painstakingly dusted, researched, and organized the jumbled contents over the span of months.

"I can't tell you how thrilling it was to hold a letter that she had held more than a hundred years before," recalls rare book dealer Kitts when she discovered the first letter signed "Susan B. Anthony."

Libbie Merrow says she was pleased when Kitts told her what she had found. "They called up and said: 'We have pretty exciting papers here.' As they went along they realized it was more and more exciting."

Adds husband Paul: "We didn't jump up and down exactly, but it was pretty exciting to hear what they felt the value was."

Once they finished cataloging, the dealers offered the trove on behalf of their clients for sale to Rochester. They chose Rochester because of the University's existing



# The Ubiquitous Beechers

The Beecher family influenced almost every religious, political, and social movement in the United States during the 19th century.

## Thomas Kinnicut Beecher

1824–1900

A half-brother of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas was a Congregationalist minister in Elmira, New York, and a writer and lecturer, with a conservative leaning, on contemporary issues.

## William Henry Beecher

1802–1889

Eldest son of Lyman Beecher and his first wife, Roxana Foote, William was a cabinetmaker and a clerk before becoming a preacher. He was active in the antislavery and temperance movements.

## Edward Beecher

1803–1895

Abolitionist Edward was a preacher and the president of Illinois College. He wrote *Narrative of the Riots at Alton* about the 1837 murder of friend Elijah Lovejoy by an antiabolitionist mob.

## Charles Beecher

1815–1900

Youngest child of Lyman and Roxana, Charles lived for a time in New Orleans. His letters home describing life under slavery shaped sister Harriet's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

## Henry Ward Beecher

1813–1887

Second in fame only to Harriet among the children, Henry was a renowned abolitionist preacher. His adultery scandal in the 1870s created deep family, and even social, rifts.



## Isabella Beecher Hooker

1822–1907

The eldest child of Lyman and his second wife, Harriet Porter Beecher, Isabella helped to found the National Woman's Suffrage Association in 1869 with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

## Catharine Esther Beecher

1800–1878

The first Beecher child, pioneering education reformer and school founder Catharine was a proponent of education for young women to fortify their role in the home. She opposed women's suffrage.

## Lyman Beecher

1775–1863

One of the most famous clergymen in the first half of the 19th century, Lyman garnered national attention with his antislavery sermons in response to the Missouri Compromise in the 1820s.

## Mary Beecher Perkins

1805–1900

Less outspoken than her siblings, Mary worked with sister Catharine to open the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut. She was the grandmother of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

## Harriet Beecher Stowe

1811–1896

The author of more than 30 books, Harriet in the 1850s was catapulted to international fame by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which galvanized the antislavery movement.

## Roxana Foote Beecher

1775–1816

Quietly intellectual, Roxana was the granddaughter of Revolutionary War general Andrew Ward. To help the family financially, she ran with her sister Mary a small boarding school for girls while the family lived on Long Island.

## Harriet Porter Beecher

1790–1835

Lyman married second wife Harriet in 1817. From Portland, Maine, she was better connected socially than Lyman, related to senators, a Maine governor, and other political figures. She was the mother of Isabella, Thomas, and James.



## James Chaplin Beecher

1828–1886

Youngest of all the Beecher children, James (left) lived a life at sea before becoming a missionary in China. He served as a colonel in the Union army during the Civil War, recruiting the First North Carolina Volunteers, an African-American regiment.

## George Beecher

1809–1843

Abolitionist George preached in Rochester and nearby Batavia before returning to the family home in Ohio, where the Beechers had moved when Lyman became president of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati in 1832.



holdings of Isabella Beecher Hooker and John Hooker papers, as well its Susan B. Anthony collection, one of the largest in the country.

The University, located in a region that was a hotbed of 19th-century social reform movements, also boasts papers of what Birrell calls the “supporting cast”—local activists Isaac and Amy Post, the Porter family, and other Rochesterians who were part of micro-movements with national implications.

The purchase was made with funds from Friends of the University of Rochester Libraries, a gift from retired manuscripts librarian and former assistant director of Rare Books and Special Collections Mary Huth, and a substantial anonymous gift, augmenting the University’s existing special collections acquisition fund.

“Acquisitions like this are so important,” says University Vice Provost Mary Ann Mavrinnac, who is also the Andrew H. and Janet Dayton Neilly Dean of Libraries. “They add to our already rich resources, draw researchers and provide the basis for teaching—which students love as they are working with original manuscripts on topics that speak to them. It’s exciting to hear the voices of these intellectual women come alive.”

However, unlike other Anthony letters already in the University’s holdings, the new collection is thoroughly political and rarely personal. The letters show the methods and machinations of (mostly) women bent on changing the status quo that heretofore had relegated them to steerage.

At times, they betray Anthony’s frustration over chronic funding problems, and with women who left the movement for marriage and children. At their rawest, they show her indignation at the general apathy for the cause of equality.

In a letter to Hooker, dated March 19, 1873, Anthony’s impatience is palpable. She tells Hooker of her planning for the suffragists’ regular May meeting in New York City. Writing stream of consciousness to her trusted friend, Anthony admonishes Hooker to show up:

“But you must not fail to be there—for we must make the Welkin ring anew with our War cry for freedom—and our constitutional right to protect it by the ballot—I hear nothing from nobody—All I can do is to run & jump to accomplish the half I see waiting before me—”

Later in the letter, Anthony mentions her impending trial for voting illegally the previous November in Rochester—where she is now speaking to potential jurors.

“I am now fairly into my Monroe County canvass—speaking every night—You [know] a Criminal cannot plead his own case before the Jury—so I am bound to plead it before the whole of Monroe County—from which the twelve must be selected—”

Anthony had been so convincing in her public addresses that the prosecutor eventually decided to move the trial to Canandaigua, in neighboring Ontario County. Without delay, Anthony set out on a lecture tour through that county, too.

Nonetheless, she was found guilty and ordered to pay \$100, plus the costs of the prosecution.

While Anthony never paid the fine, the publicity from the trial proved a windfall to the cause. The frequent laments of the suffragists for what was lost by excluding women from public discourse began to sound a newly auspicious note.

“Now wouldn’t it be splendid for us to be free & equal citizens—with

the power of the ballot to back our hearts, heads & hands—and we could just go into all the movements to better the conditions of the poor, the insane, the criminal—Wouldn’t we be happy mortals thus to work with power too,” Anthony mused to Hooker in a letter dated April 9, 1874. “I can hardly wait—The good fates though are working together to bring us into this freedom & that rapidly.”

Alas, not rapidly enough. Anthony died 14 years before Congress ratified the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting women the national right to vote. Her home state of New York had done so three years earlier.

Ann Gordon, a research professor emerita of history at Rutgers University, traveled to Rochester this winter to see the materials. “It’s quite an amazing collection,” says the noted suffrage movement expert and author of the six-volume compilation *Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (Rutgers University Press).

The collection, she says, will change prevailing scholarship on Beecher Hooker and her brief tenure in leading the suffrage movement.

“Those few years nobody has paid attention to,” Gordon Says. “We may be able to see what she tried, what techniques she used, what her arguments were, what obstacles she ran into—all those ways that one looks at a political movement and that just aren’t in the story at the moment—and I think we can put them in now. Her work is bet-




**READING NOOK:** Isabella and her husband, John Hooker, made their home in the Nook Farm community in Hartford, Connecticut, where her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Mark Twain were among the prominent residents who made it a locus of literary life in 19th-century New England.

ter documented in this collection, and it will change how we assess her importance.”

Jessica Lacher-Feldman, the Joseph N. Lambert and Harold B. Schleifer Director of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, says the collection is available for research on the website of University Libraries. Later this year, the materials will be digitized.

“While archivists and special collections librarians are entrusted to preserve historical materials for the future, we pride ourselves on providing full access to our holdings,” Lacher-Feldman says. “It’s an incredible honor to preserve and to make available these important historical materials to scholars, students, alums, and community members.”

Gordon says such collections are rare.

“An individual letter may surface at auction or at a dealer, but we don’t often find a collection of this size. It’s a real treat.” 

See a video of the story at [Youtube.com/watch?v=95shBrRdtTE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95shBrRdtTE).