

# Susan B. Anthony's Sleigh Ride Through New York State

By [Suzanne Schnittman](#) on [December 25, 2013](#)



As many of us anticipate winter traveling in New York State this week, we might complain about the price of gas, too much traffic, or long hours on the road. None of our journeys could compare with the one Susan B. Anthony embarked on December 25, 1854.

Ignoring the holiday that most of her friends and family celebrated, Susan set out, not on a train or stagecoach. Just like Santa, she chose a sleigh, pulled not by reindeer but by horses. Just like Santa, she had vast goals in mind, which seemed as miraculous as those he pursued. Yet Susan's trip would last far longer than twenty-four hours. She planned to visit each of New York's 54 counties and take four months to do so.

At age 35, Susan was a hardy young woman to whom ice and snow was no stranger. Having been born in Adams, Massachusetts, she had taught for many years in Canajoharie and now resided in Rochester. Susan knew the state would not be sheltered from winter squalls expected throughout the season. Why ever did Susan choose to launch this potentially treacherous journey in what could be the worst months of the year? The reason for her trip was to spread the word about married woman's property rights, through lectures and a petition drive. She hoped to reach women and men from one corner of the state to the next, many of whom had never heard about the woman's rights movement but who would surely find resonance with its message. For her, the timing of the journey was quite practical.

First, the New York State legislature, to whom Susan planned to deliver petitions for married women's property rights, would gather for its session early in the spring. She had four months



to collect petitions. Second, other reform groups to which Susan belonged, like temperance and antislavery, did not hold meetings during the threatening months of winter, so she had no commitments to attend them. She could also ask her reform friends like Antoinette Brown, Lucy Stone, and Ernestine Rose, to join her on the lecture circuit for a few days each. So impressed was one reformer friend, Wendell Phillips, that he advanced her \$50 to begin the campaign.



Third, in the dead of winter Susan could easily find women at home by their fires and looking for company. While husbands mended fences or tended the livestock, women were confined to indoors, often caring for children. Susan's reminders about their lack of rights required little prodding to receive their enthusiastic support. Additionally, the novelty of a woman speaking in public brought women and men out of their houses to witness the spectacle.

Susan felt optimistic about reaching a new audience, but having experienced the public from a podium in previous encounters, Susan did not expect complete compliance. Traveling alone, she had to rely on herself for the background work as well as the actual program.

Whenever she arrived in a new town or village to speak, she checked to see if notices she had sent ahead had been posted. She might have to alter her plans if unfriendly crowds banned her from appearing. Occasionally crowds who disapproved of women speaking publicly extinguished the gas lights during Anthony's talks, which she finished in the dark. Susan B. Anthony has never been known for her faint resolve, however. This trip was perfect for her temperament and for her determination. In each county seat (her general location) she held conventions with the purpose of forming a county society to advocate and advance the rights of women. She conducted two sessions a day in each location. Those at 1:00 p.m. were free and focused on a female audience. Those at 7 p.m., to which Susan invited wives to return with their husbands, cost one shilling (a coin worth 12 1/2 cents).

One of the most successful meetings was held in Albany, during Susan's 35th where despite bad weather, "quite large and respectable audiences" attended. Reporters, inexperienced with women speakers, resorted to comparing Susan to men. She had "a style of oratory that would do infinite credit to any of the male sex," according to the *Albany Argus*.

At each venue, Susan listed the wrongs against women. Among the worst was married women's inability to collect her own wages. Their earnings went automatically to their husbands. Petitions to

amend New York State's married women's property laws that governed such things as income attracted many women who signed them readily. In just a few years, the Legislature would liberalize these laws (at least for a limited period).

When a town or village had a seminary nearby, Susan requested the girls all attend her talk. One young woman said, "She talked very plainly about our rights and how we ought to stand up for them and said the world would never go right until the women had just as much right to vote and rule as men." Imagine how engaging such a performance would be for school girls, especially those caught in the darkness and cold of northern New York winters. Susan definitely knew how to draw an audience.

When only men ventured out, Susan reported that she was just as happy to talk to ten of them as a hundred. Often, a woman would peak in, but refrain from entering when she was the sole female. Thus the separate meetings worked better. Whatever the time of day or even the location, winter blustered against Susan. Her sleigh provided little protection against the snow and cold. Many days she admitted to suffering from freezing feet. On those nights, she had few companion lecturers. It required a hearty soul to continue such an onerous task. Yet continue she did. When she finally arrived home in Rochester in May, Susan could boast a positive return.

For one were her books in the black – she had collected \$2,367 and spent \$2,291 for a profit of \$76, \$50 of which she returned to Wendell Phillips. We might compare such success to Santa's. Susan brought magic like his into the lives of thousands of New Yorkers during that winter of 1854. Women became life-long believers.



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### About Suzanne Schnittman

Suzanne Schnittman received her PhD in American History from the University of Rochester, where she lives. She has been an educator for forty years, twenty at the college level. Currently an independent

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Marguerite Kearns

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