

Susan B. Anthony in Rochester

By [Marguerite Kearns](#) on [February 10, 2014](#)



Rochester is the epicenter of a great deal that's related to Susan B. Anthony in New York State. When you enter the city, it's an exhilarating experience to drive over the Frederick Douglass-Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge to reach downtown.

Rochester residents are well aware of where Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) once lived. Get lost on any city street and say you're trying to find the National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House at 17 Madison Street in the section of the

city known as the Susan B. Anthony Preservation District. Many local residents are even willing to escort you there personally.

No one asks "Who's Susan B. Anthony?" Everyone knows her as a local celebrity who worked for fifty years with Elizabeth Cady Stanton to win the vote for American women. Both Anthony and Stanton died long before 1920 when a constitutional amendment guaranteed voting rights for American women that some take for granted today. In Rochester, the memories and spirit of Anthony and Stanton live on.

Local residents may suggest that if you're free on February 12, 2014, noon to 1:30 p.m., head on over to the Rochester Riverside Convention Center (123 East Main Street) where you can join up to a thousand people who will be celebrating Susan's birthday at a special luncheon that's held annually.



This year's speaker is author Louise W. Knight whose theme is "Up and Doing," a directive Anthony used to call people into leadership and active citizenship. Knight is the author of two biographies of Jane Adams who was a suffrage activist, co-founder of Hull House, and a close friend of Susan B. Anthony.



It shouldn't be surprising that Susan B. Anthony attracts so much attention. The people of Rochester have been her neighbors since the Anthony family moved to town in 1845. Today, the house on Madison Street is where Susan lived for 40 years with her sister Mary Anthony. And this section of the city has become a model of urban development that's still in the process of emerging where the doors of 17 Madison Street open wide to the rich resources of a valuable national landmark. The Anthony house and museum represents one of the city's highly-respected institutions.

History is an essential part of Rochester's economy, as well as the Finger Lakes region of central New York that's also referred to the "Cradle" of the U.S. women's rights movement. This is due, in part, to Rochester being a little over 40 miles from Seneca Falls, the site of the 1848 Seneca Falls women's rights convention. The region is loaded with historic sites associated with free thought, abolition, native peoples, temperance, and various civil rights movements.

More than 10,000 people from the U.S. and around the world made a point of traveling to Rochester for a tour of the Susan B. Anthony home and museum last year, according to Deborah L. Hughes, President and CEO. This represents a 20 percent increase over the previous year and doesn't include several thousand people involved in off-site programs connected with the Anthony House.

"Susan B. Anthony's work is as relevant today as it was when she was living, and she said so," notes Deborah Hughes. "The work of social reform is complicated and risky, and those who work for reform must have courage, perseverance, leadership skills, and talent. Social reform movements often intersect, overlap, and conflict. It's important to remember that the revolution is not yet realized."

Outside the house on Madison Street, there's a horse chestnut tree growing, the same tree Susan loved and personally defended from a road construction project. After Susan's death, her coffin was placed in the house front parlor and positioned in such a way that the shimmering sunlight from the chestnut tree's leaves caressed the casket's lid through the window.

This year the horse chestnut tree outside 17 Madison Street didn't produce chestnuts, which concerns those who regularly monitor this living witness of Susan's legacy. In Susan's day, Rochester's townspeople were well aware of how the determined activist left the Madison Street red-brick house and began her morning power walk around the neighborhood. Susan's energy couldn't be con-

tained.



Susan demanded equality for women and an end to slavery. This included significant legislative reform, as well as the right of all American women to vote in local, state, and national elections. Anthony's "to do" list also included putting reigns on an epidemic of intoxication that left saloon owners with brimming pockets of profits and women and children tossed out into the streets without social safety nets. Susan started her activism in the temperance movement and expanded from there.

There's increasing interest in Susan B. Anthony today and even more anticipated over the next few years leading up to New York's suffrage centennial in 2017 and the 2020 national suffrage centennial. The year 2020 is the 200th anniversary of Susan's birth, the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment, and the 75th anniversary of the acquisition of the property at 17 Madison Street by the Rochester Federation of Women's Clubs as a memorial to Susan.

"Susan B. Live" is an innovative program that will be launched in the spring of 2014 by the house and museum. It will allow schools, special interest organizations, and community groups to participate in an online live tour of the Anthony House. Participants will be able to interact with docents and have questions answered about Susan B. Anthony, her life and career. This program will pave the way for an even larger number of people whose lives will be touched by an individual who refused to give up in the face of overwhelming odds.

Over the last decade or so, visitors and Anthony House staff members have witnessed the transformation of Madison Street and its environs. It's a neighborhood with resources that many point to with pride. The "1872 Café" is within walking distance of the Susan B. Anthony House –a coffee shop that serves espresso drinks, soup, salad, and pastries. It's on the same site where Susan voted illegally in 1872.

Susan's arrest for illegal voting occurred in the house at 17 Madison Street, although visitors must go to the Ontario County courthouse, about 25 miles away, to see where she was tried. Visitors to the courthouse must imagine a slightly smaller courtroom with spectators straining to see and listen to Susan B. Anthony speaking for herself and refusing to sit down in her chair despite orders from the judge.

Aunt Susan, as many called her, never attended a class on public relations and the media, but she could certainly tell us a thing or two today about activism and how to juggle home life with a demanding local, state, national and international travel schedule. She was on the road organizing for social change well into her eighties. Some visitors take the opportunity to visit Anthony house in stride. Others leave Madison Street with tears in their eyes and express openly about how it feels to walk on the same floors and open the same doors that Susan B. Anthony once did. Susan's mother bought the house in 1866 and moved in with her two daughters, Susan and Mary. Other family members and boarders lived there at various times. Mary eventually bought the house from her mother. Susan lived there until her death in 1906. Mary died the following year, in 1907.

There's a bronze sculpture by Pepsy M. Ket-tavong in a small park about a block away from 17 Madison Street called "Let's Have Tea" featuring Susan B. Anthony and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. They sit at a table across from each other drinking tea. Both lived in Rochester and shared similar interests and goals, and yet the movements of abolition and women's rights were by no means without disagreements and raised voices. For example, Douglass supported African-American men receiving the right to vote by way of the Fifteenth Amendment. Anthony disagreed.



Visitors at the park can almost hear the Susan statue wondering: Why not go for the whole ball of wax, Frederick? Why only black men? What about black women? Why not all women and men being able to vote at the same time? Didn't women pay their dues in the abolitionist movement? We can't wait any longer. Frederick sips his tea. The eyebrows on Frederick's statue highlight his hesitation. If we go for everything, Susan, we may end up with nothing. And that will set us all back. This isn't an easy road for us to travel together.

The horse chestnut in front of 17 Madison Street would chime in about the many people visiting Susan and her sister Mary during the four decades they lived there and how the tree sheltered Susan's many guests from pouring rain and driving snow. How is it possible to learn more? We merely have to fire up our imaginations and adjust our invisible hearing aids to listen.

Susan B. Anthony fans in Rochester and the region are visible and active. In the fall of 2013 the Friends of the Susan B. Anthony House sponsored a full-day bus trip to a sold-out crowd to tour Rochester from the perspective of Susan B. and how she experienced it. Little about Susan escaped

attention, including her cooking preferences in the kitchen, where she shopped, what she ordered for the household, her velvet burgundy dress on exhibit, volumes of letters to friends, family members, suffrage colleagues, and of course, the close relationship with Susan's sister, Mary.

Mary Anthony kept the home fires burning in Rochester and made sure Susan had the support she needed after returning from long trips away. Susan faced everything from being run out of town on a rail to cheering crowds of women from across the nation when she stepped up to a podium to participate in Votes for Women special events and conventions.

While Susan spoke to groups around the nation and abroad, Mary Anthony traveled, organized, and corresponded with women in small villages and towns in upstate New York. She wrote letters, attended meetings, gave speeches, and organized support for the vote. Then Mary had a hot meal ready for Susan when she staggered home from the Rochester train depot, ate dinner, took a bath, and went to bed to rest up for more traveling. Later on, other women in the household attended to the food preparation and housekeeping.

The Anthony sisters were known for their Sunday afternoon teas and Monday evening "soirees," an open house that featured music or speakers. At one event, two hundred people joined in a discussion about opening the University of Rochester to women. On another occasion, the house was packed with friends and supporters honoring Elizabeth Cady Stanton on her 80th birthday.

The Anthony sisters were there for each other, as were many friends and supporters in Rochester and across the nation who numbered in the hundreds and thousands. Susan didn't want credit for everything. She shared an astonishing energy with those she considered sisters and others she called "nieces." They received the baton directly from Susan or they carried an equality torch high and passed it to the next generation and beyond. A visit to the Susan B. Anthony House and Museum in Rochester, New York is, for many, a first step to standing on Susan's strong shoulders and bringing her vision into the present day and future.

Susan would have wanted it this way.

February 15th is Susan B. Anthony's birthday, and it is commemorated as Susan B. Anthony Day in New York, California, Florida, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The Susan B. Anthony House and Museum, 17 Madison Street in Rochester, New York is open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., closed Mondays, major holidays, and the day of the annual luncheon in February. Programming includes exhibits, educational programs, a lecture series, gift shop, and much more. Friends of the Susan B. Anthony House is the fundraising arm of the home and museum that's spon-

soring a three-day trip, August 4-7, 2014, to Rochester and highlights of the Finger Lakes, including the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, William Seward House, Wesleyan Chapel and more. For more information: susanbanthonyhouse.org or 585-235-6124.

Photos, from above: historical photo of the 17 Madison Street, in Rochester (Courtesy: Susan B. Anthony House and Museum); contemporary photo of 17 Madison Street; Susan B. Anthony (Library of Congress); Statue of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony in park nearby 17 Madison Street.



This entry was posted in African American History, Events, History and tagged Abolition, Gender History, Rochester, Suffrage Movement, Susan B. Anthony House on February 10, 2014
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