

Ernestine L. Rose

1810 - 1892



“Agitate! Agitate! ought to be the motto of every reformer.”

Ernestine L. Rose



Ernestine Rose. COURTESY OF THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY, RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Born in Poland, the daughter of a rabbi, Ernestine Rose became one of America’s leading suffragists.

Early Life in Poland

As the daughter of a Polish rabbi, Ernestine Potowska wished to study scripture with her father and insisted on learning Hebrew, as male scholars would. (Girls learned in Yiddish.) By her teens she began to doubt that scripture was divinely inspired and questioned passages that seemed to justify the subordination of women. At the age of seventeen she went to court to invalidate a wedding engagement arranged by her father. After winning the case, she left Poland – traveling alone.



Ernestine Potowska’s father was a rabbi at this synagogue in Piotrkow Trubunalski, Poland. While close to her father, she lost religious faith as a teenager.

Heavily damaged during World War II, the center of Piotrkow Trubunalski has been restored.



Peripatetic

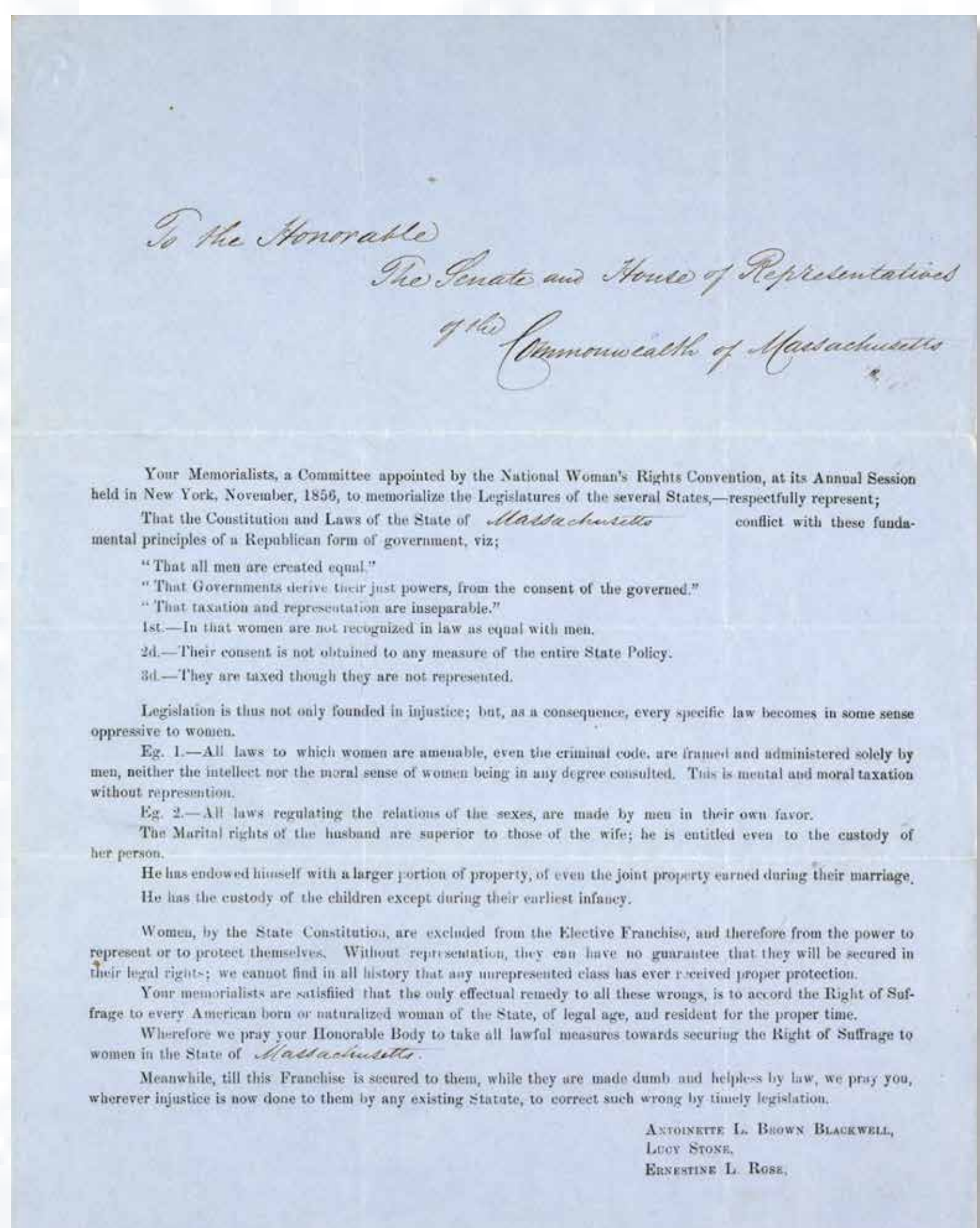
Ernestine lived in Berlin for a time, then Paris. Moving to England, she met her husband William Rose and was influenced by Robert Owen, a textile manufacturer whose model socialist community emphasized fair treatment of workers and progressive education. Arriving in America she settled in New York City.

A Rare Platform Presence

Ernestine Rose came to prominence at Woman’s Rights Conventions in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850 and 1851. She developed a reputation for clear, concise, and logical presentations. (Some guessed at her accent, variously described as “French” or “German.”) She was said to be the best of the women’s speakers early on when few women had platform experience—never embarrassing the cause or attracting ridicule. Dressing conservatively, she went by the name “Mrs. Rose,” a convention rejected by many suffragists.

“Emancipation from every kind of human bondage is my principle.”

Ernestine Rose, advocating voting rights for all men and women, black and white, after the Civil War.



Ernestine Rose joined prominent suffragist Lucy Stone, and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman ordained as a Congregationalist minister, in this 1856 petition to the Massachusetts legislature for women’s suffrage. MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES



In declining health, Rose retired to England, her husband’s birthplace. Friends Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton visited several times. LITHOGRAPH OF ROSE, PUBLISHED BY SUSAN B. ANTHONY, 1886.



In this photo of Susan B. Anthony a lithographic image of Ernestine Rose can be seen in the background. FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON PHOTO

Free Thinking, Women’s Rights, and Abolition

Best known today as a suffragist, her lectures also emphasized “free thinking,” a shorthand phrase for atheist thought. As a “foreigner,” of Jewish birth, and an atheist, Rose was not universally accepted. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison welcomed her as the only atheist to join his organization. While not religiously observant, she strongly opposed antisemitism.