

Abolitionism

Antislavery sentiment in the United States began in colonial times. But in the thirty years before the Civil War, the sentiment turned to militant action as blacks and whites began demanding the immediate abolition of slavery. Abolitionist organizations, local and national, were created to promote the emancipation of slaves and to aid fugitive slaves. Abolitionist publications attacked slavery as a moral and political evil, trying to raise the consciousness of northern whites and force the issue of slavery onto the national agenda.

Women played a strong role in the abolitionist movement, often breaking new ground for women as well as for blacks. By the mid-1830s, abolitionists engaged in heated debates over whether women should participate in "male" activities for the sake of the cause. In fact, the idea for the first convention for women's rights, held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, grew out of women abolitionists' dissatisfaction with the limitations placed on their role.

Angelina Grimke Weld, abolitionist, and pioneer lecturer and author for woman's rights, was the sister of Sarah Moore Grimke. Leaving Charleston, she became a Philadelphia abolitionist, joined the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and wrote an abolitionist pamphlet *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), which caused a stir. Taking up woman's rights as well, Angelina wrote a series of letters on the subject in the abolitionist *Liberator*. Sarah and Angelina's pioneering lectures and writing on abolition and woman's rights inspired Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, and others to take up both causes.

From a prominent South Carolina family, she was one of 14 children of John Grimke. He fathered both white and African American children, which made his daughters sensitive to the injustices of slavery. Angelina left Charleston, joined her sister in Philadelphia and followed her into the Quaker faith. Angelina held abolition meetings for women in New York City and, accompanied by her sister, lectured to "mixed" (men and women) audiences, shocking behavior in its day. Their lectures created a sensation that landed the sisters at the center of the woman's rights debate, provoking a rebuke from ministers against their "unwomanly behavior." In 1838, Angelina married abolitionist Theodore Weld "out of meeting" and both sisters were expelled from the Quaker faith. Two days later, Angelina spoke passionately at the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women held at Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia. As 3,000 white and black women gathered to hear prominent abolitionists, the speakers' voices were drowned out by a mob that had gathered outside. When the women emerged, arms linked in solidarity, they were stoned and insulted. The mob returned the following day and burned the hall, which had been inaugurated only three days earlier, to the ground.

An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South is unique because it is the only appeal made by a Southern woman to other Southern women regarding the abolition of slavery, written in the hope that Southern women would not be able to resist an appeal made by one of their own. In the essay, Grimke makes the arguments that slavery is contrary to the Declaration of Independence and to the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles. Grimke also argues that it is the responsibility of women to speak and act on their moral opposition to slavery and endure whatever persecution might result as a consequence. She dismisses the notion that women are too weak to withstand such consequences. The essay was widely distributed by the American Anti-Slavery Society, and was received with great acclaim by radical abolitionists. However, it was also received with great criticism by her former Quaker community and was publicly burned in South Carolina.

The Welds retired from the antislavery circuit and settled first in New Jersey, then Massachusetts. Sarah made her home with them for the remainder of her life. Other women

assisted the movement by boycotting slave-produced goods and organizing fairs and food sales to raise money for the cause.

William Lloyd Garrison published the *Liberator*, a radical anti-slavery newspaper, from 1831 until after the end of the Civil War in 1865. In the very first issue Garrison stated, "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD." And Garrison was heard. For more than three decades, from the first issue of his weekly paper in 1831, until after the end of the Civil War in 1865 when the last issue was published, Garrison spoke out eloquently and passionately against slavery and for the rights of America's black inhabitants.

The son of a merchant sailing master, William Lloyd Garrison was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1805. Due in large measure to the Embargo Act, which Congress had passed in 1807, the Garrison family fell on hard times while William was still young. In 1808 William's father deserted the family, forcing them to scrounge for food from more prosperous families and forcing William to work, selling homemade molasses candy and delivering wood.

In 1818, after suffering through various apprenticeships, Garrison began work for the *Newburyport Herald* as a writer and editor. This job and subsequent newspaper jobs would give the young Garrison the skills he would utilize so expertly when he later published his own paper.

When he was 25, Garrison joined the abolition movement. He became associated with the American Colonization Society; an organization that believed free blacks should emigrate to a territory on the west coast of Africa. At first glance the society seemed to promote the freedom and happiness of blacks. There certainly were members who encouraged the manumission to slaves. However, it turned out that the number of members advocating manumission constituted a minority. Most members had no wish to free slaves; their goal was only to reduce the numbers of free blacks in the country and thus help preserve the institution of slavery. By 1830 Garrison had rejected the programs of the American Colonization Society.

On January 1, 1831, he published the first issue of his own anti-slavery newspaper, the *Liberator*. In speaking engagements and through the *Liberator* and other publications, Garrison advocated the immediate emancipation of all slaves. This was an unpopular and radical view during the 1830s, even with northerners who were against slavery. What would become of all the freed slaves? Certainly they could not assimilate into American society, they thought. Garrison believed that they could assimilate. He believed that, in time, all blacks would be equal in every way to the country's white citizens. They, too, were Americans and entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Though circulation of the *Liberator* was relatively limited -- there were less than 400 subscriptions during the paper's second year -- Garrison soon gained a reputation for being the most radical of abolitionists. Still, his approach to emancipation stressed nonviolence and passive resistance, and he did attract a following. In 1832 he helped organize the New England Anti-Slavery Society, and, the following year, the American Anti-Slavery Society. These were the first organizations dedicated to promoting immediate emancipation.

Garrison was unyielding and steadfast in his beliefs. He believed that the Anti-Slavery Society should not align itself with any political party. He believed that women should be allowed to participate in the Anti-Slavery Society. He believed that the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Many within the Society differed with these positions, however, and in 1840 there was a major rift in the Society which resulted in the founding of two additional organizations: the Liberty Party, a political organization, and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which did not admit women. Later, in 1851, the once devoted and admiring

Frederick Douglass stated his belief that the Constitution could be used as a weapon against slavery. Garrison, feeling betrayed, attacked Douglass through his paper. Douglass responded, and the attacks intensified. Garrison and Douglass would never reconcile their differences.

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, Garrison published his last issue of the *Liberator*. After thirty-five years and 1,820 issues, Garrison did not fail to publish a single issue.

Although they often worked together, the relationship between black and white abolitionists was complex. Both groups hated slavery and fought for emancipation, but the struggle was much more personal for black abolitionists, who wanted not only their freedom but equal rights as well. Many white abolitionists, while decrying slavery, could not accept blacks as their equals.

David Walker, the son of a free black mother and a slave father, was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, perhaps in 1796 or 1797. In accordance with existing laws, since his mother was a free black, David Walker was also free. This freedom, however, did not shield him from witnessing firsthand the degradations and injustices of slavery. He witnessed much misery in his youth, including one disturbing episode of a son who was forced to whip his mother until she died. Walker travelled throughout the country, eventually settling in Boston. But even in that free northern city, with its prevalent discrimination, life was less than ideal for its black residents. Still, Walker apparently fared well, setting up a used clothing store during the 1820s.

In Boston, Walker began to associate with prominent black activists. He joined institutions that denounced slavery in the South and discrimination in the North. He became involved with the nation's first African American newspaper, the *Freedom's Journal* out of New York City, to which he frequently contributed. By the end of 1828, he had become Boston's leading spokesman against slavery.

In September of 1829 he published his *Appeal*. To reach his primary audience -- the enslaved men and women of the South -- Walker relied on sailors and ship's officers sympathetic to the cause who could transfer the pamphlet to southern ports. Walker even employed his used clothing business which, being located close to the waterfront, served sailors who bought clothing for upcoming voyages. He sewed copies of his pamphlet into the lining of sailors' clothing. Once the pamphlets reached the South, they could be distributed throughout the region. Walker also sought the aid of various contacts in the South who were also sympathetic to the cause.

David Walker pushed the abolitionist movement into militancy in 1829 when he published *Appeal*. His scathing denunciation of slavery used the language of the Declaration of Independence, especially the claim to the right of revolution, to urge slaves to rise up against their masters. Walker's objective was nothing short of revolutionary. He would arouse slaves of the South into rebelling against their master.

The *Appeal* made a great impression in the South, with both slaves and slaveholders. To the slaves the words were inspiring and instilled a sense of pride and hope. Horrified whites, on the other hand, initiated laws that forbade blacks to learn to read and banned the distribution of antislavery literature. They offered a \$3,000 reward for Walker's head, and \$10,000 to anyone who could bring him to the South alive. Friends concerned about his safety implored him to flee to Canada. Walker responded that he would stand his ground. "Somebody must die in this cause," he added. "I may be doomed to the stake and the fire, or to the scaffold tree, but it is not in me to falter if I can promote the work of emancipation." A devout Christian, he believed that abolition was a "glorious and heavenly cause."

David Walker published a third edition of his *Appeal* in June of 1830. Two months later he was found dead in his home. Although there was no evidence supporting the allegation, many believed that he had been poisoned. Later scholarship suggests he died of tuberculosis, the same disease that killed his daughter.

Henry Highland Garnet -- born a slave, well educated, known for his skills as an orator, a leading abolitionist, a clergyman -- stood before the delegates of the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York. In a speech given just the previous year, he had stated his belief that responsibility for the abolition of slavery lay chiefly with the whites. Freedom, he thought, would come about politically. Sometime since then, however, Garnet had a radical change of mind. In what has come to be known as his "Call to Rebellion," Garnet gave an impassioned speech in which he encouraged slaves to revolt against their masters.

Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists aligned with William Lloyd Garrison's doctrine of moral suasion -- a non-resistant approach to abolish slavery -- spoke after Garnet and denounced the speech. Should Garnet's "call" be officially endorsed by the convention? A committee worked to tone down the message, but the convention's delegates still found the language too harsh. Garnet's address was rejected, but by only one vote.

By 1849 Garnet began to favor emigration. Liberia, a country in Africa inhabited by freed blacks from the New World, had declared its independence two years earlier. Garnet saw no reason not to advocate for the emigration to other lands as well as the fight against slavery at home. Still a prominent abolitionist, he travelled to England and Scotland, where he lectured. Although he considered remaining in England, he left for Jamaica in 1852 to work as a missionary. Several years later he returned to the United States.

Garnet's role as an abolitionist leader would diminish as the years progressed, although he would continue to remain active in the cause. Too radical for the Garrisonians, Garnet lost his influence in the movement and turned even more toward religion. During the Civil War and afterwards he worked to improve the lives of former slaves. In 1881, he was appointed by the government to a post in Liberia. He died two months after his arrival there.

Frederick Douglass, who spoke after Garnet at the Convention, denounced the idea of a violent rebellion. Douglass, an eloquent ex-slave from Maryland, was the leading African American spokesperson of the time. The son of a slave woman and an unknown white man, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born in February of 1818 on Maryland's eastern shore. He spent his early years with his grandparents and with an aunt, seeing his mother only four or five times before her death when he was seven. (All Douglass knew of his father was that he was white.) During this time he was exposed to the degradations of slavery, witnessing firsthand brutal whippings and spending much time cold and hungry. When he was eight he was sent to Baltimore to live with a ship carpenter named Hugh Auld. There he learned to read and first heard the words abolition and abolitionists. "Going to live at Baltimore," Douglass would later say, "laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity."

Douglass spent seven relatively comfortable years in Baltimore before being sent back to the country, where he was hired out to a farm run by a notoriously brutal "slavebreaker" named Edward Covey. And the treatment he received was indeed brutal. Whipped daily and barely fed, Douglass was "broken in body, soul, and spirit."

On January 1, 1836, Douglass made a resolution that he would be free by the end of the year. He planned an escape. But early in April he was jailed after his plan was discovered. Two years later, while living in Baltimore and working at a shipyard, Douglass would finally realize his dream: he fled the city on September 3, 1838. Travelling by train, then steamboat, then train

again, he arrived in New York City the following day. Several weeks later he had settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, living with his newlywed bride (whom he met in Baltimore and married in New York) under his new name, Frederick Douglass.

Always striving to educate himself, Douglass continued his reading. He joined various organizations in New Bedford, including a black church. He attended abolitionists' meetings. He subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's weekly journal, the *Liberator*. In 1841, he saw Garrison speak at the Bristol Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting. Douglass was inspired by the speaker, later stating, "No face and form ever impressed me with such sentiments [the hatred of slavery] as did those of William Lloyd Garrison." Garrison, too, was impressed with Douglass, mentioning him in the *Liberator*. Several days later Douglass gave his speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention in Nantucket. Of the speech, one correspondent reported, "Flinty hearts were pierced, and cold ones melted by his eloquence." Before leaving the island, Douglass was asked to become a lecturer for the Society for three years. It was the launch of a career that would continue throughout Douglass' long life.

Despite apprehensions that the information might endanger his freedom, Douglass published his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The year was 1845. Three years later, after a speaking tour of England, Ireland, and Scotland, Douglass published the first issue of the *North Star*, a four-page weekly, out of Rochester, New York.

Ever since he first met Garrison in 1841, the white abolitionist leader had been Douglass' mentor. But the views of Garrison and Douglass ultimately diverged. Garrison represented the radical end of the abolitionist spectrum. He denounced churches, political parties, even voting. He believed in the dissolution of the Union. He also believed that the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery document. After his tour of Europe and the establishment of his paper, Douglass' views began to change; he was becoming more of an independent thinker, more pragmatic. In 1851 Douglass announced at a meeting in Syracuse, New York, that he did not assume the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, and that it could even "be wielded in behalf of emancipation," especially where the federal government had exclusive jurisdiction. Douglass also did not advocate the dissolution of the Union, since it would isolate slaves in the South. This led to a bitter dispute between Garrison and Douglass that, despite the efforts of others such as Harriet Beecher Stowe to reconcile the two, would last into the Civil War.

Frederick Douglass would continue his active involvement to better the lives of African Americans. He conferred with Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and recruited northern blacks for the Union Army. After the war he fought for the rights of women and African Americans alike.

When asked to give a speech on *The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro* he told his white audience, "This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn." The split between Douglass and Garrison mirrored the uneasy alliance between black and white abolitionists as blacks more and more demanded leadership in the movement.

Historian Eric Foner argues that the greatest obstacle facing the Abolitionist Movement as it develops in the 1830s was not so much the heated hostility of the white South – everybody would understand that the white South would be bitterly opposed to a movement demanding the abolition of slavery – but the indifference, you might say, in the North. There was a conspiracy of silence about the issue of slavery. Both major political parties, Whigs and Democrats, basically agreed to keep this out of politics. No one was allowed to raise this question in a public forum. And when abolitionists did begin to talk about slavery publicly, in the North, mobs would

break up their meetings. There was at the time the belief that the Abolitionist Movement was a danger to the existing social order. Foner goes on to argue that many northerners were deeply implicated in the institution of slavery itself – the trade of cotton, the financing of cotton, etc. Then there were the racist fears that the abolition of slavery would unleash a flood of black migrants into the North, competing for jobs. Then there were those who felt, “Well, if we raise the slavery question, it’s going to destroy the American Union.”

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