



U.S. History

Abolitionists

A Lively Learning Guide
by Shmoop

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In a Nutshell/Overview

From the moment the United States was founded as a free and independent republic, dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal," [slavery](#) represented a fundamental contradiction to the nation's most cherished values. Chattel bondage was also a contradiction inherent in itself: human beings were treated as property, yet there was no escaping the essence of humanity that they embodied. Slaves defied the premise of slavery simply through their own existence, their cognizance, their humanity.

Why Should I Care?

This is a story for activists. And idealists. And anyone who ever fought for a cause that seemed impossible to win, because the odds appeared too insurmountable and because no one seemed to listen. Before there ever was a United States of America, people on this continent were fighting against the evils of slavery. [Generations of humanitarians](#) who would never live to see emancipation day still dedicated their lives to try and make people understand why bondage was wrong. In the end, they prevailed, but only after generations of struggle, mob violence, hardships, setbacks, and betrayals.

Not all abolitionists were complete egalitarians; many shared at least some of the racial beliefs and stereotypes that infused eighteenth- and nineteenth- century America. [Black and white abolitionists](#) had their differences, as did [male and female abolitionists](#). Yet, for the sake of their cause, this small but important group of uncompromising and principled Americans somehow managed to overcome the usual boundaries of class, race, and gender that have so often separated people throughout United States history. They worked together amidst an extremely hostile environment of racist northerners and even less receptive southerners; they petitioned a federal government that tried to shut its doors to their pleas; they helped transform a party system that long resisted the disruptive influence that the slavery issue would bring. But for the new western territories and the inherently racist appeal of the "free soil" movement, abolitionists might never have succeeded. And when they did succeed, it turned out that emancipation did not necessarily mean complete freedom *or* equality for black people. For many more generations, through the Reconstruction period and the Civil Rights Movement, new waves of activists carried on the abolitionists' crusade for equal rights and freedoms for all Americans. Women who found their voices in the abolitionist rank-and-file went on to speak out on their own behalf, for suffrage and just treatment.

This is a story that unfolds over hundreds of years, across the North and South, among people of all races, genders, and religious persuasions. It is therefore appropriate that the main subject of this story centers on the one thing all those people have in common: they recognized slaves' [inherent humanity](#), and the inhumanity of slavery. Their success may have come along with severe limitations, but it came just the same, and when it did, the whole country was forever changed as a result.

So if you are working on behalf of a similarly noble-but-seemingly-lofty cause- environmentalism, the eradication of AIDS, Third World poverty, the fight to end any number of terrible diseases, and so on- you should keep reading. Your ultimate objective might not be reached during your own lifetime, but that's no reason not to make the effort while you are still alive and kicking. Who knows? You might end up in the history books for it! Regardless, you'll be part of a legacy bigger than yourself, one that stretches across the boundaries of both time and space. And that's quite a good way to spend a lifetime.

Overview of Abolitionism

Slavery in human societies dates back at least to antiquity in Egypt. Aristotle once argued that, "from the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule."⁹ While such a concept seems imbued with the spirit of autocracy, Aristotle in fact hailed from Athens, the birthplace of democracy. Thus the institution of slavery had a very long history of paradoxical existence within otherwise free and democratic nations that long predated its introduction into the colonies that became the United States after 1776.

The [apparent contrast](#) between a defiance of divine birthright (the American Revolution against the monarchy) and the acceptance of subordination-from-birth (slavery) was not lost on many colonists, black and white. Although paradoxical, there may have been a sort of relationship at play between the two extremes (some professors might call this relationship a "[dialectic](#)"): the blatant inequality, inhumanity, and cruel subjection of bondage and the idealistic self-determination of a free and equal society. The two opposites emerged and developed in contrast to one another, yet alongside one another, similar to the Chinese concept of yin and yang. As historian [David Brion Davis](#) has described it, "Since man has a remarkable capacity to imagine abstract states of perfection, he very early imagined a perfect form of subordination." Thus the ideal and the real coexisted in the first 250 years of European settlement on the North American continent; but the lingering potency of the ideal-that is, "that all men are created equal"-also formed the basis for a persevering anti-slavery movement.

Even in [colonial times](#), American societies struggled with the issue of slavery. This continued to be a major issue after independence. The independent, idealistic, and often deeply pious thought that had spurred so many immigrant journeys to the New World also prompted a great many antislavery sentiments among individuals and larger groups. Religion, politics, and philosophy all spurred antislavery activism at various times and in various places. Yet southerners would later mobilize these same forces to *defend* slavery during the nineteenth century.

Antislavery activists were always a minority within American society, encountering heavy opposition from the majority that either supported slavery outright or wanted to avoid making slavery a divisive political issue. Abolitionists endured violent mob attacks on their lecture halls and printing presses, and for decades a "gag rule" in Congress banned antislavery legislators from even raising the subject. But this opposition only galvanized the antislavery activists. They made martyrs out of the murdered editor [Elijah Lovejoy](#), the beaten Senator Charles Sumner, and the possibly insane John Brown. Abolitionists did not simply want to end slavery, but to reconfigure the terms by which Americans applied their concepts of liberty and equality. They wanted to create a society that embodied the values of the Revolution for *all* of its citizens, black and white, male and female.

Abolitionists were hardly perfect, and differing attitudes and opinions on racial characteristics, roles, and responsibilities abounded within the mixed classes, genders, and races of the abolitionist movement. In terms of leadership positions, money, and raw numbers (since there weren't that many free blacks in the country) whites dominated the abolitionist movement of the 1830s. Some white activists wanted black runaway slaves to censor their comments about northern racism and simply deliver speeches on the horrors of slavery in the South. White female abolitionists occasionally wrote speeches that they attributed to black female abolitionists, essentially using black women as their vehicle for attempting to forward the antislavery cause. Black abolitionists like [David Walker](#) took a more radical approach and called for an immediate end to slavery, but were harshly criticized by some white abolitionists who wanted a gradual emancipation and who feared that such radicalism would scare away potential supporters and even hurt the entire movement.

Though they constituted a tiny minority of the total population, even in the north, abolitionists proved to be a highly successful pressure group. They made slavery an urgent political issue, framing the question of bondage as a moral imperative that could and must be addressed by the American people to redeem the true calling and potential of their nation. Abolitionist political parties never won a majority of the vote, but they captured enough votes that the major parties were forced to take notice. By the 1850s, northern politicians were forced to display resistance to southern influence in Congress if they wished to remain politically popular at home. Although most [northern whites](#) held little sympathy for blacks and remained overwhelmingly committed to the notion of white supremacy, the rapidly emerging specter of a "southern oligarchy" alarmed white northerners who were passionate about their democratic system and extremely wary of disproportionately influential cabals.

The country's rapid spread westward exacerbated sectional conflict, as both antislavery northerners and proslavery southerners sought to extend their respective, incompatible systems into the same western territories. Politicians sought to resolve the sectional crisis over the future of the west through a series of tenuous national compromises that tended to inflame both sides, only heightening the stakes for all involved. The resulting political disarray led to the rise of the new [Republican Party](#), which by the late 1850s became the north's dominant party behind its antislavery platform. The slavery issue led to outright violence between northerners and southerners in places like "Bleeding Kansas," Harper's Ferry, and even the floor of the Senate. Ultimately the conflict would engulf the country in Civil War. From the ashes of that conflict, the abolitionists' objective of emancipation was finally achieved. Yet it would take another century (and then some) to bring their larger goal into fruition: the establishment of a truly colorblind democracy for men and women in which *all* the nation's citizens enjoyed *complete* protection for their rights and *true* equality. Some would argue that this ideal remains elusive even today.

Religion in Abolitionism

Early Religious Opposition to Slavery

When the [Mennonites of Germantown, Pennsylvania](#) held their monthly meeting on 18 February 1688, they drafted a set of resolutions in opposition to slavery, or what they called "the traffic of men-body." The Mennonites, German Baptists whose beliefs resembled those of the English and Welsh Quakers, had founded Germantown half a century earlier. They argued that it was hypocritical for whites, especially Christians, to participate in the enslavement that they had themselves so feared for generations at the hands of the Turks on the high seas. They wrote that, "there is a saying, that we should do to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent, or colour they are."¹⁰

Sowing the Seeds of Discord

Slavery split several American churches before it moved on to divide and conquer the national party system and then the country itself. In 1793, the General Committee of Virginia Baptists changed course from their previous statements against slavery and decided that the institution was a political issue best left to the legislature, not the church. Yet the obvious moral implications of this inhuman institution prevented most sects from being able to neatly or permanently dispense with the matter. As abolitionists became more outspoken both within and outside of the church membership, and as sectional tensions continued to increase along with the territorial compromises of the nineteenth century, some (especially southern) congregants developed the idea that slavery was perhaps an evil but not a sin. Later on in the antebellum period, several southerners took this reasoning a step further and actually argued that slavery was a [positive good](#) that was sanctioned by the Bible in the story of the curse of Ham and all of his descendants.

To many northerners, on the other hand, slavery was inherently sinful and [un-Christian](#). Such radically different approaches could only remain under the same ecclesiastical umbrella for so long. The Quakers maintained unity against slavery only because the vast majority of their members were non-slaveholders in the North who could effectively exile the few slaveholders from the sect. In 1837, the Presbyterians divided into Old and New "Schools" over the issue. Adherents of the New School were much more involved with the recent revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and the evangelical spirit of extending salvation to all men.

The Baptists tried to avoid discussion of the controversial topic but could not after the Baptist Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. Southern delegates admitted that slavery was a great evil, but maintained that it was no sin. Then, when the Alabama

Convention requested that slave owners be eligible to become missionaries, the Baptist Board denied them. Northern Baptists formed a Free Mission Society that "refused 'tainted' Southern money."¹¹ The Baptist denomination officially split in 1845; southern members withdrew to form the Southern Baptist Convention, which eventually grew to become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The Methodist Episcopal Church controversy arose from an 1844 General Conference resolution that censured Bishop J. O. Andrew of Georgia, who by marriage came into the possession of slaves. When word of the censure spread, southern Conference delegates decided to split off into their own faction. The anti-slavery contingent continues today as [the Wesleyan Church](#); it included members from North Carolina. The southern churches organized the [Methodist Episcopal Church \(South\)](#), at a meeting in Louisville, Kentucky.

The Methodist Schism

Many rank-and-file abolitionists were Methodists, but their antislavery activism prompted considerable discord within the denomination, which had rapidly spread throughout the country, including the South, during the Second Great Awakening. By the 1840s, the Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest denomination in the country, with more than 1 million members. As historian Chris Padgett has argued, "No other nonpolitical institution reached more individuals in antebellum America than the Methodist Episcopal Church."¹² Beginning in the 1830s and increasingly in the 1840s, antislavery activists began seceding from the Methodist Episcopal Church because they had come to the conclusion that it condoned slavery.

In 1842, leading Methodist [abolitionists](#) called for their supporters to join them in leaving to establish a new church that would be free of fellowship with slaveholders. Thus the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was established in May 1843 with 6,000 charter members. They quickly developed a newspaper, the *True Wesleyan*, which was distributed to a grass roots constituency in twelve northern states. Their members included some of the most fervent abolitionists of the day at a time when prominent activists like William Lloyd Garrison routinely criticized most other northern churches for their conservatism on the slavery issue. Frederick Douglass praised the "True Wesleyans" for pursuing an "inflexible Christian course." By 1849, the Wesleyan Methodists had grown to number about 20,000 people, three-quarters of them having joined within the first two years of secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church (which retained more than 1 million members).

Quakers

In 1754, [John Woolman](#), a 34-year-old Anglo-American Quaker leader and abolitionist, published at his own expense [Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes](#), in which he asked his readers to "suppose that our ancestors and we had been exposed to constant servitude...destitute of the help of reading and good company...while others, in ease, have plentifully heaped up the fruit of our

labour...should we, in that case, be less abject than they now are?" This poor shopkeeper from New Jersey traveled through the South to meet with slaveholding Friends, trying to convince them of the error of their ways. He did not live to see the abolition of slavery among all Quakers, dying of smallpox while attending a yearly meeting in England in 1772, but just four years after Woolman's death the Quakers did ban slaveholding by members of the Society of Friends.

George Fox founded the [Quakers](#) in England during the middle of the seventeenth century; shortly thereafter, many members immigrated to America, particularly the New England and Middle Atlantic colonies. This sect distinguished itself from fellow Christians through its emphasis on the immediate guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit. They held a silent worship that was devoid of ritual, they believed in a simple style of dress, and they were the only sect that allowed women to serve as ministers. As a result of their unorthodox practices and the threat they represented to more traditional church doctrines and hierarchies, the Quakers found themselves persecuted, whipped, and banished by the Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1650s and afterwards.

Like the Puritans, the Quakers initially expressed no objection to slaveholding, though few slaves initially inhabited the northern colonies where both Puritans and Quakers settled. George Fox did visit Barbados in the late seventeenth century and admonished the slaveholders he encountered there to train their slaves about God and to treat them "gently and mildly."¹³ Yet no formal sect-wide action took place until 1742, when Woolman objected to preparing a bill of sale for a black woman that his boss had sold. Although he did ultimately comply, Woolman told his employer that he considered slaveholding inconsistent with Christianity. This started a life-long campaign for Woolman and like-minded members of the Society of Friends. Quakers soon came to compose a disproportionate number of the most conscientious opponents of slavery. Quakers helped to found the [Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery](#) in 1775. One of their members, Benjamin Lundy, assembled a series of documents in the late 1820s that indicated a pro-slavery plot to acquire Texas. This gave rise to a very powerful "[Slave Power conspiracy](#)" thesis that eventually convinced even non-abolitionist northerners that they risked losing their democratic government to the disproportionate power and influence of a wealthy oligarchy of aristocratic southern slaveowners. After 1787, Quakers in Rhode Island and Massachusetts led the fight against the ratification of the Constitution, which they deemed immoral for sanctioning slavery.

Quakers to be Spared in the Planned Slave Rebellion

In 1800, a slave named Gabriel (some historians called him [Gabriel Prosser](#), after his master's surname) unsuccessfully conspired to seize Richmond, Virginia, with a large force of 1,000 armed slaves. The blacks were then to proceed with a general slaughter of whites. Prosser planned that the Quakers should be one of only three groups of whites-the others were the French and the Methodists-to be spared. Clearly Prosser was not thinking strictly in terms of the color line, and recognized that these groups

were friends to the slaves.

Christian Women

Religion was mobilized to defend slavery throughout southern congregations during the nineteenth century. Yet in the North, the evangelical revivalist movement known as the [Second Great Awakening](#) mobilized many Christians to become antislavery activists. The areas most affected by the revivalism of the Great Awakening mobilized their evangelical fervor and moral spirit to combat what they considered to be a deeply immoral and inhuman institution. Women were in the vanguard of this movement. Faith played a pivotal role throughout the antislavery movement, but women were portrayed and believed to be the more pious sex according to nineteenth-century culture and its prescribed gender roles. Thus it was more acceptable for women to engage in acts that corresponded to their religious activity and their role as moral guardians of the household and the next generation.

In the process, religion could become a means of surpassing traditional gender roles. Women could organize and speak their mind under the auspices of Christian piety and moral suasion; in this sense, religious motivation provided them with a sort of bulwark against criticism that they were being *too* aggressive or outspoken "for their sex." Nonetheless, most women of this period were not conscious feminists, nor were they simply acting under the guise of faith; they really *did* believe that it was their Christian duty to convert the general public to an antislavery standpoint and to stamp out the sin of bondage in America. In an [1838 antislavery lecture](#), Angelina Grimke Weld told an audience of Philadelphia women that the men of her native South who "rule in the councils of the nation...deny our right to petition and to remonstrate against abuses of our sex and of our kind. We have these rights, however, from our God." Grimke thus combined feminism with abolitionist activism: "our sex" obviously referred to women, and abuses of "our kind" referred to human beings. She argued that women possessed the right to act on their own behalf and on the behalf of enslaved people, regardless of the gag rule that silenced their petitions to Congress at the time. She turned to religion as the justification for this right. For Grimke, God could sanction no equivocal position on the slavery issue: "We may talk of occupying neutral ground," she said, "but on this subject, in its present attitude, there is no such thing as neutral ground"; after all, Grimke argued, "God swept Egypt with the besom of destruction, and punished Judea also with a sore punishment, because of slavery. And have we any reason to believe that he is less just now?"

Society in Abolitionism

Immediatism

From the 1829 publication of [David Walker's Appeal](#) onward, the antislavery movement shifted into a more radical phase as some abolitionists demanded immediate emancipation of all slaves rather than merely gradual steps toward future emancipation in the South and free soil in the new western territories. [William Lloyd Garrison](#) sounded the clarion call with his 1831 launch of [The Liberator](#), an antislavery newspaper based out of Boston. Garrison pledged to continue publishing *The Liberator* until the day that all American slaves were free. He kept his word, but as it turned out, that took 35 years. Garrison had grown up in an impoverished family in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and went on to become a newspaperman's apprentice and then an editor. The *Liberator's* circulation was never large, but Garrison achieved wide influence by allowing his articles to be excerpted in much more popular newspapers. Garrison himself was unflinching in his commitment to the cause, even after he was dragged through the streets of Boston by a hostile mob in 1835. He disapproved of the small [religious sects](#) that had formed to oppose slavery, under the grounds that the American Anti-Slavery Society, which he co-founded in 1833, should not be weakened through splintering into denominations.

A Southern Scapegoat

Southerners of the Revolutionary generation were ambivalent about slavery-some freed their slaves, some admitted to hate slavery, some (like Thomas Jefferson) couldn't figure out how to end it but assumed it would die out in the future. Southern slaveholding leaders of that generation were much more moderate on the slavery issue than later southern leaders, who adopted a much stronger proslavery position in the antebellum period. George Washington freed all two hundred men, women, and children in his possession-just as soon as he and his wife both died.

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, John Laurens, Arthur Lee, George Mason, and St. George Tucker were among the other eminent southerners who all expressed antislavery views, although many of them-like Mason-never freed their slaves. In his private correspondence, Robert Beverley confessed in a 1761 letter that slavery was "something so very contradictory to Humanity, that I am really ashamed of my Country whenever I hear of it; & if ever I bid adieu to Virginia, it will be from that cause alone."¹⁴ Though he [publicly](#) expressed the belief that blacks were biologically inferior to whites, Jefferson was also known to support the notion of black education and the abolition of slavery from any acquired lands in the West.

Such relatively liberal positions would have been impossible to embrace for any major

southern political leader by 1835. In response to the Missouri Compromise crisis (over the newly acquired western lands and whether they would permit slavery) and the increasingly strident abolitionist movement, southerners began to mount a new defense of slavery. Antebellum southerners' unapologetic defense of [slavery as a "positive good"](#) developed as a justification for an increasingly profitable cornerstone of the southern economy. It also provided a rationalization for maintaining a strict racial hierarchy in southern society. Southern intellectuals and leaders increasingly feared the prospect of racial mixing and aggressively began to propose pseudo-scientific theories on the inherent inferiority of the black and mulatto races.

Nonetheless, unexpected events in the South constantly threatened to undermine this tenuous and superficial vision of a stable and secure racial hierarchy. The "positive good" argument maintained that slavery kept blacks in their rightful place and actually took better care of them than the heartless, impersonal world of ["wage slavery"](#) in the industrial North ever could. Yet the specter of murderous and rebelling blacks threatened to turn this argument on its head; slaves clearly were not content if they were plotting insurrection and the murder of their masters. Southerners therefore turned to "outside agitation" as an explanation for such unrest. When, in 1831, Nat Turner led the last substantial slave revolt in American history, southerners blamed Garrison as a dangerous inciter of racial violence. Yet Garrison was a pacifist who never promoted outright violence as a means of accomplishing his goals.

An Impetus for Action

[Nat Turner](#) was a slave preacher who had been planning a revolt for months; he intended for it to occur, interestingly enough, on Independence Day of 1831, but he fell ill. Instead, the uprising took place on 22 August of that year, after Turner noticed the unusual appearance of the sun (an atmospheric disturbance made it appear bluish-green) and took it as a sign from God. In the violence that followed, at least 55 whites were shot or clubbed to death before Turner and his over 40 followers (most on horseback) could be stopped. The resulting trials lead to 55 executions and many more deportations. The response to the Nat Turner rebellion heightened tensions and action on both sides.

In 1832, Garrison organized the [New England Anti-Slavery Society](#). This pioneer organization channeled northern abolitionists, black and white, into an effective and unified voice for abolition and the aid and protection of free blacks. They recruited members, raised funds, and initiated research reports on the slave trade, the status of slavery in America, and the condition of the free black population. The controversial topic gained even more attention the following year, when the British Parliament ended slavery throughout the British Empire. That year, wealthy merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan founded an Anti-Slavery Society in New York. Then the Tappans, along with Garrison and others, founded the first nationwide organization-the American Anti-Slavery Society, (AAS).

The AAS

The Society had thirteen agents and a budget of \$25,000; it was hardly an imposing institution, but its mere existence nonetheless managed to frighten and enrage millions of people, North and South, many of whom resorted to violence to quash the Society's existence and silence its members. Many of these northerners thought that the Society was just inciting trouble; its call for emancipation threatened to undo the tenuous sectional compromise that had just been reached in 1823. Equally as important, if not more so, the AAS also supported political and religious equality among the races. This went beyond emancipation to a demand for race equality that many antebellum Americans (North and South) automatically associated with interracial sex, or "[amalgamation](#)," as they called it. Now that *really* incited the mobs-many felt they were literally battling for the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race itself. During the summer of 1835, Society official Elizur Wright had to barricade his doors in New York City "with bars and planks an inch thick," for fear of the uncontrollable mobs. Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child dared not venture into the city that summer, "so great is the excitement here"; she compared it to the French Revolution, when no one could trust their neighbors.¹⁵

Colonization

The goal of the long-running [American "colonization" movement](#) was to encourage planters to free their slaves, then return them along with their free black comrades to their African homeland. Colonization supporters also sought to provide Africa with a group of black missionaries who would "civilize" and "Christianize" the "Dark Continent." Their objective was inherently racist, for they sought to remove all black people from American society. From hindsight, they were correct in their belief that white prejudice was so deeply engrained in America that blacks and whites would not be able to peacefully or successfully coexist as equals for some time, if ever. Through their actions, however, they may have helped to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For many whites, this goal was a combination of good intentions and convenience, as the prospect of freeing blacks and immediately shipping them out of the country promised to avoid any prospect of racial conflict or, really, interracial interaction of any kind. People supported the colonization movement for many different and often conflicting [reasons](#). Some whites supported any move towards emancipation, or thought that colonization represented a moderate reform that acknowledged the evils of slavery but did not seek the "radical" goal of a colorblind society. Still others thought of colonization as a means of supporting slavery by eliminating the troublesome free black population. Yet these last two groups did not offer the movement much substantial support, as the ultimate goals or implications of colonization were unclear to them.

The [American Colonization Society \(ACS\)](#), established in 1816, included such prominent members as Whig statesmen Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, Chief Justice John Marshall, author of the Star-Spangled Banner Francis Scott Key, and presidents James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, and James Madison. In 1821, Society agents

acquired land in [West Africa](#); the first freed slaves arrived there within the next year, and in 1847, the Society relinquished control over the settlement so that it could become the independent republic of Liberia. The Society facilitated the migrations of about 80% of the blacks who went there. The total migration was paltry in comparison with the growth of the enslaved population in America: only about 15,000 blacks went to Africa between 1822 and 1860, compared with a slave population of 3,953,760 in 1860 alone.¹⁶

The Colonization Controversy

Most northern free blacks denounced the colonization scheme as forced expulsion, and they were supported by abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison. *The Liberator* savaged the colonization effort and its supporters, calling them deceitful, hypocritical, anti-Christian, and more anti-Negro than antislavery. Garrison argued that colonization would actually shore up the institution of slavery by eliminating the problematic element of free blacks in the society and providing a convenient means for disposing of elderly and infirm slaves. In other words, in a slave society structured upon racial hierarchy, the very presence of free black people represented an anomaly that undermined the "white=free and superior, black=slave and inferior" structure. Free African Americans might agitate enslaved black people, who would see that not all blacks were enslaved and might get ideas about equality and freedom.

Poor whites also felt threatened by free blacks, since both groups had to compete for the same job opportunities or for access to western lands. Almost all whites were paranoid about [interracial interaction or sex](#); they feared free black people because free blacks had no visible restraints on their actions and they might aspire to social, political, and even *sexual* equality with white folk. Garrison argued against the notion that colonization would "solve" all of these problems; he thought that Americans must overcome their prejudices instead.

Garrison acknowledged that many people with good intentions had joined the Colonization Society, but that they had been "shamefully duped" and that the Society must fall together with slavery as two interconnected institutions. In the spring of 1832, half a year after founding the New England Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison published [Thoughts on African Colonization](#), an attack on the American Colonization Society. With financial support from abolitionist and wealthy New York City merchant Arthur Tappan, it gained a wide circulation, reaching as far west as Ohio. The New England Anti-Slavery Society instituted weekly anti-colonization forums in Boston and sent lecturers to surrounding cities and towns. It also planned Fourth of July meetings to compete with the traditional colonizationist activities, such as grand public orations designed to raise donations for the ACS.

Northern Opponents of the Abolitionists

The United States was a [deeply racist society](#) throughout the nineteenth century. It should therefore come as no surprise that while the free states developed an industry

increasingly based on wage labor and small farms, few whites saw the need to stand up on behalf of enslaved blacks. Abolitionists remained a minority within the northern population throughout the antebellum period, and they frequently met with vigorous and often violent attacks from their fellow northerners. Most northerners didn't like the abolitionists drumming up controversy and disunion over the slavery issue, and as previously mentioned, they were *really* angry about the idea that abolitionists supported social equality among the races, because they took that to mean that abolitionists supported the idea of [interracial sex](#). (Actually, historian Betty Fladeland was only unable to uncover a single interracial relationship among abolitionists; such relationships, however, were not nearly so unusual in the South, as evidenced by the sizeable mulatto population there. Fladeland has also documented instances even among the abolitionist ranks where whites refused to sit next to black men. For several abolitionists, emancipation was a worthwhile cause, but it did not mean the same thing as social equality.)¹⁷ Nonetheless, the northern public remained irate about the specter of social equality and all the sordid aspects that they were sure would follow from it.

In 1835, Bostonians dragged William Lloyd Garrison through the city streets. On the same day, [mobs broke up a meeting of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society](#) at Utica. That year, northerners petitioned for legislation to make the propagation of abolitionist sentiments a criminal offense. Northern congressmen supplied the necessary votes to help southern representatives pass the "gag rule" against reading abolitionist petitions on the floor of the House of Representatives; this rule was reenacted in each session from 1836 to 1844. Connecticut passed its own gag law in 1836 to prohibit abolitionist lecturers from occupying Congregational pulpits. The citizens of Alton, Illinois either participated in or tacitly permitted the 1837 murder of abolitionist editor [Elijah Lovejoy](#).

The next year, at [Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia](#), activists like Angelina Grimke Weld delivered antislavery speeches inside as a gathering crowd surrounded the building, screamed obscenities, and pelted the edifice and those exiting from it with rocks and any other implements they could find. At the end of the day, whites and blacks walked out of the hall arm in arm, partly as a display of solidarity but also to protect their black comrades. The next day, the mayor locked the doors and announced that all remaining meetings had been canceled; after he left, a mob broke into the building, ransacked it, and burned it down, only four days after the building had been completed and opened. Abolitionists had raised the money (\$40,000) for Pennsylvania Hall when they could not find any other place in the city to accommodate them for their meetings. Everyone from workers and mechanics to prominent citizens, male and female, had contributed what they could to the building's construction, from financial donations to labor and materials. In September 1835, [James Gordon Bennett](#), editor of the fastest-growing newspaper in the country, the *New York Herald*, called the abolitionists "a few thousand crazyheaded blockheads" who had frightened some fifteen million people around them "out of their senses."

In a New York City [anti-abolition mob](#) in July 1834, some 20,000 rioters shouted (African) colonization vows as they attacked blacks, abolitionists, black churches, and

homes of prominent abolitionists. The Utica mob of October 1835 included prominent local colonizationists, as did the group of Cincinnati men who murdered Elijah Lovejoy in 1837. The American Colonization Society was not confined to prominent statesmen, and many of its rank-and-file members used violence throughout the 1830s as a response to the Garrisonian attacks on their cause. Yet they were not the only members of the mobs. Many anxious white northerners were alarmed and offended by the prospect of racial assimilation that the abolitionists represented to them. Garrison and his followers wanted to end slavery but not to deport all blacks to another country so as to avoid any race mixing (a perennial fear of Americans throughout the nineteenth century and well into the late twentieth, too).

A Conspiracy of Silence

Mob violence and the appeals of colonizationists were both substantial threats to the antislavery cause, but northern whites' overwhelming apathy was an even more ominous problem. Slavery did not seem a pressing moral issue to most northerners, and the national political parties—the Whigs and the Democrats—sought to keep it that way, by omitting the issue from the halls of Congress and, they hoped, from the national consciousness. Politicians, after all, stood to benefit from the [cross-sectional alliances](#) they had carved out; northern businessmen (who often backed the politicians or were the politicians) and financiers profited from a textile economy that relied on the raw materials of cotton, sugar, and tobacco that were supplied by slave labor. One of the greatest accomplishments of the abolitionist minority during the 1830s and after was to force slavery as an issue onto the national stage.

The Abolitionist Rank-and-File

A combination of economic, social, and religious factors combined to form the abolitionist movement. In the so called "[Burned-Over District](#)" of upstate New York and the Great Lakes region, the Christian evangelical revivalism that came to be known as the Second Great Awakening swept the population into a religious fervor. Not coincidentally, this period followed on the heels of the 1825 [Erie Canal](#) completion, which solidified New York City as the gateway metropolis to the agricultural hinterlands of the country's interior. With the economic opportunities and transportation revolution that the Canal represented came the birth of a new middle class, a group particularly receptive to the new methods of worship and the codes of morality inherent in the evangelism of preachers like [Charles G. Finney](#).

The revivals focused on an extirpation of sin, a creed of individualism, and a faith in the human capacity for inner perfection. This moralist revival subsequently inspired the activism of many citizens in the region, notably in the crusade against slavery. A center for this activity, as well as the violent responses that sometimes followed, was [Utica](#), which in 1835 was a city of 10,000 people situated strategically along the Erie Canal. Craftsmen, laborers, businessmen, and others soon found opportunities in this gateway juncture between the canal and the surrounding countryside. Women could find employment in the dress shops, sewing in tailor shops, and laboring in the cotton

mills.

Many of the mob members who attacked the local Anti-Slavery Convention were older citizens who were anxious about the role the new activism would play in transforming their hometowns. These [anti-abolitionists](#) were drapers and tailors, wallpaper dealers, grocers, and even some of the wealthiest men in the region and former office holders like past mayor and lawyer Horatio Seymour. The abolitionists came from the same trades and neighborhoods as their attackers: they included the owner of a hide and leather store, a leading Methodist and business owner, merchants, grocers, and cordwainers (shoe-makers). Most of the activists did represent a [new middle class](#), and they signaled their strength in numbers when 1,200 of them—a majority of them men—signed their names to a March 1836 petition to Congress that prayed for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Such petitions were a mainstay of the antislavery movement in its early decades.

The growing [working class](#) in the region also contributed to the movement. They were similarly transformed by Christian revivals, most notably Charles G. Finney's from 1825 to 1831. Finney's dissemination of a liberal, anti-aristocratic and egalitarian Protestant creed soon filled Methodist churches with the employees of the local mills and other factories. The Welsh residents of towns like Rochester, Buffalo, Utica, and elsewhere in [Oneida county](#) tended to be active Baptists or Presbyterians who supported movements for temperance and against slavery. This contingent of the population was steadily growing, thanks in part to the Welsh immigrants who obtained jobs laboring on the new canals and roads and who encouraged their friends and relatives back home to come out and join them. These immigrants lived in the region primarily for the economic opportunities it provided; they worshipped in sects with longstanding cultural and ethnic ties to their communities; and their membership in these progressive northern churches often convinced them that slavery was a great evil and that they must do what they could to eradicate it from existence.

Manufacturing Towns

Massachusetts and Rhode Island stood in the vanguard of the industrial revolution during the early nineteenth century. Their factory towns—Fall River, Lynn, Springfield, Lowell, and Worcester—rapidly developed mass production capacities for textiles, footwear, and iron, among other products. Yet despite the rapid growth and the concurrent friction between emerging classes of employers and employees, a significant proportion of both groups agreed on their opposition to slavery. The laborers were already organized into unions to call for a [ten-hour day](#) and to resist wage cuts; their leaders often appealed to them to fight against slavery as an extension of the Jacksonian creed of equal rights (even though President Andrew Jackson himself had been a slaveowner and a great many of his white working-class supporters composed a substantial portion of the anti-abolitionist mobs!). In so doing, they actually took Jackson's egalitarian rhetoric several steps further than he himself had ever intended to take it—that is, to apply it to women and to blacks.

In Lynn and Saugus, Massachusetts, 912 women signed an antislavery petition in December 1838; among them were probably the many women shoe binders who resided in both cities. Two of the most prominent shoe binder union members were also involved with the [Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society](#). Hundreds of fellow Lynn residents, women who worked in the textile mills, also supported the abolitionist cause. It was in the factory owners' interest to decry slave labor in favor of their own white wage workers, since the factories would receive more business that way. But employer encouragement does not suffice as an explanation for why such clearly independent female union members would organize to combat bondage. After all, when the women textile workers [walked out](#) of the Lowell factory in 1836, they were signing antislavery petitions at virtually the same time. For them, the aims of their own labor action and the abolitionist cause were similar, if not one and the same. They sought to apply the principles of the American Revolution to the sectors of society that had been left out: the women, African-Americans, and the newly emerging working class. They sought independence from wage slavery as well as chattel slavery, and supported the worker's right to negotiate the terms of his labor, regardless of race or gender.

Of the male abolitionists in Worcester County, Massachusetts, where these manufacturing towns were located, the vast majority were skilled workers. Many were also proprietors, managers, and officials. Their tax records appear to indicate that most were of the "middling sort"; the emerging middle class. Over a third of the abolitionists in Lynn and Worcester had no property to their names in 1837, as was true of the majority of residents in both towns: 61% were propertyless in 1832 and 56% in 1837. Yet the proprietors, managers, and officials were much more likely to own real estate. The abolitionist movement therefore carried an appeal in this region that cut across class and gender lines. Even if most activism was confined to the "Burned-Over District," this region provided the radical core of the movement and would later manage to capitalize on sectional disagreements over western lands and northern resentment of the "Slave Power" to provoke a war over the issue of slavery.

Race in Abolitionism

Gabriel's Plot

The slave Gabriel, often mis-identified as Gabriel Prosser (though historian [Douglas R. Egerton](#) has shown that no contemporary documents accord him with his master's surname) was a blacksmith who plotted a slave rebellion in the spring of 1800 and planned to seize Richmond, Virginia. He devised a complex plan with branches in at least three Virginia cities. It was to involve a large-scale massacre of whites, with the exception of only three groups historically supportive of emancipation: Quakers, the French, and Methodists. Gabriel's plot was uncovered amidst heightened tensions and public unrest over the specter of the [Haitian Revolution](#), in which the Caribbean island had erupted in violence and bloodshed as the enslaved black majority rose up against their masters to claim their freedom. Many of the white masters and several of their black servants fled to the United States, which took them in but suspected the motives of the black servants and feared the spread of rebellion stories to their own slaves. To demonstrate their commitment to defeat any such plots on the United States, Virginia authorities had twenty-five of the conspirators executed and ten others deported to the West Indies.

This was a turning point in the history of slavery in American life. The Virginia Assembly, terrified by the possibility of slave revolution, debated the possibility of gradual emancipation, provided that the freed slaves were colonized to Africa. They also wanted to colonize free blacks. Though this was the scheme that he had recommended in his 1787 work, [Notes on the State of Virginia](#), President Thomas Jefferson now failed to implement the Assembly's recommendations. He argued that there was nowhere to send the blacks under such a colonization scheme, since Sierra Leone was still unstable and so was Haiti (even though Jefferson had helped to bring about Haiti's unrest by economically isolating the island under an American [embargo](#)).

As a result of Jefferson's inability to act, the state legislature decided against any further plan of reform and chose instead to restore the old colonial methods of control in order to discipline the troublesome labor force and crush its rebellious spirit. After 1806, any freed slave (per the manumission act of 1782) [had to leave the state](#) within twelve months or risk being sold back into slavery. The law turned free blacks into a closed class. Within the next decade, the state also passed added restrictions against slave literacy, cracked down on black and mulatto sailors' ability to obtain a pilot's license (so as to cut off slave communication between other port and river towns), bolstered urban defenses, and outlawed the practice of hiring out surplus slaves.

Southern society could have reacted to attempted slave rebellion by working to eliminate the troublesome institution from their lives, or they could pass laws to

strengthen that institution to prevent any potential unrest. They wound up opting for the latter, thereby solidifying sectional differences over social organization and labor.

Some nineteenth-century southern academics and officials took the example of [Haiti](#) as proof of the dangers inherent in immediate abolition, recommending gradual emancipation instead. They insisted the Caribbean disaster had conclusively proven that, in the wake of emancipation, neither race could coexist with the other in the same country. For most others, Haiti only strengthened their resolve to fight abolition. North Carolina passed legislation restricting a slaveholder's rights to free his own slaves, although most slave states did not outlaw private manumission until the mid-nineteenth century.

Abolitionists in Black and White

[Free blacks in the North](#) organized their own anti-slavery societies even before the formation of national societies (such as the AAS), in which several of them were active participants. At black anti-slavery meetings, held in Boston, New York City, Rochester, Nantucket, New Bedford, Salem, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Providence, Trenton, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn, delegates adopted resolutions against slavery and African colonization. Though blacks were usually reduced to the most menial jobs in the North, they could apply their overlooked skills and talents by making several important contributions to the cause. When William Lloyd Garrison sought to undertake a mission to England in order to secure support for a proposed manual labor school for blacks, and to attack the aims of the American Colonization Society, free blacks contributed about one half the necessary funds-over \$300. Blacks served as agents for the sale and distribution of antislavery publications like *The Emancipator*, which began in New York in 1833. They contributed to the columns of *The Liberator* with reports from their meetings and comments on the condition of their people. They also purchased advertising space. Colored Female Anti-Slavery Societies were organized beginning in the fall of 1831 in Philadelphia and quickly spread to Providence, Rhode Island, Nantucket and Salem, Massachusetts, Rochester, New York, and Middletown, Connecticut.

Several blacks held leadership roles on the Board of Managers of the American Anti-Slavery Society, but free African-Americans also maintained their own societies throughout the period, from Lexington, Ohio to Albany, New York. Yet not all free blacks participated in such activism, as the scathing resolutions of these societies (condemning their apathetic brethren) attest. Those who did [participate](#) clearly invested a considerable portion of their time, energy, and hard-earned wages for a deeply personal cause. Black Americans knew just what was at stake in the struggle to end to slavery and in fighting the colonizationists to remain in their own country. Though whites formed an important aspect of the movement, free blacks had been organizing and taking action for generations before the antebellum period.

Henry Highland Garnett