

How did abolitionism challenge barriers to racial equality and free speech?

BLACK AND WHITE ABOLITIONISM

Black Abolitionists

Blacks played a leading role in the antislavery movement. Even before the appearance of *The Liberator*, as we have seen, northern free blacks had organized in opposition to the Colonization Society. James Forten, a successful black sailmaker in Philadelphia, helped to finance *The Liberator* in its early years. As late as 1834, northern blacks, attracted by Garrison's rejection of colonization and his demand for equal rights for black Americans, made up a majority of the journal's subscribers. Several blacks served on the board of directors of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and northern-born blacks and fugitive slaves quickly emerged as major organizers and speakers.

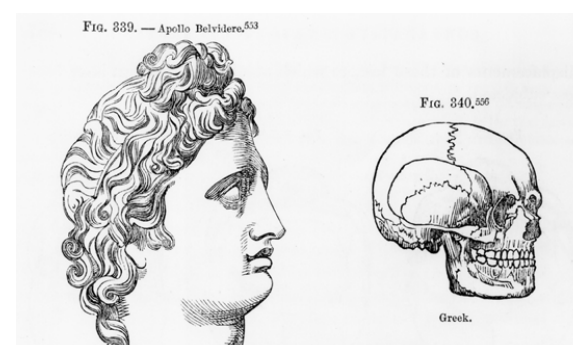
Frederick Douglass was only one among many former slaves who published accounts of their lives in bondage; these works convinced thousands of northerners of the evils of slavery. Indeed, the most effective piece of antislavery literature of the entire period, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was to some extent modeled on the autobiography of fugitive slave Josiah Henson. Serialized in 1851 in a Washington antislavery newspaper and published as a book the following year, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more than 1 million copies by 1854, and it also inspired numerous stage versions. By portraying slaves as sympathetic men and women, and as Christians at the mercy of slaveholders who split up families and set bloodhounds on innocent mothers and children, Stowe's melodrama gave the abolitionist message a powerful human appeal.

Abolitionism and Race

The first racially integrated social movement in American history and the first to give equal rights for blacks a central place in its political agenda, abolitionism was nonetheless a product of its time and place. Racism, as we have seen, was



This portrait of Harriet Beecher Stowe was painted by Alanson Fisher in 1853, shortly after the publication of Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.



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 pervasive in nineteenth-century
 America, North as well as South.

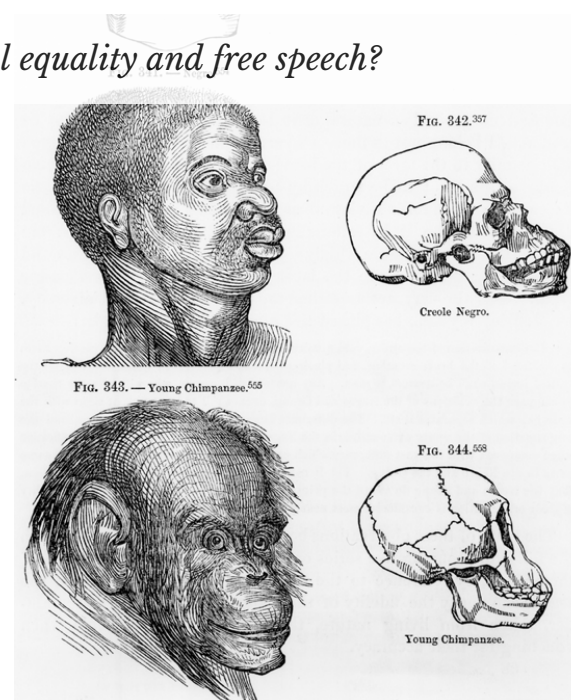
White abolitionists could not free themselves entirely from this prejudice. They monopolized the key decision-making posts, charged black spokesman Martin R. Delany, relegating blacks to “a mere secondary, underling position.” By the 1840s, black abolitionists sought an independent role within the movement, regularly holding their own conventions. The black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, who as a child had escaped from slavery in Maryland with his father, proclaimed at one such gathering in 1843 that slaves should rise in rebellion to throw off their shackles. His position was so at odds with the prevailing belief in moral suasion that the published proceedings entirely omitted the speech. Not until 1848 did Garnet’s speech appear in print, along with Walker’s *Appeal*, in a pamphlet partially financed by an obscure abolitionist named John Brown.

What is remarkable, however, is not that white abolitionists reflected the prejudices of their society, but the extent to which they managed to rise above them. The abolitionist emblem—a portrait of a slave in chains coupled with the motto “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”—challenged white Americans to face up to the reality that men and women no different from themselves were being held in bondage.

Most adamant in contending that the struggle against slavery required a redefinition of both freedom and Americanness were black members of the abolitionist crusade. Black abolitionists developed an understanding of freedom that went well beyond the usage of most of their white contemporaries. They worked to attack the intellectual foundations of racism, seeking to disprove pseudoscientific arguments for black inferiority. They challenged the prevailing image of Africa as a continent without civilization. Many black abolitionists called on free blacks to seek out skilled and dignified employment in order to demonstrate the race’s capacity for advancement.

Slavery and American Freedom

At every opportunity, black abolitionists rejected the nation’s pretensions as a land of liberty. Many free blacks dramatically reversed the common association of the United States with the progress of freedom. Black communities in the North devised an alternative calendar of “freedom celebrations” centered on January 1, the date in 1808 on which the slave trade became illegal, and



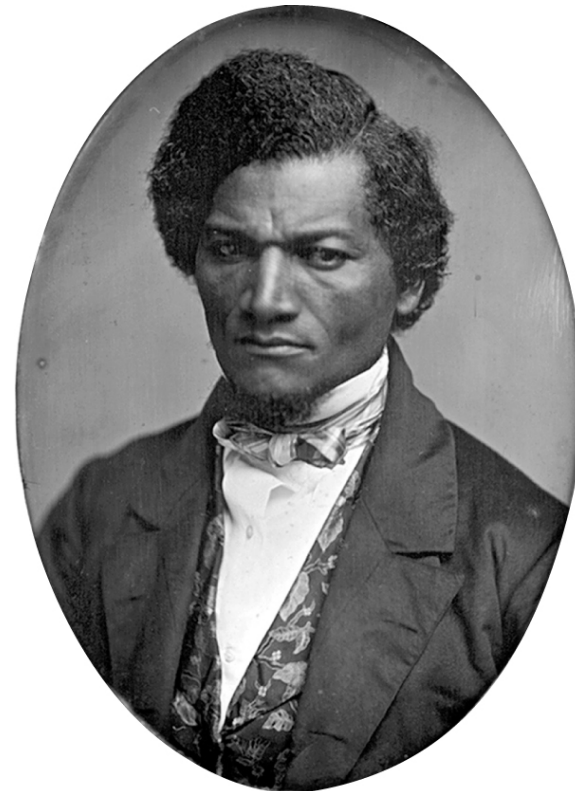
An illustration from *Types of Mankind*, an 1854 book by the physicians and racial theorists Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, who argued that blacks formed a separate species, midway between whites and chimpanzees. Abolitionists sought to counter the pseudoscientific defenses of slavery and racism.

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from Independence Day festivities.) Thanks to its embrace of emancipation in the 1830s, declared a group of black abolitionists in Philadelphia, Britain had become a model of liberty and justice, while the United States remained a land of tyranny.

Black abolitionists also identified the widespread poverty of the free black population as a consequence of slavery and insisted that freedom possessed an economic dimension. It must be part of the “great work” of the antislavery crusade, insisted Charles L. Reason, “to abolish not only chattel slavery, but that other kind of slavery, which, for generation after generation, dooms an oppressed people to a condition of dependence and pauperism.”

The greatest oration on American slavery and American freedom was delivered in Rochester in 1852 by Frederick Douglass. Speaking just after the annual Independence Day celebration, Douglass posed the question, “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?” (see the [Appendix](#) for excerpts from the speech). He answered that Fourth of July festivities revealed the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaimed its belief in liberty yet daily committed “practices more shocking and bloody” than any other country on earth. Like other abolitionists, however, Douglass also laid claim to the founders’ legacy. The Revolution had left a “rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence,” from which subsequent generations had tragically strayed. Only by abolishing slavery and freeing the “great doctrines” of the Declaration of Independence from the “narrow bounds” of race could the United States recapture its original mission.



A photograph of Frederick Douglass, the fugitive slave who became a prominent abolitionist, taken between 1847 and 1852. As a fellow abolitionist noted at the time, “The very look and bearing of Douglass are an irresistible logic against the oppression of his race.”

Gentlemen of Property and Standing

At first, abolitionism aroused violent hostility from northerners who feared that the movement threatened to disrupt the Union, interfere with profits wrested from slave labor, and overturn white supremacy. Led by “[gentlemen of property and standing](#)” (often merchants with close commercial ties to the South), mobs disrupted abolitionist meetings in northern cities. In 1835, a Boston crowd led William Lloyd Garrison through the streets with a rope around his neck. The editor barely escaped with his life. In the following year, a Cincinnati mob destroyed the printing press of James G. Birney, a former slaveholder who had been converted to abolitionism by Theodore

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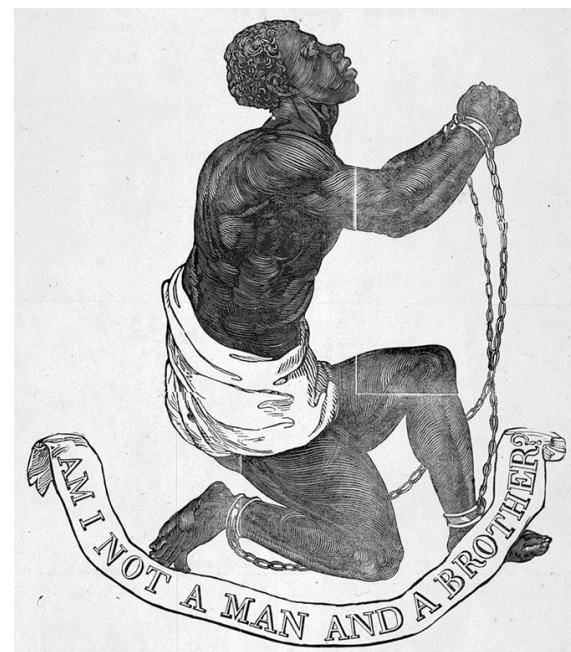
In 1837, antislavery editor Elijah P.

Lovejoy became the movement's first martyr when he was killed by a mob in Alton, Illinois, while defending his press. A native of Maine and a Presbyterian minister, Lovejoy began his editorial career in the slave state of Missouri but was soon forced to move to Illinois. His message, that "the system of Negro slavery is an awful evil and sin," won few converts in Alton, which enjoyed a flourishing trade with the South. Four times, mobs destroyed his printing press, only to see Lovejoy resume publication. The fifth attack ended in his death. In 1838, a mob in Philadelphia burned to the ground Pennsylvania Hall, which abolitionists had built to hold their meetings. Before starting the fire, however, the mob patriotically carried a portrait of George Washington to safety.

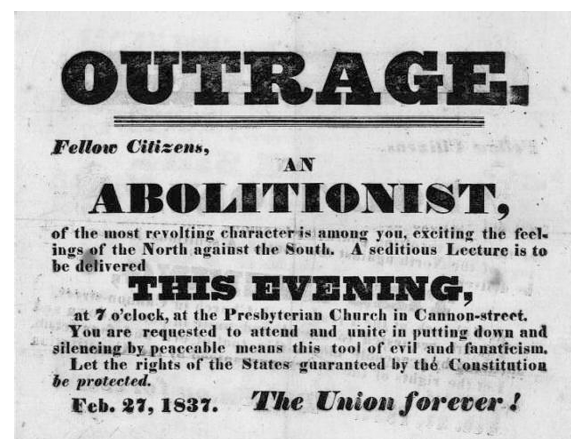
Elsewhere, crowds of southerners, with the unspoken approval of Andrew Jackson's postmaster general, Amos Kendall, burned abolitionist literature that they had removed from the mail. In 1836, when abolitionists began to flood Washington with petitions calling for emancipation in the nation's capital, the House of Representatives adopted the notorious **gag rule**, which prohibited their consideration. The rule was repealed in 1844, thanks largely to the tireless opposition of former president John Quincy Adams, who from 1831 represented Massachusetts in the House.

Slavery and Civil Liberties

Far from stemming the movement's growth, however, mob attacks and attempts to limit abolitionists' freedom of speech convinced many northerners that slavery was incompatible with the democratic liberties of white Americans. In a speech after Lovejoy's murder, Theodore Weld commented on the contrast between Americans' self-confident claims to freedom and the reality of anti-abolitionist violence: "The empty name is everywhere—*free* government, *free* men, *free* speech, *free* schools, and *free* churches. Hollow counterfeits all!" It was the murder of Lovejoy that led Wendell Phillips, who became one of the movement's greatest orators, to associate himself with the



Am I Not a Man and a Brother? The most common abolitionist depiction of a slave, this image both presents African-Americans as unthreatening individuals seeking white assistance and calls upon white Americans to recognize blacks as fellow men unjustly held in bondage.

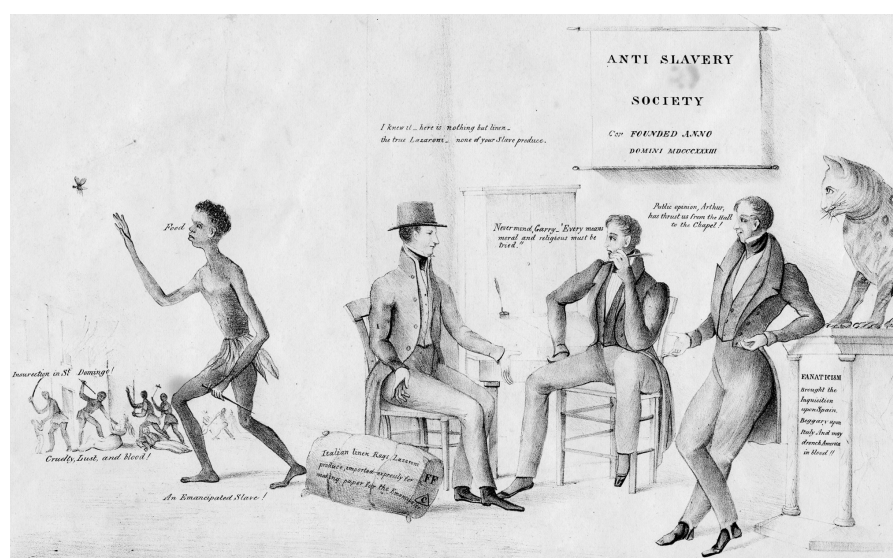


A broadside calling on "fellow citizens" to disrupt an 1837 lecture by "an abolitionist of the most revolting character."

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abolitionist cause. “We commenced the present struggle” announced abolitionist William Jay, “to obtain the freedom of the slave; we are compelled to continue it to preserve our own. We are now contending . . . for the liberty of speech, of the press, and of conscience.”

The abolitionist movement now broadened its appeal so as to win the support of northerners who cared little about the rights of blacks but could be convinced that slavery endangered their own cherished freedoms. The gag rule aroused considerable resentment in the North. “If the government once begins to discriminate as to what is orthodox and what heterodox in opinion,” wrote the *New York Evening Post*, hardly a supporter of abolitionism, “farewell, a long farewell to our freedom.”

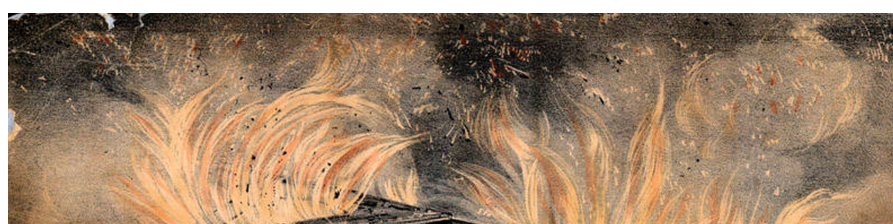


“Immediate Emancipation Illustrated,” an anti-abolitionist cartoon from 1833. Members of an antislavery society prepare to write a pamphlet calling for immediate abolition. The statue of the leopard is meant to remind viewers of the biblical phrase, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?”—that is, that blacks’ condition is fixed by nature. On the left is a reminder of the Haitian revolution, with slaves massacring a white family. The emancipated slave has only one interest—food.

For many years, the American public sphere excluded discussion of slavery.

“Free opinion”

Tocqueville had noted that in a democracy, individual dissenters found it difficult to stand up against the overwhelming power of majority opinion. Americans valued free speech, he wrote, but he did “not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America.” The fight for the right to debate slavery openly and without reprisal led abolitionists to elevate “free opinion”—freedom of speech and of the press and the right of petition—to a central place in what Garrison called the “gospel of freedom.” In defending free speech, abolitionists claimed to have become custodians of the “rights of every freeman.”



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Destruction by Fire of Pennsylvania Hall, a lithograph depicting the burning of the abolitionist meeting hall by a Philadelphia mob in 1838.
