

What were the different varieties of abolitionism?

THE CRUSADE AGAINST SLAVERY

Abolitionists and Christmas Shopping

[▶ Transcript](#)

00:00 Interviewer: You make the somewhat surprising point
00:03 that the abolitionists had a role
00:05 in establishing the custom of Christmas shopping.
00:08 Could you describe it?
00:09 Eric Foner: Well, I came upon this issue
00:11 of raising money for the abolitionist movement
00:15 which people have written about
00:16 via my study of the Underground Railroad.
00:18 Where did the money come from to help?
00:20 It costs money to help fugitive slaves.
00:23 And what I found out was a lot of it came
00:25 from what they called these anti-slavery fairs
00:28 or bazaars, mostly run by women,
00:30 where anti-slavery women would make things,
00:34 you know, clothing, quilts.
00:36 They would bake goods.
00:38 It was like a bake sale for the Underground Railroad.
00:41 And they'd have these little fairs, they'd call them,
00:43 where people would buy these goods
00:45 and the money would go to the anti-slavery movement
00:49 and often to help assist fugitive slaves.
00:52 Now the most elaborate of them was in Boston—

00:55 *What were the different varieties of abolitionism?*

00:57 which took place every year for about

00:59 twenty-five years in Boston.

01:01 It was right before Christmas in early December,

01:04 and it was really extravagant, because they just didn't

01:06 have people baking goods, they imported a lot

01:10 of goods donated

01:12 by anti-slavery women in England.

01:14 Often luxury goods: fancy silks, French goods,

01:19 things from Scotland and England, perfumes,

01:22 all sorts of stuff.

01:24 Many children's goods: toys, clothing.

01:29 Obviously, people giving someone a present

01:31 for Christmas was not new, but the abolitionists

01:33 did really establish this idea of a Christmas shopping season

01:40 where you would purchase goods as gifts for your family

01:45 or your friends, especially for children.

01:48 In a certain sense, it's a precursor

01:52 to more modern consumer activism.

01:55 Today there are people who say you should only buy,

01:58 I don't know, coffee made by people

02:01 who are working under certain conditions

02:05 in Central America, or only goods made

02:09 under inspected conditions in factories in Bangladesh

02:14 or Vietnam or China or somewhere.

02:16 Use your consumer power to help improve the condition

02:19 of workers in these places.

02:21 Well, the abolitionists had a slogan:

02:23 "Buy for the sake of the slave."

02:26 Use your money to purchase goods

02:28 which will actually help promote the idea

02:31 of freedom for slaves, and do it as

02:34 a Christmas thing— to give Christmas presents.

02:37 So the idea of a specific shopping season

02:40 coming up to Christmas was really first promoted

02:42 by the abolitionist movement in these anti-slavery fairs,

02:47 which some of the money, not all, but some of it

02:56 *What were the different varieties of abolitionism?*

02:54 And merchants in Boston were a little annoyed about this,

02:57 because it kind of undercut their sales.

02:59 Again, it wasn't just a bake sale, but it was

03:02 really high-quality goods, jewelry,

03:05 all sorts of stuff.

03:06 There were people who said, you know,

03:07 this was getting too elite.

03:08 We're only selling to the rich here.

03:11 We want to promote anti-slavery among everybody.

03:13 We shouldn't just be trying to raise as much money

03:16 as we can by going for the top one percent,

03:18 you know.

03:19 And eventually the anti-slavery fair

03:21 was suspended and ended in 1858—the Boston one.

03:26 And they changed it to a thing where they would

03:30 get people to give subscriptions—pledge money —

03:33 for the anti-slavery movement but without getting goods.

03:36 But those things continued in other places as well.

03:41 But it's an interesting little sideline

03:44 on how the abolitionist movement actually tried to raise money

03:46 for its activities.

Compared with drinking, Sabbath-breaking, and illiteracy, the greatest evil in American society at first appeared to attract the least attention from reformers. For many years, it seemed that the only Americans willing to challenge the existence of slavery were Quakers, slaves, and free blacks. After the antislavery impulse spawned by the Revolution died out, the slavery question faded from national life, with occasional eruptions like the Missouri controversy of 1819–1821.

Colonization

Before the 1830s, those white Americans willing to contemplate an end to bondage almost always coupled calls for abolition with the “colonization” of freed slaves—their deportation to Africa, the Caribbean, or Central America. In 1816, proponents of this idea founded the [American Colonization Society](#), which promoted the gradual abolition of slavery and the settlement of black Americans in Africa. It soon established Liberia on the coast of West Africa, an outpost of American influence

whose capital, Monrovia, was named for President James Monroe.

What were the different varieties of abolitionism?

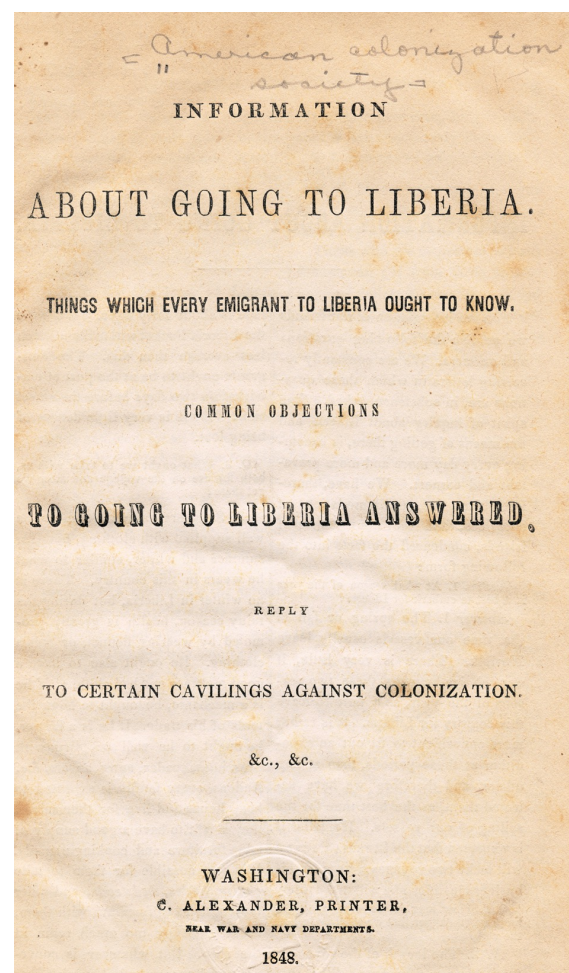
Colonization struck many observers as totally impractical. When the English writer Harriet Martineau visited the United States in the 1830s, she was amazed that former president James Madison endorsed the idea. “How such a mind as his” could be convinced that slavery would not end unless blacks were deported from the country she could not understand.

Nonetheless, numerous prominent political leaders of the Jacksonian era—including Henry Clay, John Marshall, and Jackson himself—supported the Colonization Society. Many northerners saw colonization as the only way to rid the nation of slavery. Southern supporters devoted most of their energy to persuading those African-Americans who were already free to leave the United States. Free blacks, they insisted, were a “degraded” group whose presence posed a danger to white society. Other colonizationists believed that slavery and racism were so deeply embedded in American life that blacks could never achieve equality if freed and allowed to remain in the country. Like Indian removal, colonization rested on the premise that America is fundamentally a white society.

Blacks and Colonization

In the decades before the Civil War, several thousand black Americans did emigrate to Liberia with the aid of the Colonization Society. Some were slaves emancipated by their owners on the condition that they depart, while others left voluntarily, motivated by a desire to spread Christianity in Africa or to enjoy rights denied them in the United States. Having experienced “the legal slavery of the South and the social slavery of the North,” wrote one emigrant on leaving for Liberia, he knew he could “never be a free man in this country.”

But most African-Americans adamantly opposed the idea of colonization. In fact, the formation of the American Colonization Society galvanized free blacks to claim their rights as Americans. Early in 1817, some 3,000 free blacks assembled in Philadelphia for the first national black convention. Their resolutions insisted that blacks were Americans, entitled to the same freedom and rights enjoyed by whites. “We have no wish to separate from our present homes,” they declared. In the years that followed, a number of black organizations removed the word



A pamphlet issued in 1848 by the American Colonization Society urging free blacks to emigrate to Liberia, in West Africa, and defending the society against “certain cavilings”—that is, abolitionist criticism.

“African” from their names to eliminate a possible reason for being deported from the land of their birth.

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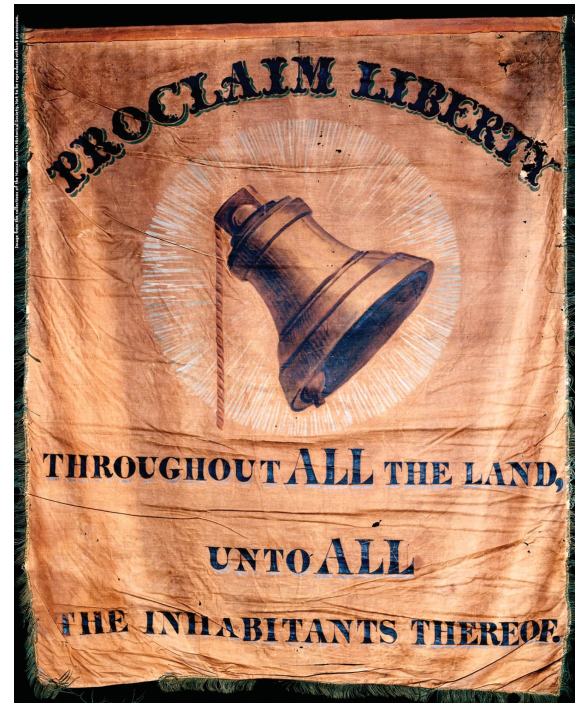
Militant Abolitionism

The abolitionist movement that arose in the 1830s differed profoundly from its genteel, conservative predecessor. Drawing on the religious conviction that slavery was an unparalleled sin and the secular one that it contradicted the values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, a new generation of reformers rejected the traditional approach of gradual emancipation and demanded immediate abolition. Also unlike their predecessors, they directed explosive language against slavery and slaveholders and insisted that blacks, once free, should be incorporated as equal members of the republic rather than being deported. White abolitionists themselves were hardly free of the racism that pervaded American society. Nonetheless, nearly all abolitionists insisted that economic, civil, and political rights in the United States should be equally enjoyed without regard to race. Perfecting American society, they insisted, meant rooting out not just slavery, but racism in all its forms.

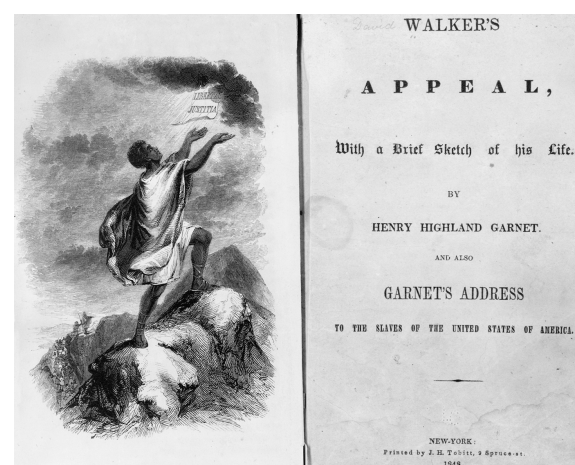
The first indication of the new spirit of abolitionism came in 1829 with the appearance of *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* by David Walker, a free black who had been born in North Carolina and now operated a used-clothing store in Boston. A passionate indictment of slavery and racial prejudice, the *Appeal* warned whites that the nation faced divine punishment if it did not mend its sinful ways. Walker invoked the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, but he went beyond these familiar arguments to call on blacks to take pride in the achievements of ancient African civilizations and to claim all their rights as Americans.

The Emergence of Garrison

Walker's language alarmed both slaveholders and many white critics of slavery. When free black sailors secretly distributed the pamphlet in the South, some southern states put a price on Walker's head. Walker, however, did not create an abolitionist organization, and he died in mysterious circumstances in 1830. Not until the appearance in



An abolitionist banner. Antislavery organizations adopted the Liberty Bell as a symbol of their campaign to extend freedom to black Americans. Previously, the bell, forged in Philadelphia in the eighteenth century, had simply been known as the Old State House Bell.



1831 of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison's weekly journal published in Boston, did the new breed of abolitionism find a permanent voice. "I will be as harsh as truth," Garrison announced, "and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard."

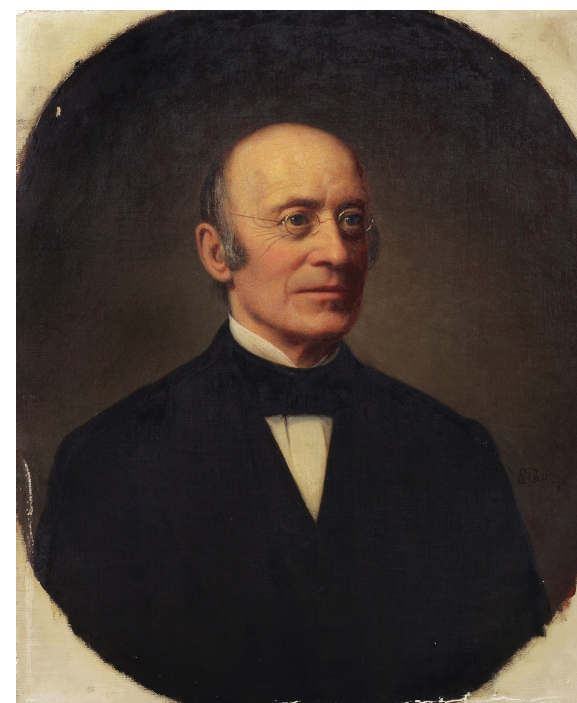
And heard he was, partly because southerners, outraged by his inflammatory rhetoric (one editorial called slaveowners "an adulterous and perverse generation, a brood of vipers"), reprinted Garrison's editorials in their own newspapers in order to condemn them, thus providing him with instant notoriety. Some of Garrison's ideas, such as his suggestion that the North abrogate the Constitution and dissolve the Union to end its complicity in the evil of slavery, were rejected by most abolitionists. But his call for the immediate abolition of slavery echoed throughout antislavery circles. Garrison's pamphlet *Thoughts on African Colonization* persuaded many foes of slavery that blacks must be recognized as part of American society, not viewed as aliens to be shipped overseas.

David Walker's *Appeal* and Henry Highland Garnet's *Address to the Slaves* depicts a black figure receiving "liberty" and "justice" from heaven.

Spreading the Abolitionist Message

📺 Abolition Movement, Part 1: Freedom and Citizenship

Beginning with a handful of activists, the abolitionist movement expanded swiftly throughout the North. Antislavery leaders took advantage of the rapid development of print technology and the expansion of literacy due to common school education to spread their message. Like radical pamphleteers of the American Revolution and evangelical ministers of the Second Great Awakening, they recognized the democratic potential in the production of printed material. Abolitionists seized upon the recently invented steam printing press to produce millions of copies

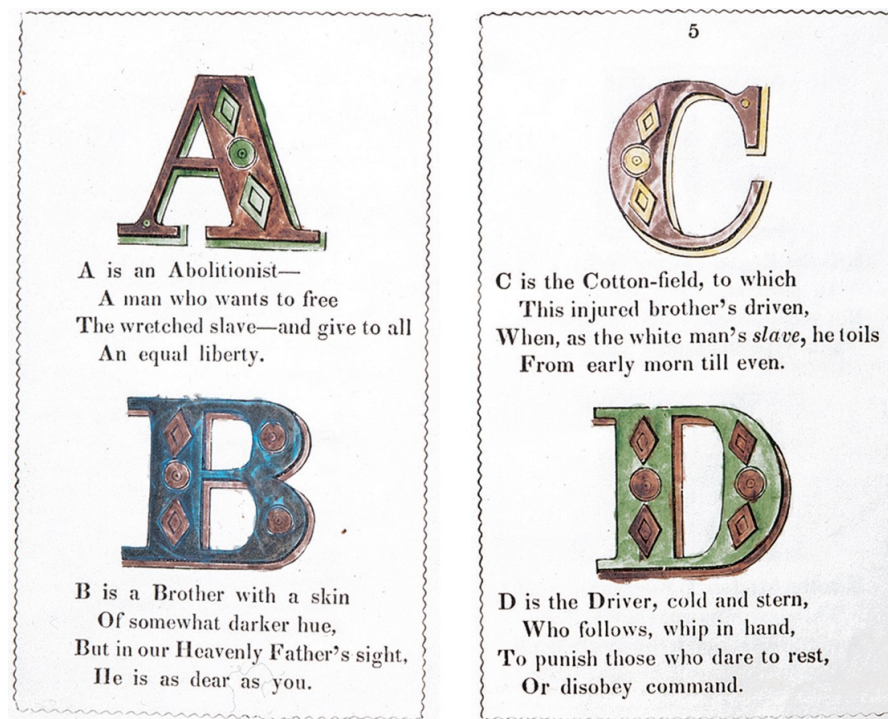


William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator* and one of the country's most prominent abolitionists, in an undated

of pamphlets, newspapers, petitions, portrait by Edwin T. Billings.
novels, and broadsides. Between the

formation of the **American Anti-Slavery Society** in 1833 and the end of the decade, some 100,000 northerners joined local groups devoted to abolition. Most were ordinary citizens—farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and laborers, along with a few prominent businessmen like the merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan of New York.

If Garrison was the movement's most notable propagandist, Theodore Weld, a *Theodore Weld* young minister who had been converted by the evangelical preacher Charles G. Finney, helped to create its mass constituency. A brilliant orator, Weld trained a band of speakers who brought the abolitionist message into the heart of the rural and small-town North. Their methods were those of the revivals—fervent preaching, calls for individuals to renounce their immoral ways—and their message was a simple one: slavery is a sin. “In discussing the subject of slavery,” wrote Weld, “I have always presented it as preeminently a moral question, arresting the conscience of the nation. As a question of politics and national economy, I have passed it with scarce a look or a word.”



Pages from an abolitionist book for children. Abolitionists sought to convince young and old of the evils of slavery.

There was far more to Weld's moralistic approach than a concern for religious righteousness. Identifying slavery as a sin was essential to discrediting the traditional strategies of gradual emancipation and colonization. The only proper response to the sin of slavery, abolitionist speakers proclaimed, was the institution's immediate elimination. Weld also supervised the publication of abolitionist pamphlets, including his own *Slavery As It Is* (1839), a compilation of accounts of the maltreatment of slaves. Since Weld took all his examples from the southern press, they could not be dismissed as figments of the northern imagination.

Abolitionists also pioneered modern ways of raising

funds, especially charity fairs or "bazaars," where women sold clothing and embroidery made by local sewing circles

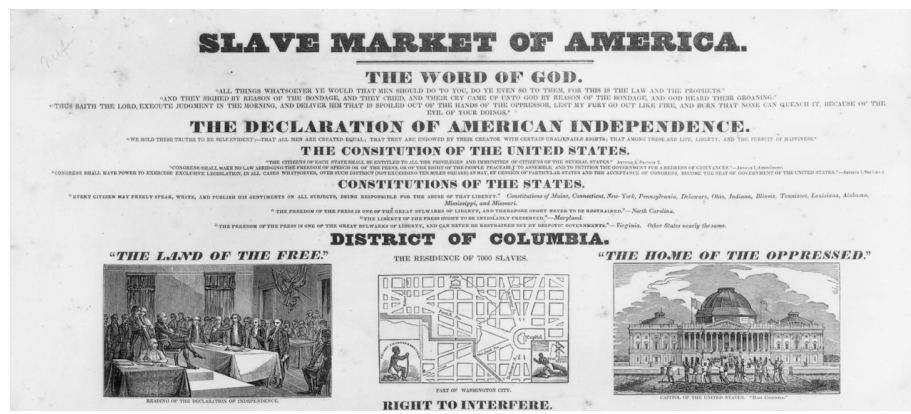
and luxury items such as silks, porcelain, jewelry, and works of art dispatched by antislavery groups in the British Isles. Generally, fairs were held just before Christmas, and included a large assortment of dolls, toys, and other gifts for children. Indeed, abolitionists helped to establish the idea of a Christmas shopping season when people exchanged presents bought at commercial venues. With their slogan, "Buy for the Sake of the Slave," the fairs offered a foretaste of later consumer activism. The grandest of these fairs was the National Anti-Slavery Bazaar in Boston, organized by the wealthy and stylish reformer Maria Weston Chapman, which by the 1850s was raising several thousand dollars per year for the cause, but smaller versions proliferated throughout the North.

Slavery and Moral Suasion

Many southerners feared that the abolitionists intended to spark a slave insurrection, a belief strengthened by the outbreak of Nat Turner's Rebellion a few months after *The Liberator* made its appearance. Yet not only was Garrison completely unknown to Turner, but nearly all abolitionists, despite their militant language, rejected violence as a means of ending slavery. Many were pacifists or "non-resistants," who believed that coercion should be eliminated from all human relationships and institutions. Their strategy was **moral suasion** and their arena the public sphere. Slaveholders must be convinced of the sinfulness of their ways, and the North of its complicity in the peculiar institution.

Standing outside established institutions, abolitionists adopted the role of radical social critics. Among the first to appreciate the key role of public opinion in a mass democracy, they focused their efforts not on infiltrating the existing political parties, but on awakening the nation to the moral evil of slavery. Their language was deliberately provocative, calculated to seize public attention. "Slavery," said Garrison, "will not be overthrown without excitement, without a most tremendous excitement."

Social critics



Slave Market of America, an engraving produced by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1836, illustrates how abolitionists sought to identify their cause with American traditions, even as they mocked the nation's claim to be a "land of the free."

Abolitionists and the Idea of Freedom

The abolitionist crusade both reinforced and challenged common understandings of freedom in Jacksonian America. Abolitionists helped to popularize the concept, fortified by the market revolution, that personal freedom derived not from the ownership of productive property such as land but from ownership of one's self and the ability to enjoy the fruits of one's labor. Abolitionists repudiated the idea of "wage slavery," which had been popularized by the era's labor movement and by southern defenders of slavery. Compared with the slave, the person working for wages, they insisted, was an embodiment of freedom: the free laborer could change jobs if he wished, accumulate property, and enjoy a stable family life. Only slavery, wrote the abolitionist William Goodell, deprived human beings of their "grand central right—the inherent right of self-ownership." On the other hand, abolitionists argued that the inherent, natural, and absolute right to personal liberty, regardless of race, took precedence over other forms of freedom, such as the right of citizens to accumulate and hold property or self-government by local political communities.

Birthright Citizenship

The crusade against slavery gave birth to a new understanding of citizenship and the rights it entailed—a new answer to the question, "Who is an American?" Long before the Civil War, abolitionists black and white developed a definition of national citizenship severed from the concept of race, with citizens' rights enforced by the federal government. The first legal treatise on the rights of free black Americans came from the pen of a white abolitionist, William Yates, in 1838. Abolitionists campaigned for northern free blacks' right to vote, access to education, and equal treatment by transportation companies and public accommodations such as hotels and theaters. They put forward ideas that would be incorporated into the laws and Constitution after the Civil War: that any person born in the United States was entitled to American citizenship and that citizens should enjoy full equality, regardless of race.

The antislavery conventions organized by free blacks promoted the principle of "birthright citizenship,"



A rare photograph of an abolitionist meeting in New York State around 1850. Frederick Douglass is at the left of the woman at the center.

commonly describing themselves as gatherings of “colored citizens.” “Nothing could be plainer,” declared the National Convention of Colored Citizens in 1843, “than that native free born men must be citizens.” They seized upon the Constitution’s language requiring the president to be a “natural born citizen” to argue that American citizenship derived from place of birth, not ancestry or race. Black leaders insistently claimed the same civil and political rights as enjoyed by white citizens, as well as what they called “public rights,” which encompassed equal access to businesses serving the public such as hotels, theaters, streetcars, steamships, and railroads, which regularly excluded blacks. Free blacks and their white allies used a variety of tactics to press for citizenship rights. They launched campaigns for the right to vote, sued streetcar companies that excluded black passengers, and challenged discriminatory laws in local, state, and federal courts. Their efforts were usually unsuccessful, but they did win a few victories, such as the repeal of Ohio’s discriminatory Black Laws in 1849 and the racial integration of Boston’s public schools in 1855. These campaigns helped to establish a new discourse of citizens’ rights.

A New Vision of America

Angelina and Sarah Grimke

In a society in which the rights of citizenship had become more and more closely associated with whiteness, the antislavery movement sought to reinvigorate the idea of freedom as a truly universal entitlement. The origin of the idea of an American people unbounded by race lies not with the founders, who by and large made their peace with slavery, but with the abolitionists. The antislavery crusade viewed slaves and free blacks as members of the national community, a position summarized in the title of Lydia Maria Child’s popular treatise of 1833, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. Child’s text insisted that blacks should no more be considered Africans than whites were Englishmen. Abolitionists also pioneered the modern idea that human rights took precedence over national sovereignty. They urged the United States to participate in the courts that brought together judges from Britain and other countries to punish those who violated the ban on the Atlantic slave trade. These courts were perhaps the first example of

transnational human rights enforcement. But with southerners exerting powerful influence in Washington, the United States did not join the court system until 1862, in the midst of the Civil War.



Antislavery Picnic at Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts, a watercolor from 1845, depicts dozens of men, women, and children at an abolitionist gathering. Unlike most social events of the time, it includes both black and white participants. The artist, Susan Torrey Merritt, painted the tiny figures separately and then cut them out and pasted them on the paper. The red flag at the upper left proclaims Liberty, possibly an allusion to the antislavery Liberty Party.

The crusade against slavery, wrote Angelina Grimké, who became a leading abolitionist speaker, was the nation's preeminent "school in which human rights are . . . investigated." Abolitionists debated the Constitution's relationship to slavery. William Lloyd Garrison burned the document, calling it a covenant with the devil; Frederick Douglass came to believe that it offered no national protection to slavery. But despite this difference of opinion, abolitionists developed an alternative, rights-oriented view of constitutional law, grounded in their universalistic understanding of liberty. Seeking to define the core rights to which all Americans were entitled—the meaning of freedom in concrete legal terms—abolitionists invented the concept of equality before the law regardless of race, one all but unknown in American life before the Civil War. Abolitionist literature also helped to expand the definition of cruelty. The graphic descriptions of the beatings, brandings, and other physical sufferings of the slaves helped to popularize the idea of bodily integrity as a basic right that slavery violated.

Despite being denounced by their opponents as enemies of American principles, abolitionists consciously identified their movement with the revolutionary heritage. The Declaration of Independence was not as fundamental to public oratory in the early republic as it would later



become. Abolitionists seized upon it, interpreting the document's

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preamble as a condemnation of slavery. The Liberty Bell, later one of the nation's most venerated emblems of freedom, did not achieve that status until abolitionists adopted it as a symbol and gave it its name, as part of an effort to identify their principles with those of the founders. (Prior to the 1830s, it was simply the Old State House Bell, used at various times to mark the death of prominent citizens, summon students at the University of Pennsylvania to their classes, and celebrate patriotic holidays.) Of course, Americans of all regions and political beliefs claimed the Revolution's legacy. Mobs that disrupted abolitionist meetings invoked the "spirit of '76," as did southern defenders of slavery. Abolitionists never represented more than a small part of the North's population. But as the slavery controversy intensified, the belief spread far beyond abolitionist circles that slavery contradicted the nation's heritage of freedom.



One of many popular lithographs illustrating scenes from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most widely read of all antislavery writings. This depicts the slave Eliza escaping with her child across the ice floes of the Ohio River.
