Abolitionism

The crusade against slavery was the most significant of the reform era movements. Slavery existed in all of the original 13 American colonies, but by the middle of the eighteenth century some Americans began to speak out against human bondage. The Society of Friends--the Quakers--became the first group to take a public stand in support of the abolition of slavery. The devotion of the Quakers was paralleled, in varying degrees, by other religions. As the Revolutionary War approached, the moral arguments against slavery were bolstered by secular concepts drawn from the Enlightenment, including individual freedom and political equality.

Spurred on by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, opposition to slavery grew throughout the United States. Northern states, in part due to economic conditions, inaugurated gradual emancipation programs. Since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibited slavery in that region, by the first decade of the nineteenth century all the states that would be free by the time of the Civil War were on the road to manumission. Additionally, Congress prohibited foreign slave trade in 1808.

Slavery may appear to have been dying out in the United States, but the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made it economically viable in the southern states. Furthermore, slavery was more than just a labor system—it was an institution to control the black race in America. Racism alone prevented the abolition of slavery during the Age of Reform. Southerners defended slavery as a "necessary evil," and argued that they could not free millions of slaves without destroying their economy and their society. Many Northerners had economic ties to the "peculiar institution," and still others worried about their own futures if they were suddenly competing in the marketplace with millions of free African Americans. Most northern states restricted the political rights and civil liberties of their black citizens. Lydia Maria Child, an active reformer in many fields, captured this Northern spirit when she wrote, "Our prejudice against colored people is even more inveterate than it is at the South."

The abolition movement grew slowly during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In late December 1816, a prominent group of men, dominated by Southerners, gathered in Washington and founded the American Colonization Society. Judge Bushrod Washington, nephew of the first president, presided. Henry Clay, a Kentucky slaveholder and national political figure, praised the aim of the society to "rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous, portion of its population"—free blacks.

Several years later, the first African Americans arrived in what became the Republic of Liberia. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for the slaveholding president who supported the goals of the American Colonization Society. Colonization, however, had no real chance of success. Only a tiny fraction of the African American population removed to Liberia, due to the costs involved and the opposition of free blacks who rightly viewed America as their homeland. Most white abolitionists, too, soon turned to other methods to combat slavery. Nonetheless, during the 1850s Martin Delany, a free black doctor and journalist, preached economic self-sufficiency and the creation of separate African American communities in Africa, Canada, or Latin America. As late as the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln seriously considered establishing black colonies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A new intensity and enthusiasm galvanized the abolition movement during the reform era. African Americans were active in the crusade from the start. The first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded in New York in 1827, and within a few years there were more than 50 antislavery societies in black communities. David Walker, a free black who moved from North Carolina to Boston, was one of the *Journal's* agents. He published in 1829 a radical pamphlet, *Walker's Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*, that scornfully rejected colonization, and warned whites of the destruction they faced, "If we have to obtain our freedom by fighting." Although Walker died the following year, his call for slave rebellion led southern states to outlaw black education and crack down on "incendiary" publications from the North. In an unfortunate coincidence of timing, Nat Turner, a literate slave, led two-dozen followers on a bloody rampage in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. About 60 whites were killed before the insurrection was brutally crushed and Turner executed. Nat Turner's rebellion was blamed by terrified southern whites on northern abolitionists. Any lingering hopes for gradual and voluntary emancipation by state legislatures died with Nat Turner. Southerners soon were defending slavery not as a necessary evil, but as "a positive good."

Most white abolitionists rejected the violent approach advocated by David Walker. William Ellery Channing, Lyman Beecher, and Charles Grandison Finney, to name a few, were motivated by evangelical revivalism. Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker, published in Baltimore the most influential antislavery newspaper of the 1820s, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Among his staff was William Lloyd Garrison, who moved to Boston and started his own abolitionist weekly. Garrison embodied a more radical approach to abolitionism than his mentor. The first issue of *The*

Liberator, dated January 1, 1831, carried a message that Garrison forcefully continued to deliver: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Garrison demanded immediate, uncompensated emancipation, and equal rights for black Americans. He lambasted the Constitution for permitting slavery to exist, refused to engage in political action to attain his goals, and called upon northern states to secede from the Union if slavery was not abolished by the "wicked" Southerners. Garrison led the way in founding the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, and served as the first president of the American Anti-Slavery Society the following year. The chief financial backing for the national society came from two wealthy New York merchants, Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Within a decade, there were about 2,000 affiliates of the American Anti-Slavery Society, enrolling 200,000 members.

Women played a major role in the abolitionist movement. Lucretia Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was a network of local organizations. African Americans, including Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart, addressed "promiscuous" audiences of men and women in New England. Abby Kelley, a Quaker, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who converted to Quakerism before leaving their southern home, were among the more celebrated female platform speakers. Angelina and Sarah contributed much of the primary research from southern newspapers and firsthand testimonials to Theodore Dwight Weld's graphic exposé of the peculiar institution, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. Weld, who was married to Angelina, was a revivalist preacher trained by Charles Grandison Finney and a leading western abolitionist.

Many escaped slaves made particularly effective speakers. Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown, both escapees from Kentucky, were prominent African American abolitionist orators. Frederick Douglass was the greatest African American abolitionist and a mesmerizing speaker. His autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, traced the remarkable life of a young slave who taught himself to read and write before escaping from Maryland in 1838. Douglass founded the *North Star*, an abolitionist newspaper, in Rochester, New York, and continued the crusade for racial equality.

Despite their growing numbers, antislavery crusaders were never more than a small minority of Northerners. They were also the subjects of physical threats. Garrison, for example, was paraded around Boston in 1835, with a rope hanging from his neck, by what was described as a "well-dressed" mob. Two years later, the movement had its first martyr. In Alton, Illinois, across the Mississippi River from slave-holding Missouri, Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered while defending his abolitionist newspaper office. Cassius Marcellus Clay faced the same threat in Lexington, Kentucky, and mounted two small brass cannons to guard the doors of the True American. Violence was averted, however, when Clay's press was dismantled and shipped out of the state.

To further the cause of freedom for the slaves and freedom of the press, thousands of petitions were sent to Congress urging the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1836, however, the House passed a "gag rule," that automatically tabled antislavery petitions without debate. Many Northerners, who previously gave little thought to abolition, now viewed their own civil liberties as being in jeopardy. John Quincy Adams, then a representative from Massachusetts, led the fight against the gag rule until its repeal in 1844.

The petition drive was one form of political action employed by abolitionists. Some leaders of the movement, most notably William Lloyd Garrison, continued to rely solely on moral suasion. Increasingly frustrated by their lack of progress, however, Douglass, Weld, and the Tappan brothers were among those abolitionists calling for a political war against slavery. In 1840, they organized the Liberty Party, and nominated for president James G. Birney, a former Kentucky slaveholder. Birney received only 7,000 popular votes in the ensuing election. Four years later, again with Birney heading the ticket, the Liberty Party increased its vote count to 62,000. The abolitionists probably cost the Whigs the electoral vote of New York, thereby ensuring the election of Democrat James Knox Polk. In 1848, the Free Soil Party played a significant role in the election, and foreshadowed the founding of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Ultimately, the abolitionist crusade proved to be the most powerful of all the reform era movements, forever changing the history of the United States.