

The Abolition Movement

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although most White Americans had no problem with racial inequality prior to the Civil War, a growing number of individuals became concerned about the effects of slavery on American society and morality. This tutorial examines the efforts of those who sought to end slavery in the United States before the Civil War.

Our discussion of the abolition movement breaks down as follows:

1. Colonization

Opponents of slavery had different ideas about how to end the institution. Some could not envision a racially harmonious society, and they feared potential racial violence and chaos unleashed by emancipation. These antislavery activists advocated **colonization**, or sending emancipated people to Africa or the Caribbean.



TERM TO KNOW

Colonization

The strategy of moving free African Americans out of the United States, usually to Africa.

In 1816, a group of wealthy, influential White Americans—convinced that the two races could not live together as equals—founded the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America (also called the American Colonization Society, or ACS). The group called for the gradual end of slavery and the “colonization” (“removal” might be a better word) of emancipated people to Africa, the Caribbean, or Central America.



DID YOU KNOW

A number of leading American statesmen were proponents of colonization. Among them were Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson.

The ACS raised money and asked Congress for funding. In 1819, the organization succeeded in getting \$100,000 from the federal government to further the colonization project. The ACS used this money to create the colony of Liberia, on the west coast of Africa.



DID YOU KNOW

The capital city of Liberia, Monrovia, was named in honor of President James Monroe, who supported the

colonization initiative.

Most African Americans—free or enslaved—opposed the idea of colonization and questioned its motives. Colonization, and the ACS in particular, stood out as an example of how White men—particularly men of property and political standing—sought to end slavery without addressing the issue of racial inequality upon which the institution was built.



DID YOU KNOW

By the early 1840s, fewer than 5,000 African Americans, most of whom were former enslaved people, had migrated to Liberia.

2. Free Labor Ideology

Other White Americans, particularly enterprising artisans, merchants, business owners, and farmers who comprised a growing middle class in northern society, continued to criticize slavery through the lens of **free labor ideology**.



TERM TO KNOW

Free Labor Ideology

The ideal that each laborer should have the ability to climb up the economic ladder and receive a fair return for their labor, thus achieving economic independence.

These Americans strove to maintain or improve their status in northern society, and they believed they could do so through hard work, self-discipline, education, and innovation. They criticized slavery because they believed the institution promoted the exact opposite—a culture of leisure among plantation owners who did not perform work and profited from the exploitation of other laborers.

It is important to remember that free labor ideology did not espouse racial equality. Like most White Americans, many advocates of free labor accepted polygenesis and other racist theories of the day. Nevertheless, they feared that southern slavery would affect the economic status of northern White laborers.

Free labor ideologues argued that slavery should remain in the South. They opposed the potential expansion of slavery into western territories, for fear that it would allow slaveholders to access more land and deprive free laborers of an opportunity to achieve economic independence. In contrast, if slavery was restricted to the South, many free labor advocates believed that the institution would gradually go extinct. They believed that the North's economic system remained superior, and they were convinced that the South would have to abandon slavery if it sought modernization and improvement along lines similar to that of the North.

3. Militant Abolitionism

The initial stirrings of the abolition movement in the United States, which argued for the complete elimination of slavery, occurred during the American Revolution when some revolutionaries formed societies dedicated to ending the institution.

➞ **EXAMPLE** One of the earliest of these societies formed in Philadelphia in 1775, when Dr. Benjamin Rush and other Philadelphia Quakers formed what became the Pennsylvania Abolition Society.

Previous tutorials have already examined early attempts to end slavery in the United States, particularly those that occurred in the northern United States under programs of **gradual emancipation**.



TERM TO KNOW

Gradual Emancipation

A process that provided for the eventual freedom of enslaved people upon reaching certain requirements such as age or time served.

By the 1830s and 1840s, the impulses on behalf of gradual emancipation had fused with free labor ideology and articulated a need to contain slavery to the South, convinced that the institution would gradually become extinct in the face of northern economic superiority.

At the same time, however, a new generation of reformers, influenced by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, demanded the immediate end of slavery in the United States, under the conviction that the institution was a sin that stained national morality. This version of abolitionism, sometimes referred to as **militant abolitionism**, sprang from voluntary groups that spearheaded other reforms, such as temperance, during the early 19th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Militant Abolitionism

Movement that advocated for the complete and immediate elimination of slavery from the United States on moral grounds.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Similar to supporters of the temperance movement—who argued that excessive alcohol consumption was a vice that threatened to unravel the social fabric of the entire nation—abolitionists argued that slavery was a sin that threatened individual salvation and the soul of the United States.

Such an emphasis on religion and **moral suasion**, or appealing to the public's conscience, allowed abolitionists to distinguish themselves from other antislavery advocates who opposed the institution on the grounds of free labor. Abolitionists insisted that slavery was a moral evil, one that would not go extinct in the United States without concerted efforts by its opponents.



TERM TO KNOW

Moral Suasion

A technique of appealing to the public consciences to end slavery.

What distinguished abolitionism even further was the fact that the movement was biracial. It included White northerners, free Black northerners, and escaped enslaved people. In contrast to advocates of colonization, most abolitionists argued that African Americans should have the right to become citizens of equal standing in the United States.

4. Notable Abolitionists

Let's meet three of the most notable abolitionists in the United States.

4a. David Walker

David Walker was an African American who was originally born free in North Carolina and subsequently moved to Boston. Walker helped ignite the abolition movement in the United States. He was self-educated, owned a clothing store, was active in the local American Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, and became a vocal critic of slavery.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

David Walker

A free African American in Boston who helped ignite the abolition movement in the United States with the publication of his “An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” in 1829.

In 1829, he wrote a pamphlet that some historians believe was the most significant publication in American history since Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. The title was *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States*. In it, Walker condemned the practice of slavery in the South, and in particular the hypocrisy of Christian slaveowners who defended the institution in Biblical and paternalist terms. He aggressively criticized the daily humiliations to which all African Americans—free and slave—were subjected within the United States, and he compelled all other Americans to do the same:

David Walker, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States*

“They tell us of the Israelites in Egypt, the Helots in Sparta, and of the Roman Slaves, which last were made up from almost every nation under heaven, whose sufferings under those ancient and heathen nations, were, in comparison with ours, under this enlightened and Christian nation, no more than a cypher—or, in other words, those heathen nations of antiquity, had but little more among them than the name and form of slavery; while wretchedness and endless miseries were reserved, apparently in a phial, to be poured out upon, our fathers ourselves and our children, by *Christian* Americans!.... I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing—who knows that my object is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!....”



THINK ABOUT IT

Who do you think Walker is referring to when he writes, “They tell us of the Israelites in Egypt, the Helots in Sparta, and of the Roman enslaved people?” In what ways does he believe American slavery is different from these previous institutions?



DID YOU KNOW

David Walker died suddenly of natural causes in August 1830. Some individuals at the time suspected poison, and some historians continue to disagree over Walker's cause of death.

4b. William Lloyd Garrison

Walker's work as an abolitionist was carried on by **William Lloyd Garrison** of Massachusetts, who soon distinguished himself as a leader of the movement. Garrison was deeply religious, and although he had once been in favor of colonization, he came to believe that such a scheme only deepened racism and perpetuated the sinful practices of his fellow Americans.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Lloyd Garrison

White abolitionist leader in Boston who founded the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* in 1831 and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833.

In January 1831, he founded the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, whose first edition declared:

William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*

“I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”



THINK ABOUT IT

How does Garrison’s declaration reflect the principles of militant abolitionism?

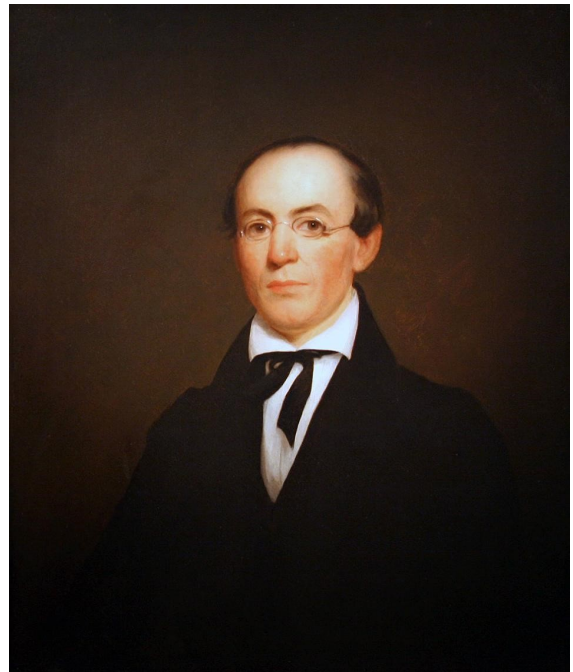
Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1831, and the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in 1833. By 1838, the AASS had 250,000 members. The AASS and leaders such as Garrison recognized that they constituted a minority within American society, but they believed that slavery could come to an end in the United States if a significant segment of public opinion concluded that the institution was a moral evil.

To achieve this goal, Garrison and other abolitionists relied on dramatic narratives, often from former enslaved people, about the horrors of slavery. The abolitionist press produced hundreds of tracts for readers across the United States. Garrison and other abolitionists also used the power of petitions, sending hundreds of petitions to Congress, beginning in the early 1830s, that demanded an end to slavery.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1835, Garrison and his allies attempted to mail abolitionist tracts to approximately 20,000 prominent White southerners. Convinced that this literature would fall into the hands of enslaved people, southern leaders in the federal government (who included President Andrew Jackson and Senator John C. Calhoun) allowed postmasters to censor any mail that they deemed incendiary.



Portrait of William Lloyd Garrison by Nathaniel Jocelyn, 1833

4c. Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass, who was born into slavery in Maryland in 1818 but escaped to New York in 1838, was among many former enslaved people who used his experience to highlight the immorality of slavery and racial inequality. Douglass’s commanding presence and powerful speaking skills electrified listeners when he

lectured on slavery.

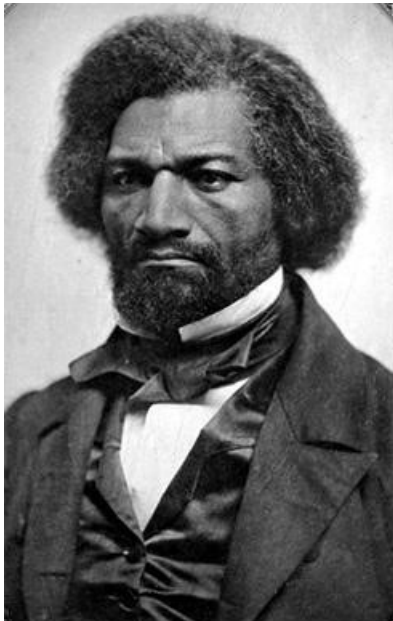


PEOPLE TO KNOW

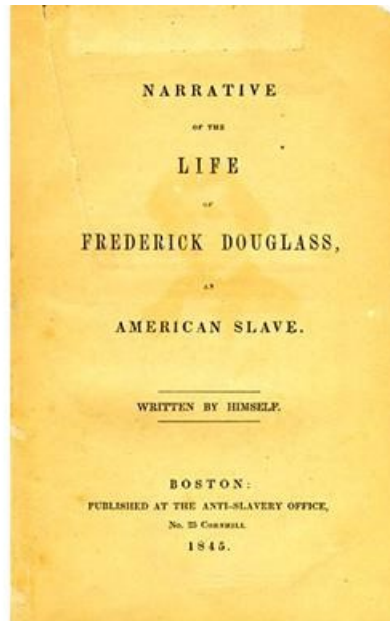
Frederick Douglass

A formerly enslaved person from Maryland who escaped and became a leader in the abolition movement in the North. His commanding presence, powerful speaking skills, and 1845 publication of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself*, drew many to the movement.

In 1845, under the encouragement of William Lloyd Garrison, he published his autobiography: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (pictured below).



(a)



(b)

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* demonstrated the brutality of slavery for northern audiences who were unfamiliar with the institution. In the excerpt below, Douglass explains the consequences for the children fathered by White masters and enslaved women:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself*

"Slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers. . .this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable. . .the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father. . . .

Such slaves [born of white masters] invariably suffer greater hardships. . .They are. . .a constant offence to their mistress. . .she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers. . .for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker. . .and ply the gory lash to his

naked back.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What moral complications did slavery unleash upon White slaveholders in the South, according to Douglass?
2. What imagery does he use?



BRAINSTORM

Compare the three primary source selections from abolitionists to the material on free labor ideology and colonization. In what ways do these sources challenge other proposals to restrict or reform slavery?



SUMMARY

Americans struggled to deal with slavery, and reformers addressed the issue through contrasting proposals that offered profoundly different solutions to the dilemma of the institution. Many leading American statesmen favored colonization, or the relocation of people of African descent to Africa. Advocates of free labor ideology, meanwhile, feared that the expansion of slavery would limit opportunities for White laborers and argued for the containment of slavery to the South. Militant abolitionists, who included David Walker, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass, believed that slavery was a moral wrong and argued for its immediate end.

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REFERENCES

Walker, D. (1829). “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829”, in *The American Yawp*, Joseph Locke and Ben Wright, eds., last modified August 1, 2016, bit.ly/2JRf30c



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TERMS TO KNOW

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A technique of appealing to the public conscience to end slavery.



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William Lloyd Garrison

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DATES TO KNOW

1775

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was founded by Philadelphia Quakers.

1816

The American Colonization Society (ACS) is founded.

1818

Frederick Douglass is born into slavery.

1819

The ACS receives \$100,000 from the federal government to create the colony of Liberia.

1829

David Walker publishes *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*.

1831

William Lloyd Garrison founds *The Liberator* and the New England Anti-Slavery Society.

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Frederick Douglass escapes to New York.

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