

# Think About It: How Was American Culture Changing?

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Despite the disruptions that came with international affairs, the market revolution, and the democratization of American politics during the early 19th century, many Americans were confident and optimistic about the future.

This tutorial introduces you to some of the ways that individuals sought to improve American culture during the early 19th century, focusing specifically on religion, reform, and women.

## 1. The Second Great Awakening

The waves of popular religion, waves that began by the mid-18th century and during the First Great Awakening, accelerated during the American Revolution. As colonial society disintegrated, and traditional relationships defined by hierarchy or deference disappeared, religion remained one way that Americans could establish connections with each other. As a result, the Revolution witnessed the creation of an unprecedented number of new religious communities. In many cases, these communities replaced older, traditional churches—ones with connections to Great Britain—in favor of new religious denominations.

Older, traditional churches with well-established connections to Great Britain—such as the Anglican (Episcopal) church—either weakened or failed to gain members during the American Revolution. However, new Protestant denominations, such as the Methodist church, exploded in membership.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1760, Methodism had virtually zero adherents in British North America. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, publicly opposed the American Revolution. However, by 1790, the Methodists had established over 700 churches within the United States. By 1820, the Methodist church had over 250,000 members, making it the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

Free Black communities in the North created their own Protestant churches as well. The city of Philadelphia, which had a significant population of approximately 12,000 free African Americans by the early 19th century, led the way in this regard.

➞ **EXAMPLE** By 1809, Philadelphia featured the first Black Episcopal church, the first Black Methodist church, the first Black Presbyterian church, and the first Black northern Baptist church.

For a time, Black congregations in Philadelphia remained part of the larger, national Protestant denominations.

But disputes with central church authorities soon contributed to their separation.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1816, after a property dispute with Methodist church leaders authorities, members of Philadelphia's Black Methodist community broke away and created a separate denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME Church was the only institution in the United States entirely under Black control at this time.

In addition to Baptists and Methodists moving into mainstream American society and the creation of independent Black churches, a number of new sects and utopian religious communities, such as the Shakers, Universalists, and a variety of other groups, emerged. Such communities attracted individuals who had become disillusioned by an emergent capitalist society that promoted individualism rather than cooperation. These communities often rejected private property and traditional family life.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The first Shaker community was established in 1787. By the 1840s, Shaker communities could be found anywhere between Maine and Kentucky, and they featured more than 5,000 members. Shakers were known for the ritual dances they performed during religious ceremonies. Increased church membership and growing interest in church practices contributed to the **Second Great Awakening** of the early 19th century.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Second Great Awakening**

A revival of evangelical Protestantism in the United States during the early 19th century. This explosion in religious fervor built upon the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century by being more personal and optimistic with its audiences, which helped mobilize a significant number of people who previously had not been affiliated with any Protestant denomination. Individuals were drawn to religious rhetoric that preached the authority of Scripture, emphasized the personal conversion experience, and rejected predestination. Such principles meshed nicely with revolutionary beliefs associated with individualism, liberty, and equality.



This image by J. Maze Burbank (ca. 1839) shows a camp meeting during the Second Awakening. Revivalist camp meetings held by itinerant Protestant ministers became a feature of the period. The meetings could draw audiences of hundreds of people, and they often produced demonstrative, emotional displays of religious conviction and conversion.

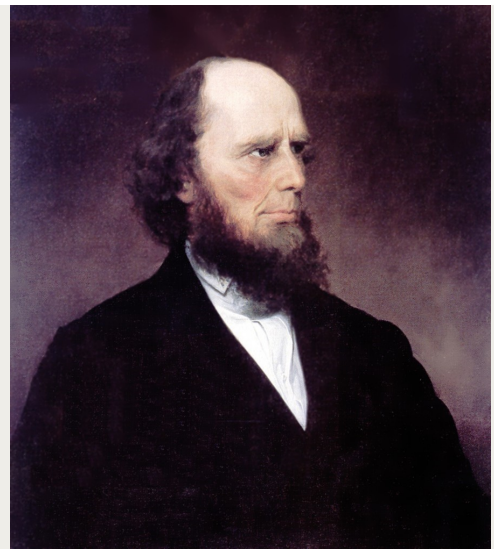
Given the broader context of the democratization of American politics during the first half of the 19th century, historians have argued that the Second Great Awakening *democratized* American Christianity. Protestant ministers insisted that individuals had the right to choose salvation and, on certain occasions, framed the larger battle between Heaven and Hell in terms of American democracy.

Perhaps no one utilized this tactic better than **Charles Grandison Finney**, who held revival meetings throughout upstate New York during the 1820s and 1830s. In his sermons, Finney (1836) emphasized that individuals had the freedom to choose between salvation and sin:

**Charles Grandison Finney, Protestant Minister**

“A change of heart...consists in changing the controlling preference of the mind in regard to the *end* of pursuit. The selfish heart is a preference of self-interest to the glory of God and the interests of His kingdom. A new heart consists in a preference of the glory of God and the interests of His kingdom to one’s own happiness. In other words, it is a change from selfishness to benevolence....

The conduct of impenitent sinners demonstrates that they prefer Satan as the ruler of the world, they obey his laws, electioneer for him, and are zealous for his interests, even to martyrdom....A new heart is the choice of JEHOVAH as the supreme ruler; a deep-seated and abiding preference of his laws, and government, and character, and person, as the supreme Legislator and Governor of the universe.



Portrait of Charles Grandison Finney.

Thus the world is divided into two great political parties; the difference between them is, that one party choose Satan as the god of this world, yield obedience to his laws, and are devoted to his interest.... The other party choose Jehovah for their governor, and consecrate themselves, with all their interests, to his service and glory.”



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Charles Grandison Finney

Presbyterian minister who held revival meetings throughout upstate New York during the 1820s and 1830s during the Second Great Awakening and preached man’s free will to choose salvation.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Finney, what is the difference between a “selfish heart” and a “new heart”?
2. Do you notice any similarity between the “new heart” espoused by Finney and the “civic virtue” espoused by the Founding Fathers? If so, what might explain the similarity?
3. In what ways does Finney compare Christianity to the American political process, and what effect might such comparisons have had on Finney’s audiences?



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1835, Finney had moved to Ohio and ultimately became the president of Oberlin College, which was the first institution of higher education in the United States that accepted women and people of color as students as well as White men.

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## 2. Reforming American Character: The Temperance Movement

Evangelists such as Charles Finney, along with a number of other people in the United States, were also

united in an effort to reform American character during the early 19th century. These reform movements sought to eliminate any aspect of American society that hindered social harmony. According to many reformers, intemperance, or drunkenness, was the most troubling problem in American society because they believed it eroded morality and corrupted democracy.

The **temperance movement** emerged in the face of heavy alcohol consumption in the United States. By the early 19th century, the drinking of hard liquor and cider in the United States was greater than that in any major European nation, and the social consequences of such consumption could be profound. Accidental deaths, domestic violence, and rioting attributed to alcohol led a number of Americans to wonder whether the United States would become a nation of drunkards.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Temperance Movement**

A social movement encouraging moderation or self-restraint in the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

The temperance movement, which emphasized self-control, began in the 1810s. The movement's original goal was to moderate alcohol consumption, rather than ban it altogether. However, when the Second Great Awakening emerged in the 1820s, the temperance movement became infused with evangelical reformers, who sought to ban alcohol use completely.

Lyman Beecher—along with other Protestant evangelicals such as Charles Finney—argued that excessive alcohol consumption led to social disruption and made individuals unfit for salvation. In 1825, Beecher delivered six sermons on temperance that were published the following year as *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance*. In them, he urged total abstinence from hard liquor.



“The Drunkards Progress. From the First Glass to the Grave.” (ca. 1846)

A popular image utilized by temperance advocates, “The Drunkards Progress,” describes an individual’s descent into alcoholism, to the detriment of his friends, family, and property. The process was outlined as follows:

- Step 1. A glass with a friend.
- Step 2. A glass to keep the cold out.
- Step 3. A glass too much.
- Step 4. Drunk and riotous.
- Step 5. The summit attained. Jolly companions. A confirmed drunkard.
- Step 6. Poverty and disease.
- Step 7. Forsaken by friends.
- Step 8. Desperation and crime.
- Step 9. Death by suicide.



THINK ABOUT IT

How does this image reinforce the central messages of the temperance movement?

Although never successful in removing liquor from society, the temperance movement did contribute to an overall decline in alcohol consumption in the United States by the 1840s.

➞ **EXAMPLE** By the 1840s, the annual rate of alcohol consumption among Americans over the age of 15 was approximately 1.8 gallons per person per year. This was down from almost five gallons per

person per year in 1820.

More significant than the movement's role in declining alcohol consumption was its ability to organize voluntary societies, or what Beecher called "a disciplined moral militia," to influence and mobilize public opinion on a range of issues.

In 1826, the American Temperance Society was formed. By the early 1830s, thousands of similar societies had sprouted across the country.

Members from these groups distributed Bibles, pamphlets, and other literature. They also organized rallies or speaking engagements that addressed issues that plagued the American republic. These issues included alcohol consumption, poverty, and prostitution. Most importantly, these organizations mobilized a large number of people—including women and African Americans—who were otherwise excluded from democratic processes.

Such reform efforts took place in a realm that scholars call *civil society*, or public spaces in which people were encouraged to emerge from their individual, everyday lives to discuss an issue of public concern. By learning to organize within such spaces (which were not affiliated with the halls of government or situated within private homes or businesses), American evangelicals and reformers contributed to the creation of one of American democracy's most essential institutions. Through voluntary organizations, Americans brought forth causes that might otherwise have been left out of the political conversation.

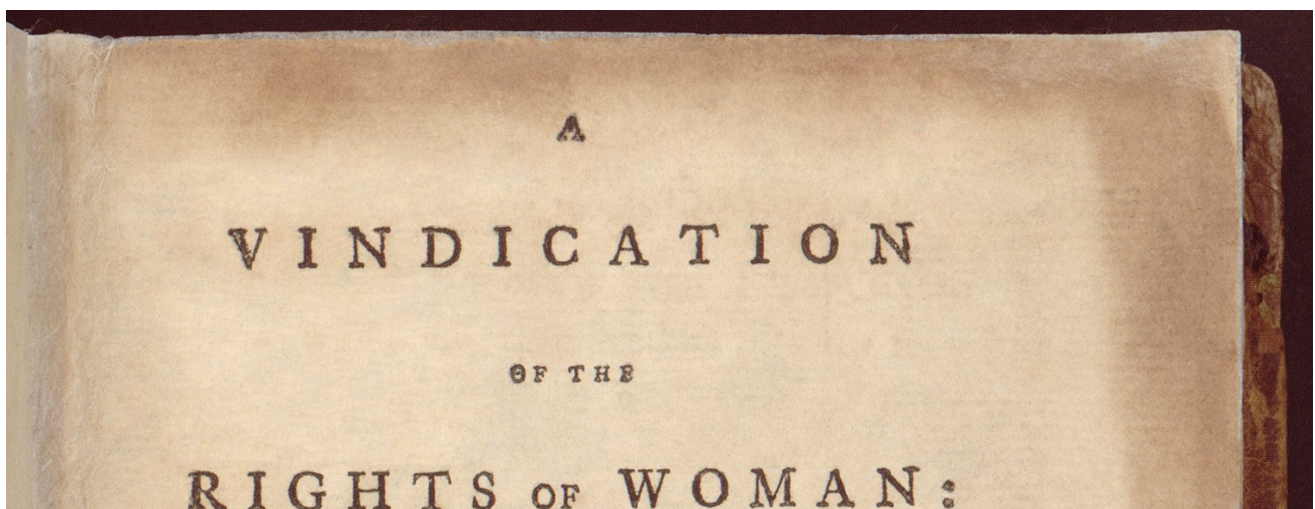
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### 3. Women, Reform, and Equality

Women—who were drawn in large numbers to the revivals of the Second Great Awakening—took part in all reform movements, including temperance. In many ways, traditional perceptions of women as nurturers played a role in encouraging their participation in such movements. Women who joined the cause of temperance oftentimes amplified their accepted role as moral guardians of the home.

Yet there were some women in the United States who also took advantage of these reform movements to take action against gender inequality. When doing so, they were not alone, because they were part of a broader, transatlantic movement on behalf of reform and women's rights.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Among the most significant influences was **Mary Wollstonecraft's** *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, first published in London in 1792. Wollstonecraft called upon men to recognize the intellectual equality of women, and insisted that women be allowed "to participate in the inherent rights of mankind," including rights associated with political participation.



WITH  
STRICTURES  
ON  
POLITICAL AND MORAL SUBJECTS.

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BY MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT.

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PRINTED AT BOSTON,  
BY PETER EDES FOR THOMAS AND ANDREWS,  
FAUST'S Statue, No. 45, Newbury-Street.  
MDCXCII.

Title page of "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" from an American edition published in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1792.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

**Mary Wollstonecraft**

Author of Vindication of the Rights of Women, published in London in 1792, which argued for the

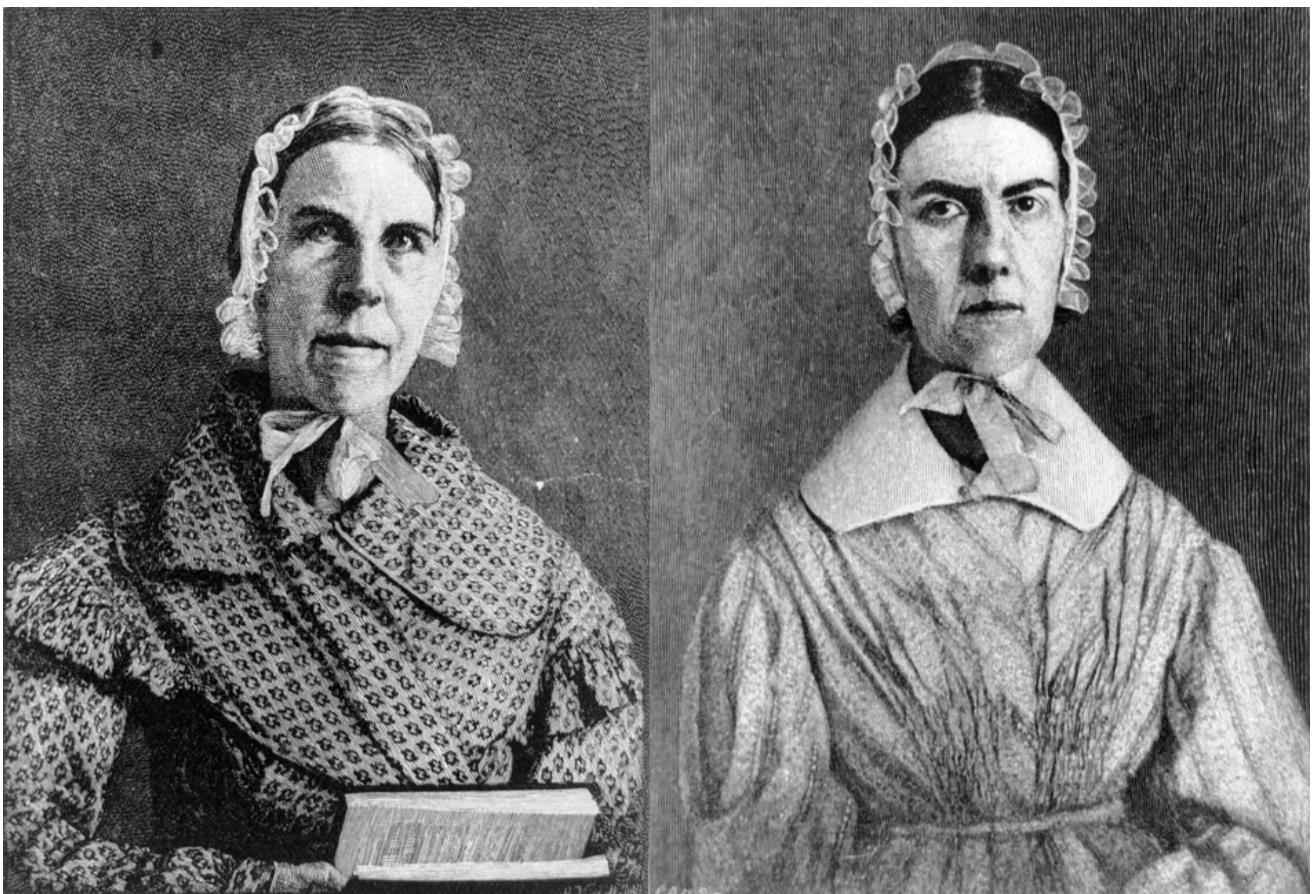
intellectual equality of women.

That Wollstonecraft and other women were able to express their ideas as published authors reflected the growth of print culture for women across the Atlantic, including in the United States. By the end of the 19th century, a number of American women were interested in writing and reading. Novels, short stories, and plays that featured female authors and leads were marketed for female audiences. Magazines devoted specifically to women also appeared in major cities such as New York City and Philadelphia.

With the proliferation of female authors, audiences, and ideas related to equality everywhere in the United States by the early 19th century, women had opportunities to participate in civil society. The fact that a number of women took advantage of these opportunities, without assistance from an organized movement on behalf of women's rights (which would not emerge until later in the 19th century), makes their efforts even more remarkable.

Work on behalf of antislavery efforts was one notable springboard for women who wanted to participate in civil society. Two women in particular, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, played major roles in combining the burgeoning fight to end slavery with the struggle to achieve female equality.

The Grimké sisters had been born into a prosperous slaveholding family in South Carolina. However, both were caught up in the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, and they moved to the North and converted to Quakerism. By the mid-1830s, the sisters had joined the antislavery crusade and, in 1837, embarked on a public lecture tour.



Sarah (left) and Angelina (right) Grimké



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Grimké sisters' lecture tour was seen as a scandal in much of American society because, during this

period, it was unheard of for women to lecture before mixed male-female audiences.

The prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison endorsed the Grimké sisters' public lectures and his newspaper, *The Liberator*, became one venue in which they defended the right for women to voice their opinions on the political and civic issues of the day, including slavery and women's rights.

Angelina Grimké made this point clear in a series of letters published by *The Liberator* (1837). A selection from one is provided below:

**Angelina Grimke, Selection from *The Liberator*** "Since I engaged in the investigation of the rights of the slave, I have necessarily been led to a better understanding of my own; for I have found the Anti-Slavery cause to be the high school of morals in our land....Here we are led to examine why human beings have any rights. It is because they are moral beings; the rights of all men, from the king to the slave, are built upon their moral nature: and as all men have this moral nature, so all men have essentially the same rights....

Now it naturally occurred to me, that if rights were founded in moral being, then the circumstance of sex could not give to man higher rights and responsibilities, than to woman.... To suppose that it did, would be to break up utterly the relations of the two natures, and to reverse their functions, exalting the animal nature into a monarch, and humbling the moral into a slave....When I look at human beings as moral beings, all distinction in sex sinks to insignificance and nothingness; for I believe it regulates rights and responsibilities no more than the color of the skin or the eyes. My doctrine then is, that whatever it is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for woman to do. Our duties are governed, not by difference of sex, but by the diversity of our relative connections in life, and the variety of gifts and talents committed to our care, and the different eras in which we live."



#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why does Angelina Grimké refer to "the Anti-Slavery cause" as "the high school of morals in our land?"
2. According to Angelina Grimké, what is the difference between "moral nature" and "animal nature?" Is one superior to the other? If so, why?



#### BRAINSTORM

Can you see any evidence that the Second Great Awakening influenced Grimké's writing? In particular, how might Grimké's understanding of "moral nature" have influenced her opinions toward gender and racial equality?



#### SUMMARY

The American Revolution—and with it the destabilizing forces of international affairs, the rise of capitalism, and democratization in American politics—produced widespread optimism and confidence about the future of the United States. Such hope, alongside growing concern toward or frustration with certain aspects of society, allowed many Americans to engage in efforts to improve American culture. Evangelical Protestantism pervaded American culture during the Second Great Awakening, and fueled a belief that individuals could change society for the better. This spirit of religious

awakening generated widespread reform movements throughout civil society, such as the temperance movement. Most importantly, religion and reform mobilized a number of Americans and, in particular, allowed women to highlight the contradictions of racial slavery and gender inequality in a society that espoused democracy.

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## REFERENCES

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Grimké, A. (1837)



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- [Grimké](#) | License: Public Domain
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## TERMS TO KNOW

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### Temperance Movement

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## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Charles Grandison Finney

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