

The Abolitionist Crusade

In his 1844 essay “New England Reformers”, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, in describing 19th century reform, wrote:

“What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world! One apostle thought all men should go to farming; and another, that no man should buy or sell; that the use of money was the cardinal sin; another, that mischief was in our diet, that we eat and drink damnation. . . . With this din of opinion and debate, there was a keener scrutiny of institutions and domestic life than any we had known, there was sincere protesting against existing evils, and there were changes of employment dictated by conscience. No doubt there was plentiful vapping [hot air], cases of backsliding might occur. But in each of these movements emerged a good result, a tendency to the adoption of simpler methods, and an assertion of sufficiency [rights] of the private man.”

Emerson put his finger on the pulse of 19th century reform. There was a plethora of reform movements, from temperance to abolitionism that sprang up all over antebellum America. Not only did these reforms attempt to create a new moral order but also asserted “the sufficiency of the private man,” which reflexed the intense optimism concerning the potential of man during this period. But say the each reform produced a good result is an idea that must be challenged.

The abolitionist’s movement started out in U.S. history, particularly in

the three decades before the Civil War, members of the movement that agitated for the compulsory emancipation of the slaves. Abolitionists are distinguished from free-soilers, who opposed the further extension of slavery, but the groups came to act together politically and otherwise in the antislavery cause. The abolitionist movement was one of high moral purpose and courage; its uncompromising temper made the slavery question the prime concern of national politics and hastened the demise of slavery in the United States.

Although antislavery sentiment had existed during the American Revolution, and abolitionist Benjamin Lundy began his work early in the 19th century, the abolition movement did not reach crusading proportions until the 1830s. One of its mainsprings was the growing influence of evangelical religion, with its religious fervor, its moral urgency to end sinful practices, and its vision of human perfection. The preaching of Lyman Beecher and Nathaniel Taylor in New England and the religious revivals that began in W New York state in 1824 under Charles G. Finney and swept much of the North, created a powerful impulse toward social reform—emancipation of the slaves as well as temperance, foreign missions, and women's rights. Outstanding among Charles Finney's

converts were Theodore D. Weld and the brothers Arthur Tappan and Lewis Tappan.

The American abolitionist crusade which began in the 1830s was characterized by a religious fervor, a sense of moral urgency and a vision of human perfection. In its initial stages the abolitionist movement was only one of many proposed reforms, in the 19th century, aimed at providing the society with a new moral and ethical basis. However ultimately abolitionism overshadowed all other movements.

Abolition Crusade seemed to burst on the American public in 1830, however the debate over slavery is as old as the republic itself. Throughout the colonial period and after the American Revolution most Americans accepted slavery as a normal and evitable part of their society. As the system evolved it is true that it became more and more confined, as an working institution to the southern states. It is also true that relatively few Americans had a direct stake in the perpetuation of slavery. It is interesting to note that those few who did have a stake in the system represented the most respected elements of society. They bought and sold slaves, rented them out as laborers and lived by the money they gained from the use of their slaves. They involved in their fortune non-slave-

holding Northerners from who they purchased goods and services and from whom they felt. They enjoyed the good will of humbler classes of southerners and Northerners who despised the slave for his color or feared him as a possible competitor. (Filler, p. 1) And yet during the decades which preceded the era of reform, slavery had not inspired one notable literary or legal defense.

Opposition of slavery was not a new phenomenon in the American society. To men of the age of enlightenment, slavery was both an anachronism and a denial of the natural rights of men. Every truth that Jefferson held to be self-evident was a repudiation of the rights of men to hold other human beings in bondage and no one subscribing to the Enlightenment philosophy could believe life to be tolerable without liberty or the pursuit of happiness without freedom. (Tyler, p.463)

In 1700, Judge Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts published *The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial*, which condemned the legal sanction of slavers as property.

During the pre Revolutionary Period the argument against slavery was kept alive by four Quaker pamphleteers. In 1729, Ralph Sandiford published a *Brief Exposition of the Practice of the Times* which was said to

be been “packed with brimstone.” Benjamin Say a crusader who traveled through out the colonies condemning the institution he so obviously detested, published All Slave Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates in 1737.

In his essay Some Consideration on the Keeping Negroes published in 1754, John Woolman wrote:

“Man is born to labor and experience abundantly sheweth that it is for our good: but where the powerful lay the burthen on the inferior without a Christian education and suitable opportunity of improving the mind, and in treatment which we, in their case, should approve, that they themselves may live at ease and sumptuously and lay up riches for their posterity, this . . . I doubt not is sometimes the effect of the perverted mind; for while life of one is made grievous by the rigour of another it entails misery on both.”

Two decades before the Revolution, Anthony Benezet published six tracts condemning slavery and the slave trade which he regarded as a panacea for all of the ills humanity.”

The American Revolution with its emphasis on the natural rights of man and the mere accident of economics led North States to the passages of gradual emancipation. Vermont proclaimed it in 1777. Vermont was followed by Massachusetts, Maine and Pennsylvania in 1780. Rhode Island (which had large farm-slavery) passed emancipation laws in 1783,

Connecticut in 1784, New York in 1799 and New Jersey in 1804.

Congress excluded slavery from the North West territory in the Ordinance of 1787. Under the Ordinance, slavery was abolished from the territory north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi rivers. And yet slavery held its ground. Although the Constitution did not mention slaves by name, recognized them as “three fifths of all other persons” (Art. I, sec.2), in giving shareholders representation in Congress based on slaves as well as on freemen. The Constitution also recognized slavery by implication in that it provided for the extradition of persons “held to service or labour” (Art. IV, sec. 2). However, the Constitution also permitted, though it did not require, the abolition of the international slave trade in 1808. Jefferson congratulated his country men on having outlawed slave traffic. (Filler, p.12)

From between 1808 and 1815 the country was primarily interested in foreign affairs and the question of slavery for a time was ignored or forgotten. However with the coming of peace, sectionalism was soon apparent. The capitalists of the Northeastern states invested in the manufacturing of textiles and other industrial establishments that demanded protective tariff legislation. “Henry Clay became the father of the

American System by which the West was to be bound to the manufacturing areas through a community of interests in the production and marketing of raw and finished products, alike protected by the tariff. The South, meanwhile devoted to cotton production by slave labor, saw little for itself in the nationalistic policies of tariffs, internal improvements and more pervasive federal controls and became more convinced of its agrarian destiny and of its dependence upon the supremacy of state governments.” (Tyler, p. 470)

Earlier anti-slavery groups, on the other hands were disposed toward gradualism and used indirect methods in attacking slavery. After the passage of the emancipation laws in the North, anti-slavery sentiment flourished, particularly in the Border States. The energy of this sentiment was espoused in the advocacy of Black Colonization by both “humanitarians”, who thought that free Blacks would be better off in a land of their own and by Southern slaveholder who considered free Blacks a dangerous element in society.

In 1816 a group of prominent American, which included Henry Clay, who was then the Speaker of the House of Representatives, founded the American colonization Society. These men claimed to have been

motivated by humanitarianism, but in fact refused to oppose racist laws and customs and actually gave support and justified the existence of racial barriers that made the condition of free Blacks so humiliating and debasing that Blacks would be quite willing to leave the American continent.

Many of those who supported colonization believed that the exodus of Blacks to Africa would encourage slave holders to liberate their slave, while many saw the exodus of free blacks as a means to strengthen the system of slavery. At any rate, until 1830 anti-slavery advocates saw colonization as a solution to American racial problems. Men such as Gerrit Smith, one of New York's wealthiest landowners, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, prominent merchants and Benjamin Lundy, a co-editor of the anti-slavery newspaper, *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, supported the American Colonization society.

Anti-slavery supporters became somewhat optimistic because it appeared that the slavery question had been settled. Consequently the crisis over Missouri, 1819-20, took them by surprise. This in part, was due to the fact, the country "Thomas Jefferson exclaimed that the crisis was "like a 'fire-bell' in the night." It reminded him that slavery flourished among his closest associated and that the question of whether or not Missouri

could join the Union with slaves might be a harbinger of civil war. General James Tallmadge responded "If a dissolution of the Union must take place, let it be so! If civil war, which gentlemen so much threaten must come, I can only say, let it come . . .

Others argued for and agreed on a Compromise which prohibited additional slave states above the 36°30' parallel line. This had created a vast area of freedom. Many reasoned that in time slavery would deteriorate in the South. (Filler, p.13)

The years following the Missouri Compromise were relatively quiet, but there is ample evidence in contemporary material of the hair trigger temper of the South on the subject of slavery and of the growing antislavery sentiment of the North. Northern congressmen argued that from their point of view slavery was incompatible with natural laws, with divine will and with the Declaration of Independence. In a speech, New York Senator Rufus King explained the essence of the Northern argument by pointing that slavery was contradictory to the laws of God and nature and that no one man had the right to make a slave of another.

A few days after the vote on Missouri, in analyzing Southern thinking on the issue of slavery, John Quincy Adams summarized a conversation

with John Calhoun in which the Southern had expressed a fear of the dissolution of the Union. He writes:

“. . . they show at the bottom of their souls pride and vain glory In their condition of masterdom. They fancy themselves more generous and noble-hearted than the plain freemen who labor for subsistence. They look down upon the simplicity of a Yankee’s manner, because he has no habits of overbearing like theirs and cannot treat Negroes like dogs. It is among the evils slavery that it taints the very sources of moral principle. It establishes estimates of virtue and vice, for what can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin.”

Yet, it only logical to assume, given the American response to slavery, that the Abolitionist Crusade of the 1830s was a culmination of earlier anti-slavery movements. Those who participated were militant radicals who condemned slavery as a sin and called for immediate action to abolish slavery from American life. In their pursuit of their goal, they met hostility in both the North and the South and were called fanatics and lunatics. In fact William Lloyd Garrison reported that he found “Contempt more bitter, opposition more stubborn, and apathy more frozen” in New England than in the South itself.

The Tappan brothers and William Lloyd Garrison, who began publishing an abolitionist journal, *The Liberator*, in 1831, were the principal organizers in Dec., 1833, at Philadelphia, of the American Anti-Slavery

Society. The primary concern of the society was the denunciation of slavery as a moral evil; its members called for immediate action to free the slaves. In 1835 the society launched a massive propaganda campaign. It flooded the slave states with abolitionist literature, sent agents throughout the North to organize state and local anti-slavery societies, and poured petitions into Congress demanding the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.

The abolitionists were at first widely denounced and abused. Mobs attacked them in the North; Southerners burned antislavery pamphlets and in some areas excluded them from the mails; and Congress imposed the gag rule to avoid considering their petitions. These actions, and the murder of abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1837, led many to fear for their constitutional rights. Abolitionists shrewdly exploited these fears and antislavery sentiment spread rapidly in the North. By 1838, more than 1,350 antislavery societies existed with almost 250,000 members, including many women.

Although abolitionists united in repudiated the African venture of the American Colonization Society, they disagreed among themselves as to how their goal might be best reached. Garrison believed in moral suasion as the only weapon; he and his followers also argued that women be

allowed to participate fully in antislavery societies, thus disturbing more conservative members. When the Garrisonians passed such a resolution at the society's 1840 convention, a large group led by the Tappan brothers withdrew and formed the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. The abolitionists were never again united as a single movement.

Advocates of direct political action founded (1840) the Liberty party; James G. Birney was its presidential candidate in 1840 and 1844. Writers such as John Greenleaf Whittier and orators such as Wendell Phillips gave their services to the cause, while Frederick Douglass and other freed or escaped slaves also took to the lecture platform.

An antislavery lobby was organized in 1842, and its influence grew under Weld's able leadership. Abolitionists hoped to convert the South through the churches, until the withdrawal of Southern Methodists (1844) and Baptists (1845) from association with their Northern brethren. After the demise of the Liberty party, the political abolitionists supported the Free-Soil party in 1848 and 1852, and in 1856 they voted with the Republican party. (<http://www.us-civilwar.com/abolitionist.htm>)

The passage of more stringent fugitive slave laws in 1850 increased abolitionist activity on the Underground Railroad. Uncle Tom's Cabin, by

Harriet Beecher Stowe, became an effective piece of abolitionist propaganda, and the Kansas question further aroused both North and South. The culminating act of extreme abolitionism occurred in the raid of John Brown on Harpers Ferry. After the opening of the Civil War insistent abolitionist demands for immediate freeing of the slaves, supported by radical Republicans in Congress, pushed President Lincoln in his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.