

Abolition

The abolition movement sought to end the practice of slavery in the United States.

Overview

- Abolitionism was a long-term social reform effort to abolish slavery in the United States. It started in the mid-18th century and lasted until emancipation in 1865.
- The movement evolved from its religious roots to encompass political organization and even violent resistance.
- Though most abolitionists were white, upper-middle-class men, some of the most powerful and influential members of the movement were women and people who had escaped from bondage.

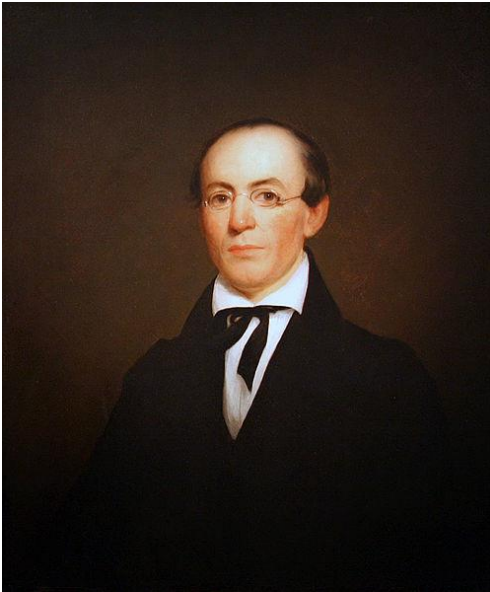
Origins of the abolition movement

The **antislavery** issue started as a moral and religious movement centered on the belief that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. Not confined to a single church, early antislavery sentiment was found among Mennonites, Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, Amish, and other Protestant denominations. From its religious roots in the 18th century, abolitionist sentiment had evolved by the early 19th century into the formation of antislavery societies aimed at raising awareness of the moral evils of slavery. An early effort of the antislavery societies was the **colonization movement**, which sought to free enslaved people and send them back to Africa. This was viewed by antislavery activists as a compromise with a deeply racist white society that they believed would never accept black equality. The **American Colonization Society**, founded in 1817, set up a colony on the west coast of Africa in 1822, called **Monrovia**—present-day Liberia. By 1860, nearly 12,000 African Americans had returned to Africa, but the colonization project met with hostility from white Southern slaveholders who were adamantly opposed to manumitting—freeing—their slaves. Moreover, some abolitionists opposed the colonization movement, viewing it as unjust to remove African Americans from the land of their birth.

Abolitionism in black and white

The [Missouri Compromise of 1820](#), which allowed Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state, bolstered antislavery sentiment in the North. The **abolitionist movement**, which gathered steam in the years after the compromise, was centered in New England and many prominent leaders of the movement were white, upper-middle-class social reformers and clergy members.

William Lloyd Garrison, a journalist from Massachusetts, was one of the most radical and influential abolitionists. In 1831, he founded the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, which advocated the immediate emancipation of all enslaved men and women. In the first issue of *The Liberator*, Garrison published an open letter, “To the Public”, which called for the “immediate enfranchisement of our slave population”. Garrison was also one of the most radical members of the **American Anti-Slavery Society**, AAS, established in 1833 as a national organization. The AAS was highly effective at fanning moral outrage over the institution of slavery but ultimately was hindered in its efforts by disagreements between members over the position of women in the movement and the tactical use of violence in the struggle to eradicate slavery.

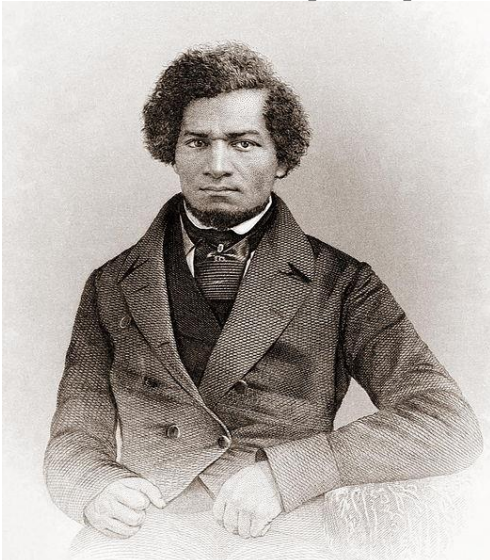


Portrait of William Lloyd Garrison

Nathaniel Jocelyn; portrait of William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, the leading abolitionist newspaper of the early republic; 1833. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Though most abolitionist leaders were white men, some of the most powerful voices in the movement belonged to women and people who had escaped enslavement. The **Grimké sisters**, Angelina and Sarah, were two of the most influential female activists for abolition and women's rights. They were originally from South Carolina but had converted to Quakerism and moved north to Philadelphia. In 1839, they published *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, a documentary record of the brutalities of slavery in the South. The Grimké sisters' activism helped raise awareness of the harsh and repressive realities of slavery.

Free northern black people and people who had escaped enslavement played a vital role in the movement by virtue of their firsthand experience of slavery. In 1845, **Frederick Douglass**—who had escaped slavery himself—published his memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, one of the most influential memoirs of an enslaved person in US history. Douglass was a tireless advocate for the abolition of slavery and was also a strong supporter of the women's suffrage movement.³³



Portrait of Frederick Douglass from the frontispiece of his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Political action and violence

In 1840, the abolitionist movement entered the political arena. Members of the movement established the **Liberty Party** and nominated James G. Birney—a former slaveholder turned antislavery activist—as its candidate for president. Though Birney garnered only a tiny percentage of votes, his candidacy drew national attention to the abolitionist movement. Birney ran again in 1844 and received nearly ten times as many votes as he had in 1840. In 1848, the **Free Soil** party nominated former president Martin Van Buren and ran on an antislavery platform of “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men.”

In 1850, Congress passed the [Fugitive Slave Act](#), which provided for the return of people who had escaped enslavement to their owners. It was a major victory for the slaveholding South and directly inspired social reformer and abolition activist **Harriet Beecher Stowe** to pen the novel [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#), which quickly became a bestseller and fueled the antislavery cause across the nation.

The passage of the [Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854](#), which allowed residents of Kansas to determine whether the state would be slave or free, sparked a violent struggle between proslavery and antislavery factions. In 1859, **John Brown**, an ultra-radical abolitionist who believed that an armed uprising was the only way to abolish slavery, led a raid on the federal armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, where he was planning to steal weapons to arm enslaved people. The raid was put down by proslavery militiamen and US Marines commanded by General Robert E. Lee. Brown was captured, convicted of treason, and hanged. Two years later, the American Civil War erupted, proving prescient Brown's prophecy that “the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away; but with blood”.⁴⁴

Abolitionism was the first sustained human rights campaign in US history. By raising national awareness of the moral evils of slavery and ceaselessly demanding the immediate and complete emancipation of all enslaved men and women in the United States, abolitionists directly contributed to the ultimate downfall of the institution of slavery. Not only did the antislavery movement lead to [emancipation](#), but it inspired other social reform movements, such as the movement for [women's suffrage](#).

What do you think?

What were the most important influences on the abolitionist movement?