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The Antislavery Movement

Origins of the Antislavery Movement

The antislavery movement in the United States dates back to before the American Revolution. Early colonists, such as the Quakers, had long protested against slavery on moral grounds. As the colonists' struggle for independence from Great Britain intensified, more people in the colonies joined the call to end slavery. In fact, the first antislavery society in North America was formed in Philadelphia in 1775.

The antislavery movement did not become a major force in American society until the early 1800s, however. At that time, a religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening spread across the United States. This rebirth of religious fervor encouraged some Americans to try to reform, or improve, society. The increased focus on religion and social reform contributed to the growth of the antislavery movement. A growing number of Americans viewed slavery as a moral wrong that went against their religious beliefs. Social reformers began to unite and form organizations to oppose slavery. The antislavery movement soon became one of the most prominent—and controversial—reform movements of the period.

1. What contributed to the growth of the antislavery movement in the early 1800s?

Black Abolitionists

American antislavery groups differed in their goals. For example, some groups opposed the spread of slavery but wanted to keep the system in areas where it already existed. Other antislavery groups supported the **abolition movement**, a campaign to abolish, or end, slavery. The supporters of this movement were called abolitionists. Among the most vocal abolitionists were free blacks, who often risked their freedom and even their very lives to try to end slavery.

Black Militants

Some of the first outspoken black abolitionists were militants, people who aggressively support a cause. Many militant black abolitionists favored the use of force to end slavery. Their rousing writings and speeches called on African Americans to resist slavery by any means necessary. One such militant abolitionist was a free black merchant named **David Walker**. In 1829 Walker published a controversial pamphlet calling on African Americans to rise up against slavery.

“They want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed . . . Had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?”

—David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*

Walker was not alone in his call for the use of force to end slavery. New York abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet urged slaves to resist their slaveholders. In an 1843 speech he declared, “Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties . . . Let every slave throughout the land do this.” Such calls for resistance shocked some black abolitionists, who looked for more peaceful methods to end slavery.

2. Explain David Walker’s significance to the black antislavery movement.

Frederick Douglass

One black abolitionist who opposed the use of force was **Frederick Douglass**. A former slave who had escaped, Douglass was a gifted writer and speaker for the abolition movement. He published an antislavery newspaper, *The North Star*, and described his life under slavery in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In addition, Douglass traveled throughout the United States and the British Isles giving speeches on the evils of slavery. His eloquent appeals drew many people to the abolition movement.

The Black Abolition Movement

Douglass was just one of many free blacks who worked to try to abolish slavery during the early to mid-1800s. To promote their cause, black abolitionists gave public speeches and held antislavery conventions to push for freedom. In addition, black abolitionists wrote movingly about the evils of slavery. By 1860 African Americans were publishing more than a dozen antislavery newspapers in the United States. These papers included Douglass’s *North Star* and the *Mystery*, a Pittsburgh paper published by Martin R. Delany. Some black abolitionists who had once been enslaved, such as Douglass, also wrote slave narratives. These personal accounts of slave life helped educate Americans about the horrors of slavery.

Black abolitionists included brave women as well as men. One of the best-known female black abolitionists was **Sojourner Truth**. A tall, charismatic woman, Truth had escaped from slavery. She went on to become a leading abolitionist and women’s rights activist. Truth wrote a stirring slave narrative about her life and captivated audiences with her fiery speeches and songs. In 1851 she delivered her most famous speech, “Aint I a Woman,” in which she spoke about the power of women.

In addition to working to end slavery, black abolitionists protested against racial **discrimination**, the unfair treatment of people of a certain race. Although African Americans in the North were free, they often faced unequal treatment because of their race. Some black abolitionists took direct action to fight racial discrimination. For example, Elizabeth Jennings of New York City fought a horse-drawn streetcar company that refused to let her ride in the car reserved for white passengers. She boldly sued the Third Avenue Railway Company—and won! Jennings received \$225 in damages. More important, her case paved the way for a second legal case, after which the company decided to let black passengers ride its streetcars.

3. How did militant abolitionists differ from other black abolitionists?

White Abolitionists

African Americans were not the only people to speak out against slavery in the United States. Thousands of white activists also joined the antislavery movement during the mid-1800s. Many of these white activists were strong abolitionists who and became leaders in the movement and worked tirelessly to end slavery.

William Lloyd Garrison

White journalist **William Lloyd Garrison** became one of the foremost abolitionists in the nation. In 1831 Garrison founded a leading antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. In the first issue he made his commitment to abolition clear.

“I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or write, with moderation . . . I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”

—William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*, January 1831

As his statement shows, Garrison was a radical abolitionist. He challenged calls for gradual abolition and instead demanded an immediate end to slavery. In 1854 Garrison caused a sensation when he burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution, which he claimed supported the institution of slavery.

Over the years, Garrison worked hard to end slavery. He helped found the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society. He and other white abolitionists contributed their own money to pay for lecture tours and to purchase the freedom of many slaves. Like black abolitionists, white abolitionists also often risked their lives in their attempts to end slavery. For example, in 1835 a mob in Boston physically attacked Garrison during a speech until he was rescued.

4. What is Garrison’s attitude toward slavery? How can you determine his attitude?

Other White Abolitionist Leaders

To abolish slavery, abolitionists needed to persuade people to join their cause. White abolitionists, like black abolitionists, used many methods to spread their message. Some white abolitionists, such as Garrison, published antislavery newspapers. Other white abolitionists, such as Theodore Weld, published antislavery pamphlets and books. Weld’s 1839 pamphlet *Slavery As It Is* helped inspire one of the most famous abolitionist literary works—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This novel, published in 1852, depicts the terrors and tragedies of slave life. The novel sold some 300,000 copies the first year and drew new supporters to the antislavery cause.

Some white abolitionists used political means to oppose slavery. The New York abolitionists Arthur and Lewis Tappan favored the use of legislation rather than protest to oppose slavery. More moderate than Garrison and his followers, the Tappan brothers thought that the U.S. government should end slavery. In 1839 they helped establish the Liberty Party, the first antislavery political party in the United States.

Some white abolitionists were willing to take more drastic steps to oppose slavery. One of these militant white abolitionists was **John Brown**. Like black militants, Brown thought that only force could end slavery. In 1849 he moved his family to a black community in North Elba, New York. There, he learned firsthand from former slaves of the evils of the slave system. Brown came to believe that nothing short of war could end slavery. In time, his belief would come true.

5. What methods did white abolitionists use to spread their message?

6. Which method do you think was most successful in drawing new supporters to the abolition movement? Why?

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Support a Point of View

Directions: Choose between the views of militant abolitionists and the views of mainstream abolitionists. Whose tactics are most effective? Below, make a list of points that support your position.

What tactic would you choose?: _____

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Be prepared for a class discussion and debate on abolitionist tactics. Where do you stand on this issue