**The Abolition Movement**

***Read the following reading on the abolition movement, you will need to know this information to participate in the lesson we will be doing in class the next few days.***

**Early Antislavery Efforts**

As late as the 1750s, no church had discouraged its members from owning or trading in slaves. Slaves could be found in each of the 13 American colonies, and before the American Revolution, only the colony of Georgia had temporarily sought to prohibit slavery (because its founders did not want a workforce that would compete with the convicts they planned to transport from England).

By the beginning of the 19th century, however, protests against slavery had become widespread. By 1804 nine states north of Maryland and Delaware had either emancipated their slaves or adopted gradual emancipation plans. Both the United States and Britain in 1808 outlawed the African slave trade.

The emancipation of slaves in the northern states and the prohibition against the African slave trade generated optimism that slavery was dying. Congress in 1787 had barred slavery from the Old Northwest, the region north of the Ohio River to the Mississippi River. The number of slaves freed by their masters had risen dramatically in the upper South during the 1780s and 1790s, and more antislavery societies had been formed in the South than in the North. At the present rate of progress, predicted one religious leader in 1791, within 50 years it will “be as shameful for a man to hold a Negro slave, as to be guilty of common robbery or theft.”

By the early 1830s, however, the development of the Cotton Kingdom proved that slavery was not on the road to extinction. Despite the end of the African slave trade, the slave population continued to grow, climbing from 1.5 million in 1820 to over 2 million a decade later.

A widespread belief that blacks and whites could not coexist and that racial separation was necessary encouraged futile efforts at deportation and overseas colonization. In 1817 a group of prominent ministers and politicians formed the American Colonization Society to resettle free blacks in West Africa, encourage planters voluntarily to emancipate their slaves, and create a group of black missionaries who would spread Christianity in Africa. During the 1820s, Congress helped fund the cost of transporting free blacks to Africa.

A few blacks supported African colonization in the belief that it provided the only alternative to continued degradation and discrimination. Paul Cuffe (1759–1817), a Quaker sea captain who was the son of a former slave and an Indian woman, led the first experiment in colonization. In 1815 he transported 38 free blacks to the British colony of Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa, and devoted thousands of his own dollars to the cause of colonization. In 1822 the American Colonization Society established the colony of Liberia, in west Africa, for resettlement of free American blacks.

It soon became apparent that colonization was a wholly impractical solution to the nation’s slavery problem. Each year the nation’s slave population rose by roughly 50,000, but in 1830 the American Colonization Society succeeded in persuading only 259 free blacks to migrate to Liberia, bringing the total number of blacks colonized in Africa to a mere 1,400.

**The Rise of Abolitionist Sentiment in the North**

Initially, free blacks led the movement condemning colonization and northern discrimination against African Americans. As early as 1817, more than 3,000 members of Philadelphia’s black community staged a protest against colonization, at which they denounced the policy as “little more merciful than death.” In 1829 David Walker (1785–1830), the free black owner of a second-hand clothing store in Boston, issued the militant Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World. The appeal threatened insurrection and violence if calls for the abolition of slavery and improved conditions for free blacks were ignored. The next year, some 40 black delegates from 8 states held the first of a series of annual conventions denouncing slavery and calling for an end to discriminatory laws in the northern states.

The idea of abolition received impetus from William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879). In 1829 the 25-year-old white Bostonian added his voice to the outcry against colonization, denouncing it as a cruel hoax designed to promote the racial purity of the northern population while doing nothing to end slavery in the South. Instead, he called for “immediate emancipation.” By immediate emancipation, he meant the immediate and unconditional release of slaves from bondage without compensation to slaveowners.

In 1831, Garrison founded The Liberator, a militant abolitionist newspaper that was the country’s first publication to demand an immediate end to slavery. On the front page of the first issue, he defiantly declared: “I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch--AND I WILL BE HEARD.” Incensed by Garrison’s proclamation, the state of Georgia offered a $5,000 reward to anyone who brought him to the state for trial.

Within 4 years, 200 antislavery societies had appeared in the North. In a massive propaganda campaign to proclaim the sinfulness of slavery, they distributed a million pieces of abolitionist literature and sent 20,000 tracts directly to the South.

**Abolitionist Arguments and Public Reaction**

Abolitionists attacked slavery on several grounds. Slavery was illegal because it violated the principles of natural rights to life and liberty embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Justice, said Garrison, required that the nation “secure to the colored population...all the rights and privileges that belong to them as men and as Americans.” Slavery was sinful because slaveholders, in the words of abolitionist Theodore Weld, had usurped “the prerogative of God.” Masters reduced a “God-like being” to a manipulable “THING.” Slavery also encouraged sexual immorality and undermined the institutions of marriage and the family. Not only did slave masters sexually abuse and exploit slave women, abolitionists charged, but in some older southern states, such as Virginia and Maryland, they bred slaves for sale to the more recently settled parts of the Deep South.

Slavery was economically retrogressive, abolitionists argued, because slaves, motivated only by fear, did not exert themselves willingly. By depriving their labor force of any incentive for performing careful and diligent work, by barring slaves from acquiring and developing productive skills, planters hindered improvements in crop and soil management. Abolitionists also charged that slavery impeded the development of towns, canals, railroads, and schools. Antislavery agitation provoked a harsh public reaction in both the North and the South. The U.S. postmaster general refused to deliver antislavery tracts to the South. In each session of Congress between 1836 and 1844 the House of Representatives adopted gag rules allowing that body automatically to table resolutions or petitions concerning the abolition of slavery.

**Division Within the Antislavery Movement**

Questions over strategy and tactics divided the antislavery movement. At the 1840 annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York, abolitionists split over such questions as women’s right to participate in the administration of the organization and the advisability of nominating abolitionists as independent political candidates. Garrison won control of the organization, and his opponents promptly walked out. From this point on, no single organization could speak for abolitionism.

One group of abolitionists looked to politics as the answer to ending slavery and founded political parties for that purpose. The Liberty Party, founded in 1839 under the leadership of Arthur and Lewis Tappan, wealthy New York City businessmen, and James G. Birney, a former slaveholder, called on Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, end the interstate slave trade, and cease admitting new slave states to the Union. The party also sought the repeal of local and state “black laws” in the North, which discriminated against free blacks, much as segregation laws would in the post-Reconstruction South. The Liberty Party nominated Birney for president in 1840 and again in 1844. Although it gathered fewer than 7,100 votes in its first campaign, it polled some 62,000 votes 4 years later and captured enough votes in Michigan and New York to deny Henry Clay the presidency.

In 1848 antislavery Democrats and Whigs merged with the Liberty Party to form the Free Soil Party. Unlike the Liberty Party, which was dedicated to the abolition of slavery and equal rights for African Americans, the Free Soil Party narrowed its demands to the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and the exclusion of slavery from the federal territories. The Free Soilers also wanted a homestead law to provide free land for western settlers, high tariffs to protect American industry, and federally sponsored internal improvements. Campaigning under the slogan “free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men,” the new party polled 300,000 votes (or 10 percent) in the presidential election of 1848 and helped elect Whig candidate Zachary Taylor.

Other abolitionists, led by Garrison, took a more radical direction, advocating civil disobedience and linking abolitionism to other reforms such as women’s rights, world government, and international peace. Garrison and his supporters established the New England Non-Resistance Society in 1838. Members refused to vote, to hold public office, or to bring suits in court. In 1854 Garrison attracted notoriety by publicly burning a copy of the Constitution, which he called “a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell” because it acknowledged the legality of slavery.

African Americans played a vital role in the abolitionist movement, staging protests against segregated churches, schools, and public transportation. In New York and Pennsylvania, free blacks launched petition drives for equal voting rights. Northern blacks also had a pivotal role in the “underground railroad,” which provided escape routes for southern slaves through the northern states and into Canada. African-American churches offered sanctuary to runaways, and black “vigilance” groups in cities such as New York and Detroit battled slave catchers who sought to recapture fugitive slaves.

Fugitive slaves, such as William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Tubman, advanced abolitionism by publicizing the horrors of slavery. Their firsthand tales of whippings and separation from spouses and children combated the notion that slaves were contented under slavery and undermined belief in racial inferiority.

By the 1850s, many blacks had become pessimistic about defeating slavery. Some African Americans looked again to colonization as a solution. In the 15 months following passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, some 13,000 free blacks fled the North for Canada.

Other blacks argued in favor of violence. Black abolitionists in Ohio adopted resolutions encouraging slaves to escape and called on their fellow citizens to violate any law that “conflicts with reason, liberty and justice, North or South.” By the late 1850s, a growing number of free blacks had concluded that it was just as legitimate to use violence to secure the freedom of the slaves as it had been to establish the independence of the American colonies.

Over the long run, the fragmentation of the antislavery movement worked to the advantage of the cause. Henceforth, Northerners could support whichever form of antislavery best reflected their views. Moderates could vote for political candidates with abolitionist sentiments without being accused of radical views or of advocating violence.

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