

British Abolitionism

At the same time that efforts for the abolition of slavery were underway in the fledgling United States at the end of the eighteenth century, there were corresponding efforts in Britain, also led by Quakers, among others. In June 1783, Quakers submitted to Parliament the first public petition for abolishing slavery, and two years later, eleven thousand copies of Anthony Benezet's pamphlet were distributed to members of Parliament, justices of the peace, and clergy. In 1787, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, one of the central British abolitionist groups, was founded.

Moral concern motivated efforts to abolish slavery. Seymour Drescher highlights the key question that abolitionists in Britain were asking: "How could the world's most secure, free, religious, just, prosperous, and moral nation allow itself to remain the premier perpetrator of the world's most deadly, brutal, unjust, immoral offenses to humanity?" In response to such questions, ordinary people were mobilized on a widespread basis to call for the end of slavery. For instance, one of the first antislavery petitions to reach Parliament was from Manchester, England, with 10,600 names, including two-thirds of the eligible adult males in the working-class town.

The 1791 defeat in Parliament of an abolition bill resulted in a nationwide campaign to boycott sugar grown on plantations using slave labor. Such efforts, and petition campaigns involving nearly one-third of the country's populace, resulted in efforts in Britain to limit slavery in the early 1800s, unlike in the United States, where abolition efforts met with limited success prior to the Civil War. Women in Britain were mobilized with arguments about slavery's terrible effect on families, and religious communities, particularly Methodists, were also active in abolitionist efforts in the early 1830s. This broad popular mobilization led to the 1833 abolition legislation that resulted in the emancipation of 800,000 enslaved people in 1834, only six years after Abdul Rahman's long struggle to free himself in the United States.

The Turn to Immediatism

Should slavery be eliminated gradually, without upsetting the framework of the broader society and by sending African Americans to Africa, or should it be ended immediately with calls for full African American inclusion and equality? While in 1828, when Abdul Rahman was on his speaking tour of the North, efforts at immediate abolition were not yet fully underway, by 1830 the tide had begun to shift among activists, who were increasingly frustrated with the slow pace and racist rhetoric of the American Colonization Society.

African American leaders were instrumental in this shift. For instance, William Lloyd Garrison [\[LINK\]](#), a white abolitionist, transformed his perspective after spending time with a number of African American leaders, such as Benjamin Lundy, reading their works, including David Walker's *Appeal*, and listening to their experiences and perspectives. By the mid-1830s, few African Americans were speaking of colonization. Instead, as Goodman notes, "racial prejudice was the principal enemy, and the ACS, its most potent disseminator, had to be crushed."

African American voices organizing resistance to slavery found willing ears as a confluence of factors came together. Wage labor—in which workers were paid an hourly wage for their work—was more and more common in the North, and white workers seeking to find dignity in their labor found the idea of coerced slavery at odds with the changing economy. In addition, word of the massive mobilizing efforts in Britain had made its way to the United States: change was possible! The Second Great Awakening, a Christian religious revival movement, was taking place about the same time. Methodist, Baptists, and others were holding camp meetings and working for social reform; many saw slavery as the “national sin” against which they needed to struggle.

In 1831 the first national African American convention was held, attended by white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan, and they worked alongside black leaders to struggle for the end of slavery. Unlike earlier antislavery groups, whose membership was often entirely white, the new immediatist organizations, such as the American Anti-Slavery Society, founded by Garrison and Tappan, included black members, including Frederick Douglass, a key lecturer for the organization, though there were still tensions regarding the full equality of blacks.

These varied streams joined together in a mighty river, and by the late 1830s, there were more than one thousand local organizations working against slavery in the United States, with more than 100,000 members.

Frederick Douglass

Call-out Quote: The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

(“The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies,” Canandaigua, New York, 1857)

Call-out Quote: “I shall never forget his first speech at the convention--the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind—the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise—the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is influenced by it, on

the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than over. There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in a soul manifestly ‘created but a little lower than the angels’—yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave,—trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the America soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards, for the love of God and humanity! Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being—needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race—by the law of the land, buy the voice of the people, buy the terms of the slaver code, he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal, nevertheless!”

(William Lloyd Garrison, commenting a speech by Frederick Douglass)

In 1838, when Abdul Rahman passed through Baltimore, Maryland, during his speaking tour of the North, Frederick Douglass was a child enslaved on a nearby plantation. A decade later, in 1848, Douglass had escaped from slavery by running away to the North, where he became a leading figure in both the abolitionist movement and the women’s movement. He spoke widely, founded and edited the *North Star* newspaper, and published a noteworthy autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. He was an active partner with William Lloyd Garrison during the early 1840s, serving as a key lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society. By the mid-1840s he split with Garrison and became increasingly involved in political efforts to end slavery through the Free Soil Party and the Liberty Party.

Again and again, like so many other African American activists, Douglass urged the United States to live up to its own ideals. In 1852 he was asked to give a speech celebrating July Fourth, and he used the opportunity to make this point: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.” He noted that the problem was not the principles on which the country’s independence was founded. In fact, he explained that they were “saving principles.” Rather, the problem was that the country had failed to live them out.

Douglass traveled in many circles, working for justice for all. Like Abdul Rahman, Douglass met with presidents, among them President Lincoln, providing guidance and advice during the Civil War. In 1848 Douglass spoke in favor of women’s suffrage at the Seneca Falls Convention, the first convention for women’s rights, where he was the only African American in attendance. His voice, along with many others, leaves a lasting legacy for freedom and equality.

CALL-OUT QUOTE TO ADD TO WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON SECTION:

“Are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then are you the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf? Be faithful, be vigilant, be untiring in your efforts to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. Come what may—cost what it may—inscribe on the banner which you unfurl to the breeze, as your religious and political motto—‘NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!’”

(from Garrison’s preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*)