

## abolitionism

A major reform movement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, abolitionism sought to end slavery and free millions of black people held as slaves. Also known as the antislavery movement, abolitionism in the United States was part of an international effort against slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic World. Its historical roots lay in black resistance to slavery, changing interpretations of Christian morality, eighteenth-century ideas concerning universal human rights, and economic change. Some of slavery's opponents advocated gradual abolition and others immediate abolition. By the 1830s the term *abolitionism* applied only to the latter.

### Early Development

Race-based slavery, whereby people of European descent relied on the forced labor of Africans and their descendants, began on a large scale during the sixteenth century as a result of European colonization in the Americas. By the middle of the seventeenth century, slavery had reached the portion of Great Britain's North American colonies that later became the United States. In the American form of slavery, the enslaved lost customary rights, served for life, and passed their unfree condition on to their children. From the start, those subjected to slavery sought freedom through self-purchase, court action, escape, or, more rarely, rebellion. There were major slave revolts in New York City in 1712 and Stono, South Carolina, in 1739.

The first white abolitionists in America were members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), who—like their coreligionists in Britain—held slavery to be sinful and physically dangerous to slave and master alike. During the 1740s and 1750s, Quaker abolitionists John Woolman of New Jersey and Anthony Benezet of Pennsylvania urged other American members of the society to end their involvement in the slave trade and gradually free their slaves. With the American Revolution (1775–83), abolitionism spread beyond African Americans and Quakers. Natural rights doctrines rooted in the European Enlightenment and endorsed by the Declaration of Independence, black service in Patriot armies, black petitions for emancipation, evangelical Christianity, and the activities of the earliest white abolition societies encouraged the American North to lead the world in political abolitionism. Starting with Vermont in 1777 and Massachusetts in 1783, all the states north of Delaware had by 1804 either ended slavery within their jurisdiction or provided for its gradual abolition. Meanwhile, Congress in 1787 included a clause

in the Northwest Ordinance banning slavery in the Northwest Territory. During the 1780s, states in the Upper South eased restrictions on masters who wished to free individual slaves, and small, Quaker-dominated, gradual abolition societies spread into Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

Revolutionary-era abolitionism peaked during the 1780s. Thereafter, several developments stopped and then reversed the southward advance of antislavery sentiment. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and resulting expansion of cotton cultivation into the Old Southwest reinvigorated slavery. The brutal Haitian slave revolt that began in 1791 and culminated in the creation of an independent black republic in 1804 led white Southerners—who feared they could not control free African Americans—to believe that slavery had to be strengthened rather than abolished. An aborted revolt conspiracy led by the slave Gabriel near Richmond, Virginia, in 1800 bolstered this belief. As a direct result of increased white defensiveness, antislavery societies in the Upper South disbanded or declined. Meanwhile, in the North, a new scientific racism encouraged white residents to interpret social status in racial terms, restrict black access to schools, churches, and jobs, and regard enslavement as suitable for black Southerners.

White gradual abolitionists came to accept a contention that emancipation must be linked with expatriation of former slaves to avoid the formation of a dangerous and uncontrollable free black class. The American Colonization Society (ACS), organized by prominent slaveholders in 1816, claimed its objective was to encourage gradual abolition by sending *free* African Americans to Africa. It became the leading American antislavery organization of the 1820s and established Liberia as a black colony in West Africa. For a time black leaders, facing increasing oppression in the United States, agreed with this strategy. Best represented by black sea captain Paul Cuffe, they cooperated with the ACS during the 1810s, hoping that a homeland beyond America's borders would undermine slavery there and throughout the Atlantic World. Yet, by the 1820s, most free African Americans believed the ACS's real goal was to strengthen slavery by removing its most dedicated opponents—themselves.

### Immediate Abolitionism

Three factors led to the emergence, during the late 1820s and early 1830s, of a more radical form of abolitionism dedicated to immediate emancipation and equal rights for African Americans in the United States. First, black abolitionists convinced a small minority of white Northerners that the ACS was a proslavery fraud. Second, signs of black unrest

## abolitionism

inspired urgency among white abolitionists who wished to avoid a race war in the South. In 1822 a free black man named Denmark Vesey organized a major slave conspiracy in Charleston, South Carolina. Seven years later in Boston, black abolitionist David Walker published his revolutionary *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. Slave preacher Nat Turner in 1831 led a slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, which left nearly 60 white residents dead. Third, the convergence of northern economic modernization with a massive religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening encouraged increasing numbers of white people to regard slavery as a barbaric, outmoded, and sinful practice. They believed it had to be ended if the country were to prosper and avoid God's wrath.

All these factors influenced the extraordinary career of William Lloyd Garrison, a white New Englander who began publishing his weekly newspaper, *The Liberator*, in Boston in 1831. Late in 1833 Garrison brought together in Philadelphia a diverse group—including a few black men and a few white women—to form the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Rejecting all violent means, the AASS pledged to rely on “moral suasion” to achieve immediate, uncompensated emancipation and equal rights for African Americans in the United States. White men dominated the organization's leadership, but thousands of black men and thousands of women of both races lent active support. A few African Americans, including former slaves Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and Sojourner Truth, emerged as leaders in this biracial abolitionist movement. As they became antislavery activists, such white women as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton grew conscious of their own inequality and initiated the women's rights movement.

Although members of the AASS comprised a tiny, despised minority, the organization spread rapidly across the North. In 1835 and 1836 its members sent thousands of antislavery petitions to Congress and stacks of abolitionist propaganda into the South. Their efforts, combined with Turner's revolt and the 1833 initiation of gradual abolition in the British West Indies, produced another fierce proslavery reaction. Abolitionists could not safely venture into the South. In the North, mobs beat abolitionist speakers and destroyed abolitionist meeting places, schools, and printing presses. They also attacked black communities.

### A More Aggressive Abolitionism

Antiabolitionism and the failure of peaceful agitation to weaken slavery split the immediatist movement in 1840. Garrison and his associates, centered in New England, became social perfectionists, feminists, and anarchists. They denounced violence, unrighteous government, and organized religion. They refused to vote and embraced dissolution of the Union as the only way to save the North from

the sin of slavery and force the South to abolish it. Known as Garrisonians, they retained control of the AASS and, until the Civil War, concentrated on agitation in the North.

The great majority of abolitionists (black and white) insisted, however, that church and government action could end slavery. They became more willing to use violent means, rejected radical assertions of women's rights, and formed aggressive organizations. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (1840–55), led by New York City businessman Lewis Tappan, concentrated on converting churches to immediatism and continued to send antislavery propaganda into the South. The Liberty Party (1840–48) employed a variety of political strategies. The more radical Liberty abolitionists, centered in upstate New York and led by Gerrit Smith, maintained that slavery was always illegal, that immediatists had an obligation to go south to help slaves escape, and that Congress could abolish slavery in the southern states. The more conservative—and by far more numerous—Liberty faction depended on two Cincinnati residents, Gamaliel Bailey and Salmon P. Chase, for intellectual and political leadership. It accepted the legality of slavery in the southern states, rejected abolitionist aid to help slaves escape in the South and sought to build a mass political party on a platform calling not for abolition but removing U.S. government support for slavery.

Meanwhile, black abolitionists led in forming local vigilance associations designed to protect fugitive slaves, and most of them supported the AFASS and the Liberty Party. In 1846 they joined church-oriented white abolitionists in the American Missionary Association, an outgrowth of the AFASS that sent antislavery missionaries into the South. Douglass, who in 1847 began publishing the *North Star* in Rochester, New York, remained loyal to Garrison until 1851, when he joined the radical wing of the Liberty Party.

In 1848 members of the Liberty Party's conservative wing helped organize the Free Soil Party, dedicated to preventing the spread of slavery into American territories. By then they had essentially ceased to be immediatists. In 1854, when Congress opened Kansas Territory to slavery, they worked with antislavery Whigs and Democrats to form the Republican Party, which nominated its first presidential candidate in 1856. The Republican Party formally aimed only at ending slavery within the national domain. Many of its leaders claimed to represent the interests of white Northerners against the domination of slaveholders. But members of the party's “Old Liberty Guard” and such former Free Soilers as Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio held Republicans to a higher standard. As Radical Republicans, they pressed for abolition and equal rights for African Americans.

After 1848 the more radical members of the Liberty Party—known as radical political

abolitionists—maintained their tiny organization. They excelled in Underground Railroad efforts and resistance in the North to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. More than any other abolitionist faction, the radical political abolitionists supported John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Brown and his biracial band had hoped to spark a slave revolt but were easily captured by Virginia militia and U.S. troops. Brown's actions, nevertheless, angered and frightened white Southerners; after his capture and prior to his execution that December, his elegant appeals for racial justice aroused sympathy among many Northerners.

### Abolitionism during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Brown's raid and the victory of Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in the presidential election of 1860 precipitated the secession movement among white Southerners, which led to the Civil War in 1861. As the war began, Lincoln, who advocated the "ultimate extinction" of human bondage, believed former slaves should be colonized outside the United States and promised not to interfere with slavery in the South. He feared that to go further would alienate southern Unionists and weaken northern support for the war. Abolitionists, nevertheless, almost universally supported the war because they believed it would end slavery. Garrison and his associates dropped their opposition to forceful means, and church-oriented and radical political abolitionists rejoined the AASS. As the organization's influence grew, Garrison's friend Wendell Phillips emerged as the North's most popular orator. Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and other prominent abolitionists joined Radical Republicans in lobbying Lincoln in favor of making emancipation and racial justice Union war aims. Abolitionists—especially black abolitionists—led in urging the president to enlist black troops.

When, in January 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring slaves in areas under Confederate control to be free, abolitionists worried that—by resting emancipation on military necessity rather than racial justice—he had laid an unsound basis for black freedom. But they recognized the proclamation's significance, particularly its endorsement of enlisting black troops. Young white abolitionist men became officers in the otherwise segregated black regiments. Abolitionists advocated voting rights, education, and landownership for African Americans as compensation for generations of unrequited labor. These, they maintained, were essential to black economic and political advancement. In this regard abolitionists were similar to Radical Republicans, but they were much more insistent on involving African Americans in rebuilding the Union. They reacted negatively to Lincoln's December 1863 Reconstruction plan that would leave former masters in control of the status of their former slaves. As a result, in 1864 a few abolitionists joined

a small group of Radical Republicans in opposing Lincoln's renomination for the presidency. However, Garrison, Douglass, and most leaders of the AASS believed they could influence Lincoln and continued to support him.

During the summer of 1861, abolitionist organizations had begun sending missionaries and teachers into war zones to minister to the physical, spiritual, and educational needs of the former slaves. Women predominated, in part because younger abolitionist men had enrolled in Union armies. The most ambitious effort occurred in the South Carolina Sea Islands centered on Port Royal, which Union forces captured in 1861. There, and at locations in Virginia, Kentucky, and Louisiana, abolitionists attempted to transform an oppressed people into independent proprietors and wage laborers. Their efforts encouraged the formation of black churches, schools, and other institutions but had serious shortcomings. Northerners did not understand southern black culture, tended toward unworkable bureaucratic policies, and put too much faith in wage labor as a solution to entrenched conditions. When the former slaves did not progress under these conditions, most abolitionists blamed the victims.

Nevertheless, with the end of the Civil War in May 1865 and the ratification that December of the Thirteenth Amendment, making slavery illegal throughout the United States, Garrison declared that abolitionism had succeeded. He ceased publication of the *Liberator* and urged the AASS to disband. He believed the Republican Party could henceforth protect black rights and interests. A majority of immediatists, including Douglass, Phillips, and Smith, were not so sure and kept the AASS in existence until 1870. Black abolitionists became especially active in lobbying on behalf of the rights of the former slaves and against the regressive policies of Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor as president. In 1866 and 1867 most abolitionists opposed ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, contending that it did not insufficiently protect the right of black men to vote. Thereafter, they supported the stronger guarantees the Fifteenth Amendment provided for adult black male suffrage, although a minority of feminist abolitionists—led by Stanton—objected that enfranchisement of white women should take precedence.

When the Fifteenth Amendment gained ratification in 1870, the AASS declared that abolitionism had achieved its ultimate objective and disbanded. The organization was too optimistic. During the 1870s and 1880s, southern states—having rejoined the Union—curtailed black rights and the white North acquiesced. The abolitionists bear some responsibility for this tragic outcome. Nevertheless, they played a crucial role in ending slavery, in creating black institutions in the postwar South, and in placing protections for minority rights in the Constitution.

*See also* slavery.

## agrarian politics

**FURTHER READING.** James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wick- edness: American Evangelicals against Slavery 1770–1808*, 1982; Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830–1870*, 1982; Stanley Harrold, *American Abolitionists*, 2001; Idem, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*, 2004; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among North- ern Free Blacks 1700–1860*, 1997; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement*, 1998; Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic*, 2006; James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 1964, reprint, 1992; Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837–1860*, 1976; James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, 2nd ed., 1997.

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## agrarian politics

Agrarian politics describes the strategies, tactics, and values of the farmer-based political movements that played a prominent reform role in American political history. Its purest manifestation came in the Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, but its language, goals, and methods persisted, in a more subdued way, in the New Deal Era and beyond.

Agrarian politics played an important role in the evolution of American democracy and the construction of public institutions to regulate business with- out diminishing its productive energies. Indeed, the regulatory goal of agrarian politics after the Civil War provided the confidence that consumers, service users, and investors needed to buy, sell, and ship in a market economy. Agrarian politics—egalitarian, rights-based, inclusive, electoral, and targeted at the legislature where the most numerous classes pre- sumably have their best shot—produced important structural reforms of national institutions, at least those not won by war: the Bill of Rights, direct elec- tion of senators, antimonopoly laws, an income tax, regulation of big business (starting with railroads), a monetary system controlled by public officials and not based on gold, the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively (and of agricultural coopera- tives to similarly operate without being charged as “conspiracies in restraint of trade” under the Sher- man Act), and the lowering of tariffs (the most preva- lent and burdensome taxes) on goods consumed and used by ordinary people, to name just a few.

The term *agrarian* is virtually synonymous with *republican*, denoting a mode of politics and political thought nurtured by British and French Enlighten- ment philosophy that flowered in eighteenth-century North America. It was no doubt encouraged by the immigration of dissenters and the mode of settle- ment in what became (in 1789) the United States—a

nation of independent landowners who belonged to diverse religious communities, themselves permeated by democratic demand, in contrast to the hierarchi- cal denominations prevalent in the Old World.

Agrarianism’s central tenets were galvanized by the struggle for independence from Great Britain. Its foremost philosopher was Thomas Jefferson, the apostle of sturdy yeoman farmer democracy (or, more accurately, *self-government*), whose creed came together in the cauldron of revolution and who pro- vided the revolutionary language of that struggle. Agrarianism’s principal antagonist was Alexander Hamilton, the foremost intellectual advocate of economic industrialism, commercialism, and po- litical elitism.

In Jefferson’s philosophy, the hand of government should be as light as possible, keeping opportunities open without favoritism, exploitation, or needless constraints on human affairs; and that hand’s guid- ance should be in the legislature, the popular branch of the people’s elected representatives. If its public of- ficials became unresponsive to the sufferings of their constituents, the spectacle of a passionate people ris- ing up in arms against its government (as in Shays’s Rebellion in 1787) was not for Jefferson the night- mare it was for Hamilton.

Popular mobilization *against* bad, and *for* better, government, with wide participation by citizens and guaranteed commitment not to infringe on the per- sonal rights on which good government depended— these were the tenets of Jeffersonian republicanism that shaped the rhetoric and action of agrarian poli- tics. Individual rights, but a strong role for collec- tive action; decentralized power, but enough govern- mental authority to protect the people from private exploitation—these became the central tensions of agrarian republicanism. This may sound like the ros- iest statement of an American creed. But while an American creed without Alexander Hamilton, busi- ness politics, and a powerful presidency is possible to imagine, an American political history without Jef- fersonian republicanism is not.

Yet agrarian reformers had to struggle for decades to achieve their political goals; their successes were episodic, concentrated in reform periods like the Populist and Progressive eras, and the New Deal. Their opponents had far greater material resources and the deference of many elected officials (as well as the federal courts, historically skeptical of regulation and redistribution).

The first national manifestation of agrarian politics came in the battle over the Constitution itself. Given the elite composition and Hamiltonian persuasion of many delegates at Philadelphia, the small farmers of the interior and less-developed regions who had con- stituted the left flank of the Revolution would not accept this ominous concentration of power in a national government without the guarantees of the Bill of Rights, and only its promise got the new Consti- tution ratified.