



THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT



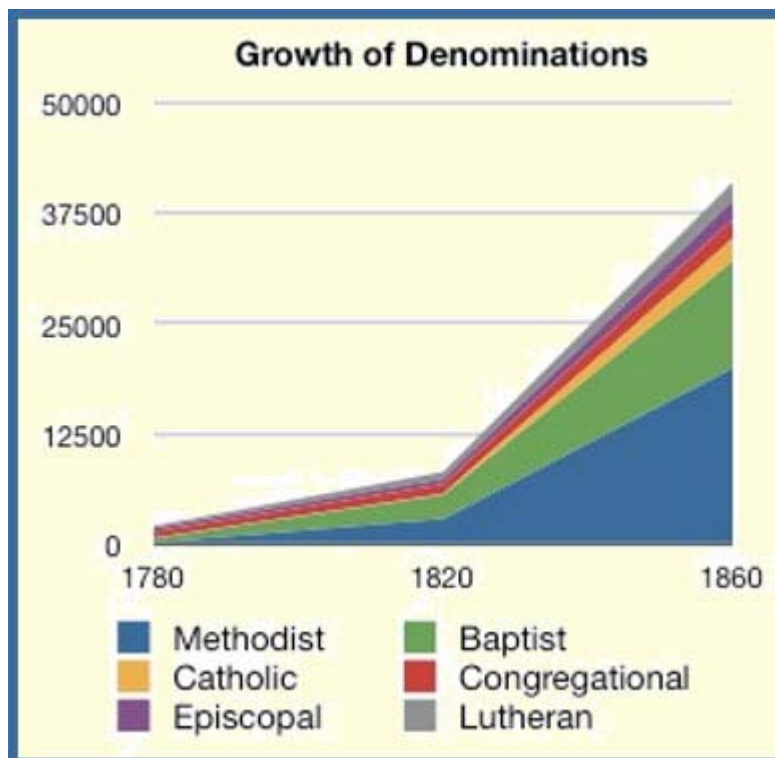
The Underground Railroad: Charles T. Webber, 1893

Unit Overview

During the first half of the 1850s, some northerners expressed concerns about the quality of life in America. They worked to improve education, the prison system, the treatment of the mentally ill and problems related to the consumption of alcohol. The nation's most controversial reform movement, however, was the effort to end slavery. Let's see how it all happened.

A Better America

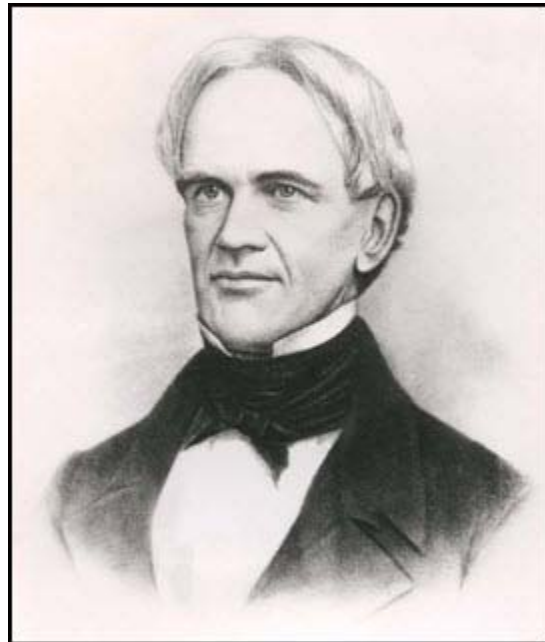
In the early 1800s, the **Second Great Awakening**, a religious movement, energized American Christians. It began on the frontier with camp meetings called **revivals**. Dynamic preachers inspired their listeners to improve the world along with their personal lives. The Second Great Awakening expanded church membership, increased the number of missionaries and encouraged an interest in social reform. You can see the growth of churches for each denomination pictured in the graphic below.



One problem that drew the attention of nineteenth reformers was the abuse of alcohol. They claimed that it was responsible for crime, insanity, poverty and the breakup of families. The demands for **temperance**, or drinking little or no alcohol, gained momentum with the formation of the **American Society for the Promotion of Temperance** in 1826. The group held rallies, distributed pamphlets and delivered lectures concerning the negative effects of alcohol consumption. Although some states passed legislation to outlaw the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, many Americans disliked these laws. Within a few years, most were canceled or repealed. However, the temperance movement reappeared

in the early 1900s and convinced Congress to propose a constitutional amendment banning alcohol. Although the amendment passed, it was overturned in 1933.

At the same time, some northerners began working to improve public education and campaigned for schools supported by tax dollars. The leader of the educational reform movement was **Horace Mann**, a Massachusetts lawyer. He became the head of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837. While he held this office, the board improved curriculum, lengthened the school day and doubled teachers' salaries. Massachusetts also established a school for training teachers in 1839. Other states soon followed Mann's example. By 1860, free public elementary schools were common in all northern states and several southern cities. On the other hand, public high schools were rare, but the number of colleges and universities grew rapidly. Although most colleges admitted only men, **Mount Holyoke** became the first permanent women's college in 1837. In Ohio, **Oberlin College**, founded in 1833, was open to men, women and free African Americans.



Horace Mann

Concerned citizens also questioned the living conditions of prisoners and the mentally ill. Several northern state legislatures passed laws to assist criminals with their return to society. For example, prisoners learned trades that would help them to find employment upon their release from jail. Young offenders were separated

from hardened criminals, and architects designed jails with individual cells. In some instances, inmates were not guilty of any crime but were mentally ill.

Dorothea Dix, a Boston teacher, made it her life's work to bring this issue to the attention of the American public. Traveling extensively throughout the North and the South, she visited prisons and documented the condition of the insane. She presented these findings to several state legislatures to secure funds for hospitals and treatment of the mentally disabled.



Go to Questions 1 through 5.

The Question of Slavery

Improving education and providing appropriate care for the mentally ill were not the only reform movements that swept the country during the early 1830s.

Motivated by the Second Great Awakening and American ideals, groups of reformers worked to end slavery and to extend the rights of citizenship to African Americans. This was not a new idea. Some Americans had tried to limit or ban slavery before the American Revolution, and delegates at the Constitutional Convention had debated the issue. Although the practice continued in the South, most northern states outlawed slavery by the early 1800s. When the British outlawed enslavement throughout their empire in 1832, American interest in the issue grew.



Map of Liberia: 1830

At first, the antislavery movement focused on resettling African Americans rather than securing their freedom within the United States. In 1816, the **American Colonization Society**, composed of several white Virginians, bought slaves for the purpose of freeing them and planned to send them out of the country. The organization raised money and purchased land in West Africa for a colony. By 1822, African Americans arrived to settle in what was called **Liberia**. Even though Liberia became an independent country in 1847, it did not attract large numbers of black colonists from America, and it did not discourage the growth of slavery within the United States. African Americans, whose families had lived in the U.S. for several generations, did not want to go to Africa. They wanted to live as free people in America.

Other antislavery reformers in the North concentrated their efforts on convincing southerners to give up their slaves voluntarily. They suggested that slaves should be freed gradually to avoid any major disruptions in the economy. Some congressmen considered asking the federal government to pay owners for the loss of their slaves. This approach, referred to as **gradualism**, won very little support.





Go to Questions 6 and 7.

The Abolitionists

In the 1830s, the increased cultivation of cotton made planters in the Deep South more dependent on slave labor, and the number of enslaved individuals continued to grow. Reformers, therefore, accepted that a gradual approach to ending slavery had little chance of success. They took a harder line and called for the immediate end, or **abolition**, of slavery. Americans who held this view became known as **abolitionists**.



Statue of William Lloyd Garrison: Boston, Massachusetts

One of the first white abolitionists to demand complete freedom for African Americans was **William Lloyd Garrison**. Garrison left Massachusetts in 1829 to work for an antislavery newspaper printed in Baltimore, Maryland. Because he believed this publication was too willing to compromise on the slavery question, William Lloyd Garrison returned to Boston two years later and founded the *Liberator*, his own antislavery newspaper. The paper attracted a large number of readers and led to the establishment of the **New England Antislavery Society** in 1832 along with the creation of the **American Antislavery Society** in 1833. By

1840, over 1,000 chapters of the American Antislavery Society appeared in towns and cities across the North.

For free African Americans living in the North, the abolition of slavery was an important goal. They were proud of their freedom and wanted to help those who remained enslaved. African Americans took an active role in organizing the American Antislavery Society and subscribed to the *Liberator* in large numbers. Following Garrison's example, **Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm** founded *Freedom's Journal*, the first U.S. newspaper owned by African Americans. In 1830, free African-American leaders held a convention in Philadelphia and discussed ways to help slaves emigrate from the Deep South. Learn more about Garrison and other famous abolitionists by watching the video listed below.



The Abolitionists

The best-known African-American abolitionist was **Frederick Douglass**. Born in Maryland as a slave, Douglass taught himself to read and write before escaping to Massachusetts in 1838. Because he was a runaway, he could have been legally captured and returned to Maryland. Nevertheless, Douglass joined the Massachusetts Antislavery Society and became a powerful, popular speaker for the organization's cause. His antislavery message reached even more people when he edited a newspaper called the *North Star*. Douglass not only spoke on the evils of slavery in the United States, but he also delivered lectures in Great Britain and the West Indies. He became a free American in 1847 when he purchased his freedom from his former owner.

Fredrick Douglass: New York, 1852

The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a by-word to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your Union. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you cling to it, as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! Be warned! Be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!



Although the majority of white southerners defended slavery, a few joined the ranks of the abolitionists. Among them were **Sarah and Angelina Grimke**. The sisters, born in South Carolina, were members of a wealthy, influential family that owned slaves. After the death of their father, they persuaded their mother to give them their share of the family inheritance. Normally, this consisted of cash or land. The two women, however, asked for several slaves whom they, in turn, immediately freed. As expected, they were severely criticized in their community for this action. Sarah and Angelina Grimke decided that they could do more for the cause if they moved to the North so they settled in Philadelphia in 1832. With her husband, **Theodore Weld**, Angelina published *Slavery as It Is*, a collection of first-hand descriptions of life under slavery. It became one of the most influential abolitionist works of the era. Both sisters were frequently invited to deliver lectures at antislavery society meetings. Read an excerpt from one of these speeches quoted in the graphic below.

Angelina Grimke: Philadelphia, 1838

As a Southerner I feel that it is my duty to stand up here to-night and bear testimony against slavery. I have seen it -- I have seen it. I know it has horrors that can never be described. I was brought up under its wing: I witnessed for many years its demoralizing influences, and its destructiveness to human happiness. It is admitted by some that the slave is not happy under the worst forms of slavery. But I have never seen a happy slave. I have seen him dance in his chains, it is true; but he was not happy. There is a wide difference between happiness and mirth. Man cannot enjoy the former while his manhood is destroyed, and that part of the being which is necessary to the making, and to the enjoyment of happiness, is completely blotted out. The slaves, however, may be, and sometimes are, mirthful. When hope is extinguished, they say, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"...

Many persons go to the South for a season, and are hospitably entertained in the parlor and at the table of the slave-holder. They never enter the huts of the slaves; they know nothing of the dark side of the picture, and they return home with praises on their lips of the generous character of those with whom they had tarried. Or if they have witnessed the cruelties of slavery, by remaining silent spectators they have naturally become callous -- an insensibility has ensued which prepares them to apologize even for barbarity. Nothing but the corrupting influence of slavery on the hearts of the Northern people can induce them to apologize for it; and much will have been done for the destruction of Southern slavery when we have so reformed the North that no one here will be willing to risk his reputation by advocating or even excusing the holding of men as property.

Those who escaped slavery were often invited to describe their experiences. They gave powerful testimonies about their lives as enslaved workers. One popular witness was a woman named **Sojourner Truth**. She was born a slave in rural New York in 1797 and given the name Isabella Baumfree. In 1826, Belle escaped, changed her name and settled in New York City. She worked for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights. Part of one of her speeches is quoted in the graphic below. Making a break for freedom was no easy task for African Americans living in the South. A few managed to get away to Florida, Mexico or the Caribbean Islands. Most, however, dreamed of going north by way of the Underground Railroad.



Sojourner Truth: American Equal Rights Convention 1867

I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again.



Go to Questions 8 through 16.

The Underground Railroad

Some abolitionists believed that speaking out against slavery was not enough and were determined to help African Americans gain their freedom. With this in mind, they established a network of escape routes between the South and the North. This became known as the **Underground Railroad**. As you learned in a previous unit, the Underground Railroad was not underground and was not an actual railroad. Runaway slaves, most of whom had never gone more than a few miles from their owner's land, traveled on foot at night and relied on the North Star as their guide. They rested during the day in a series of barns, church basements and safe houses, referred to as **stations**. Both black and white abolitionists served as **conductors** and guided the runaways to their next destination. They also provided food and clothing. Some slaves who made this journey decided to settle in the North, but most hoped to cross the border into Canada.

The Underground Railroad was a dangerous activity for everyone involved. The abolitionists broke the law when they harbored runaway slaves. At the same time, professional catchers, who were paid to return slaves to their owners, were a constant threat. Capture resulted in severe punishment for a slave forced to return

to the South. In reality, only a small number of African Americans successfully escaped through the Underground Railroad, but it provided hope for millions.



The Underground Railroad

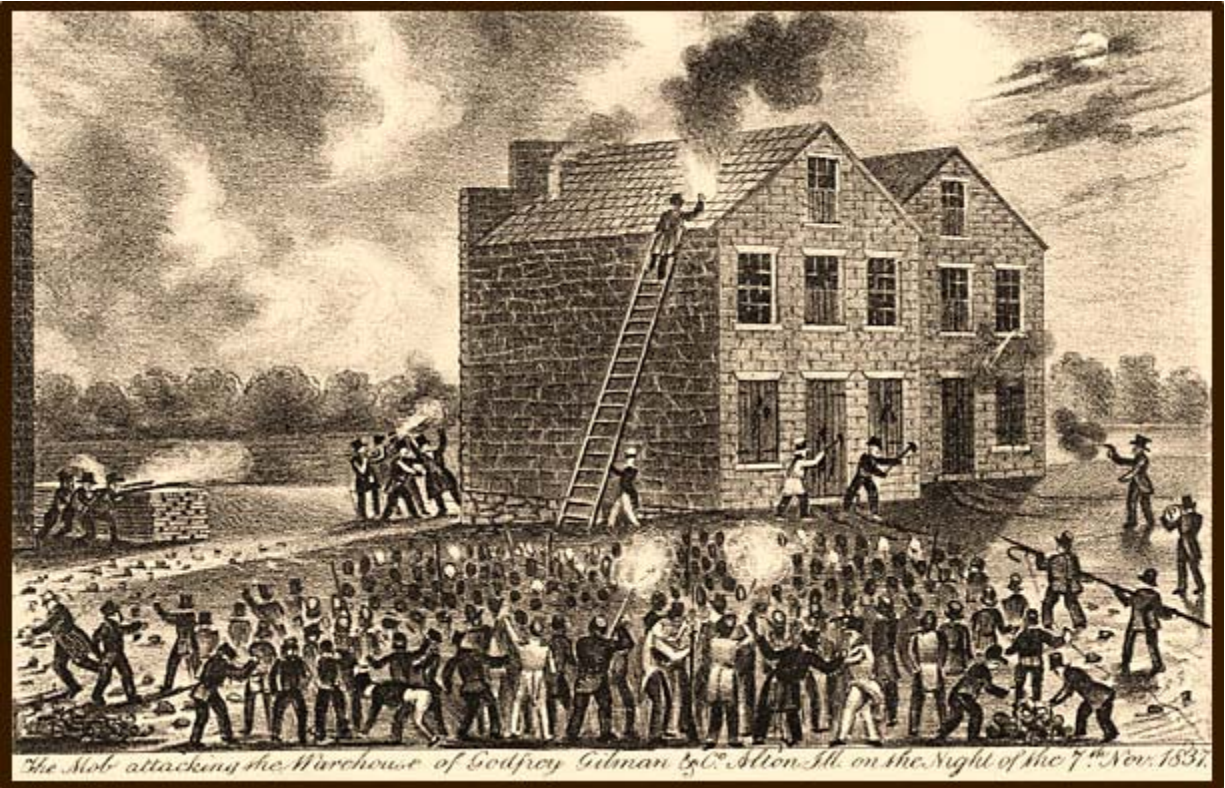


Go to Questions 17 and 18.

The Abolitionists Meet the Opposition

Abolitionist societies in the North continued to grow, but their members represented only a small segment of the population. In fact, most northerners did not support the antislavery movement. They viewed the abolitionists as radicals and feared their antislavery stance would remove all hope of compromise. Northern industrialists worried that the national economy would suffer as a result. Factory workers also resented the abolitionists because they believed that an influx of freed slaves would lower wages. Others argued that, if freed, African Americans would never blend into American society.

Strong opposition to the abolitionist movement resulted in violent attacks in a number of northern cities. A mob burned Philadelphia's antislavery headquarters to the ground, and William Lloyd Garrison had to be rescued in Boston from a hostile crowd that was prepared to hang him. In Illinois, **Elijah Lovejoy's** abolitionist newspaper office was raided on three separate occasions. Each time Lovejoy replaced his ruined presses. In a fourth attack, a mob set fire to the building and killed Lovejoy.



A Mob Attacking Lovejoy's Business

The abolitionists also drew an angry response from southerners. They insisted that slavery was essential, not only to the economy of the South but to the financial stability of the nation as a whole. Slave owners argued that they treated their slaves much better than northern manufacturers treated their workers. Planters provided housing, clothing, medical care and food for their slaves, but factory employees paid for these necessities out of their own low earnings. Read an example of this line of reasoning quoted in the graphic below. Southern anger increased when northern abolitionist groups began to use the U.S. mail to send antislavery pamphlets to the South. Mail sacks suspected of containing this type of literature were burned when they reached post offices in the South. Most southerners, even if they did not own slaves, remained united against the abolitionist cause.

The Negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged and infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessaries of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor. The women do little hard work, and are protected from the despotism of their husbands by their masters. The Negro men and stout boys work, on the average, in good weather, not more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent in perfect abandon. Besides, they have their Sabbaths and holidays. White men, with so much of license and liberty, would die of boredom, but Negroes luxuriate in bodily and mental repose. With their faces upturned to the sun, they can sleep at any hour, and quiet sleep is the greatest of human enjoyments...We do not know whether free laborers ever sleep. They are fools to do so, for whilst they sleep, the wily and watchful factory owner is devising means to ensnare and exploit them. The free laborer must work or starve. He is more of a slave than the Negro because he works longer and harder for less allowance than the slave and has no holiday, because the cares of life with him begin when its labors end. He has no liberty, and not a single right.

George Fitzhugh (adapted)

Virginia, 1857



Go to Questions 19 through 22.

What Happened Next?

Even though politicians made an effort to keep the Union together through compromise, tension mounted between the North and the South throughout the 1850s. The focus of the controversy shifted to the Great Plains where the Kansas Territory became a battleground for slavery and antislavery forces. Southerners connected the violence to the abolitionists and resented the refusal of some northerners to comply with the Fugitive Slave Law. Before examining the impact of these events in the next unit, review the names and terms found in Unit 31; then, complete Questions 23 through 32.



Go to Questions 23 through 32.