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## **The Abolitionist Adventure, Part 1**

**by Wendy McElroy**

“Resolved, that the compact which exists between the North and the South is a covenant with death and an agreement with hell — involving both parties in atrocious criminality — and should be immediately annulled.”

This resolution, passed by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, was written by the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The compact to which it referred was the Constitution of the United States, which was called an agreement with hell because — in its original form — it sanctioned slavery.

Abolitionism was the radical wing of the American anti-slavery movement. It demanded the immediate cessation of slavery on the grounds that all men are self-owners. That is, every human being has a natural right to his own person and property, which no other moral or practical consideration outweighed. This emphasis, along with strong ties to Quakers, who denied the government moral authority over men, meant that abolitionism emerged as a libertarian movement.

Spun out against a backdrop of internal debate, social backlash, war, and political limitations, the history of abolitionism provides both inspiration and cautionary tales about the attempt to reform society in a fundamental manner.

### **The American anti-slavery movement**

The early American colonies had no consistent policy regarding the treatment of slaves. Some adopted the harsh code of the nearby British colony Barbados. South Carolina, for example, imposed no penalty for beating a slave to death and defined the rape of a female slave as a trespass against her master. In the Northern colonies, where slaves were less numerous, the laws tended to be milder.

Before the American Revolution, little anti-slavery sentiment was expressed outside Quaker circles. In that community, tracts against slavery appeared as early as the 17th century and Quakers who owned slaves began to divest themselves of such “property.” In 1773, Patrick

Henry expressed what might have been a common sentiment among non-Quaker slaveowners. He wrote to a friend,

I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them. I will not, I can not justify it. However culpable my conduct, I will so far pay my *devoir* to virtue, as to own the excellence and rectitude of her precepts and to lament my own want of conformity to them.

The Declaration of Independence, which was universal in its application, stated,

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Nevertheless, the ensuing Constitution entrenched slavery into the fabric of America. Article I, Section 2 — to which Garrison so strenuously objected — stated,

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other Persons.

The representation provided by slavery became a bulwark of political power for the South. To abandon slavery meant placing itself at the mercy of Northern interests, which favored such measures as tariffs that benefited Northern industries at the expense of the agrarian South.

A series of events heightened the conflict. They included: the admission of Kentucky as a slave state, which increased “slave” representation in the Senate; the Fugitive Slave Act, which required “free” states to return escaped slaves to their owners; and the invention of the cotton gin, which made cotton plantations — and, so, slave labor — far more profitable.

Meanwhile, free labor in the South found it difficult to compete with slave labor, causing many whites to migrate. A resident of North Carolina commented,

Of my neighbors, friends and kindred, nearly one-half have left the State since I was old enough to remember. Many is the time I stood by the loaded emigrant wagon and given the parting hand to those whose faces I was never to look upon again. They were going to seek homes in the free west, knowing, as they did, that free and slave labor could not both exist and prosper in the same community.

As economic, social, and political tensions reached a fevered pitch, one voice distinguished itself as the moral conscience on slavery.

### **William Lloyd Garrison**

In 1805, William Lloyd Garrison was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, into modest circumstances that worsened with his father's desertion of the family. Driven by necessity, a young Garrison found his calling in life as a newspaperman when he apprenticed to the printing office of the *Newburyport Herald*.

Garrison's anti-slavery passions were ignited by the Quaker Benjamin Lundy, publisher of the periodical *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. The two men became fast friends. But in order to work together, they needed to resolve a conflict. Lundy was a gradualist and a colonizationist; that is, he wanted to phase out slavery gradually and to establish foreign colonies to which free and freed blacks could be sent. Garrison flatly rejected this approach. In the first issue of a new *Genius*, co-edited by the two men, Garrison declared,

These, therefore, are my positions:

1. That the slaves are entitled to immediate and complete emancipation;
2. That the question of expediency has nothing to do with that of right, and it is not for those who tyrannize to say when they may safely break the chains of their subjects. As well may a thief determine on what particular day or month he shall leave off stealing;
3. That, on the ground of expediency, it would be wiser to set all the slaves free today than tomorrow.
4. That, as a very large proportion of our colored population were born on American soil, they are at liberty to choose their own dwelling place, and we possess no right to use coercive measures in their removal.

The two men signed their own articles and took no responsibility for opinions expressed by the other.

Garrison and Lundy's partnership was doomed by a lawsuit. After a badly beaten slave sought sanctuary with them, Garrison published a furious attack upon Francis Todd, whose ship transported slaves from Africa to New Orleans. Todd responded with a libel suit and won. The impoverished Garrison was imprisoned for more than six weeks until a sympathetic abolitionist anteed up. Somewhere in the process, the *Genius* ceased to publish.

On January 1, 1831, *The Liberator* rose from the ashes, with the motto “Our Country is the World — our Countrymen are Mankind.” Garrison and Isaac Knapp were the publishers; Garrison, the editor. The neatly printed weekly issued from a small room in Boston that functioned as both an office and a home to the two men. At night, the floor became a bed. A friendly cat kept mice away and caressed Garrison’s balding head while he wrote editorials. A visitor described Garrison at work:

I never was more astonished. All my preconceptions were at fault. My ideal of the man was that of a stout, rugged, dark-visaged desperado, — something like we picture a pirate. Here was a quiet, gentle, and I might say handsome man, — a gentleman indeed, in every sense of the word.

*The Liberator*, however, did not remain gentlemanly.

The second issue attacked the American Colonization Society, whose views were similar to those of Lundy. The Society, Garrison proclaimed, was wrong in principle and impotent in design. Garrison dedicated *The Liberator* to disclosing the Society’s true nature, especially the fact that so many members were prominent slaveowners, who wanted to deport *free* blacks.

The attack raised complaints that would be hurled repeatedly at Garrison. His language was too blunt. He attacked individuals instead of principles, thus giving personal offense. In response, Garrison thanked God no one accused him of being lukewarm. To critics he said, “I have need to be all on fire for there are mountains of ice around me to melt.”

In a sense, *The Liberator* was badly timed. *Walker’s Appeal*, a pamphlet recently published by a free black, had panicked the slave states. This pamphlet flaunted black superiority and called for insurrection in the South. As a direct result, in 1830, North Carolina passed a law to prohibit slaves and free blacks from reading and writing. All blacks emancipated after 1830 were ordered to leave the state within 90 days.

Wendy McElroy is the author of *The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival* (Prometheus Books, 1998).

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