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The Abolitionist Adventure, Part 2

by Wendy McElroy

On August 31, 1831, a Virginia slave named Nat Turner instigated a slave revolt in which a slave owner and his family were killed.

Eventually, the victims of Turner's band exceeded 50. The South exploded with fear and rage, with many blaming Northern abolitionists, especially William Lloyd Garrison.

A Virginia paper called for a price on Garrison's head; the Georgia legislature appropriated money for that same purpose. Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, passed a law prohibiting any free black from taking *The Liberator* from the post office on pain of a \$20 fine or 30 days' imprisonment.

Garrison responded by making *The Liberator* even more radical and placed a woodcut representing a slave auction on *The Liberator's* heading. A resident of Georgia assured Garrison that the picture achieved its goal: it galled slave owners.

The Liberator also became a voice for free blacks. When a New England Anti-Slavery Society formed with the goal of immediate emancipation, *The Liberator* became its voice. Of the 72 people endorsing the society's constitution, one-fourth were black, a remarkably high percentage for that day and age.

In its second volume, *The Liberator* ran a series of woodcuts illustrating slavery. One of them depicted a slave woman kneeling under the words "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" This woodcut headed the Ladies' Department of *The Liberator* and foreshadowed a major controversy within the abolitionist movement — women's rights. More accurately, should abolitionism embrace the women's cause or would this dilute the single issue of anti-slavery?

Garrison's answer was clear: abolitionism was a fight for *human* rights, not *male* rights. He wrote,

Two capital errors have extensively prevailed, greatly to the detriment of the cause of abolition. The first is, a proneness on the part of the advocates of immediate and universal emancipation to overlook or deprecate the influence of woman in the promotion of the cause; and the other is, a similar

disposition on the part of the females in our land to undervalue their own power. A million females in this country are recognized and held as property — liable to be sold or used for the gratification of the lust or avarice or convenience of unprincipled speculators — without the least protection for their chastity — cruelly scourged for the most trifling offenses — and subject to ... to severe privations and to brutish ignorance! Have these no claims upon the sympathies — prayers — charities — exertions of our white countrywomen?

Garrison's defense of women was undoubtedly spurred by three events. After Prudence Crandall wrote to him for advice on opening the nation's first academy for black girls, *The Liberator* carried the school's advertisement.

Crandall was arrested, imprisoned, tried twice, and ostracized from respectable society. Eventually, the school was set ablaze.

Then Garrison attended the Annual Convention of Anti-Slavery Women in Philadelphia, where the women's meeting hall suffered the same fate as Crandall's school.

The pivotal event for women's rights was the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Lucretia Mott, a Quaker and veteran abolitionist, accompanied Garrison, both attending as representatives of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

But British abolitionists refused to admit female representatives onto the floor. When women were finally allowed to sit in the gallery, Garrison withdrew from the convention floor to join them.

(Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were so distressed by their treatment that they organized the first Woman's Rights Convention in America — in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.)

American male abolitionists continued to debate the propriety of including women's rights under the anti-slavery banner as well as including female radicals in the front ranks of the cause.

Many believed these strategies blunted the movement's forward motion. Did the contributions of the many zealous female writers and speakers outweigh the social backlash caused by their prominence within abolitionism? Would women's rights have been better served by separating from abolitionism, by which women felt betrayed after the Civil War? Should a single-issue cause ever attempt to expand its message?

The impossibility of comparing parallel histories — one in which abolitionism embraced women's rights, the other in which it did not — means that these questions have no clear answers. Similar questions haunt movements today.

Political activity

Electoral politics raised its own set of controversies. The political creed of early abolitionism had been "Don't vote for anyone against liberty." Abolitionists had preferred to circulate anti-slavery petitions rather than run candidates, but when Congress began to gag these

petitions by tabling them without discussion, anti-slavery societies in New York began to grumble about the need for an anti-slavery political party.

Garrison rejected electoral politics. He believed reform occurred by changing the hearts and souls of people, not through politics or law, which was a form of force. This Quaker-like approach was called moral suasion, and it formed the core of anti-slavery strategy. Garrison granted that if a man believed in government, it was proper for him to vote but he himself could not cast a ballot with a clear conscience.

Henry Stanton (husband to Elizabeth Cady) and Garrison faced off on this issue at the 1839 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The Society had pledged “to influence Congress” and Stanton took this as a mandate for electoral activity, including the establishment of a third party. Garrison argued that there were many ways to influence Congress without running candidates.

The controversy came to a head at the next annual meeting (1840) when political abolitionists walked out on the first day because Garrison blocked their effort to have the Society endorse an explicitly political strategy.

Garrison’s compromise resolution proposed that both political and anti-political abolitionists follow their conscience: it was rejected.

Defectors formed a separate organization from which the Liberty Party sprang. James Birney and Thomas Earle, the presidential and vice presidential candidates, predicted the Liberty Party would gain control of the government within 20 years.

The split established electoral politics as a major approach to anti-slavery. Nevertheless, the American Anti-Slavery Society resolved,

that the ballot box is not an anti-slavery, but a pro-slavery argument, so long as it is surrounded by the U.S. Constitution, which forbids all approach to it except on the condition that the voter shall surrender fugitive slaves — suppress negro insurrections — sustain a piratical representation in Congress, and regard man-stealers as equally eligible with the truest friends of human freedom and equality to any or all the offices under the United States Government.

Such internal conflicts were partially smoothed over by outside pressures that drew the movement together. Anti-slavery meetings and lectures continued to be mobbed. Anti-slavery ministers were attacked and dragged from their pulpits. Abolitionists were tarred and feathered. Then Elijah Lovejoy, the editor of an abolitionist paper, was murdered by a mob. His death made the North aware of the lengths to which the pro-slavery advocates would go.

Garrison called for the North to secede from the South. An editorial in *The Liberator* began,

A Repeal of the Union Between Northern Liberty and Southern Slavery is Essential to the Abolition of the One and the Preservation of the Other.

“No union with slaveholders!” became Garrison’s cry, and objections from fellow anti-slavery advocates flooded *The Liberator*. Disunion was an impractical goal that would cripple anti-slavery’s influence. Besides, wasn’t a cry for disunion precisely what the South wished to hear from abolitionists? And wasn’t this a slap at the Liberty Party which was trying to work within the system? Nevertheless, the American Anti-Slavery Society ratified Garrison’s call for disunion, 250 in favor, 24 against.

In this spirit, Garrison publicly burned a copy of the Constitution, declaring, “So perish all compromises with tyranny.” Cries of “Amen” rose from his audience.

Now, both anti-slavery radicals in the North and pro-slavery zealots in the South looked forward to the death of the American Union.

Secession

Garrison favored Northern secession but not Southern secession. Why? Because only the causes set forth in the Declaration of Independence could justify secession; only the denial of inalienable rights could justify disunion. A bloody dissolution may have seemed inevitable but Garrison cautioned against it.

We are growing more and more warlike. Just in proportion as this spirit prevails, I feel that our moral power is departing and will depart. I say this not so much as an Abolitionist but as a man. I believe in the spirit of peace, and in sole and absolute reliance on truth and the application of it to the hearts and consciences of the people. I do not believe that the weapons of liberty ever have been, or ever can be, the weapons of despotism. I know that those of despotism are the sword, the revolver, the cannon, the bombshell; and, therefore, the weapons to which tyrants cling, and upon which they depend, are not the weapons for me, as a friend of liberty.

Anti-slavery feelings reached fever pitch with the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). Twenty thousand copies were sold in three weeks, four times that many by the twelfth week. Nearly 500,000 copies circulated in England alone.

After requesting a copy of *The Liberator*, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, met with Garrison. She became, in her own words, a constant reader of *The Liberator*.

Then a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns, was arrested in Boston, and abolitionists tried to stop his extradition to the South. The abolitionist Wendell Phillips urged everything short of violence to aid Burns. But appeal to government was no longer possible, for government had become the servant of slavery. Phillips declared,

The future seems to unfold a vast slave empire. Our Union, all confess, must sever finally on this question. It is now with nine-tenths only a question of time.

Anthony Burns was sent back into slavery. Under constant pressure from abolitionists, Massachusetts passed the Personal Liberty Law of 1855, making the return of fugitive slaves more difficult. The South called this a declaration of disunion.

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