Chapter 15 Lesson 2

The Abolitionists

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What motivates people to act?

The growing demands of abolitionists helped deepen the divide between North and South.

The Start of the Abolition Movement

SS.8.A.4.8, LA.8.1.6.1, LA.8.1.6.2

How did Americans' attitudes toward slavery change?

Among the reformers of the early 1800s were abolitionists (a • buh • LIH • shuhn • ihsts), who sought the end of slavery. Though their voices were growing, their cause was not a new one.

The Early Movement

Even before the Revolution, some Americans had tried to limit or end slavery. Early antislavery societies generally believed slavery had to be ended gradually. First they wanted to stop the slave trade. Then they would phase out slavery itself. Supporters believed that ending slavery gradually would give the South's economy time to adjust to the loss of enslaved labor.

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, delegates debated slavery and its future. The delegates reached a compromise, allowing each state to decide whether to allow the practice.

By the early 1800s, the Northern states had officially ended slavery there. The practice continued in the South. In fact, the rise of the Cotton Kingdom increased the use of enslaved labor.

The reform movement of the early and mid-1800s gave new life to the antislavery cause. A growing number of Americans were coming to believe slavery was wrong and that the practice should end.

Many who led the antislavery movement came from the Quaker faith. One Quaker, Benjamin Lundy, founded a newspaper in Ohio in 1821 called the Genius of Universal Emancipation. Its purpose was to spread the abolitionist message. "I heard the wail of the captive," he wrote. "I felt his pang of distress, and the iron entered my soul."

The Colonization Plan

There were many barriers to ending slavery. Many white Northerners still supported the practice. Even some white abolitionists worried about the effect free African Americans would have on society. They did not like the idea of hundreds of thousands of former enslaved people living in the United States.

In 1816 a group of powerful whites formed the American Colonization Society. They planned to send free African Americans to Africa to start new lives. The society raised money to send free African Americans out of the country. Some went to the west coast of Africa, where the society acquired land for a colony. The first settlers arrived in Liberia ("place of freedom") in 1822. In 1847 Liberia declared itself an independent republic.

The American Colonization Society did not stop the growth of slavery. It helped resettle only about 10,000 African Americans by the mid-1860s. Only a few African Americans wanted to go to Africa, while most wanted to be free in America

Identifying What was the purpose of the American Colonization Society?

The Movement Builds Strength

SS.8.A.4.8, SS.8.A.4.11, SS.8.A.5.2, SS.8.E.2.1, SS.8.G.4.2, SS.8.G.4.4, LA.8.1.6.3

Why did the reform movement gain momentum?

Gradualism and colonization remained the main goals of antislavery groups until the 1830s. At this time, abolitionists began arguing that enslaved African Americans should be freed immediately. Slavery became America's most pressing social issue.

Making the Case Against Slavery

Massachusetts abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison had a great influence on the antislavery movement. In 1831 he started a newspaper called The Liberator.

Garrison was one of the first white abolitionists to call for an immediate end to slavery. He rejected a slow, gradual approach. In the first issue of The Liberator, he wrote, "I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. . . . I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Garrison was heard. He attracted enough followers to start the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832 and the American Anti-Slavery Society the next year. By 1838, the groups Garrison started had more than 1,000 local branches.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were two other early abolitionists. The sisters were born in South Carolina to a wealthy slaveholding family. They both moved to Philadelphia in 1832. While living in the North, the Grimké sisters spoke out for both abolition and women's rights.

To show their commitment to abolition, the Grimkés asked their mother to give them their family inheritance early. Instead of money or land, the sisters wanted several of the family's enslaved workers. The sisters immediately freed them.

The Grimkés, along with Angelina's husband Theodore Weld, wrote American Slavery As It Is in 1839. This book collected firsthand stories of life under slavery. The book was one of the most powerful abolitionist publications of its time.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was another writer who made a major impact on public opinion. Her 1852 novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, became a wildly popular best-seller. The book portrayed slavery as a cruel and brutal system. Some people, however, strongly opposed the book and its message. Sale of Uncle Tom's Cabin was banned in the South.

African American Abolitionists

Free African Americans in the North especially supported the goal of abolition. Most lived in poverty in cities and had trouble getting good jobs and decent housing. They were often subject to violent attacks. Yet these African Americans were proud of their freedom. They sought to help those who remained enslaved.

African Americans helped organize and lead the American Anti-Slavery Society. They subscribed to The Liberator. They also did their own writing and publishing. In 1827 Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm started the country's first African American newspaper Freedom's Journal.

Born free in North Carolina and settling in Boston, writer David Walker published a powerful pamphlet against slavery. He challenged African Americans to rebel and overthrow slavery. He wrote, "America is more our country than it is the whites'—we have enriched it with our blood and tears."

In 1830 free African American leaders held a convention in Philadelphia. Delegates met "to devise ways and means for the bettering of our condition." They discussed starting an African American college and encouraging free African Americans to move to Canada.

The Role of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass is the best-known African American abolitionist. Born into slavery in Maryland, Douglass escaped in 1838. He settled first in Massachusetts.

As a runaway, Douglass faced the danger of capture and a return to slavery. Still, he joined the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He traveled widely to speak at abolitionist meetings. He even appeared at events in London and the West Indies. Douglass was a powerful speaker who often moved listeners to tears. He also edited the antislavery newspaper North Star.

Douglass made his home in the United States because he believed abolitionists must fight slavery at its source. He insisted that African Americans receive not just freedom but full equality with whites as well. In 1847 friends helped Douglass buy his freedom from the slaveholder from whom he had fled in Maryland.

Sojourner Truth

"I was born a slave in Ulster County, New York," Isabella Baumfree began when she told her story to audiences. After a childhood and youth filled with hardship, she escaped in 1826. Then, she officially gained her freedom in 1827 when New York banned slavery. Baumfree later settled in New York City with her two youngest children. In 1843 Baumfree chose a new name. In the biography Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend, she explained: "The Lord [named] me Sojourner . . . Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people."

The Underground Railroad

Abolitionists sometimes risked prison and death to help African Americans escape slavery. They helped create a network of escape routes from the South to the North called the Underground Railroad.

Underground Railroad "passengers"—that is, escaping African Americans—traveled by night, often on foot. The North Star guided them in the direction of freedom. During the day they rested at "stations"—barns, basements, and attics—until the next night. The railroad's "conductors" were whites and African Americans who guided the runaways to freedom in the northern United States or Canada. Harriet Tubman was the most famous conductor.

The Underground Railroad helped as many as 100,000 enslaved people escape. It gave hope to many more.

Identifying What were Underground Railroad "stations"?

Florida CONNECTION

Stowe in Florida

Stowe's family owned property in Mandarin, Florida. Her visits there provided material for a series of simple stories about the region. She wrote that life in Florida was "a tumble-down, wild, panicky kind of life [filled with] general happy-go-luckiness." Stowe's writings helped encourage tourists to visit, and people continue to visit today.

Reaction to the Abolitionists

SS.8.A.4.8, SS.8.A.5.2

Who opposed the abolition of slavery?

Abolitionists stirred strong reactions. Most white Southerners believed abolition threatened their way of life, which required enslaved labor.

Even in the North, only a few white people supported abolition. Many white Northerners worried that freed African Americans would never blend into American society. Others feared that abolitionists could begin a war between the North and South.

Opposition to abolitionism sometimes led to violence. In Philadelphia a bloody race riot followed the burning of an antislavery group's headquarters. Police had to jail William Lloyd Garrison to protect him from a Boston mob.

Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois was not so lucky. Angry whites invaded his antislavery newspaper offices and wrecked his presses three times. Three times Lovejoy installed new presses. The fourth time the mob attacked, it set fire to the building. When Lovejoy came out of the blazing building, someone shot and killed him.

The White South Reacts

White Southerners fought abolitionism with arguments in defense of slavery. They claimed that slavery was necessary to the Southern economy and had allowed Southern whites to reach a high level of culture. As anti-abolitionist Senator James Henry Hammond said in an 1858 speech to Congress: "In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. . . . Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement."

White Southerners also argued that they treated enslaved people well. They claimed that Northern workers were worse off than enslaved workers because they worked in factories for long hours at low wages. Also, Northern workers had to pay for their own goods and services from their small earnings, while enslaved African Americans received food, clothing, and medical care.

Other defenses of slavery were based on racism. Many whites believed that African Americans were better off under white care than on their own.

The conflict between pro-slavery and antislavery groups continued to mount. At the same time, a new women's rights movement was growing.

Identifying Points of View How did many Southerners defend the institution of slavery?