

THE AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY

The furor that had been aroused over the Missouri Compromise quieted down considerably in the 1820s, only to be brought back to life by a series of events at the end of the decade. Serious debates over abolition took place in the Virginia legislature in 1829 and 1831; in the North discussion began about the possibility of freeing the slaves and then resettling them back in Africa (a proposal that led to the founding of Liberia). Agitation increased with the publication of David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in 1829, Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 and Andrew Jackson's handling of the nullification crisis that same year.

The Turner rebellion was only one of about 200 slave uprisings between 1776 and 1860, but it was one of the bloodiest, and thus struck fear in the hearts of many white southerners. Nat Turner and a handful of slaves spontaneously launched a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. They moved from farm to farm, indiscriminately killing whites along the way and picking up additional slaves. By the time the militia put down the insurrection, more than eighty slaves had joined the rebellion, and sixty whites lay dead. While the uprising led some southerners to consider abolition, the reaction in all southern states was to tighten the laws governing slave behavior.

That same year, South Carolina's opposition to the federal tariff led the legislature to declare that the law was null and void in the state, and the state's leaders spoke of using the militia to prevent federal customs agents from collecting the tax. President Andrew Jackson swept aside the states' rights arguments and threatened to use the army to enforce federal laws. In the face of Jackson's determination, the state backed down, but the episode raised fears throughout the South that it was only a matter of time before Congress would begin to tamper with slavery.

Southern anxiety increased in 1833 with the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Led by the fiery abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the Society pledged to end slavery in the United States. The sentiments adopted at the founding meeting established the basic argument of the Society for the next three decades, namely, that slavery was illegal, if not under the Constitution (which Garrison had damned as "a covenant with hell"), then certainly under natural law.

Membership in the new organization mushroomed. By 1835 there were more than 400 chapters and by 1838 the number had grown to 1,350, with more than 250,000 members. The growth of the abolition movement was due in part to the similarity between it and other reform movements of the era. Abolitionists, like other reformers, were calling for a freeing of the human spirit and the elimination of artificial barriers to self-fulfillment. Abolition turned out to be the most important of all the reforms of the Jacksonian era, but its success would put the Union itself at risk.

For further reading: Russell B. Nye, *William Lloyd Garrison and Humanitarian Reformers* (1955); Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery* (1960); Martin Duberman, ed., *The Anti-Slavery Vanguard* (1965); and Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics* (1967).

DECLARATION OF SENTIMENTS (1833)

We have met together for the achievement of an enterprise, without which that of our fathers is incomplete; and which, for its magnitude, solemnity, and probable results upon the destiny of the world, as far transcends theirs as moral truth does physical force.

In purity of motive, in earnestness of zeal, in decision of purpose, in intrepidity of action, in steadfastness of faith, in sincerity of spirit, we would not be inferior to them....

Their grievances, great as they were, were trifling in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those for whom we plead. Our fathers were never slaves -- never bought and sold like cattle -- never shut out from the light of knowledge and religion -- never subjected to the lash of brutal taskmasters.

But those, for whose emancipation we are striving -- constituting at the present time at least one-sixth part of our countrymen -- are recognized by law, and treated by their fellow-beings, as brute beasts; are plundered daily of the fruits of their toil without redress; really enjoy no constitutional nor legal protection from licentious and murderous outrages upon their persons; and are ruthlessly torn asunder -- the tender babe from the arms of its frantic mother -- the heartbroken wife from her weeping husband -- at the caprice or pleasure of irresponsible tyrants. For the crime of having a dark complexion, they suffer the pangs of hunger, the infliction of stripes, the ignominy of brutal servitude. They are kept in heathenish darkness by laws expressly enacted to make their instruction a criminal offence.

These are the prominent circumstances in the condition of more than two million people, the proof of which may be found in thousands of indisputable facts, and in the laws of the slave-holding States.

Hence we maintain -- that, in view of the civil and religious privileges of this nation, the guilt of its oppression is unequalled by any other on the face of the earth; and, therefore, that it is bound to repent instantly, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free...

It is piracy to buy or steal a native African, and subject him to servitude. Surely, the sin is as great to enslave an American as an African.

Therefore we believe and affirm -- that there is no difference, in principle, between the African slave trade and American slavery:

That every American citizen, who detains a human being in involuntary bondage as his property, is, according to Scripture, (Ex. xxi, 16,) a manstealer.

That the slaves ought instantly to be set free, and brought under the protection of law:

That if they had lived from the time of Pharaoh down to the present period, and had been entailed through successive generations, their right to be free could never have been alienated, but their claims would have constantly risen in solemnity:

That all those laws which are now in force, admitting the right of slavery, are therefore, before God, utterly null and void; being an audacious usurpation of the Divine prerogative, a daring infringement on the law of nature, a base overthrow of the very foundations of the social compact, a complete extinction of all the relations, endearments and obligations of mankind, and a presumptuous transgression of all the holy commandments; and that therefore they ought instantly to be abrogated.

We further believe and affirm -- that all persons of color, who possess the qualifications which are demanded of others, ought to be admitted forthwith to the enjoyment of the same privileges, and the exercise of the same prerogatives, as others; and that the paths of preferment, of wealth and of intelligence, should be opened as widely to them as to persons of a white complexion.

We maintain that no compensation should be given to the planters emancipating their slaves:

Because it would be a surrender of the great fundamental principle, that man cannot hold property in man:

Because slavery is a crime, and therefore is not an article to be sold:

Because the holders of slaves are not the just proprietors of what they claim; freeing the slave is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to its rightful owner; it is not wronging the master, but righting the slave -- restoring him to himself:

Because immediate and general emancipation would only destroy nominal, not real property; it would not amputate a limb or break a bone of the slaves, but by infusing motives into their breasts, would make them doubly valuable to the masters as free laborers; and

Because, if compensation is to be given at all, it should be given to the outraged and guiltless slaves, and not to those who have plundered and abused them.

We regard as delusive, cruel and dangerous, any scheme of expatriation which pretends to aid, either directly or indirectly, in the emancipation of the slaves, or to be a substitute for the immediate and total abolition of slavery.

We fully and unanimously recognize the sovereignty of each State, to legislate exclusively on the subject of the slavery which is tolerated within its limits; we concede that Congress, under the present national compact, has no right to interfere with any of the slave States, in relation to this momentous subject:

But we maintain that Congress has a right, and is solemnly bound, to suppress the domestic slave trade between the several States, and to abolish slavery in those portions of our territory which the Constitution has placed under its exclusive jurisdiction.

We also maintain that there are, at the present time, the highest obligations resting upon the people of the free States to remove slavery by moral and political action, as prescribed in the Constitution of the United States. They are now living under a pledge of their tremendous physical force, to fasten the galling fetters of tyranny upon the limbs of millions in the Southern States; they are liable to be called at any moment to suppress a general insurrection of the slaves; they authorize the slave owner to vote for three-fifths of his slaves as property, and thus enable him to perpetuate his oppression; they support a standing army at the South for its protection; and they seize the slave, who has escaped into their territories, and send him back to be tortured by an enraged master or a brutal driver. This relation to slavery is criminal, and full of danger: It must be broken up.

These are our views and principles -- these our designs and measures. With entire confidence in the overruling justice of God, we plant ourselves upon the Declaration of our Independence and the truths of Divine Revelation, as upon the Everlasting Rock.

Source: *Louis Ruchames, ed., The Abolitionists (1963), 78.*