Abolitionists

Harriet Beecher Stowe
Harriet Beecher Stowe (June 14, 1811 – July 1, 1896) was an abolitionist and author. Her famous novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin depicted what life was like for African-Americans under slavery. Published in 1852, the novel (which was later made into a play) is credited for helping Americans become aware of the cruel reality of life for a slave and made the political issues of the 1850s regarding slavery tangible to millions. As the book spread, it energized anti-slavery forces in the North, while provoking widespread anger in the South, where the book was banned. Upon meeting Stowe, Abraham Lincoln allegedly remarked, “So you’re the little lady who started this great war!”

William Lloyd Garrison
William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), the lightning rod of the abolitionist movement, promoted “moral suasion,” or nonviolent and non-political resistance, to achieve emancipation. In 1831, he began publishing The Liberator, the single most important abolitionist publication, and later led the American Anti-Slavery Society. His avid support for a woman’s right to participate in the movement and his attack on the American Constitution as a pro-slavery document created deep divisions in the abolitionist movement. However, his unflagging conviction and his influence in promoting “immediatism” shaped the course of abolitionism in America.

Levi Coffin
Levi Coffin (1798-1877), a Quaker and successful merchant, along with his wife Catharine, helped thousands of slaves on their way North and to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Raised in a religious Southern family who never owned slaves, Coffin hated oppression. Coffin stated that the Bible did not mention race when it urged people to be charitable to one another. Because of his prominent role in helping slaves to freedom, Coffin’s home was given the title of “Grand Central Station” and he, the “President” of the Underground Railroad.

Wendell Phillips
Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) was one of the abolitionist movement’s most powerful orators. The Harvard-educated lawyer came from a wealthy and influential Boston family, many of whom were appalled by his activism in support of the abolitionist cause. However, he was undaunted in his work and was thrust into prominence when he gave a riveting speech in Boston’s Faneuil Hall in defense of Elijah Lovejoy in
1837. The Rev. Lovejoy had been murdered for his repeated attempts to run a printing press sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Phillips used plain, yet metaphorical language to convey his message. He also gave generously to abolitionists in need of financial assistance.

Lucretia Mott

Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) was a Quaker and a “non-resistant” pacifist who was committed to black emancipation and women’s rights. As a woman, her role in official abolitionist movements was fraught with difficulties. In 1840, she and six other American female delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in England were refused seats. Because of her opposition to violence of any kind, Mott did not support the Civil War as a means of liberating slaves. She did, however, welcome the War’s hastening of emancipation. Of her principles she wrote, “I have no idea, because I am a non-resistant, of submitting tamely to injustice inflicted either on me or on the slave. I will oppose it with all the moral powers with which I am endowed. I am no advocate of passivity.”

Lydia Maria Child

Novelist, scholar, and activist for women’s rights, Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) became an abolitionist after she began reading Garrison’s news journal, The Liberator. In 1833, Child wrote “An Appeal to that Class of Americans Called Africans,” an anti-slavery tract in which she declared her willingness to battle for emancipation. Her new abolitionist rhetoric so repelled readers that Child’s books sold poorly, and she could not find a publisher willing to accept her work. From 1841-43, Child was the editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, the American Anti-Slavery Society’s newspaper. She later resigned because of infighting among the society’s members, who were divided in their support for the diverging philosophies, “moral suasion” and political persuasion. Child revitalized her role as an opponent of slavery after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859. She continued publishing letters, edited Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and wrote primers and anti-slavery tracts to combat racial injustice.

Samuel May

Samuel May’s life was forever changed when he heard William Lloyd Garrison lecture about immediate, unconditional emancipation without expatriation in 1830. May (1797-1871) wrote of that experience, “my soul was baptized in his spirit, and ever since I have been a disciple and fellow-laborer of Wm. Lloyd Garrison.” May, a Unitarian minister, was a pacifist and practiced non-violent resistance by lecturing, acting as a general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and sheltering slaves on the Underground Railroad. In one notable case, May helped to liberate William “Jerry” Henry, who had been taken into custody in Syracuse under the Fugitive Slave Law, and was to be returned to slavery. After the “Jerry Rescue,” a pro-slavery mob attacked May and other rescuers and burned the unwavering May in effigy.

Sojourner Truth
Despite her inability to read or write, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797-1883) had a commanding presence and considerable oratorical powers. She was one of the best known and esteemed black women of the nineteenth century. Born a New York slave and given the name Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth gained her freedom when New York abolished slavery in 1827. A pacifist, she transformed herself into an activist for abolitionism and proclaimed her new identity by changing her name to Sojourner Truth. Her anti-slavery activities included recruiting black troops, publishing her narrative, and winning a civil rights lawsuit. Her circle of influence included both black and white allies as well as several presidents. (President Abraham Lincoln chose her to be a counselor to the freedmen in Washington.) Sojourner Truth drew upon her experience as a black woman and former slave, advocating the abolition of slavery, civil liberties for African Americans, and women’s rights.

**Lewis Tappan**

Lewis Tappan (1788-1873), a wealthy merchant from a strong Calvinist family, is best known for his role in organizing the defense of Joseph Cinque in the Amistad trial. Tappan also funded anti-slavery journals and helped to form the American Anti-Slavery Society, which he later abandoned because of his disapproval of women’s involvement in the society. Tappan and other disaffected former members of the American Anti-Slavery Society formed the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which employed political abolitionism. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Tappan supported the Underground Railroad, and he fought for black civil rights in the North. His abolitionist deeds were often met with hostility, which extended as far as the destruction of a church built by Tappan and his brother.

**William Seward**

William Seward (1801-1872), of Auburn, New York, served as governor of New York from 1838 to 1842. He was elected to the U.S. Senate as a Whig party member in 1847, primarily because of his anti-slavery stance. He fought a hard political battle against the Missouri Compromise of 1850 and in favor of the admission of California as a free state.

Seward later softened his stance on slavery to appease Southerners during his unsuccessful run for president on the Republican ticket. Lincoln made Seward his Secretary of State, and called upon Seward to help compose the Emancipation Proclamation. Seward also sheltered slaves on the Underground Railroad. He admired the work of Harriet Tubman, and sold her the land in Auburn, New York, where she built her home.

**Frederick Douglass**

As a lecturer, writer, editor and ex-slave, Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818-1895) emerged as the most prominent African American of the nineteenth century to fight for racial justice. Under Garrison’s mentorship, Douglass adopted “moral suasion” as an abolitionist strategy. Impatient with this approach, Douglass later broke from Garrison, believing that political activism was the only way to achieve freedom. Although vehement in his rhetoric, Douglas refused to use violence. Indeed, he refused to defend or take part in John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry.
Douglass wrote three autobiographies, edited four newspapers, lectured nationally and internationally, and recruited black soldiers for the Civil War. He advised and pressured Lincoln to make slavery the single most important issue of the Civil War and remained committed to integration and civil rights for all Americans throughout his life.

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**Gerrit Smith**

Gerrit Smith (1797-1874) was a wealthy abolitionist from Utica, New York. His conversion to abolitionism occurred in 1835, when he attended an abolitionist conference in Utica, New York. The meeting was disrupted by a violent mob of anti-abolitionists. Consequently, Smith offered his Peterboro, New York estate to house the conference and, there, made a powerful speech on behalf of the cause. He became the president of the New York Anti-Slavery Society for three years. Smith served as Station Master of the Underground railroad and sold portions of his land to fugitive slaves for the nominal fee of one dollar. Gerrit Smith was also one of the Secret Six, a group of supporters who gave financial assistance to John Brown for his raid at Harper’s Ferry. Smith ran for president three times and was the only abolitionist to hold a Congressional office.

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**John Brown**

John Brown (May 9, 1800 – December 2, 1859) was a radical abolitionist who advocated and practiced armed insurrection as a means to end all slavery. He led the Pottawatomie Massacre in 1856 in Bleeding Kansas and made his name in the unsuccessful raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Brown attempted to start a liberation movement among enslaved African Americans in Harpers Ferry by stealing weapons from the federal arsenal located there and arming slaves. His attempt was unsuccessful and he was tried for treason against the state of Virginia, the murder of five proslavery Southerners, and inciting a slave insurrection and was subsequently hanged. The Harpers Ferry raid in 1859 escalated tensions that a year later led to secession and the American Civil War.

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**William Still**

William Still (November 1819 or October 7, 1821 – July 14, 1902) was an African-abolitionist, conductor on the Underground Railroad, writer, historian and civil rights activist. In 1844, he moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he began working as a clerk for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. When Philadelphia abolitionists organized a committee to aid runaway slaves reaching Philadelphia, Still became its chairman. By the 1850s, Still was a leader of Philadelphia’s African-American community. In 1859 he attempted to desegregate the city's public transit system.

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**Harriet Jacobs**
Harriet Ann Jacobs (February 11, 1813 - March 7, 1897) was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813. She escaped slavery in 1835 and became a writer, abolitionist speaker and reformer. Jacobs' single work, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl", published in 1861 under the pseudonym "Linda Brent", was one of the first autobiographical narratives about the struggle for freedom by female slaves and an account of the sexual abuse they endured.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Ross; c. 1822 – March 10, 1913) was an African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and Union spy during the Civil War. After escaping from slavery, into which she was born, she made thirteen missions to rescue over seventy slaves using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. She later helped John Brown recruit men for his raid on Harpers Ferry, and in the post-war era struggled for women's suffrage.

Nat Turner

Nathaniel "Nat" Turner (October 2, 1800 – November 11, 1831) was a slave who led a slave rebellion in Virginia on August 21, 1831 that resulted in 60 deaths, the largest number of fatalities to occur in one uprising in the antebellum southern United States. He gathered supporters in Southampton County, Virginia. Turner's killing of whites during the uprising makes his legacy controversial. For his actions, Turner was convicted, sentenced to death, and executed.

Paul Cuffe

Paul Cuffee (January 17, 1759 – September 9, 1817) was a Quaker businessman, patriot, and abolitionist of Aquinnah Wampanoag and African Ashanti descent. Cuffee built a lucrative shipping empire and established the first school in Westport, Massachusetts to be racially integrated. A devout Christian, Cuffee often preached and spoke at the Sunday services at the multi-racial Society of Friends meeting house in Westport. In 1813 he donated most of the money to build a new meeting house in 1813. He became involved in the British effort to resettle former slaves in the colony of Sierra Leone. (Many had been transported from the US to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution after gaining freedom with the British.) Cuffee helped to establish The Friendly Society of Sierra Leone, to gather financial support for the colony.
Henry Highland Garnet

Henry Highland Garnet (December 23, 1815 – February 13, 1882) was an abolitionist and orator. An advocate of militant abolitionism, Garnet was a prominent member of the abolition movement that led against moral suasion toward more political action. Renowned for his skills as a public speaker, he urged blacks to take action and claim their own destinies. Garnet was the first black minister to preach to the United States House of Representatives.

David Walker

David Walker was a black abolitionist who was born as a free black in Wilmington, North Carolina. Although he was free, Walker witnessed the cruelty of slavery during his childhood in North Carolina. Walker is most famous for his pamphlet *David Walker’s Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker denounced the American institution of slavery as the most oppressive in world history and called on people of African descent to resist slavery and racism by any means. The book was notable for refusing to conform to the period’s conventions of polite and deferential etiquette, and terrified southern slave owners, who immediately labeled it seditious. A price was placed on Walker’s head: $10,000 if he were brought in alive, $1,000 if dead.

Henry “Box” Brown

Henry “Box” Brown was a 19th century Virginia slave who escaped to freedom by arranging to have himself mailed to Philadelphia abolitionists in a dry goods container. For a short time he became a noted abolitionist speaker and later a showman, but later lost the support of the abolitionist community, notably Frederick Douglass, who wished Brown had kept quiet about his escape so that more slaves could have escaped using similar means.