The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism

Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement

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Introduction

Say not that it is man's business to
destroy slavery. I know man ought to do it
—he should have done it a long time ago,
but he has been recreant to his duty. Now
let woman speak, and it shall be done.
—Signal of Liberty, *August 11, 1845*[1]

In 1847, William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, declared that "the Anti-Slavery cause cannot stop to estimate where the greatest indebtedness lies, but whenever the account is made up, there can be no doubt that the efforts and sacrifices of the WOMEN, who helped it, will hold a most honorable and conspicuous position." Garrison's certainty that participants in the great crusade would ultimately recognize the contributions of women to abolitionism was not shared by his son. While acknowledging the importance of women to the movement to free the slave, William Lloyd Garrison Jr. seems to have accepted the fact of abolitionist women's historical invisibility when he referred to that "great army of silent workers, unknown to fame, and yet without whom the generals were powerless."[2]

Scholars studying the most important reform movement before the Civil War have also tended until quite recently to overlook the army of silent workers. Although historians have offered differing interpretations of the

significance of abolitionism, the motives and achievements of its leaders, and the relationship of abolitionism to historical processes and events, they have traditionally focused on male leaders and male activities like third-party politics. While the birth of women's history helped to remedy the neglect of abolitionist women, attention tended to center on the small number of radical women who became feminists. The majority of women who shied away from feminism still remained in the shadows. In a sign that ordinary women abolitionists are finally becoming part of the historical debate over abolitionism, David Brion Davis recently challenged the effort to link the discipline of the marketplace to the development of abolitionism because it failed to account for women's involvement in abolitionist activities.[3]

Historians have begun to explore new aspects of the drive to eliminate slavery in the antebellum period. Several studies have delineated the social, economic, and religious characteristics of the abolitionist rank and file, while others have investigated the involvement of black women in abolitionism. Essays and books have been written on women's antislavery work in Boston, Rochester, Philadelphia, New York, and Rhode Island and the political culture within which abolitionist women operated.

This book builds upon and extends these treatments in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the involvement of ordinary women in abolitionism from the 1830s through the Civil War. In the spirit of the great abolitionist orator Theodore Weld, who counseled, "let the great cities *alone* . . . The springs to torch *lie in the country*," I have particularly tried to recover the efforts and experiences of abolitionist women living in small towns and rural communities, the very areas where abolitionism was strongest.[4]

Frederick Douglass, who had ample reason to acknowledge the important role black and white abolitionist women played in sustaining his own activities, tried to describe why women were important to abolitionism. He pointed to the "skill, industry, patience and perseverance" shown at "every trial hour," the willingness to "do the work which in large degree supplied the sinews of war," and the "deep moral convictions" that helped to give abolitionism its character. As Douglass knew, it was white middle-class and some black women who did much of the day-to-day work of reform. For more than three decades, they raised money, created and distributed propaganda, circulated and signed petitions, and lobbied legislators. During the 1840s and 1850s, they helped to keep the moral content of abolitionism alive when a diluted political form of antislavery emerged.[5]

Women formed the backbone of the movement, and without their involvement, as William Lloyd Garrison Jr. recognized, the leaders would have been powerless. Observers acknowledged at the time that individual

women and women's groups often sustained abolitionism when men be came dispirited. In 1850, a resident of Portland, Maine, admitted the "mo tifying" fact that, in a period of darkness and discouragement, men ha allowed the antislavery society to die, while the women of the Portlan Anti-Slavery Sewing Society had "kept up their meetings" and work fc the cause. The same year, when the English abolitionist lecturer Georg Thompson visited Salem, Massachusetts, he noted the advances abolitior ism had made since his earlier visit in 1835: "A few faithful women, members of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, had been "scatterin anti-slavery seed," for fifteen difficult years and had changed "almost th entire sentiment" of the community. Women, Thompson knew, did nc play a peripheral role in abolitionism but a central one.[6]

Abolitionism was never a popular cause before the Civil War. Althoug it is impossible to know how many people either supported or worked fc immediate emancipation between 1830 and 1865, one historian has est mated that, out of a population of over 20 million in 1860, only aroun 20,000, or 1 percent of all American men and women, were abolitionist Not only was the reform unpopular, but it also generated hostility an even violence, as George Thompson learned when mobs accosted him du ing his first American tour in the 1830s. Women abolitionists belonged to minority movement that many Americans distrusted and even despised.[7]

Despite the "social ostracism, persecution, slander, [and] insult" th Rhode Island abolitionist Elizabeth Chace recalled abolitionist women er countering, evidence suggests that some, like Elizabeth herself and thos women belonging to the Portland and Salem female societies, maintaine their interest over long periods of time. Others, including members Rochester's Female Anti-Slavery Society, took up and then abandone abolitionism, and then sometimes became interested again years late Although public hostility, lack of progress, and dissension among abo tionists caused attrition, more continuous interest in the cause may ha existed than it is possible to document. At the end of the 1830s, disagre ments within abolitionist ranks over the place of women in antislave organizations, the relationship of abolitionism to other reforms, and tl advisability of pursuing antislavery through politics rather than throu moral suasion led to noisy and rancorous divisions that some scholars ha suggested reduced women's involvement in antislavery. Most abolitioni women disagreed with Garrisonian radicalism, to be sure, but they did n necessarily reject the necessity of working for immediate emancipatio Dover, New Hampshire, women reorganized their antislavery society as non-Garrisonian sewing society in 1840 and kept up associational recor

for decades, but more informal groupings like church sewing circles usually left no written evidence of their involvement at all. Letters written by abolitionist women of one faction often bemoaned the fact that they were almost alone in their support for the cause even as they acknowledged that other women in their communities were pursuing antislavery in secular or church societies. The emphasis on division, then, possibly obscures the extent of female commitment.[8]

The collapse of a unified national antislavery effort in 1840 actually created a variety of individual and collective opportunities to work for the slave and encouraged different styles of activism. As Nancy Hewitt has shown in her study of Rochester, middle-class women from different social, economic, and religious backgrounds did not approach reform in similar ways.[9]

While women differed in their expression of abolitionism over the decades, common convictions undergirded their activities. They agreed that slavery was a sin that, as women, they had a moral and religious duty to eradicate. Despite the scope of the change they were seeking, they were confident that, in the end, their cause would triumph, that moral activism would be efficacious. What might happen to former slaves once slavery had ended was not a question that troubled most of them. Yet they were not indifferent to racism that permeated American life in both the North and South. Although few women were interested in racial equality as understood in the late twentieth century, they did believe that abolitionists should work to improve the situation of free blacks in the North. The 1835 constitution for the first female antislavery organization in Dover, New Hampshire, like those of many other societies, proclaimed the importance of elevating the character and condition of blacks, correcting the "wicked prejudices" of the majority of northern whites, and striving for civil and religious equality.[10]

Some groups and individuals, however, stressed certain of these ideas more than others. Black abolitionists, aware of the serious problems in their communities, became far more interested in improving the status of free blacks than most white abolitionists, and they felt the demands of moral duty far less keenly than the demands of racial responsibility. The egalitarian tradition of the Society of Friends led Quaker women abolitionists to minimize the idea of women's particular responsibility for moral causes that evangelical women stressed so strongly. But substantial ideological agreements undergirded abolitionist women's activism.[11]

As this study shows, female activism changed over time as abolitionism responded to outside events and internal realities. In the 1830s, for example, most abolitionist women expected that the church would support and further their cause. They joined secular antislavery societies and used them as their base for work like petitioning. When the reluctance of church leaders to take a stand against slavery became clear in the 1840s, however, strategies to expose and pressure Protestant denominations became more central, and the locus for activity often changed. For the abolitionists who established individual abolitionist congregations, the church became the main institutional home for antislavery work.[12]

Past accounts have frequently described the 1830s as the heyday of the antislavery society, and then, neglecting associational life and the projects women supported, have placed abolitionist politics at the center of the antislavery narrative during the 1840s and 1850s. Such a focus has relegated women to the margins. This study, while acknowledging the importance of electoral politics, attempts to provide a more balanced and comprehensive picture. It suggests both the shifting locations and patterns of female involvement as well as the political activities that women pursued even though denied the ballot.[13]

Despite the changing rhythms of activism as time passed, women from different abolitionist camps relied on similar tactics to pursue their goals. Securing financial support for abolitionist work consumed countless hours and energy. Although women devised numerous ways to collect money, one of their most successful measures was the antislavery fair. When the black women of New York State who determined to raise money for the *Impartial Citizen*, a black Liberty Party newspaper, decided to hold a fair, they were in good company. Women from all camps of abolitionism mounted fairs and bazaars. While a major purpose of the fair was to generate income, fair managers also used the occasion as an opportunity to make powerful symbolic statements about the nature of their cause and to connect abolitionists to one another. They relied upon fairs as a means of energizing and linking local antislavery groups and individuals who produced the goods to be sold at the fair.[14]

Despite disagreements on issues like the relevance of political action to abolitionism, abolitionist women undertook similar projects, ranging from collecting signatures on petitions to sewing. Although the greatest petitioning effort of the antebellum period occurred in the 1830s, women mounted petition drives throughout the 1840s and 1850s, culminating in a spectacular campaign during the Civil War. The work of creating and circulating antislavery propaganda and sponsoring lectures, as the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society did for so many years, was also ubiquitous.

Sewing for fairs, fugitives, poor northern blacks, or for freedpeople

during the war united abolitionist women of all stripes. The modest and tangible character of such work helped keep women involved in abolitionism. One Georgetown, Massachusetts, woman explained that the humble sewing circle had the power to "augment our numbers and cause a more punctual attendance." The exposure that members had to abolitionist conversation and literature during meetings meant that antislavery's "influence may be diffused into all the families where our members reside and thus the whole community be *abolitionised*." While she may have overestimated the impact of the local sewing circle, the concrete tasks women undertook seem to have kept many of them attached to the cause for long periods of time. That women had something tangible in which to root their loyalty may be one reason that women, not men, constituted the great silent army of abolitionism. Continuing and often humble labors bound women together and provided milestones on the way to a distant goal.[15]

In this book, I not only sketch out the contributions women made to the movement over time, which have, by and large, been neglected or viewed as trivial, but I also try to convey the meaning of abolitionism in ordinary women's lives. Most of the women who wrote the letters and diaries I read and who left the few surviving organizational records were busy women with substantial family and domestic commitments. Many came from modest backgrounds and did most of their own housework. Unmarried white women and married black women often also worked outside of the home. Written sources reveal some of the difficulties women experienced as they tried to mesh their abolitionist convictions with day-to-day responsibilities and suggest both the emotional costs and rewards involved in supporting the cause. They give brief but revealing glimpses of lives that are otherwise lost to the historical record. As often as possible, I have allowed the women to speak for themselves. Their words are not meant to replace analysis but to convey the color and meaning of an unusual commitment in what, in other respects, seem to have been ordinary lives.

Beyond detailing the contours of women's activism and its meaning, I hope to show the ways in which female abolitionism contributes to our understanding of white middle-class women in the antebellum period and to the debate over the meaning of private and public in middle-class life. The tendency to classify some women abolitionists as radical and others as conservative, usually based upon their attitude toward feminism, misses an essential truth about abolitionism and the ways in which it led its adherents to transgress ideological norms. No matter what one's attitude might be toward women's rights, to embrace abolitionism was to embrace radicalism. The commitment to immediate emancipation challenged the

political, economic, religious, and social status quo. It also became a challenge to gender arrangements. The latter challenge was ironic, for, with the exception of Quaker women, most women who adopted abolitionism did so because they accepted a gendered view of the world and women's unique religious and moral responsibilities. Their positive response to the call of duty, however, led them in unexpected directions. In the early 1830s, when the parameters of women's participation were unclear, the prevailing expectation was that white middle-class women would quietly pursue abolitionism in the privacy of their own homes. But it soon became apparent that the beleaguered movement needed more from women than home life would allow.

Abolitionist women, more directly than other women reformers who enjoyed greater community approval than did antislavery advocates, gradually and often in a piecemeal fashion, contested many of the norms that supposedly governed their behavior and woman's sphere. Moral commitments demanded public expressions. Abolitionists could neither be silent nor inconspicuous. The struggle against slavery led them to speak out in a variety of settings, ranging from their parlors to the public streets and meetinghouses. They confronted authority even when it claimed sacred prerogatives, and they broke the law when it was unjust. Even the women who formed church circles to sew for fugitive slaves and supply their settlements in Canada were acting out their repudiation of the law of the land. The crisis in gender relations that some scholars have explored in terms of early feminism and the Civil War began as ordinary abolitionist women followed the dictates of duty. It affected not only women's relations with men but also their self-perception and self-image.[16]

For women, whose sphere was supposedly private and domestic, in whom innate qualities of sympathy and intuition sufficed, abolitionism proved a demanding taskmaster. Home life proved to be an inadequate preparation for new responsibilities. To advocate immediate emancipation successfully, women had to learn to reason and to argue, to appeal to the mind as well as to the heart and emotions. Routine projects led them to transgress the usual norms for female behavior in public places and to participate alongside men in political events. While they did not vote, some assumed a more visible and meaningful political presence than the symbolic ceremonial role Mary Ryan describes in *Women In Public*. Indeed, some women went so far as to distribute third-party propaganda to voters. Their activities suggest that they understood that political activities encompassed far more than going to the polls. Far from being shielded from the vagaries of a market economy, their interest in raising money enmeshed

them in the marketplace and the consumer economy. They acquired and used an array of managerial and financial skills. As time passed, they more frequently entered the public debate about slavery, and, when a second generation of abolitionists emerged, they felt an ease in their public identity as abolitionists that had been rare in the 1830s.[17]

This study joins others that, while acknowledging the power of the ideology of public and private and the construction of male and female domains, demonstrate the intersection of public and private, male and female. In the decades during which abolitionists were active, a middle class, different from both the middling sort of the eighteenth century and the new industrial working class, was taking shape. Middle-class American men increasingly held nonmanual, "white collar" jobs that provided their families with the means for a respectable and genteel way of life. Because the process of class formation was incomplete and its membership and identity not yet set, there was room to contest class definitions and boundaries. The activities of abolitionist women defied emerging middle-class norms and helped to broaden the arena of action for white middle-class women, even though it did not lead most of them to feminism. The powerful conviction that women's moral duty demanded an abolitionist commitment limited the challenge to gender arrangements. Only a few women were willing to abandon woman's moral voice for feminist egalitarianism.[18]

Who were the women who form the basis for this study and what sources revealed their work in the cause? In my effort to uncover the experiences of abolitionist women, I read hundreds of unpublished letters from ordinary white middle-class women, often found in collections of prominent abolitionists, correspondence published in the abolitionist press, a handful of diaries, and scattered organizational records of women's antislavery societies. Reminiscences provided another window into female abolitionism. For black women, the microfilm and published versions of the *Black Abolitionist Papers* provided basic information that other sources supplemented. In comparison to the material on white women, evidence for black women's participation in abolitionism is scanty, and, especially from the 1830s and 1840s, their voices are more muted in this book than I would have wished.

Most of the women leaving a record of their involvement in abolitionism were white evangelical Protestant or Quaker women living in rural and small-town communities. The materials were richest for New England, where abolitionism was centered, but Midwestern, New York, and Pennsylvania archives yielded enough to make this account reflect the areas of abolitionist strength. Although many individuals left only one or two traces of their involvement, making it impossible to flesh out their circumstances, most evidence points to modest middle-class backgrounds. In the narrative, when it has been possible to piece together more comprehensive pictures of women's situations, I have tried to do so.

A few of the women who will appear in the following pages kept diaries, wrote numerous letters to other abolitionists or to the newspapers, or even recorded their recollections of antislavery activities in the decades after the Civil War. Several profiles suggest the nature of these ordinary women's lives and hint at the meaning abolitionism had for them.

Mary White (1778–1860), daughter of a minister, wife of a farmer and shopkeeper, and mother of ten children, lived in an old homestead, a "good specimen of New England domestic comfort," in Boylston, Massachusetts. Like most farm wives, she had varied responsibilities and chores, and her life was a busy one. Despite all her domestic commitments, she became active in antislavery in the mid-1830s. Mary joined a female antislavery society, circulated petitions, attended many antislavery lectures, and sewed for the Boston fair and for fugitives. In addition to her abolitionist activities, she also supported temperance and taught Sunday school. Her diary records the way in which she integrated her reformism into her day-to-day routine and shows the antislavery involvement of other members of her family and her community.[19]

Lucy Colman was perhaps as much as forty years younger than Mary White and never enjoyed the settled life that Mary took for granted. One of her early memories was of her mother singing an antislavery song to her before her early death, when Lucy was only six. Lucy married twice and found herself a widow for the second time when she was not yet forty. Although her determination to work for emancipation predated the accidental death of her second husband, the work took on another meaning with her widowhood. Lucy became an antislavery lecturer during the 1850s, first earning her own expenses and salary as an agent of the Western Anti-Slavery Society of New York and then winning a paid position from the American Anti-Slavery Society. Primitive traveling conditions, frequently unsympathetic audiences, and constant self-denial made her tours through the Midwest taxing. "I never allowed myself the luxury of more than one meal a day, nor a fire in my room," she later recalled. Although eventually a young black woman shared speaking responsibilities, Lucy found life as an agent exhausting. When the war broke out, she left lecturing to become a teacher at a school for black children in Georgetown, New

York. There, as she struggled to teach her students middle-class values, she concluded that "generations of the most debasing, abject slavery, is not productive of a high order of morals."[20]

For decades, Frances Drake, probably the wife of Jonathan Drake, was a tireless worker for abolitionism in central Massachusetts. In the 1840s and 1850s, she organized local women to work for the great Boston fairs, gathered and sent greens to decorate the halls, and helped to plan and mount local fairs in Fitchburg and Worcester. She arranged for antislavery lectures and, in 1856, nursed Bernardo, a black boy, during his final illness. She regarded her nursing as a privilege, and, when Bernardo died, she acknowledged that it had been a "great . . . blessing . . . to me, to pillow his dying head on my bosom." An 1862 issue of the *Liberator* provides the last view of Frances in her role serving as secretary for an antislavery convention in Leominister, Massachusetts.[21]

In Salem, New Jersey, Abigail Goodwin had kept her antislavery convictions alive for decades with little support from her immediate community. A Quaker and a friend of Esther Moore, first president of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, Abigail joined the society in its petition work during the 1830s. Determined to collect signatures and not to become discouraged, she found New Jersey weak in "the abolitionist faith." Local women did not even have enough enthusiasm "to form a society just yet." Twenty years later, Abigail, now a poor widow, again entered the historical record. A friend explained her new focus: "Giving to the colored people was a perfect *passion* with her." Abigail's correspondence with the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee reveals some of the details of this passion to assist fugitive slaves. Without the ability to dip into her own pocket for funds, Abigail either earned or solicited money to support her interests. In the 1860s she was still active, collecting dollars and clothing for contrabands. She died in 1867.[22]

Like many abolitionists, Andrew and Sarah Ernst carried their commitments with them when they moved west in 1841. Originally from Boston, Sarah Otis Ernst was a strong Garrisonian. When she arrived in Cincinnati, she found that the city did not have one antislavery society, although African Americans had established the Educational Society for the Colored. Like many white abolitionists, Sarah was less interested in free blacks than in slaves and dismissed the Educational Society because it did "nothing at all for the slave." When political and Christian abolitionists became active in the city, she rejected their approaches as misguided. Yet, although she worked hard to generate a "new . . . spirit," she ultimately found it expedient to cooperate with other abolitionist groups. She made a major contribution to antislavery in the Midwest through her work for the Cincinnat fair and inclusive antislavery conventions. Her commitment had persona and familial costs. She found organizing the fair a "physical drudgery" an feared her work might be harmful to her newborn baby, whom she wa nursing. "Sleepless nights and anxious distressed days are not calculate to give a healthy constitution to my baby," she worried. Moreover, th storage of fair items in her home disrupted domestic life and was contrar to her husband's "*wishes*—his pride." As Sarah discovered, stress was par and parcel of abolitionism.[23]

Mary Still (1808–89), an African American who left traces of her abo litionist activities, was the daughter of a former slave from Maryland an his fugitive wife. She grew up in New Jersey and, like four of her siblings moved to Philadelphia. In the late 1840s, she kept a school for black chil dren there and became involved in the life of Philadelphia's black commu nity. As a member of the Female Union Publication Society of Philadelphia an organization affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church she helped raise money for publications that contributed "to the improve ment and elevation of our people." Her professional and organizationa commitments, like her abolitionism, helped to establish her place in th city's black middle class. During the war, she volunteered to teach free slaves. Heading south, she found her "heart . . . very sad" and realized tha "I have desided hastily about going so far from home alone." Although th climate in South Carolina proved problematic for her health, the enthusi asm of her pupils lifted her spirits. She adapted so well to her importan work that in 1869 she moved to another American Missionary Associatio school in Florida, where she remained until 1872.[24]

The contributions of these and countless other women to abolitionis reveal the varied and important part they played in the most significant re form before the Civil War. Herbert Aptheker points out that abolitionis was the first major social movement to involve women in all aspects of th work. What he does not emphasize enough, however, is what many of th leaders realized: without women, abolitionism would have been far mor marginal a movement for change than it was.[25]

This book follows a thematic and roughly chronological approach Chapter 1 focuses on the 1830s and the efforts abolitionist leaders made t recruit women to the cause. Although some women had already demor strated their interest in antislavery by supporting free produce movement or by writing antislavery pieces for publication, William Lloyd Garriso did not initially expect women to play a great part in abolitionism. Gradu ally he became aware of the benefits of their assistance and began to urg

them to educate themselves so that they could argue the case for immediate emancipation. As abolitionist societies began to spring up, women formed and joined female antislavery societies. Chapter 2 explores women's experience in abolitionist organizations in the 1830s and the ways in which they met the challenges of organizational life. Active membership in an antislavery society and involvement in its projects demanded skills and attitudes that moved women beyond the conventional boundaries of middle-class female life. Petitioning, the central work for many antislavery societies, exemplifies the ways in which women confronted social norms in the cause of duty.

The division of the national antislavery movement in 1840 created a new set of circumstances for abolitionist women. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of dissension and disunion on women working for immediate emancipation in the 1840s and 1850s. Some societies disbanded, while others managed to struggle along, often with reduced numbers. Women often felt beleaguered and isolated, although they may have felt more isolated than they were in fact. During these decades, the communications network, initiated in the 1830s, played a crucial role in connecting women to one another and to abolitionism. This network also facilitated the antislavery fair, the great work of the 1840s and 1850s . Chapter 3 argues that women's fairs made an important contribution to the survival of antislavery and enmeshed women in the commercial world. The role of work, especially handwork, in sustaining enthusiasm is a significant theme in the discussion of fairs and women's assistance to fugitive slaves.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore different aspects of female activism in the 1840s and 1850s. Chapter 4 follows women's paths in Christian and political abolitionism and shows how they spoke out against "proslavery" religion and supported political antislavery initiatives. Commitment to moral duty allowed them to redefine what was required of them as abolitionists and as women. Chapter 5 describes the response of women to the crises of the 1850s. By the 1850s, female activism included working in the underground railroad and lecturing for the antislavery cause. Sources are abundant enough for this period to demonstrate the involvement of black women in all aspects of antislavery, including public lecturing. During a decade of continuing crises over the expansion of slavery, northerners proved more tolerant of women's public participation in the antislavery crusade than they had been during the 1830s.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Civil War and shows how women's efforts for abolitionism during the war represent an extension of the work of three decades and the fruition of efforts to enlarge the scope of female activism. Although female abolitionism contributed to the crisis in gender relations, the reality of emancipation and the petering out of abolitionism limited most women's implicit or explicit challenge to the status quo. When women had done their duty, most disappeared from the historical record.

It is time to make them part of the historical record once more.

Chapter 1

Recruiting Women into the Cause

To Freedom's cause, the cause of truth,

With joy we dedicate our youth.

To Freedom's holy altar bring

Fortune and life as offering.[1]

When readers of the *Liberator* opened their newspaper one day in mid-August 1831, they discovered a fiery poem composed by a woman who identified herself only as a "female." While the author did not explain what had prompted her to compose her verses and to submit them for publication, her outrage over slavery and her desire to compel others to acknowledge its evils hinted at the significant role women would play in the movement to eradicate American slavery.

Wake up, wake up, and be alive,
Let the subject of the day revive!
How can you sleep, how can you be at rest,
And never pity the oppressed.[2]

The woman's urgent tone also indicated how drastically and rapidly the debate over American slavery was changing in the early 1830s. William Lloyd Garrison's own interest in abolitionism dated back to an 1829 meeting with Benjamin Lundy, the Quaker editor of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. The Society of Friends had long opposed slavery and had pressed for gradual emancipation in the North. Now Lundy was advocating gradual emancipation and voluntary colonization as the twin strategies for ending American slavery in the South. When Garrison moved to Baltimore to work with Lundy on his newspaper, however, he discovered that the free black community in that city, as elsewhere, rejected colonization. Their influence transformed his thinking. By 1831, Garrison was espousing a platform of immediate uncompensated emancipation and publicizing the program in the pages of his Boston paper, the *Liberator*. Within a few years, Lundy would adopt Garrison's view that colonization was "totally inadequate to abolition."[3]

Garrison did not invent the idea of immediate emancipation, nor did he provide a clear definition of its meaning. The slogan "immediate emancipation" made the simple point that the work to end slavery must begin at once. Furthermore, the phrase suggested a dramatic break between modern Garrisonian abolitionism and previous efforts to abolish American slavery.[4] Half a century earlier, opponents of slavery had hopes of gradually eliminating the institution so contrary to republican and revolutionary ideals. For several decades there were signs of progress. Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist ministers denounced slavery as a sin, and northern states, one by one, made slavery illegal. Quakers, recently forbidden to hold slaves, manumitted hundreds in Maryland and North Carolina. Even southern planters, particularly in the Upper South, where tobacco had worn out the land, emancipated their slaves in the 1780s and early 1790s. By 1810, more than 100,000 free blacks lived in the South, evidence of the scope of manumission in that region. Finally, in 1807, the infamous international slave trade, at least legally, came to an end.[5]

Whatever enthusiasm existed for ridding the nation of slavery faded rapidly in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In the South, the development of the cotton gin opened lucrative new possibilities for the region's economy and encouraged the expansion of the plantation system. In the Upper South, breeding slaves for the internal slave trade cemented loyalty to the institution once seen as moribund. By the time of the debate over the Missouri Compromise, it was clear that southerners had a vigorous attachment to slavery and were prepared to defend it as a positive good. Bargains struck during the Constitutional Convention such as assigning to the federal government the responsibility for crushing slave insurrections offered powerful protections for the rejuvenated slave system.[6]

Still, antislavery sentiment did not disappear. In 1816, a Presbyterian

minister from New Jersey established the American Colonization Society (ACS). As the organization's name suggests, one of its primary goals was to send American free blacks back to Africa as colonists. This proposal appealed to conservative southern slaveholders who believed free blacks threatened the slave system and attracted those who wanted to rid the United States of its black population. Evangelicals, hopeful that former American slaves might convert the "pagan" Africans to Christianity, also supported the Colonization Society. Most free blacks had little interest in the scheme, however, and very few agreed to emigrate. By 1830, the ACS had transported only 1,420 African Americans to Liberia.[7]

The American Colonization Society's second goal, gradual emancipation, was as far from realization as its first. The idea that slaveholders would, over time, voluntarily emancipate their slaves if they could all be sent off to Africa was flawed. But many northerners clung to the ACS because its program held out the possibility that eventually slavery might be ended without ruinous consequences for the country. During the 1820s, prominent evangelical laymen, well-known clergy, and well-known national politicians all endorsed the ACS and its agenda.[8]

Like black abolitionists who had rejected colonization out of hand in the mid-1820s, Garrison now condemned the ACS's approach. The organization, he pointed out, did not regard slaveholding as a sin, and its attempt to rid the country of blacks revealed its prejudice against people of color. Garrison's demand for immediate emancipation in the first issue of the *Liberator* in January 1831 represented the first salvo in his campaign against the ACS and its program. Ironically enough, Garrison had already hinted at his future position in an 1829 lecture delivered to the ACS in Boston's Park Street Church. Slavery, he had declared on that occasion, was barbarous, despotic, and difficult to dislodge. Efforts to do so would require "a struggle with the worst passions of human nature," but that struggle must begin at once. Antislavery demanded action. The "cause . . . would be dishonored and betrayed," he argued, "if I contented myself with appealing only to the understanding." Such an approach was "too cold and its processes are too slow for the occasion." Barbarous, despotic, difficult to dislodge—slavery was all of these. But most important, slavery was a sin, not just for the slaveowner but for all Americans. It was a "national sin," Garrison insisted, and one of which "we are all alike guilty."[9] The *Liberator*'s anonymous female poet had been less sweeping in assigning guilt, but she shared Garrison's understanding of the moral universe. To the slaveholder, she issued a warning:

"Repent, repent, for you must die!
O, be admonished—turn and live."[10]

While most evangelical Protestants ignored Garrison's program of immediate emancipation, his identification of slavery as a sin that implicated all Americans grew out of an evangelical cultural perspective that provided a powerful moral and emotional context for abolitionism. Slavery was not just a flawed economic and social system. It was a moral transgression that could no longer be tolerated. The call to action that Garrison issued echoed the summons to repentance and a new life of active Christian commitment that had been sounded repeatedly in the Northeast since the 1820s. During the revivals of the Second Great Awakening, Protestant clergy had skillfully used an array of emotional techniques to stir up members of their churches to acknowledge their sinfulness and to turn to Christ. But conversion was not the final destination so much as it was the beginning of a new life. God, the pious believed, demanded more than a cultivation of the individual soul; those who had accepted Christ must struggle against sin. The converted Christian, disciplined against unseemly passions and committed to benevolence, should commence a new life in the world. Garrison's definition of slavery as a heinous sin (caused by the slaveholder's lust and self-indulgence) was capable of motivating evangelical Christians to action and could appeal to those, like Unitarians, who believed in the importance of good works in the world.[11]

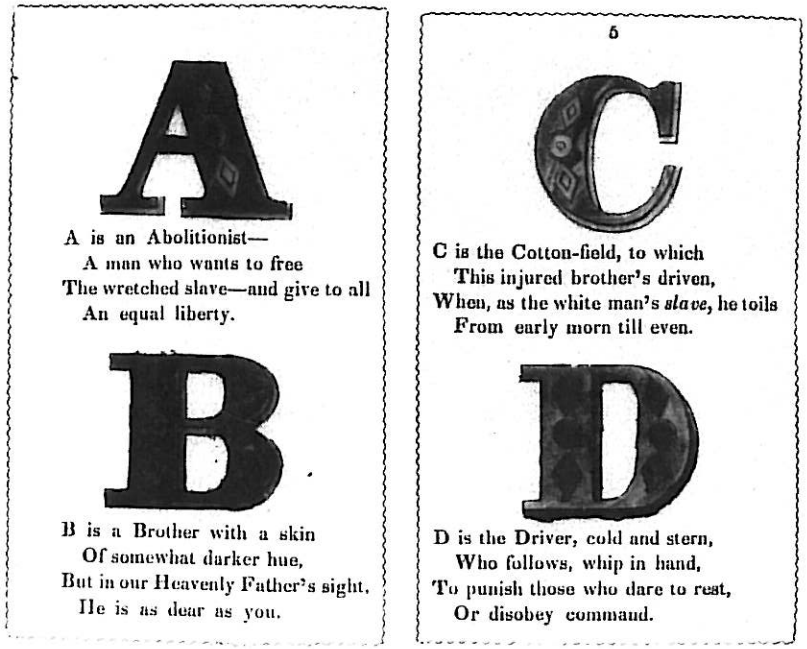
Some members of the Society of Friends, whose historical and religious experiences differed dramatically from those of evangelical Protestants also found Garrison's analysis convincing. The Quakers had adopted a forceful stand against slavery during the eighteenth century, refusing slaveholders membership, taking the lead in early abolitionist organizations like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and fostering the education of free blacks. Friends were no longer in the forefront of antislavery by the time Garrison announced his program of immediate emancipation. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, for example, supported gradual change through political channels and focused more on assisting free blacks than on freeing slaves in the South. But the Quaker belief in the Inner Light that revealed what had to be done in this life to gain salvation in the next could prompt a commitment to immediatism. Although the guidance of the Inner Light became clear only over time, the emphasis on doing one's duty in the world did not differ so much from the compulsion that the climactic event of an evangelical conversion might unleash.[12]

In the late 1820s, controversies over the Inner Light and antislavery contributed to a division in the Society of Friends. Hicksites (the followers of Elias Hicks) laid more emphasis on the importance of the Inner Light and antislavery measures like the avoidance of slave products than Orthodox Friends. Orthodox Friends did became Garrisonians, but Hicksites were most responsive to Garrison's program of immediate emancipation. One scholar has suggested that the division offered Hicksite women leadership opportunities that could promote social activism. In advocating the Hicksite position before members of the local and more distant meetings, women participated in debates crucial to the Society's future and gained a heightened sense of female importance and equality. This self-confidence allowed some of them eventually to move into reform causes, whether or not more conservative Friends approved.[13]

While Garrison's speech before the ACS did not represent any fully developed plan for ridding the nation of slavery, the definition of women as moral guardians of nineteenth-century society and culture implied some female role in antislavery activities. In his address, Garrison encouraged women to join with their congregations in pouring out "supplication[s] to heaven on behalf of the slaves." Acknowledging three decades of women's involvement in organized charitable and benevolent work, he also recommended that women work within the framework of "charitable associations to relieve the degraded of their sex."[14]

When Garrison formally launched his antislavery effort in January 1831, he had given little further thought as to how women might contribute to the cause. Female readers, as his paper pointed out, could and should "fall upon . . . [their] knees, and lift up . . . [their] voices to heaven for those who are in bondage." Early children's stories in the *Liberator* also depicted parents instructing their children about slavery's evils and indicated that, at this early point, Garrison and others visualized abolitionist women's commitment as primarily domestic and familial. The belief that mothers were uniquely placed to shape children's thinking was so central to the way middle-class northerners thought about motherhood that this emphasis never disappeared, even when other possibilities for female participation emerged. As one abolitionist paper explained at the end of the decade, the mother who read antislavery stories to her children began the process of making an abolitionist. "The child of two or three years will be more interested in the story of the poor slave, than with the whole Catalogue of Nursery tales."[15]

In January 1832, Garrison, impressed by the antislavery work of British women, established a Ladies' Department in his paper. This new feature,



This alphabet, aimed at bringing the antislavery message to children, is an example of the continuing interest in converting children to abolitionism within the confines of the home. (Boston Athenæum)

he hoped, would add to the interest women felt in the *Liberator* and "give a new impetus to the cause of emancipation." Assuming that women needed encouragement, even though some were already contributing to his paper, he pointed out that a million enslaved women "ought to excite the sympathy and indignation of American women." Attracting female support was hardly his most important priority, however. Because his ideas about the scope of female activism were still vague, his paper continued to propose the most obvious and least controversial possibilities. No doubt, the early emphasis on using nonslave products stemmed partly from the fact that "females who are interesting themselves in behalf of the poor slaves" could and already were acting upon their commitments at home. The *Liberator*'s anonymous poet had asked her readers:

> "How can you eat, how can you drink,
> How wear your finery, and ne'er think
> Of those poor souls, in bondage held,
> Whose painful labor is compelled?"

The implied response was that no true Christian, and certainly not a woman, could fail to understand the relationship between the articles of daily life and slavery. Domestic life could not continue as usual.[16]

A letter published in 1832, ostensibly from "a plain hardworking farmer," showed the internal ramifications of adopting free-labor principles. The farmer pictured his family in the midst of a domestic transformation in which women took the lead. "My wife and grown up daughters," he wrote, "have got a notion out of some tract they have been reading, that we ought not to eat rice, nor sugar, nor anything that is raised by the labor of slaves." Using the *Liberator* as her guide, his daughter had quizzed him about free and slave products. As she finished her list of questions, she announced triumphantly, " 'I am sure you will think just as we do.' "[17]

Boycotting goods not only drew upon impeccable historical precedents —in particular, the activities of women during the American Revolution— but it also accorded with the nineteenth-century view of women as unselfish, practiced in self-denial, and morally insightful. The practice was firmly rooted in the new realities of economic life. Although the plain and hardworking farmer still went to town for household supplies, in many middle-class households women were in the position to make or at least to influence consumption decisions.

The idea of boycotting products produced by slave labor also built upon Quaker principles and organizational efforts. Quaker leaders, including Elias Hicks, had urged Friends to use only "free" goods. In the late 1820s, associations pledged to the free produce principle were established in several cities with substantial Quaker communities. Black women belonging to Philadelphia's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church also established their own free produce association in 1829. Several of these women would later become active in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFAS).[18]

The fact that women who abhorred slavery formed the backbone of the early free produce movement doubtless prompted Garrison to urge female sympathizers to form free produce societies and patronize shopkeepers like Lydia White, an African American, who ran a dry goods store in Philadelphia that carried products of free labor. As the newspaper pointed out, women outside of Philadelphia could take advantage of her store: White took orders from states as distant as Vermont, Indiana, and Ohio.[19]

The hardworking farmer had raised the question of just how the efforts of one family might contribute to the demise of slavery. Theoretically, the boycott could undermine the market for slave products and goods made from them, thus undermining the viability of slavery itself. But there were

other possible consequences especially appealing to women who took their moral role seriously. For example, a children's story that pictured mother and daughter explaining the merits of free produce to young Edward just home from boarding school resulted in a youthful convert to abolitionism. "If ever I am a man, and slavery is not abolished then," declared Edward, "you shall see that I have not forgotten what you have told me today." Women were also assured that their buying and consuming habits constituted valuable "testimony against this greatest of evils."[20]

The *Liberator* occasionally provided examples of women carrying their abolitionist commitment beyond the boundaries of family and household. They could, for instance, teach free blacks in a Sabbath school. While this activity challenged racial norms, the task and its location were familiar. One teacher quoted in the paper emphasized "the eagerness and intensity of interest with which . . . [her students] applied themselves to the study of God's work, and listened to instruction." The picture she provided of students thirsting for knowledge and her characterization of her work as God's minimized the radical nature of her efforts.[21]

Elizabeth Chandler's antislavery work suggested the ways in which a woman might actually express her commitment to the new cause without straying too far from her domestic setting. Elizabeth's quiet activism also serves as a reminder that some women's involvement in abolitionism preceded Garrison's own. First in Philadelphia and then in Michigan, the young Hicksite Quaker wrote antislavery pieces, observed free produce principles, and pricked the consciences of friends and family to take a stand against slavery. Her literary efforts began when her poem entitled the "Slave Ship" won a prize in a magazine poetry contest. Benjamin Lundy reprinted the piece in his paper, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. When Garrison joined Lundy in 1829, Elizabeth was writing for its Ladies' Department. Later, she also contributed to the *Liberator* and was perhaps responsible for the urgent verses beginning this chapter. Garrison, recognizing how skillfully Elizabeth used images of the anguished female slave to appeal to the emotions, described one of her early poems as a "thrilling effusion." Despite the problems she had in chaining her ideas "to one point sufficiently for serious writing," she managed to incorporate her antislavery commitments successfully into her domestic routine.[22]

Elizabeth supported the free produce movement, and her letters reveal the way her commitment affected her personal and domestic life. Avoiding slave products could be inconvenient, especially on the frontier, and inefficient. She could not always complete her chores promptly. As she explained to her aunt somewhat apologetically, "I should have sent thy

patchwork by this opportunity, but have not yet got it finished, as sewing cotton runs low with us, and I felt unwilling, unless compelled by actual necessity to purchase any of the slave manufacture." Discovering the origins of even the most ordinary household necessities took time and effort. Was "Java coffee . . . the product of free labor," she asked her aunt? It was over a year before she learned "it comes from East India."[23]

Elizabeth not only observed free produce principles, she also tried to persuade friends and family to follow her example. To her brother, she explained that it was "his sister's earnest request that both he and his wife . . . promote the use of free produce as much as it is in their power." When she had visitors, she spoke so persuasively that "they seemed almost inclined to become supporters by renouncing the unnecessary use of slave products." Her advocacy of free produce in her poetry also encouraged women, like those in Clark County, Ohio, to organize free produce societies.[24]

While much of the early material in the *Liberator* directed at women fostered the idea that women might oppose slavery without violating their routines, as, in fact, Elizabeth Chandler did, there were also hints that Garrison was gradually seeing more ambitious possibilities. An "Appeal to Ladies," published in March 1832, called upon women to use all their powers, "whether moral, political, civil, or religious, or all combined," to further the antislavery cause. Yet, as the paper acknowledged, many women would be reluctant to adopt such a comprehensive approach. "Some of you may, perhaps plead the effeminacy of your sex, and some—mental inferiority; but oh! this is nothing else than vain mockery."[25]

Despite the designation of female reticence and reluctance as vain mockery, the reality was that women might well feel inferior and inadequate. Their domestic duties had not prepared most of them psychologically or intellectually to be advocates for emancipation. All too frequently, the paper pointed out, they "undervalue[d] their own power." Of course, "the voice of women should not be heard in public debates," but women could and should speak out forcefully in other settings. Thus, articles encouraged women to learn about the evils of slavery and then use this information effectively. Never should they neglect to enter conversations when slavery was being debated or fear to discuss their opinions. "The shield of wisdom will prove the best defence against the attacks of ridicule."[26]

Without any consideration of the long-term implications of such a course of action, Garrison and other abolitionist editors encouraged women to learn the skills of argumentation more familiar to those accustomed to public discourse than to those at home. As antislavery advocates, women had to learn to speak logically, to counter an opponent's position, to "reveal

sophistry," and to muster evidence. "Use your powers of persuasion," the Maine antislavery paper, the *Advocate of Freedom*, counseled; "nine times out of ten you will succeed." While women's efforts should not involve them in any unbecoming behavior and should exhibit "long-suffering—and gentleness," they had to learn to appeal to the head. Presumably they already knew how to appeal to the heart.[27]

A series of pieces published in the *Liberator* in 1832 clearly intended to teach women some of the rudimentary information and skills they would need to become convincing speakers. Taking as subjects a variety of topics, including the importance of using free products, the part the North could play in abolishing slavery in the South, the relationship between the Constitution and slavery, and the need to be more active in the cause, the articles presented dialogues showing an abolitionist woman interacting with an uncommitted or unsympathetic speaker. The dialogue form was an effective literary device that not only introduced the reader to information but also showed her how to present it and how to counter anticipated objections. Presumably a woman could memorize parts of the dialogue if she chose and even practice responding to objections. While the exchanges depicted were between women, segments easily lent themselves to mixed company. Indeed, women were told not to turn a blind eye to the indifference of brothers and fathers (and presumably husbands), but to show them "the errors of their ways." And as the *Advocate of Freedom* suggested, if a husband was already an abolitionist, it was a woman's duty not to "allow him to fall asleep."[28]

What should be said to someone who regarded joining an antislavery society as quixotic or who felt she had no time to devote to such a cause? How could one respond to a person who had visited the South yet claimed that slavery was not so bad after all? What if someone should accuse women involved in antislavery activities of being immodest or of interfering in political business? Awkward silence or inarticulate stammerings were out of the question in such predictable situations. The answer: Tell the reluctant friend that if "without investigation [you] refuse to believe a tale of wrongs which you are called upon to help to redress, you are not acting as a Christian should." Counter the claim of having no time to act for the slave by acknowledging domestic obligation and appealing to class. Domestic duty, one might say, "cannot . . . completely occupy the time of any lady, or of any woman above the poorest class." Inquire of the southern traveler whether he or she had ever seen slaves working or being punished. Or had he or she, in fact, merely seen them in the great house? Point to evidence exposing the character of slavery that southerners revealed in their

own political debates. As for the criticism of women's activities, how could it be immodest merely to read or lend books or to speak to female friends and neighbors?

The *Liberator*'s dialogues and other printed materials gave a clear message: have the right information, ask probing questions, parry responses. As the female-authored "Appeal to Females of [the] North" explained, women must dare "to exercise those powers of mind which the Almighty has bestowed upon us, or we shall be driven from the position by the objections and entreaties of those whose views are in opposition to ours."[29]

One of the dialogues published during 1832 described a situation in which the female reader asked her friend what was becoming an increasingly critical question: "'Are you a member of the LADIES' Anti-Slavery society in this neighborhood?'" As antislavery was taking institutional form, Garrison made more focused efforts to connect "female virtue and patriotism" with the movement. Indeed, soon after Garrison and other immediatists established the all-male New England Anti-Slavery Society in January 1832, the *Liberator* suggested that "something must be done . . . and it is in the power of American women to do much. . . . They can form societies; each member agreeing to do all in her power to abolish this horrible traffic—to spread the alarm by patronizing the *Liberator*—and to abstain from the fruits of inequity and oppression." The earliest female antislavery societies were formed within months.[30]

There was good evidence to encourage Garrison to support female antislavery associations. Three decades of female association for charitable and benevolent causes suggested the power of female activism. Since the 1790s, white upper- and middle-class women had formed organizations, adopted constitutions, communicated with similar societies elsewhere, raised money, and used it for a variety of causes, including relieving suffering, helping the worthy poor, especially widows and children, and spreading the faith to those in faraway lands and nearer to home, in impoverished neighborhoods or on the western frontier. Free black women also organized, but they directed their efforts at those with whom they shared bonds of friendship, kinship, and propinquity: the less fortunate members of their own fragile communities. Such benevolent and charitable activities had raised little criticism and gained much praise. In 1817, the Presbyterian General Assembly had announced that it was "among the distinguished glories of the nineteenth century that PIOUS FEMALES are more extensively associated, and the more actively useful, in promoting evangelical and benevolent objects than in any former period of the world." British female antislavery groups provided a stirring example of what organized women might accomplish with a more radical agenda than that of American benevolent and charitable associations and confirmed the idea that organizing American women could be an important step in the effort to end slavery. As the *Liberator* remarked, British women's antislavery societies were moving that whole nation forward on the question of abolitionism. British female antislavery societies, usually laboring independently of any male counterparts, raised substantial funds for the cause, created and disseminated propaganda, and were active in petition work.[31]

The effort to draw American women into similar antislavery associations obviously required from them a greater commitment than staying at home, avoiding the products of slave labor, and conversing, with quiet logic, with friends and family. But even Evelina Smith, of Hingham, Massachusetts, who admitted in 1836 that she needed "no arguments to prove that Slavery is wrong, & altogether in opposition to the Bible," did not yet feel herself "called upon, publicly to espouse abolitionism." As she explained, "I do not feel that such is my mission."[32]

To recruit women like Evelina Smith who already disapproved of slavery into organized antislavery activity and to reach women who did not yet realize the evils of the institution necessitated confronting those concerns and obligations that might prevent a woman from committing herself. One of the most contentious issues concerned female propriety. Was it seemly for women to join an antislavery society? The question was easier to answer initially than it would be later, when the impact of abolitionism on women became clearer than it was early in the decade. Garrison and others assured women that association did not involve any impropriety. One of the dialogues in the *Liberator*, for example, minimized any danger to reputation by emphasizing the familiarity of the work and stressing the local and female character of the proposed societies. "How can I possibly think that there would be any offence to modesty," remarked the *Liberator*'s female abolitionist ingenuously, "in meeting some of the ladies of your neighborhood to talk over your plans, and to endeavor to make your efforts more effectual by uniting in a society."[33]

Despite the ubiquity of female benevolent activity, antislavery was, in fact, a radical cause. Women interested in benevolent and charitable causes focused on those worthy individuals whom progress had left behind. While they promoted certain behaviors among their clients—industriousness, Christian piety, and sobriety, for example—they tended to accept society as it was. Often affiliated with a particular denomination, benevolent and charitable groups enjoyed not only clerical support but also the encouragement of prominent women who frequently served as officers. Like

other moral reform groups emerging in the 1830s, especially those seeking to end prostitution, abolitionists sought to cleanse society, to change it. While most abolitionist women did not become feminists, their commitment would challenge racial, social, and political arrangements in both the North and the South. Their interpretation of moral duty would result in new understandings of gender and class norms. As one Unitarian minister who attempted to prevent the formation of an antislavery society in Taunton, Massachusetts, warned prophetically, "the successful prosecution of their measures would inevitably dissolve the Union, and cause civil war and bloodshed!!"[34]

The dialogues presented in the *Liberator* recognized a whole range of factors beyond the fear of transgressing the boundaries of acceptable female behavior that might prevent women from joining an antislavery society. The burden of women's domestic and family duties that, some women might argue, left not even ten minutes for the slave led the list that included bad health, a reluctance to read the "horrid accounts" about slavery, and the feeling that the institution was the government's responsibility. Particularly embarrassing to those insisting that slavery was a sin was the fact that "most religious people . . . decline taking any part in this business." Then there was always the underlying fear of impropriety, the accusation that women would be involving themselves with business "quite of out their province." Aware of these kinds of misgivings, antislavery editors and agents began several initiatives to overcome female reluctance and to secure women's loyalty to immediate emancipation. Newspapers, tracts, lectures, debates, and prayer meetings all reached out to a female audience that presumably needed outside stimulation to become involved. Although these sources reveal the efforts to recruit women, the existence of women's free produce societies, the early stream of antislavery literature, much of it written by black women, and letters women sent into the *Liberator* suggest that not all women needed as much encouragement as male organizers believed.[35]

Antislavery newspapers like the *Liberator*, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, and the *Advocate of Freedom*, though not women's newspapers, sought to address issues of consequence to women and to secure their loyalty. Elizur Wright, editor of *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, worried that his paper might not be reaching women effectively. The style, he felt, was "not well adapted to move the mass;—to interest women and children—you know a great part of the mass are . . . such." In the *Liberator*, Garrison was careful to show that every one of the typical female objections to joining an antislavery society was of little consequence.[36]

Antislavery editors realized that many potential converts did not read abolitionist newspapers. Recognizing that the ties of family and friendship could provide an entry into households that they could not easily reach otherwise, editors continually exhorted female readers to persuade their friends to take a paper or even to send one to someone who might profit from it. Lucinda Storrs not only handed around her own newspaper but also bought one for a neighbor who was "warm in the cause" but "one of the Lords poor." The testimony of a widowed schoolmistress in Florence, Pennsylvania, attests to the success of such a strategy. "The paper you sent," she wrote her brother, "has indeed been [instrumental] in converting me to the abolitionist views so far as to desire the immediate emancipation of every negro in the world."[37]

Yet the increasingly radical reputation and cost of antislavery papers limited circulation. In North Marshfield, Louisa Phillips found few interested in subscribing to an abolitionist newspaper: "It is the last thing they think of, to increase their expences in that way." Amasa Walker apparently objected to content, not cost, declaring that he would not have an abolitionist newspaper in his house. For Grace Williams, abolitionist papers spelled domestic trouble, for they affected "most disastrously on Husband's tempers." And even though Sophia Davenport was committed to abolitionism when she moved to St. Louis, she felt that it would be foolish and "dangerous to myself and friends" to take the *Liberator* there.[38]

As Louisa Phillips explained when she reported that North Marshfield residents did not want to spend the money to subscribe to an antislavery paper, "Ours is not, generally speaking, a reading community." But she did not believe that all was lost: "A good lecture will do much to promote the cause." While the potential for violence might have kept away some of the more fearful members of the community, the public lecture became another essential strategy for stimulating interest, pricking the conscience, and converting both sexes to an active role in antislavery. The traveling lecturer or agent, already a familiar figure in American religious and benevolent circles, had proved his value in the British abolitionist campaign.[39]

The American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS), formed in 1833 by Garrison and others, recognized the value of lectures. Its recruiting effort started modestly with the appointment of four agents, Samuel May, Amos Phelps, Garrison, and Theodore Weld. Each was scheduled for a three-month tour. During this brief time, they were "to arouse the public mind by addresses and lectures—to enlighten and convert individuals by private interviews—especially to operate on ministers of the Gospel." Amos Phelps's 1834 commission also highlighted another important goal: the formation of "Auxil-

iary Societies, both male and female, in every place where it is practicable. Even if such societies are very small at the outset, they may do much good as centers of light, and means of future access to the people."[40]

The agency effort became a large and expensive part of the American Anti-Slavery Society's mission during the early part of the decade. In 1833–34, the AAS devoted 14 percent of its annual income to supporting agents. Two years later, the high point of expenditure for lecturers, over half of the association's annual income went for this purpose. By 1838, partly because of cost and the financial panic of the previous year, the AAS reduced its commitment to a system of national lecturers. But it did not abandon the strategy. To replace the corps of national lecturers, the society encouraged local agents, "men in settled life, who for their interest in the cause will take short lecturing excursions in their own vicinity and labor for the Society as a freewill offering." The rationale made economic sense, for the American Anti-Slavery Society reimbursed local agents only for expenses. The new policy also represented a realistic plan for transforming people's thinking, a task that demanded time and repeated effort. "Though the great work of changing public opinion may be successfully begun, it can by no means be finished by traveling agents. In every village and neighborhood of our wide country, slavery and its kindred and inseparable evil, the prejudice of caste, must be discussed and dwelt on till they are thoroughly understood in all their bearings."[41]

Some abolitionists believed that lectures represented a more powerful recruiting tactic than printed materials. Like revival meetings, antislavery lectures could reach large numbers of people in a collective setting that a skillful speaker could manipulate to arouse emotions and stimulate commitment. In addition to being powerful motivators, lectures could attract both those interested in the cause and those who were not. In quiet country villages and towns, the lecture was an event. For Fanny McDill in Franklin, Ohio, who was "not well enough acquainted with the subject to form a decided opinion," the upcoming antislavery lecture might provide the information to seal her loyalty to the new cause. In Dedham, Massachusetts, according to Sophia Davenport in 1835, the people were "in a deplorable state of ignorance concerning the subject . . . [and] very much prejudiced against abolition." Nevertheless, "they would all like to hear [the antislavery lecturer] Mr. Thompson."[42]

Because lecturers hoped that women would attend their presentations, they made efforts to respect female propriety. If lectures were tainted by scandal, the respectable and influential women as well as their timid sisters might stay away. In Kingston, Rhode Island, opponents of abolitionism

claimed that the antislavery agent would advocate "amalgamation." As a result, "many ladies thought it would be very improper for them to attend." In Leicester, Massachusetts, no such threat existed. But when the town's minister informed his congregation that he supported the colonization society, his stance prevented "nearly all of the best portion of his congregation (the ladies) from attending" the antislavery lecture.[43]

The most desirable situation for encouraging the female presence was for one of the community's ministers to announce the lecture and lend his church for it. Obtaining sacred space legitimized the antislavery platform and reinforced the moral and religious imperative claimed by its advocates. Women felt at home in this space where they so often made up the majority of the congregation. The power of the building might occasionally serve as a counterweight to a denunciation from the pulpit; in Ware, Massachusetts, for example, agent Arnold Buffum discovered that the minister's antagonism had not prevented a crowd from gathering in the church (although ten minutes after he began, about a dozen ladies "simultaneously left the house.")[44]

Antislavery lectures had varied formats. Agents and local supporters hoped to attract a large turnout and to convert as many members of the audience to the antislavery position as they could. Whatever means might contribute to achieving their ends were used. A Plymouth, New Hampshire, lecture, for example, drew heavily upon religious associations to create a servicelike atmosphere. "The meeting-house was splendidly lighted; a choir of excellent singers performed several pieces appropriate to the occasion; a sweet sounding organ, made without instruction by a genuine abolitionist, was played by a young lady . . . who . . . was inspired with the true feeling of universal benevolence." Amos Phelps relied on props to fill his listeners with sympathy for the slave. He gripped the attention especially of the females in his audience when during his appeal for support he "brandished about in the sacred desk the slave driver's whip such as had 'lacerated the back of woman.' "[45]

Sometimes, in an effort to attract even fainthearted and conventional women, speakers had special lectures for women only. Samuel J. May designed his Fall River, Massachusetts, lecture "particularly for the ladies," and he spoke for over an hour in the Baptist meetinghouse. In Providence, again in a Baptist meetinghouse, not only did "many of . . . [the] most influential and worthy ladies, and some of the fairest of the fair" attend, but many also came forward to pledge themselves to the cause. Perhaps the female setting made the act of commitment more inviting than it would have been otherwise.[46]

During the 1830s, when agents were addressing mixed audiences, they reported that, in some places, women were in the majority. In a city like Boston, women tended to go to public lectures in greater numbers than men, and perhaps this was the reason for large female audiences in many places. During his August 1833 visit to Nantucket, for example, Arnold Buffum estimated that three-quarters of his listeners were women. In Albany, he found the same preponderance of women who "listened apparently with intense interest, for nearly two hours, to a delineation of slavery, and of our plan for its abolition." In the collection plate, Buffum discovered two gold rings, a pattern of female giving that was repeated in his other engagements in New York State. Accounts from agents about the women in their audiences and their respectability and interest appeared in the *Liberator*, thus reinforcing the moral credentials of antislavery and calming scruples that kept women away.[47]

When ministers refused to lend their churches, lecturers wishing to speak to audiences in country towns and villages might be hard-pressed to find a suitable substitute. The town hall, if available, could hold a good crowd, but with its public and political associations, it did not have as powerful symbolic legitimacy for women as did a church. Nonetheless, women were certainly willing to attend lectures in such space. In Boylston, Massachusetts, for instance, Mary White went to an antislavery lecture in the town hall in 1837, though she made the event sacred in her diary entry by inserting a short prayer of supplication for "the poor slaves." A month later, that hall was the site for the formation of the female antislavery society.[48]

Lectures proved an important venue for exposing women to abolition and for encouraging the formation of female antislavery societies. In Sangerville, Maine, the women, though interested in the cause, did not organize until they were visited by two agents. The visit acted as an incentive. As one of the officers of the society that emerged explained, "Our sympathies were enlisted . . . and most deeply did we feel, that the daughters of New England, surrounded by every comfort,—and conscious of their duty as females, should arise . . . [and] call for the freedom and protection of their sisters in bonds." In Dighton, Massachusetts, Abby Talbot reported a similar pattern that must have occurred in many country towns and villages. Few women, she wrote, "had thought much on the subject of slavery previous to Mr. Thompson,s lecturing [here]." But Thompson moved many of the women, and "from the impulse of the moment a society was foarmed & 23 gave in their names."[49]

Antislavery newspapers reported on these successful organizing efforts as a spur to other women. They often printed a society's constitution to serve as a useful example to other groups and the list of officers to encourage correspondence among them. Exhortations from British women also appeared. An 1832 letter from the London Female Anti-Slavery Society, for example, urged American women to unite. A later selection from an English tract vindicated female societies and argued that they were neither unbecoming nor unfeminine. Occasionally rebukes accompanied exhortations. An article reprinted from the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* sternly announced that "the females of this land are without excuse for their heartless indifference." Their duty to antislavery was obvious.[50]

While the agency system helped recruit women to antislavery, locally organized events also spread the abolitionist message. Because Garrison's attack on colonization had created a good deal of controversy, a town or village lyceum might devote an evening or more to the subject of colonization versus immediatism. In Augusta, Maine, speakers spent eight nights debating the topic. At the end of the series, members of the audience formed an antislavery society. Community prayer meetings, called "concerts," whether focused on the slave or not, could also be instrumental in garnering support. Young Deborah Weston found the concert she attended in 1835 "one of the most interesting meetings I ever attended." The flexible format of this service, which might include music, a choir, or a short address, afforded opportunities to move emotions, to shape perspectives, and to bear witness to the truth about slavery. Extemporaneous "prayers" combining prayer, exhortation, and instruction were standard features and allowed anyone present the chance to participate. Making supplications for the slave, as Lucinda Storrs realized, took "courage." But even females "seldom leaving the chimney corner" could summon up that courage and offer an appeal to the congregation's conscience on such an occasion.[51]

The fruits of these sorts of events might be modest or ambitious. After attending a concert in Boylston, Massachusetts, Mary White inserted in her diary a prayer that "God might bless efforts to abolish slavery." In Dover, New Hampshire, on the other hand, a concert of prayer held in 1835 fostered collective action. After the meeting, women gathered in the Methodist Parsonage to organize an antislavery society.[52]

Ministers could also help organize societies, announce meetings, and provide the church building for abolitionist events. They could pray for the slave during the regular Sabbath service and use other occasions to plead the cause. Two Dover ministers, for example, were instrumental in assisting in the formation of the ladies' antislavery society there. Later, when the group faltered, the Methodist minister helped to revive it. When Mary White attended a class meeting in Boylston in June 1836, she was

not surprised when her minister, an active proponent of abolitionism, read "an interesting piece . . . entitled a voice from Scotland on the subject of American slavery." The AAS recognized the clergy's critical role in fostering women's loyalty and instructed agents to seek ministers out.[53]

In 1837, Mary White noted in her diary that the minister's wife, "Mrs. Sanford[,] called here this evening with a constitution to form an antislavery society." Her entry highlighted the role a minister's wife might play in organizing local women into a society and in lending her prestige as one of the community's influential women to the association. But organizing did not necessarily come only from the efforts of antislavery agents, local clergy, and their spouses. Ordinary women, moved by their reading, the solicitation of friends, or remarks from a visiting lecturer, also established local female antislavery societies on their own initiative. In 1836, for example, Deborah Weston reported from New Bedford, "Last saturday afternoon I went to Susan Taber's to help lay the foundation of a female society. There were very few there, but they were strong ones. There is to be another meeting next saturday afternoon." On the Michigan frontier, Elizabeth Chandler eventually encouraged some local women to form a society, even though "many have seldom heretofore thought much about the subject."[54]

Although printed sources highlight the organizing role of male abolitionists, as these examples suggest, women themselves turned into or, in some cases, already were able recruiters and publicists for abolitionist ideas. Letters provided one avenue for discussing the subject with friends and family. In Ohio, Mary Irwin wrote to her sister Eliza to probe her on the subject of abolitionism and to encourage her to make up her mind about such an important matter. "I think you will be an Abolitionist, soon if you are not already," Mary wrote. "I am conscientiously one." Like Eliza, Sarah Berrien was also undecided in her views, but, as she explained to her abolitionist cousin Betsy Cowles, "with regard to immediate emancipation I dont know that it would be best and on the other hand the colonization plan dont suit my views at all," thus offering Betsy an opening for debate in her reply.[55]

"What agent more powerful in correcting public sentiment as woman?" A. A. Guthrie asked Betsy Cowles rhetorically in 1835. While the task of correcting public sentiment regarding slavery was an ambitious one, women might weave the work into the familiar routines of everyday life. As Hannah Cranch observed, "It is pretty surprising to what a degree inquiry is awakened." And while Hannah suggested that the study and workshop were two locations where women might wield their influence, she anticipated most encounters would take place before "the *polished grate*, and

the humble cook-stove, on the *sofa* and on the *settle*." In such settings, a woman might stimulate "*discussion* . . . on . . . this all absorbing question." In this spirit of mingling routine social occasions with recruiting, Elizabeth Chandler invited her frontier neighbors "to pass the . . . afternoon with me . . . for the purpose of looking over some papers on the subject of slavery."[56]

Among friends and acquaintances women did come face to face with the kinds of problems the *Liberator* had suggested they might experience. As women in Providence, Rhode Island, realized, they needed "strong minds and vigorous intellects" in order to be effective in the cause. To Louisa Phillips's dismay, she discovered she was dangerously ignorant about the subject of slavery. "I scarcely know the first half of the letter A about the subject," she confessed. "I find I shall have to study a long time to be thoroughly acquainted with their arguments." Other women found that their skills of argumentation were weak. Sybil Swetland in Rochester, New York, dismissed her arguments as "tame," at least in comparison to "those required to meet the aristocracy of sin, with which I combat." Sophia Davenport, who introduced the subject whenever she could, also felt that she was not as forceful as she would like to be, and certainly not so skillful as her friend Caroline Weston. She rather ruefully reflected, "I cannot talk and argue as she does." Sometimes it was not the arguments but the ability to get them out fast enough that was the problem. The Roote sisters concluded they were "*poor dunces*" when a supporter of slavery was able to outspeak them.[57]

Even bringing up the topic proved to be volatile and difficult. Abolitionists believed that northerners, including their friends and neighbors, shared responsibility for the sin of slavery. They proposed upsetting the political status quo to give freedom to a race that most white people considered inferior. They referred discretely but clearly to sexual relations between the southern white male elite and female slaves. No wonder Sophia Davenport described her conversations as "furious battle[s]" and discovered that some people were "unwilling to talk upon such a *delicate* subject." Lydia Maria Child, the author of influential abolitionist works including *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), *The Oasis* (1834), and *The Evils of Slavery, and the Cure for Slavery* (1836), was an expert on slavery and felt more secure than many other women in talking about it. When she discussed abolitionism with the eminent Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, who did not see the necessity of immediate emancipation, she countered him point by point. But genteel as their conversation undoubtedly was, she acknowledged its difficulties by classifying it as an argument.[58]

On some occasions the combat exhilarated Maria. During a stage journey in 1837, she countered the prejudiced racial views of a fellow passenger so effectively that the other travelers laughed and clapped. Pleased that she kept her temper, she thought that she had never been so brilliant and witty. "Oh, if I was a man, how I *would* lecture!" she concluded. "But I am a woman, and so I sit in the corner and knit socks."[59]

If a woman as well known and important in constructing the abolitionist attack on slavery as Maria Child saw herself as a knitter, or, as in her encounter with Channing, as a mouse, others not surprisingly found themselves silent when they should have spoken up. Octavia Gardner knew her duty and realized that she had "friends who would listen to me," but her parents' opposition kept her silent and troubled. Lucretia Cowings, who had the disadvantage of living among slaveholders in Annapolis, Maryland, was also mortified by her want of courage. She had not dared to admit that she was an abolitionist even when the conversation turned to the subject, and she concluded that she feared losing the "good opinion" of those with whom she lived and socialized. In a letter to a Boston friend, she vowed to reveal who she really was before she returned to the North. In Detroit, Mrs. Kingsbury was also silent. Only one other boarder in her boarding-house sympathized with abolitionism, and apparently Mrs. Kingsbury did not relish being in the minority. Had her husband supported her, perhaps she would have been more courageous. To her dismay, her "companion is not interested as formerly . . . which is a great trial to me. He does not oppose me at all, but still, you know . . . it would be pleasanter if he was interested with me in the good cause of Abolition."[60]

Because women often depended upon printed materials to furnish them with the ammunition they needed to discuss immediate emancipation and the evils of slavery effectively, many responded to editors' pleas to take and to circulate antislavery newspapers. For example, when Experience Billings made a trip from Foxborough, Massachusetts, to visit friends in Keene, New Hampshire, she discovered they were willing to read the papers she carried with her. Upon her return to Foxborough, she sent her Keene friends her *Liberator* every week.[61]

Many women thought that once they succeeded in getting an antislavery paper into people's hands, they would change their minds about the slavery issue. Betsy Newton identified the "great want of knowledge in this town on the subject" as the basic problem in Worcester, Massachusetts. Sarah Plummer concluded that the residents of Bangor, Maine, were prejudiced against the *Liberator*. But underlying the prejudice lurked the real obstacle, the "want of acquaintance" with the paper's character. She confessed that she understood this attitude since she had once shared it. Now she determined to change the situation by circulating the newspaper. Her success exceeded what she had "dared to hope." One gentleman had told her that he was "*decided*" to have nothing to do with any society connected with Garrison. When she discovered that he had never even seen the *Liberator*, she "prevailed" upon him to take a look at it. After reading two issues he was convinced of the rightness of the cause.

Modest economic circumstances and a want of ready cash limited the efforts of some women during the 1830s. Sarah Plummer was not able to afford enough copies of the paper to allow them to circulate freely. Instead, she had to lend her family's copy and then retrieve it to lend it again. Like Sarah, Betsy Newton's purse was "quite inadequate to the wants of this large town."[62] However, undeterred by her slender purse or the difficulties she faced in Worcester, she contemplated forming a society. After consulting with some friends, she suggested that having a lecture in Worcester would boost the cause. Louisa Phillips also wanted to establish a female society as an auxiliary to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. She did not need a lecturer but advice about organizing the women of North Marshfield, which was "not thickly settled and [had] no village."[63]

Despite the obstacles abolitionists faced, however, Garrison was able to proudly announce in 1834 at the Second Annual Meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society: "We have a large number of male and female anti-slavery societies in various parts of the land which embrace the names of thousands who are pledged to the doctrine of immediate emancipation."In actuality, black women's organizations devoted to moral and educational uplift in the free black community as well as to abolitionism predated Garrison's interest in organizing women. In 1832, the African-American Female Intelligence Society in Boston had sponsored the public lectures of Maria W. Stewart, while black women in Salem, Massachusetts, had formed the first female abolitionist society in that city. Before long, female associations were established in major cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York; some were integrated, while others were all black or all white. Outside of the cities, associations sprang up in more remote places like Sudbury, Reading, or Groton, Massachusetts, and in mill communities like Lowell or Amesbury Mills. There were societies in Weybridge, Vermont; Dover, New Hampshire; Portland and Bangor, Maine; and Norwich and Brooklyn, Connecticut. In addition to societies for adult women, there were juvenile societies, perhaps modeled on juvenile missionary societies.

And in some places like Fall River, Massachusetts; Limington, Maine; and Jefferson, Ohio, men and women had already formed joint societies.[64]

Historians have made many efforts to explain why people supported abolitionism. Some analyses suggest the psychological factors motivating commitment. Others point to the large social, economic, and cultural forces that helped to create a climate for abolitionism. Scattered records of women abolitionists living in the towns, villages, and cities of the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest do not reveal the deeper or structural reasons that may have led these mostly ordinary people to embrace an unpopular cause. Nor are there sufficient materials from any of the records to reveal the psychological basis for conviction. But it seems likely that the white woman who embraced this cause connected to her own individual need or "duty" the cultural definition of the female sex as a moral and religious force for good to define a *particular* work in the world. "All I ask," Sarah Baker explained, "is the right to suppress vice and promote virtue in the way and manner [my] conscience dictates." Abolitionism offered an opportunity, a choice, and a direction. For Maria Child, the commitment meant that "old dreams vanished, old associations departed, all things became new. . . . A new stimulus siezed me."[65]

Abolitionism gave a woman a personal emotional focus and allowed her to create a moral identity that was both rooted in and separate from her familial identity. As daughter, wife, and mother, a woman condemned slavery for its sins against her enslaved sisters. Yet her commitment also fulfilled a desire for both a real and imaginative distance from her own domestic situation. In Breemfield, New Jersey, Grace Williams explained that she entered another realm as she did her daily sewing. "Daily as I sit at my needle," she wrote, "I see the turbaned slaves pass casting their anxious glance towards me." When women met in their societies, often listening as one of their numbers read aloud from works about slavery, they also found the psychic space Grace Williams experienced in her own home.[66]

A black woman, on the other hand felt not distance but intimate involvement in her cause. Sarah Douglass quoted approvingly from an English writer who argued that, without "absorbing, heart-rendering compassion for ourselves," there could be no "deeper sympathy for others." Douglass need only look in the mirror to see the face that could belong to a slave. Slaves were, in a very real way, her own "brethren and sisters." The connections a black woman felt with southern slaves meshed with the responsibility she had for free blacks. While early black abolitionists used religious vocabulary as easily as their white counterparts, responsibility to

the community, which included themselves, rather than moral duty, gave meaning to their activism.[67]

If the sources fail to reveal the deep and often unconscious roots of ordinary women's commitment to abolitionism, ample evidence discloses those conscious, "mighty and soul moving reasons," as the women of Canton, Ohio, put it, that "render it peculiarly incumbent on women to act in this cause." In 1834, a correspondent to the *Liberator* explained the relationship between the founding documents of the Portland Female Anti-Slavery Association and the motivations of those who joined it. The society's preamble and constitution expressed "a depth of feeling and a profound sense of duty, to the will of the Almighty God, which cannot fail to convince every one that the authors . . . were fully and devoutly impressed with the magnitude and importance of the cause." These carefully considered documents of female associations formed during the 1830s (or borrowed from another society because the ideas struck its members as true) convey what members and onlookers alike understood as the reasons for their association. Combined with letters from ordinary women devoted to the antislavery cause, these materials illuminate the conscious mental and moral world of the antislavery activists of the 1830s.[68]

The concept of moral duty was a critical one in stimulating an abolitionist commitment. Because many women took seriously the assignation of moral and religious power to women and accepted the idea of slavery as a sin, they felt it was their responsibility to act for the slave. Little realizing how duty might expand their notion of what activity was appropriate, women insisted antislavery work was not outside of their sphere but well within its perimeters. The Ohio women who formed the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society expressed their understanding of what was demanded of them: "The undersigned ladies . . . under a solemn impression of the reality, extent, & unspeakable evils of the system of slavery" accepted "their obligation" to work for its elimination. In Brooklyn, Connecticut, women declared their willingness to confront the systematic nature of the problem when they decried the "atrocious and complicated system of iniquity." In Canton, Ohio, the preamble for the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society starkly stated, "We are persuaded that slavery is wrong and it ought to be immediately abolished."[69]

For some women, the duty to act was a clear extension of religious faith. Mrs. Kingsbury, for example, considered abolitionism "to be the *cause* of God" and grieved that she was not more "useful in the cause." Amy Rakestraw wrote her sister using the language of one recently converted and desirous to be "the instrument of doing some good." "Pray for me," she

begged her sister, "that I may be qualified to be more useful than I ever have been." Doubtless the desire to be more engaged in life, the longing for focus and even excitement, also played a role. Sybil Swetland, for one, revealed to a friend, "I really long to be more active in the drama of life. I long to be actively engaged in something."[70]

While women who joined abolitionist societies believed in female influence, many were unsure how powerful it was. Some accepted the rhetoric, hoping its claim of female power was true. Betsey Lincott, writing from Amesbury Mills, where the members of the female society outnumbered the male, thought that "the great object at which we aim will, ere long, be accomplished," perhaps because she felt that women were carrying out God's purposes. Members of the Brooklyn (Connecticut) Female Anti-Slavery Society also were confident that "female influence is calculated to effect great good in such a cause, as has been abundantly shown" in Great Britain. Others, however, were doubtful, not about the need to act, but about the consequences of their actions. They displayed a modesty about female power or a skepticism about inflated cultural claims. The women who formed the Weybridge Anti-Slavery Society in Vermont expressed conservative views of what they might accomplish. In their constitution they explained, "We are encouraged to throw in our mite by the reflection, that our sphere of action may be more humble than that of our brethren, and an ability to do good proportionately circumscribed—yet historic records portray in lively colors the services of females for the Good of the state."[71]

Conservative (or realistic) though the Vermont women might have been about the limits of female influence, their constitution also expressed the widely shared belief that abolitionism was not only God's cause but also the cause of freedom. The emphasis on natural rights, liberty, and the principles of humanity revealed republican and revolutionary assumptions that were fundamental to the ways in which these women understood slavery. As Abby Cox explained, how could women be worthy of raising their sons for the Republic "if we cared nothing for its interests." References to the principles of humanity that for many women, like Martha Higginson, meant that blacks were "my fellow creatures" with natural rights contributed to the conviction that slavery was wrong. Slavery degraded the principles of American government. It was a disgrace, the Vermont women insisted, "in this land of Christian light and liberty!"[72]

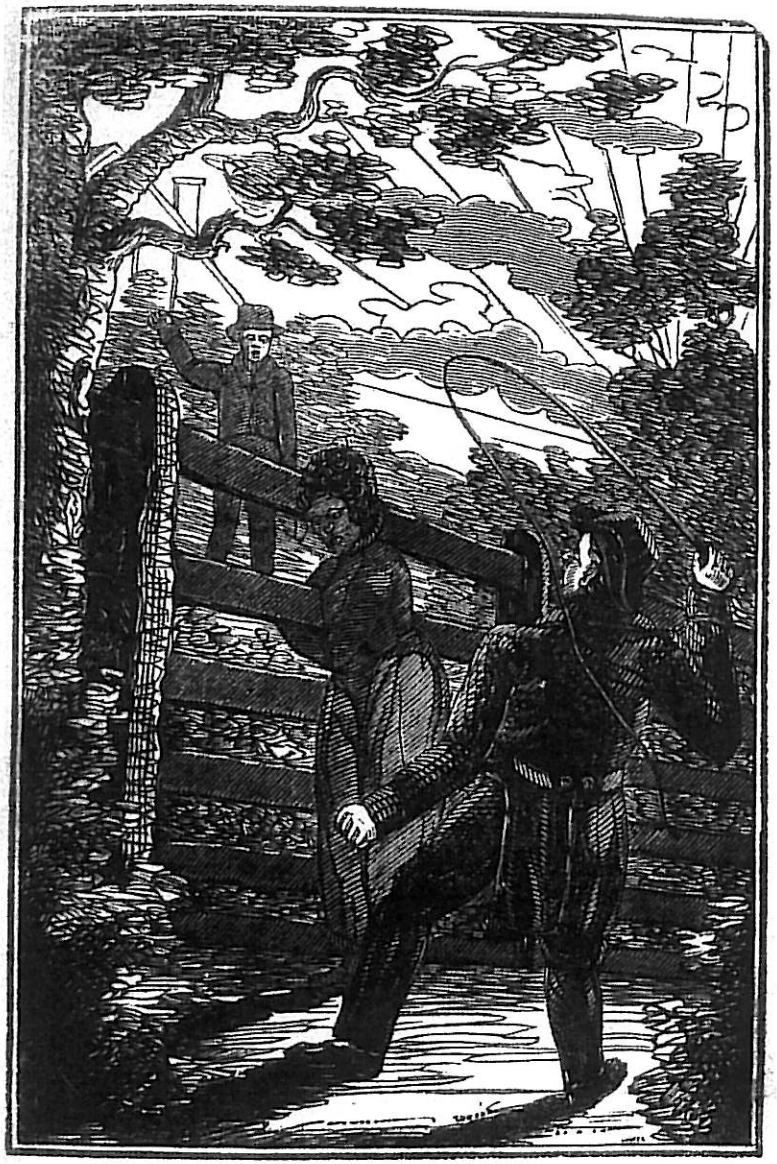
The Weybridge constitution tellingly compared American slavery to the "horrible superstition" in pagan India that forced widows to burn on their husbands' funeral pyres. While the former did not arouse the sympathy of Americans, the latter did. The constitution suggested that Americans not

only ignored evils in their midst but also overlooked the ways in which slavery blighted the country. Just as the custom of forcing Indian widows to end their lives with their husbands was a disgrace, so too was the practice of enslaving blacks. The women who joined antislavery societies felt the shame keenly because they accepted the idea of American exceptionalism. The United States was the country of light and liberty, the land of progress, peace, and prosperity. Slavery threatened this vision and therefore must be ended.[73]

Believing that the United States was a specially blessed place, abolitionist women saw their own sex as exceptionally privileged. Women who joined antislavery societies agreed with the 1836 *Anti-Slavery Almanac*'s description of women, those of New England at least, as "favored inhabitants" of their country. This status undergirded their willingness to "engage in the defence of a large class of . . . fellow immortals" and allowed them to act as the conscience of the nation. Demoralized by the "influence of the atrocious system," "voluntarily" engaged in "its barbarities," southern women had lost what was exceptional about American womanhood. While all Christians should pity southern females, women abolitionists appropriated any right southerners had to speak as women to the nation.[74]

Founding documents and letters frequently explained that women joined antislavery societies because they believed collective action was more efficient than individual exertion. This interest in efficiency may seem unimportant, especially when compared to the call of moral duty or patriotism, but it was not. The desire for efficiency showed how quickly women moved beyond the limited and ponderous domestic strategies that leaders had originally suggested as suitable for them. The emphasis on efficiency further revealed that women had accepted some of the values of the market economy, although they were supposedly shielded from it. The ideology of separate spheres drew distinctions between home and workplace that women were already ignoring in an understated and only dimly understood way.[75]

In their efforts to recruit women, abolitionist writers, antislavery editors, and lecturers had adopted a gender- and class-based strategy. When Amos Phelps had dramatically brandished the master's whip, he intended to encourage the women in his audience to feel a special imaginative and sympathetic connection with the female slave. The constitutions and private correspondence from the 1830s reveal that this approach struck a deep chord among women and motivated them to act. "We should be less women," one female society in Ohio explained, "if the nameless wrongs of . . . the slaves of our sex . . . did not fill us with horror" and awaken "a deep per-



Flogging American Women. Page 100.

The illustration from George Bourne's Picture of Slavery in the United States of America *dramatically portrays the mistreatment of female slaves. Such depictions of the sufferings of slave women touched the hearts and imaginations of many northern abolitionist women. (Boston Athenæum)*

sonal interest in this matter." Women undertook antislavery work not so much for slaves in general but for slave women, their "*oppressed sisters*."[76]

Slavery robbed black women of the rights, privileges, and protections that white middle-class women believed belonged to women. Slave women were "groaning under the yoke of an insupportable and most degrading bondage." Their masters, without any vestige of "manly shame," covered them with "merciless stripes" and perpetrated "cruel outrage" on their bodies. As a group of Ohio women explained, "while man is scourged a woman is more than scourged she is insulted too." Northern women were horrified that "profligate" and "vile" men degraded "whatever there is of delicacy or dignity, in the name of woman, whatever of innocence or helplessness in her nature, whatever of purity of loveliness in her character." If southern white women had abandoned their responsibilities, these women considered that "the dignity of our sex is spoil*d*, and we feel call*d* upon to assert that dignity fearlessly and earnestly."[77]

Although the black women who formed the first Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1832 agreed with their white counterparts that union would make them more efficient and that it was important to promote the welfare of their race, they adopted a constitution that offered a different rationale for association. These women appeared most interested in combating the prejudice that adversely affected the lives of Salem's free blacks. Their organization supported self-improvement and assistance to "needy" members of Salem's black community. Like the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, Salem women had a duty to elevate their race. Self-improvement would "break down the strong barrier of prejudice" and raise African Americans "to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion." Prejudice, the women believed, would disappear once blacks overcame poverty, lack of education, and bad habits.[78] But, concern with northern blacks did not mean indifference to slavery. In fact, as these women realized, northern racism and the southern slave system were linked by the belief that blacks were inferior. Destruction of the notion of intellectual inferiority would undermine both.[79]

As no white women could, black women abolitionists felt the cause to be their own. When Sarah Douglass attended a "Mental Feast" with a "number of respectable [black] females in Philadelphia," she explained how her connection to abolitionism occurred. Possibly because free blacks faced so many problems in the North, some, perhaps many, were more concerned with improving their own situation than they were in freeing southern slaves. Douglass confessed that she had not thought much about slaves until about a year before. The appearance of a kidnapper forced her

to recognize the fragility of her own status as a free person and how easily she too could be enslaved as long as slavery existed: "I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own." The threat to her well-being and safety led her to abolitionism.[80]

In the spring of 1834, two years after the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society was formed, "a few ladies, having carefully examined the subject of slavery" in order to determine "what duties—if any, devolve[d] upon the female portion of the community in reference to it," decided they were "obligated to lend their individual and united influences" to working for its elimination. After calling upon many other women in the town, they obtained enough support to form an association, which included women of both races and replaced the all-black association. The Salem black women did not leave any record of what they thought of the transition from an all-black to an integrated organization. Perhaps they agreed with what Sarah Douglass had written to Elizabeth Chandler in 1833. "Lade, we are a poor and ignorant people, but, believe me, we are not ungrateful. I wish it was in my power to give you an idea of the enthusiastic affection which we regard all those dear friends who are advocating immediate emancipation." White support for an unpopular cause won Douglass's appreciation.[81]

Salem women's depiction of themselves as "ladies" expressed their claim to middle-class respectability despite, or perhaps because of, the questionable nature of their cause and the mixed racial membership of their society. For similar reasons, the *Liberator* and other antislavery newspapers emphasized that *ladies* attended antislavery lectures and joined antislavery organizations. In a typical comment, the *Liberator* asserted that the Norwich, Connecticut, Female Anti-Slavery Society had "among its members some of the most respectable ladies in the place."[82] Yet although the women in the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society considered themselves ladies, some must have had a tenuous grasp on middle-class status and economic security. As the society's president pointed out in 1839, "Nearly all the members of our board support themselves, by dressmaking or teaching school."[83]

Who, in fact, were the women who joined antislavery organizations during the 1830s? The description of the leaders of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society highlights the involvement of single women of modest means in that town. The term "ladies" reveals more about the self-conception of women in abolitionist societies than it does about their position in the community.

Studies of female antislavery societies in a few communities across the Northeast have provided a general overview of their membership. In cities like Boston, New York, and Rochester, New York, few of the white women abolitionists belonged to the established elite or made up the ranks of those who had worked in older benevolent causes. Rather, women from newly successful and often recently arrived families became advocates of antislavery. Though they belonged to the emerging middle class of their cities, their status was not yet secure. Joining them in their cause were women from artisan families. Their husbands worked in establishments like bakeries, printing shops, or tailor shops.[84]

The composition of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFAS), organized in 1833, reveals the social and economic diversity that characterized the female societies that have been analyzed. Predictably, minister's wives and women from professional families were well represented in the association. The first president, Charlotte Phelps, was married to lecturer and Congregational minister Amos Phelps. A sizable percentage of members belonged to the emerging middle class, families whose livelihood came from manufacturing, sales, and business. Still others were artisans' wives. Some members were single women, like Martha and Lucy Ball, who taught school or who, like Mary Parker, ran boardinghouses in order to support themselves. From the vantage point of Caroline Weston, who belonged to one of the most prominent families connected with the society, most of the BFAS's members came from "narrow circumstances."[85]

Members of urban antislavery societies had varied religious affiliations. While almost all were Protestant and often evangelical, the denomination reflected in the membership of individual female associations mirrored the religious loyalties of their cities. Hicksite Quakers dominated the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, for example. In Boston, members tended to belong to the Congregational, Baptist, and Unitarian Churches, while in New York City, many of the women were associated with Presbyterian or Dutch Reform congregations. In Rochester, New York, Presbyterian and Baptist women supported early antislavery. Some had been involved in the series of revivals led by Charles Grandison Finney, the great evangelist of the Second Great Awakening. It was not surprising, then, that the constitution of the Rochester Female Anti-Slavery Society proclaimed that God "made it the duty of all, of every sex, class, and condition in society to do what they can to remove this sin."[86]

Initially the BFAS, like the female antislavery societies in Fall River, New York City, and other northern centers with free black communities, was an all-white organization. Attempts to open the doors to black women met initial resistance. Writing to the BFAS in April 1834, Garrison expressed dismay that "in the minds of a majority of your numbers, [there was] an

unwillingness to admit colored females." In Fall River, two Quaker sisters, Elizabeth and Lucy Buffum, invited the "respectable" young black women who had been attending the village's female antislavery society meetings to join and almost brought the society to a premature end. Although they did not mind having the black women at the meetings, some of the society's "leading members . . . did not think it was at all proper to invite them to join the society, thus putting them on an equality with ourselves." In the end, both Boston and Fall River accepted "respectable" black women as members, as did most other female antislavery societies during the 1830s.[87]

In Philadelphia, Hicksite Quaker women forming the female antislavery society welcomed black members from the beginning. Of the original forty-five members, nine were African American women from elite black families. The emphasis of the society's constitution on the sin of northern prejudice reflected its biracial composition. Members pledged themselves to work for emancipation and for "the restoration of the people of color to their inalienable rights." The Philadelphia society was among the most successful of the integrated societies. Although none of the black women ever became president, several served on the board of managers and held minor offices.[88]

Black members of the PFAS came from Philadelphia's most substantial black families and subscribed to conventional gender norms in so far as it was possible. For example, only three of them worked. While membership in the black middle class was typical of early black abolitionists, the Philadelphia women's secure economic situation that allowed them to honor genteel conventions was unusual. Members of racially mixed associations tended to come from more modest and more fragile backgrounds than the Philadelphia women and many of their white associates, and they thus found it difficult to observe the conventions that implied middle-class respectability.

Susan Paul, as the daughter of one of Boston's Baptist ministers, belonged to the city's black elite and was the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society's most prominent black member. (Other black middle-class members were married to tailors, boardinghouse owners, waiters, and blacksmiths; several were teachers.) Perhaps Paul's status was the reason that a white member of the BFAS described her as "a favorable specimen of the colored race," although apparently others in the black community did not regard her as "one of themselves." Despite her position, Paul experienced a swift reversal of fortune when her father died in 1831. Without his income, her family was in perilous economic circumstances. Forced to move out of their house to cheaper quarters, Paul's mother and her orphaned nieces all depended on Paul for their livelihood. For ten years Paul supported abolitionism while she worked as a seamstress and as a teacher in a desperate struggle to meet the family's needs. When, at thirty-four, Paul died from consumption, the family was "broken up & the children taken by sundry friends."[89]

Although most black women did not participate in organized abolition in these early days, most of those who did lived as close or even closer to the margin than Susan Paul. The vast majority of working black women labored as washerwomen, domestics, or seamstresses and had little in the way of financial resources, economic security, or leisure time. Any associational involvement testified to their determination to work for the abolition of slavery and the improvement of the fortunes of the free black community. In Hartford County, Connecticut, for instance, Hannah Austin did washing in her own home, provided for an invalid husband and four children, and still found time to support her church and local antislavery society.[90]

Some black women, like those in New York City; Nantucket; Middleton, Connecticut; and Rochester, New York, chose not to join integrated societies but preferred to form their own organizations. The racism of white abolitionists doubtlessly prompted this decision. Even Garrison in his letter admonishing the BFAS for its exclusionist policy assured the society to "remember that you are not called upon to decide, that you will make bosom friends of colored females, or invite them into your parlor, or eat or drink with them, or walk with them in the streets, (although if they are truly virtuous and intelligent, you ought not to shrink from these juxtapositions." Black members attended meetings but sat in a special section reserved for them. When on one occasion a black woman took a seat in the white section, a member informed her that "colored people were very well in their place" but apparently not out of it. In Salem, Massachusetts, the racially mixed association formed in 1834 included black women among its officers, but its constitution held out the hand of friendship and equality only to those blacks whose "characters and attainments" justified them. Then, too, black women saw the abolitionist struggle in somewhat different terms than white women. Although they shared the goal of ending slavery, they found the objective of working for equal rights for free blacks far more central to abolitionism than most whites. The constitution of all-black female antislavery societies emphasized the goal of improving the lives of free blacks.[91]

Women in the female antislavery associations scholars have studied often came from families active in the abolitionist cause. As wives, sisters, daughters, and cousins they naturally sympathized with and supported

antislavery. Some grew up in abolitionism. Eliza Earle, for example, dated her commitment "from the hour, when, in earliest childhood, I learned from Father to lisp 'Forced from home and all its pleasures.' " Her cousin, Elizabeth Buffum Chace, felt she too had been "born and baptized into the Anti-Slavery spirit." Lucia Weston, a member of one of Boston's leading abolitionist families, joined a juvenile antislavery society and announced in the unformed handwriting of a young schoolgirl, "We expect to do great things." Susan Paul's uncles were abolitionists, and her brother not only became Garrison's apprentice but was also the first African American to receive a degree from Dartmouth College.[92]

One historian has suggested that single women played a more important role in antislavery societies than they did in benevolent organizations. Certainly, unmarried women were leading figures in the Salem antislavery association as well as in the BFAS, although their prominent presence in the latter group may have partly been a reflection of Boston's large population of single women. It is also true that many of the women joining societies in the 1830s were relatively young. In Boston, a sixth of the women who became members of the BFAS were under the age of twenty. In 1834, the average age of all members was only thirty-two, reflecting perhaps the city's youthful composition; the majority of women in Boston were between the ages of twenty and forty.[93]

Scholars have not intensively studied the patterns of female membership in small towns and rural villages. While impressionistic evidence illuminates similarities between the city and country abolitionists, it also suggests that there may have been greater variety in terms of age and marital status in the composition of nonurban societies than urban organizations. In Reading, Massachusetts, for example, the men and women formed separate antislavery associations in 1833. The combined influence of family and religion was evident in the composition of the two governing bodies. The Reverend Jared Reid headed the male antislavery society, while his wife, Sarah, became the president of the female association. No doubt, many members of the society came from his congregation. The vice presidents and treasurers of each organization were husband-wife teams. In fact, three families, the Parkers, the Peabodys, and the Kingmans, accounted for half of the officers of the two societies. Similarly, in Blissfield, Michigan, family ties linked together the members of the society. Only four of the eighteen women were not obviously related to either one another or to men in the organization formed in 1838. In Danvers, Massachussetts, the pattern was similar, with two Quaker families providing the nucleus for organizing.[94]

Family ties might have helped bring women into association, but they did not necessarily keep women involved for long. Hannah Smith, writing in 1839 from Glastonbury, Connecticut, reported that the previous year there had been an effort to form a society in Hartford. The women, Hannah thought, had joined because their husbands were abolitionists, and they hardly appeared to understand abolitionist principles. "Indeed," she concluded, "I do not know of one Antislavery woman of the right stamp in Connecticut, of sufficient information & energy to organize a society or manage its concerns." This failure supported Garrison's insistence that women must be knowledgeable about their cause.[95]

The relationship between leadership, membership, and marital status appears to have varied so much that patterns are difficult to articulate. In Salem as well as in Boston, single women played important roles in leading their societies. In Reading, however, married women dominated the leadership, while in Amesbury Mills both married and single women shared leadership responsibilities. In terms of general membership, Elizabeth Wright reported from Newburyport, Massachusetts, that the society there "consists chiefly of aged and middle aged persons, who have families"; Pauline Garry, writing from Stoneham, Massachusetts, described "a number" of the society as "misses," although others were "laboring women who discharge the cares & duty of a family."[96]

While some rural associations may have included a few of the community's prominent women, members often described themselves in humble terms. In Concord, New Hampshire, Mary Clark explained that "we are few and a feeble band compared with what we might be in this town. Most of our wealthiest women are either neutral or auxiliary to the American Union, alias Colonization, alias Liberian cause." This disinterest in abolitionism on the part of powerful and affluent women was also the case in Stoneham, Maine, where none of the society was a volunteer "from the circles of wealth and fashion." Reinforcing this view of the disinterest of the leading women were the references abolitionist women made to their own resources, their lack of domestic help, and sometimes their inferior education. Experience Billings, from Foxborough, Massachusetts, confessed both her "ignorance & want of ability to write correctly" and her limited means. In many cases, limited means must have indicated modest economic circumstances and the shortage of ready cash rather than poverty. As Louisa Phillips pointed out, the people of North Marshfield were poor but comfortable. And a member of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society revealed that, "although most of us may think ourselves poor," it was only in comparison to "those who abound in the wealth and luxuries of the world."[97]

Coming after the efforts of the 1830s to draw women into the abolitionist cause, her appeal suggested some of the consequences for involvement. Those women who read and shared antislavery newspapers, talked with friends and neighbors, attended antislavery lectures, and took the step of forming an association sometimes found that their decisions brought "insult and derision" as well as "ill report" and "persecution." In 1840, when Ellen Sands wrote an appeal to the Young Ladies of Maine, asking for their help with the cause, she remembered "many a familiar face whose look expresses surprise, and on whose lips rests a something like contempt; and from voices which are music to my heart, I hear reproachful, and unbelieving enquiry—Are you an *Abolitionist*? To such I would promptly reply that—I am."[98] In the village of Florence, Pennsylvania, one woman who attended a debate on the relative merits of colonization and immediate emancipation rose to show her support for emancipation even after being labeled a vile abolitionist. "For my part," she explained, "if I once espouse a cause upon conviction of its truth, I am not ashamed to adhere to it, if it should cost me some reproach and ridicule."[99]

Not all the consequences were quite so traumatic, of course. As the poet and antislavery writer Elizabeth Chandler found, boycotting goods produced by slave labor was mainly an expensive inconvenience. Unfamiliar free products were often inferior, incurring time-consuming and often expensive trial-and-error. They demanded cooking experiments and produced culinary disasters, as Hannah Robie discovered during her "one or two attempts to make candy with our white sugar." Occasionally, principles demanded some small sacrifice. Deborah Weston's commitment to free products prevented her from eating "almost everything good" when she was entertained in New Bedford, but she had hopes that she was embarrassing her hostesses into switching to free labor goods. She was also resigned to having no new calico gowns and asked her aunt if they might trade dresses so that she would have something different to wear.[100]

Even something so seemingly innocent as acting upon free labor principles could occasionally involve a woman in an unpleasant social situation. Deborah Weston's comments about her visits in New Bedford hinted at the possibilities of creating a confrontation and of appearing rude. In a time when women's observance of social norms was considered a sign of her membership in the respectable middle class, deviance might bear a price. Deborah Weston, with a prominent family behind her, apparently could afford to be more casual about social approval than a young woman, Mary Ann, who visited Deborah's sister in Groton. "As soon as we were alone," Anne Weston explained, "she burst forth; it appears, that the day before, at Dr. Cutter's[,] on her declining slave labour, some how or other, the mine exploded." The situation had been so upsetting that Mary Ann could not even describe it in detail. " 'Dont ask me to tell you any more' said she 'for if I talk I shall get to crying.' " Anne responded by quieting and comforting the young woman, plying her with free labor blancmange and cake and assuring her "the storm would blow over."[101]

The more public step of forming an association might go off without incident and represented an important collective affirmation of commitment. This was the experience of the group of Dover, New Hampshire, women who met in the Methodist parsonage in February 1835. Inspired by concerts of prayer for the slave, the women decided to work collectively. At their organizing meeting, they established a committee to secure signatures for the constitution and were soon in operation. A similar process resulted in the creation of the Brooklyn Female Anti-Slavery Society. In 1834, a group of women gathered in a local hotel to consider what they might do for the slave. They heard several "interesting" articles read aloud, then "a very thrilling 'Appeal to American ladies' by a colored female." Conversation led to a unanimous vote in favor of forming an association. Then, as in Dover, New Hampshire, the women observed the rituals connected with beginning a voluntary organization. They formed a committee charged with preparing the constitution, drawing up a slate of officers, and starting a correspondence with other female associations.[102]

But women's involvement in abolitionism often provoked heated responses. When a woman from Uxbridge, Massachusetts, remarked in 1835 that there was much to discourage the women, she was not exaggerating. Like their counterparts in many communities, both large and small, the Uxbridge women faced "ridicule, persecution and danger." As lecturer Amos Phelps well knew, no matter what he expected ahead of time, "furious opposition" to his lectures and efforts to organize antislavery societies could arise.[103]

Throughout the 1830s, antislavery men and women in both rural and urban places faced behavior ranging from insulting and rude remarks to physical assault. When Garrison had first established the *Liberator* and issued his challenge to the American Colonization Society, most people disregarded or dismissed his variety of abolitionism. But as the antislavery movement gained adherents and the number of antislavery societies proliferated, opposition gathered strength. From 1834 to 1837, the *Liberator* and two other abolitionist papers, the *Philanthropist* and the *Emancipator*, took note of 157 antiabolitionist mob actions in the North. Some of the mobs were organized with specific and limited goals. In 1835, in Utica, New

York, for example, an unruly crowd forced an antislavery convention to end its meeting and wreaked destruction on the offices of the local newspaper that had written in favor of the convention. Other crowd actions were unplanned, however, and degenerated into orgies of violence, destruction, and death. These mobs included men of substance, manufacturers and merchants, and working-class artisans, farmers, and unskilled laborers. Fears of amalgamation, the desire to maintain the political and economic status quo, and deep-seated concerns about the unraveling of communal and family ties already threatened by economic change all played a part in motivating mob activity.[104]

Violence was especially likely to occur around organizing activities. From Portland, Maine, Merriam Hussey reported that the "fury of our opposers" had made people fearful of hearing antislavery lectures. Maine, however, was not as volatile as other New England states. Connecticut, where Phelps experienced "furious opposition" that stiffened his resolve to "stay and see the battle through," was the New England state most prone to violence when antislavery sympathizers began to organize, followed by New Hampshire and Rhode Island.[105]

Phelps's account of his troubles in Concord, New Hampshire, sheds light on what could face women who ventured forth to bear witness to their hatred of slavery. He wrote his wife that he had had a "grand meeting of the ladies and formed a ladies Anti-Slavery Society." But the occasion provoked "almost a mob. However no heads broken and no harm done farther than the throwing of one or two small stones through the windows and crying once or twice 'out with the ladies' etc." Undaunted, the women refused to leave the meeting. "We kept on talking until we had done and then took the names of such ladies (some 55 in all) who were willing to be organised into a society. The meeting was a grand one of the cause."[106]

An insight into the reaction of one of the women present comes from a letter written to her friend. The way this Concord woman describes the incident does not mean that she had not been fearful as the glass shattered and the male cries grew louder, but she distanced herself from the dangers of the situation by adopting a mocking tone. She told her friend of the "ridiculous scene" that had occurred, provoked by "poor cowards" who had "wracked their ingenuity" to come up with some method of scaring the women. She pricked male pride and prowess with her reference to the "war cry of these heroic leaders" ("out with the ladies") and the glorious battle that featured flying "pieces of glass." In a more serious vein, she soberly reflected, "Was it not appalling?"[107]

Caroline Weston, who was in Boston during the height of anti-abolition violence in 1835, expressed her fears in her diary. During the meetings of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, news came of mob action in Abington. Caroline spent a tense day, expecting trouble at any moment. In the morning, she "staid at home in great tribulation—thinking every noise I heard was the coming mob." Later, "as soon as school was over I ran down the street to learn how the battle went—I met a thorough abolitionist coming up looking comfortable so turned back." In the evening, Caroline went to a concert of prayer for the slave. Even as the prayer meeting went forward, she worried. "We supposed that the mob would turn out of course but we have a quiet & orderly meeting."[108]

If many women were frightened at the prospect of violence, others bravely confronted it and tried to use social norms to protect antislavery lecturers. They reasoned that men would—or should—think twice before hurting a lady. This was obviously the strategy in Camfield, Ohio. The speaker there was pelted with eggs, and although the speaker's sons raised their umbrellas to protect their father, the situation was lurching out of control. At this point, "the ladies closed around the lecturer, and the men formed a circle around *them*, and thus escorted, he proceeded to his carriage."[109]

Ohio lecturer Marius Robinson described several incidents in which women attempted to assist him. In Hartford, faced by "the veriest savages I ever saw," Marius met with "a fearless, noble band of women." When the meeting was delayed, the women tried to shame the opposition by praying aloud "that the Lord would make the wrath of men to praise him" rather than venting this wrath on their speaker. At another unruly lecture, one of the women "climbed into the meetinghouse at the window when I was hemmed in by the mob in the pulpit, determined to see what was going on and if possible to aid in my rescue." The bravery of this woman demonstrated that it was possible not only to manipulate gender norms but to also upset them. Rather than men lending their protection to weak women, strong women were rescuing besieged men.[110]

While such mob scenes must have deterred many men and women from responding to the abolitionist message, it may have cemented the loyalty of others. Persecution made the cause more, not less, important, and support more necessary. Living in a culture familiar with the Bible, it was not difficult to find parallels between the experience of abolitionists and early Christians or the prophets. Deborah Weston admitted that she found the trouble in Boston to be one of "the most distressing & exciting" times she had ever experienced. Indeed, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society regarded the events of 1835 as "exciting and thrilling," subjects of "great &

intense interest." So involving and stimulating were these events that the women had to be "careful that they do not become the topic of all absorbing interest. . . . that we do not forget the Slave himself." [111]

During the 1830s, abolitionist newspapers, lecturers, and already converted friends, neighbors, and kin urged women to remember the slave. The surviving sources do not reveal whether women initially played a significant role in Garrison's campaign for immediate emancipation, although the support of some for the free produce movement and the literary antislavery publications of others warn against assuming that they were altogether absent. In any case, the unpopularity of the cause made leaders feel that the support of women was at least symbolically desirable. What responsibilities women might assume only revealed themselves slowly, and few abolitionists, male or female, perceived the consequences of encouraging women to use their moral influence in the cause. While many people made soothing statements about the congruence of abolitionism with the usual female concerns, the efforts to teach women how to argue the abolitionist case and to encourage women to circulate antislavery materials and to recruit others suggested that the work of abolitionism might indeed take women far from the kitchen and parlor.

As leaders were groping toward an understanding of women's part in antislavery, women themselves were also finding their way in the new reform. Women articulated the powerful reasons that drew them to the new cause and emphasized the importance of listening to the call of moral duty. They began to learn new skills and ran the risks that went along with advocating an unpopular position. As they joined antislavery societies, they confronted organizational issues common to associational life and particular challenges related to the nature of their reform. As Mary Clark, from Concord, New Hampshire, explained in a letter to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, she, who relished the work, and other members of the antislavery society were more and more convinced that women especially were called to the work of abolitionism. In that work, there was a special part suitable for females and not adapted "to the sterner nature of man." [112]

Chapter 2
Antislavery Societies
The 1830s

Oh, turn ye not displeased away though I
should sometimes seem
Too much to press upon your ear, an oft
repeated theme;
The story of the negro's wrongs is heavy at my
heart,
And can I choose but wish from you a
sympathizing part? [1]

Although abolitionists continued to form antislavery societies until the Civil War, the 1830s were the heyday of antislavery organizational efforts. Antislavery advocates established associations on the local, county, state, and national levels. While membership figures may not be entirely trustworthy, by 1837 there were reportedly more than 1,000 state and local antislavery societies with at least 100,000 members.[2]

Many of those joining antislavery societies lived in rural communities, villages, and small towns clustered in New England, western New York, along the Pennsylvania-Ohio border, and in parts of the Midwest where New Englanders and Quakers from the South and the mid-Atlantic had settled. While abolitionist organizers could hardly afford to ignore the cities, they had followed the spirit of advice given to Lewis Tappan in 1836 by the energetic and compelling antislavery agent Theodore Weld. "Let the great cities *alone*: they must be burned down by *back fires*. The springs to touch in order to move them *lie in the country*. . . . Let every thing in the