

DEFINING MOMENTS
THE
UNDERGROUND
RAILROAD



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Chapter Two

THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT



There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven that does not know that slavery is wrong for *him*. What! am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow-men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? ... The time for such argument is past.

—Frederick Douglass,
speech delivered on July 5, 1852

As slavery expanded in the Southern section of the United States in the early 1800s, so did organized efforts to abolish or end the practice. Many enslaved people took matters into their own hands and either escaped from bondage or joined together to fight for their freedom. The growing ranks of free people of color in American cities offered proof that enslavement was not justified by racial differences. Free blacks also emerged as influential and effective leaders in the movement to abolish slavery. Many white Americans became outspoken abolitionists as well. Some white anti-slavery activists were motivated by religious faith, while others were inspired by the nation's founding principles of equality, liberty, and justice. By the mid-1800s the abolitionist movement had become an active force for social change, with many prominent organizations, publications, and leaders.

Black Resistance to Slavery

Despite the many laws and brutal punishments designed to prevent them from speaking or acting out against the system, countless enslaved Africans found ways to resist slavery and oppression. Many enslaved people used passive forms of resistance to cause problems for owners or make their lives more difficult. For instance, some enslaved people would work at a slow pace, intentionally make mistakes, or pretend to be ill in order to avoid work. Others would take food from the owners' pantry or garden or break tools or dishes so owners would have to pay to replace them. Some enslaved people got back at their owners by secretly finding ways to develop valuable skills, learn to read and write, or earn extra money that they could keep for themselves.

Enslaved people also banded together to attempt to overthrow the institution of slavery through violent rebellions. Slave uprisings were relatively rare and usually unsuccessful. After all, owners watched enslaved people closely, prohibited them from gathering in large groups, and punished them severely for insubordination. But the publicity surrounding the revolts that did occur caused many slave owners in the South to live in constant fear that enslaved people might be plotting against them. In 1800, for instance, an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel concocted a scheme to take over the city of Richmond, Virginia, where blacks accounted for 40 percent of the population. He recruited 1,000 enslaved people to participate in the uprising, which became known as Gabriel's Conspiracy. When the timing was delayed by a storm, however, whites learned about the plan and executed Gabriel and two dozen other rebel leaders.

Another famous slave insurrection occurred in Louisiana territory in 1811. Charles Deslondes, an enslaved man of mixed race, led a band of 200 slaves in an attack on several plantations along the Mississippi River. Neighboring planters formed a militia that killed more than 50 slaves and captured many others. Deslondes was mutilated, shot, and then burned alive. Other rebel leaders were decapitated, and their heads were displayed on poles as a warning to others. In 1822 a black carpenter named Denmark Vesey, who had purchased his freedom from slavery, came up with a plan to liberate all the slaves around Charleston, South Carolina. He intended to steal a ship from the harbor and sail with them to Haiti, where enslaved people of African descent had successfully overthrown slavery. His plot was discovered, however, and he was hanged along with 36 co-conspirators.

Perhaps the best-known slave revolt was the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831. While enslaved on a Virginia tobacco plantation, Turner studied the Bible,

became a preacher, and experienced religious visions. He interpreted a vision that involved “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle”¹ to mean that he was destined to lead an overthrow of slavery. Turner and his followers went from plantation to plantation, recruiting enslaved people, gathering weapons, and killing 60 white people. After two days, however, the rebellion was suppressed by state and federal troops. Turner and more than 50 other participants were tried, convicted, and hanged. In the atmosphere of fear and anger that followed, white mobs killed an estimated 200 enslaved people in retaliation.

Among people who fought to abolish slavery, violent slave uprisings created controversy. While anti-slavery activists sympathized with the anger, resentment, and longing for freedom that inspired these rebellions, they also recognized that acts of violence against whites could hurt the cause and make life more difficult for enslaved people. Slave owners in the South responded to each insurrection by implementing repressive new laws and policies to restrict the activities of enslaved people and limit the rights of free blacks. Many plantation owners also monitored enslaved people more closely and treated them more harshly.

Whenever possible, many enslaved people attempted to free themselves from bondage by running away. Escaping from slavery required tremendous courage, determination, and ingenuity (see “Henry ‘Box’ Brown,” p. 26). Enslaved people risked their safety and even their lives by attempting self-emanicipation. Since slaves were valuable property, many slave holders went to great lengths to prevent escapes and capture fugitive slaves. They hired patrollers to ride through the countryside at night, for instance, and placed advertisements in newspapers describing runaways and offering rewards for their return. Many enslaved people overcame these obstacles and reached cities in the North, where they joined communities of free people of color. Some of these free blacks had been manumitted—or freed from slavery—when their owner died, or as a reward for service, or because they were no longer needed. Others had secured their own freedom by purchasing themselves or escaping.



Enslaved people sometimes attempted to overthrow the institution of slavery through violent uprisings, such as the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831.

Harriet Tubman (c. 1820-1913)

Famous Conductor on the Underground Railroad

Harriet Tubman was born as Araminta Ross in 1820 (the exact date is unknown). Her parents, Harriet Green and Ben Ross, were enslaved on the Brodas plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. She was one of eleven children in her family. When Tubman was five years old, she began to work as a house servant on the plantation. After working indoors for roughly seven years, she was sent to work in the fields around the age of twelve.

Tubman's owner often lent her out to help in the fields of neighboring farms. On some of these occasions, she experienced horrific treatment by the plantation masters. In one instance, Tubman was told to tie up a slave who had tried to run away. She promptly refused, recognizing that the man was about to be beaten. The master became violently angry and threw a two-pound weight at Tubman, striking her in the head. She suffered a serious brain injury, which caused her to suffer from seizures, severe headaches, and sudden sleeping spells for the rest of her life.

In 1840 Tubman's owner died. Her father was freed due to conditions set forth in the owner's will. Although Tubman, her mother, and her siblings were also supposed to be set free under the terms of the will, the master's family unlawfully ignored these instructions. While Tubman and the others remained in servitude, her father continued working on the plantation.

In 1844 Tubman married a free black man by the name of John Tubman. It was at this time that she changed her name. In addition to taking her husband's last name, she chose to change her first name to Harriet to honor her mother.

Escapes to Freedom

At the end of the 1840s, Tubman's owners began selling their slaves. Since she did not want her family to be separated, she began to consider escape options. She plotted one escape in which she and her brothers ran to freedom, but she was forced to abandon the plan when her brothers began having doubts.



Frederick Douglass Condemns the Fugitive Slave Law

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave the speech excerpted below to the National Free Soil Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 11, 1852. He sharply criticizes the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, arguing that it overstepped the bounds of government by withdrawing rights from African Americans. He urges the delegates to make a strong stand against slavery everywhere, rather than only trying to prevent the spread of slavery to new territories. Finally, Douglass declares that slavery is so offensive to the laws of man and God that it cannot be sanctioned by any political party and must be abolished.

Gentlemen, I take it that you are in earnest, and mean all you say by this call, and therefore I will address you. I am taken by surprise, but I never withhold a word on such an occasion as this. The object of this Convention is to organize a party, not merely for the present, but a party identified with eternal principles and therefore permanent. I have come here, not so much of a free soiler as others have come. I am, of course, for circumscribing and damaging slavery in every way I can. But my motto is extermination—not only in New Mexico, but in New Orleans—not only in California, but in South Carolina. Nowhere has God ordained that this beautiful land shall be cursed with bondage by enslaving men. Slavery has no rightful existence anywhere. The slaveholders not only forfeit their right to liberty, but to life itself. The earth is God's, and it ought to be covered with righteousness, and not slavery. We expect this great National Convention to lay down some such principle as this. What we want is not a temporary organization, for a temporary want, but a firm, fixed, immovable, liberty party. Had the old liberty party continued true to its principles, we never should have seen such a hell born enactment as the Fugitive Slave Law.

In making your Platform, nothing is to be gained by a timid policy. The more closely we adhere to principle, the more certainly will we command respect. Both National Conventions acted in open contempt of the antislavery sentiment of the North, by incorporating, as the corner stone of their two platforms, the infamous law to which I have alluded—a law which, I think, will never be repealed—it is too bad to be repealed—a law fit only to trampled under foot (suiting the action to the word). The only way to make the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter is to make half a dozen or more dead kidnapers. A half dozen or more dead kidnapers carried down South would cool the ardor of Southern gentlemen, and keep their rapacity in check. That is perfectly right as long as the colored man has no protection. The colored man's rights are less than

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Abolitionist movement

An organized social change effort aimed at ending, or abolishing, the practice of slavery.

Bibb, Henry (1815-1854)

Prominent abolitionist, newspaper publisher, and promoter of black migration to Canada.

Brown, John (1800-1859)

Radical abolitionist who supported armed rebellion as a means to end slavery.

Brown, William Wells (c. 1814-1884)

Abolitionist writer and lecturer who promoted the anti-slavery cause in Great Britain.

Coffin, Levi (1798-1877)

Quaker abolitionist who operated active Underground Railroad stations in Fountain City, Indiana, and Cincinnati, Ohio.

Colonization

A movement based on the belief that African Americans would never achieve true freedom and equality in the United States, so their best alternative was to return to Africa and resettle in the land of their ancestors.

Conductor

An individual who guided or transported enslaved people to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

Confederate States of America

The separate nation formed by the rebellious Southern slaveholding states during the Civil War.

CHRONOLOGY

1510

King Ferdinand of Spain authorizes his subjects to begin importing people from Africa to serve as slaves in the New World. *See p. 9.*

1619

The first Africans arrive at the British settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, on board a Dutch trading ship. *See p. 14.*

1652

The Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, passes a resolution opposing slavery. *See p. 28.*

1700

Samuel Sewall, a businessman and judge from Massachusetts Bay Colony, publishes *The Selling of Joseph*, one of the earliest American abolitionist works. *See p. 28.*

1770

Crispus Attucks, a fugitive slave who has lived in Massachusetts for twenty years, is the first American colonist killed by British soldiers in the Boston Massacre. *See p. 18.*

1775

A group of Quakers forms one of the first abolitionist organizations, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race. *See p. 29.*

1776

American colonists issue the Declaration of Independence, which asserts that “all men are created equal” and have fundamental rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; about 20 percent of the population is enslaved at that time. *See p. 16.*

1777

Vermont outlaws slavery in its state constitution. *See p. 30.*

1783

After signing a peace treaty to end the Revolutionary War, the American colonies formally separate from Great Britain and form the United States of America. *See p. 18.*

The Massachusetts Supreme Court rules that slavery violates the state constitution. *See p. 30.*

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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- Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*. PBS, 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>. This online resource divides the history of slavery in America into four sections, each of which features images, documents, and biographies as well as a teachers' guide and student activities.
- Gorrell, Gena K. *North Star to Freedom: The Story of the Underground Railroad*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1996. Aimed at young adults, this book offers a solid introduction to the history and activities of the Underground Railroad.
- Grant, R. G. *Slavery: Real People and Their Stories of Enslavement*. New York: DK Publishing, 2009. Heavily illustrated and full of quotations from historical figures, this informative book covers the slave trade, life in slavery, the abolitionist movement, and emancipation.
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