

Abolitionist Movement Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

Radical abolitionism really begins to flourish in the 1830s. And the... one of the sort of leading figures in this movement is William Lloyd Garrison, who publishes a newspaper called *The Liberator*, which essentially says, "Slavery must end now, there is no compromise with slavery with slave owners. The institution is evil and we have to free ourselves from it as a nation." And this sort of doctrine flourishes through a combination of like high philosophical arguments in the writings of people like Garrison and more concrete and vivid stories of slavery that are coming from the pens and from the lives of fugitive slaves and writers of slave narratives. People like Frederick Douglass, people like Solomon Northup, people like Charles Ball, who are able to offer really vivid stories of what it was like to live amidst the horrors of slavery. More and more, these kinds of ideas are being broadcast about slavery's injustice.

Abraham Lincoln comes into this context of anti-slavery from the fringes. He was a person who was, really throughout his early political career, conscious of distancing himself from radical abolitionists. He was conscious of saying that I am not a person who wants to eradicate slavery everywhere, or who feels like it needs to be eliminated everywhere. What Lincoln's philosophy was is that slavery was problematic to the freedom of white Northerners; that the expansion of slavery was threatening to an ideal of agrarian freedom for, you know, small farming folks like his family in Illinois. And so Lincoln's whole philosophy is that we should restrict slavery, we should try to keep it confined to the places where it exists, we should try to find ways to make sure that it doesn't continue to expand into the new territory.

And so there's a complexity to anti-slavery in the North, and I think it's also really important to distinguish between anti-slavery, which was Lincoln's sort of opposition to the spread of the institution and abolitionism, which was the philosophy of someone like William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglass, that slavery is evil and must end. Anti-slavery is the broad umbrella of opposition to the institution. But there's a difference between that and the concrete work that people were doing to try to eradicate it everywhere.

Maybe the most famous abolitionist in American history is William Lloyd Garrison, who was a foundation of this immediatist abolitionist movement. The idea that slavery must be ended as soon as possible, that it was a fire, that it had to be put out. What people might not know or think about when they think about Garrison is that Garrison was radicalized in a lot of ways by talking to Black people, talking to fugitive slaves who told him how horrific slavery

was. And that made Garrison into a person who said slavery is an urgent problem.

What they also might not know is that Garrison, and this sort of vehicle for radical abolitionism, his newspaper, *The Liberator*. *The Liberator* was supported financially, it was upheld, by Black people. Most of Garrison's earliest subscribers were African Americans. And so it's impossible to really understand, or to really know, the abolitionist movement as it was promoted by white Americans, without understanding how important Black people, enslaved people, fugitive slaves, Black abolitionists were to making the abolitionist movement as radical, and as vocal and as impassioned as it was.

I think there was always a kind of tension in terms of the relations between Black and white abolitionists. There was a feeling among many white abolitionists that they were capable of and they had the ability to do the really intense, theoretical thinking and theoretical sort of argumentation about why slavery was unjust and that, you know, people like William Lloyd Garrison would offer the thought for abolitionism, and people like Frederick Douglass, Garrison would say, could tell the story. They could provide firsthand evidence of what was horrific about slavery.

There was an idea that white abolitionists could appeal to people's minds while Black abolitionists would have to appeal to people's hearts. And there is some merit to this perception, right? There's something distinctive about the kind of emotional appeal that someone like Frederick Douglass could make based on his own experiences of bondage. But it's also really unfair and ultimately we know quite untrue to think that someone like Douglass, because he had been enslaved, because he was Black, could only appeal to the heart, right? We know that Douglass was a really rigorous thinker about democracy and about the sort of ideological foundations of the nation and why exactly slavery was opposed to, or stood in opposition to, those foundations.

One of the other things that I think is really evident here is, is not just a sense of like what Douglass could offer as a formerly enslaved person. There's a bigger picture thing here or truth here, which is that a lot of white abolitionists were not invested in racial equality. They were not dedicated to this idea. They weren't fully convinced that someone like Douglass could do all the same things that they could do. They were not fully convinced that Black people and white people have the same abilities or capacities, or should possess the same rights, even as they were deeply dedicated to the idea that slavery was evil.

Kate Masur

So in a lot of places, and it's a little bit surprising, I think even to a lot of historians these days, how often or how frequently enslaved people and people who were also illegally held as slaves made use of the courts to try to secure their freedom. And I think these freedom suits, the records of them are housed oftentimes in local courthouses. And some of them are still in the courthouses themselves, in county courthouses. They haven't made their way to big repositories. And so, you have to do a certain amount of detective work and be an enterprising historian to find the record of these suits. But it turns out that in many, many places in slaveholding areas, including in Missouri, in the District of Columbia, which I'm most familiar with, many African Americans went to court to sue for their freedom.

And they made all different kinds of arguments. They argued that they were illegally enslaved. At some points they argued that an ancestor of theirs, usually a woman, had been a free woman. And because of that, they should also be free because the status of the person is supposed to follow the status of the mother. They argued that their putative owner had done something illegal. There were locals and state laws that said enslaved people couldn't be transferred across certain jurisdictional lines. And if you did, let's say, move from Virginia into the District of Columbia, you would have to register your existence and your enslaved person. So people actually tracked this and they would go to court and say, my owner did not register me, so I am entitled to my freedom. So there are all kinds of different types of legal actions that people take.

And sometimes they win in court. And it's really interesting to see there are judges who, even if they're pro-slavery, even if they're slaveholders themselves, they're willing to follow the law. They're willing to look at the law and say, well yeah, by rights you should be free.

Edna Greene Medford

The resistance movement began long before African people left the continent. Africans were resisting slave catchers and slave traders in their villages. As some boats were going up the rivers, they were attacking them, and onboard the ships during the middle passage, they are resisting as well. And of course, when they get to America, they continue to resist. We sometimes think that there were no slave revolts in the United States because we have so many of them happening in the Caribbean where Black people are vastly in the majority, and that's never the case in the United States except in a couple of states.

But we have resistance to slavery among African Americans as early as the 1600s. Certainly by 1712, we've got a revolt in New York. We've got another conspiracy in 1741 in New York. We have the Stono Revolt in 1739 in South Carolina. And of course, when we enter the national period, we have resistance to slavery through Gabriel's Revolt in 1800 in Richmond and Nat Turner's Revolt in 1831

in Southampton County, Virginia. And we have individuals who are suing for their freedom during the American Revolution and in the wake of the revolution. And so by the 1830s, when the abolitionist movement becomes better organized and societies are formed, you have Black men and women very actively involved there as well.

You've got the Garrisonians, Black people are joining that organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society. You've got African American abolitionists going to Europe and lecturing about slavery in the United States and raising funds to help the abolitionist movement. You've got Black women involved in the abolitionist movement. We spend so much time talking about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, as we should because these were extraordinary Black women, but there were many other Black women who were involved as well. And not just as ancillary, as peripheral, people. These are folk who are writing and actually contributing to *The Liberator*, the anti-slavery newspaper of William Lloyd Garrison. They are writing and making contributions to *The Anglo-African* in New York and *The Christian Recorder* and other Black newspapers.

They're going on the lecture circuit, both at home and abroad. They're raising funds for the cause. They're doing a variety of things. They're writing poetry, they're writing anti-slavery tracts. So women are not just sitting by the wayside, waiting for men to do the job, and that's extraordinary because this is a period where the cult of domesticity exists, where the role of women is supposed to be in the household, taking care of the children. They're not supposed to be on the lecture circuit and these Black women are out there doing that. White women are as well, but it's extraordinary for Black women because Black women certainly are not respected and they certainly aren't expected to be out there lecturing or writing. But they're doing it and they're very influential.

Steven Hahn

When you look at the abolitionist movement and its relationship to what we call the anti-slavery movement, you learn a lot of things, and part of it is you learn what the limitations of both of those movements were. And it was a reminder of how important what enslaved people did. Abolitionists called the morality of slavery into question. They were almost always deeply religious. They had been converted in revivals of the Second Great Awakening, or they were Quakers, who by the 19th century had come to see slavery and any involvement with enslavement, whether it was a slave trade, owning slaves, or whatever, as a sin. And this, we associate with William Lloyd Garrison. But one of the things we're beginning to learn was William Lloyd Garrison was influenced by African Americans, who were way ahead of him on the slavery question, Garrison was a colonizationist.

And then he went to work on a newspaper in Baltimore and learned from African Americans. Finally, for the first time, he went from Massachusetts to a world in which

slavery not only was legal, but was centrally important in terms of the power relationships. And he learned from them about the immorality of slavery, and then goes back to Massachusetts and establishes *The Liberator* and the American Anti-Slavery Society. And Garrison's idea, and radical abolitionists, because they didn't want simply the restriction of slavery, they wanted the abolition of slavery, and they wanted the abolition of slavery because they thought it was a sin to enslave people. But what they imagined was trying to persuade people of the sinfulness of what they were doing and therefore hoping to persuade them that they needed to act, and that they needed to end their involvement with slavery.

It was called moral suasion. The problem was that most people in the states, white people in states where slavery was legal, especially those people who owned slaves, didn't have the same view of slavery's sinfulness that Garrison and other abolitionists did. From their point of view, they had been converted in revivals, too. They didn't see any problem between being a good Christian and being a slave owner. Now, this is something that Frederick Douglass, if you read his first narrative as other African Americans, who had fled slavery and got themselves involved in the anti-slavery movement, saw, is that they emphasize the contradiction between being a good Christian and owning slaves. And they saw it as the ultimate hypocrisy, but their owners didn't see it that way. And so this was going to be a problem for the abolitionist movement. I mean, you may feel very strongly about the immorality of slavery, but what do you do about it?

At this time, there were two models that could be followed. One was the model of gradualism. We're talking about the 1830s here. When Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*, or the anti-slavery societies begin expanding, that abolitionism, it doesn't turn into a mass movement, but it turns into a movement with chapters from New England, out into the Midwest, with anti-slavery newspapers being published that oftentimes depended very heavily on African American subscribers. But the question is, now that you moved to a position of really calling for the end of slavery, I mean, white people who had questions about slavery had been colonizationists. And this idea was, as we know, that somehow or other we would couple emancipation with the removal of the free Black population. It was more of a rhetorical point than it was something that had any kind of practical implementation. But nonetheless it did suggest that the heart of that thread of the anti-slavery movement was racism, was to try to secure the United States as a country that was for white people, and not for anyone else.

But by the 1830s, if you were going to think about, well, how does slavery end? There were two models. One was the model that basically led to the gradual abolition of slavery in New England, and in the middle Atlantic, which basically said that slaves born after a certain date would be free once they reached a certain age. It really dragged out emancipation over many years. It dragged it out so slowly that most northern states had to pass emancipation laws twice because there was so much ambiguity. And that way can take a long time.

The other model was the Haitian Revolution, which was the violent overthrow of slavery. Now, by the 1850s there were more abolitionists, especially African Americans, but also people like John Brown, who began thinking that the only way to end slavery was through violence. That slavery was violent, that slavery was power that depended on violence, and that the only way you got rid of it was through violent means.

But up until, at that very point, an anti-slavery movement had really developed a mass space. And that was through, first, through a variety of third parties, like the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party, but finally, through the Republican Party, which was not about slavery as being a sin, it was not about abolishing slavery where it existed. Because Lincoln, like other Republicans, believed that the federal government did not have the constitutional authority to abolish slavery where it was legal in the states. And so the only thing that they could do was restrict slavery from expanding into federal territories in the trans-Mississippi west. And they also embraced the idea of colonization, which Lincoln hung on to for a very long time, even through the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. So you had an anti-slavery movement, which was about restricting slavery somehow, thinking that if slavery was restricted, eventually it would collapse from within. And you had an abolitionist movement that, rhetorically, saw a slavery as a sin and immoral, and slavery had to be abolished everywhere, but they had no plan on how you did it. So when the Civil War broke out, there was really nothing on the table, and so part of what turned it into a revolutionary situation was that because slaves acted and forced the federal government to deal with the issue, even though they didn't want to, that all of a sudden the question was, what do you do? And what sort of power the federal government had to deal with the questions that enslaved people demanded that they address.