Women and the Anti-Slavery Movement (1830s)

Women played a significant role in the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States, with their greatest accomplishments and influence occurring between the 1830s and the 1860s. Abolitionist women found strength in numbers, joining together to form societies that used various methods to bring about the end of slavery in the United States. Women's anti-slavery activism grew out of traditional female responsibilities for upholding moral standards through religion and ministering to the poor, elderly, and infirm. But their activism also became much more controversial than those other efforts due to the high economic, social, and political stakes of American slavery.

In December 1833 at the first meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society led by William Lloyd Garrison, women were only allowed to attend as observers, but not delegates. Just days later, Philadelphia abolitionist Lucretia Mott and 21 other women founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and immediately got to work. This society and several other female anti-slavery societies around the country used their extensive social networks and chains of correspondence to bring in more members and share their anti-slavery message. They also opened schools, organized boycotts of goods produced using slave labor, and coordinated large fundraising efforts to support the work of the male-dominated American Anti-Slavery Society. Perhaps most impactful were the petitions these women used as a political tool to try and persuade their lawmakers to abolish slavery. Given that they could neither vote nor hold political office, women relied on petitions as a means of having their voice heard in their government.

Though most of the women in the Anti-Slavery Movement were white, free African American women also took part. The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society was possibly the most integrated of the women's anti-slavery societies, with members including the three daughters of prominent black businessman James Forten. Still, many female anti-slavery societies struggled with the issue of race, with many white members holding racist beliefs and refusing to mingle socially with African Americans.

Most women who advocated publicly for abolition ran into significant public opposition, both because abolition was a controversial issue and because they were seen by many as stepping outside of their appropriate sphere of influence. Women at an 1842 anti-slavery meeting in Concord, New Hampshire were subjected to a mob smashing the windows of their meeting house, and the 1838 Anti-slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia was so reviled by white Philadelphians that the brand-new meeting hall where they had met was burned to the ground in the night.

Though women were severely limited in how they could act, they did have an impact in the Abolition Movement and laid the foundation for future gains in women's rights.

Document 1: Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women

Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women (New York: William S. Dorr, 1837).
PHS Call number: PAM E 445 .N7001 W6 1837

**See especially pages 3-14.*

Source note: This document provides an outline of the groundbreaking Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in New York from May 9-12, 1837, and a list of most of the resolutions proposed at the meeting. It does not include the speeches presented at the convention, and few letters about the convention survive to provide more detail about what was discussed, debated, argued over, and agreed upon. Still, from the *Proceedings* it is possible to see the issues that were most important to women in the Anti-Slavery Movement at this time.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this source? What was their purpose for writing it? Who was their intended audience?
2. In the very first sentence of the proceedings, it says the convention of delegates are "favorable to the immediate abolition of slavery, without expatriation." Given what you know about the Abolition Movement at this time, why do you think it was important for them to include the phrase "without expatriation" at the end of this statement?
3. A resolution on page 8 claims the right to petition as "natural and inalienable, derived immediately from God." Why is the right to petition particularly important to the women of the Anti-Slavery Movement?
4. Several resolutions refer to the obligation of religious institutions to denounce slavery and stop receiving donations from slaveholders. Why might the convention focus particularly on churches and their ties to slavery?
5. On page 8, one resolution states that by marrying southern slaveholders, northerners are in league with a system that desecrates the institution of marriage for many white southerners and destroys it for slaves. While the implication about slave marriages is clear, what do you think the convention attendees meant by their claim about marriage between white southerners?

Document 2: Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States

Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. *An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States: Issued by an Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women....* (New-York: William S. Dorr, printer, 1837).
PHS Call number: E 445 .N7001 W65 1837

**See especially pages 57-63, "How northern women can help the cause of emancipation." It also may be helpful to skim the entire pamphlet to see how the argument is laid out.*

Source note: During the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, it was decided that a committee of three, A.E. Grimke, L.M. Child, and Grace Douglass, should prepare what would become "An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States" as part of the convention's outreach efforts. Angelina E. Grimke (1805-1879), later known as Angelina Grimke Weld, and Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) were both influential white anti-slavery activists and writers. Grace Douglass (1782-1842) was an anti-slavery activist and small business owner, and came from a prominent family in the free African American community of Philadelphia. Douglass and her daughter, Sarah Mapps Douglass, were both active members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this document? What was their purpose for writing it?
2. On page 58, northern women are encouraged to lobby their church and clergymen to promote abolition and condemn slavery from the pulpit. Why is it important in this time for women to exert their influence within their churches for the anti-slavery cause?
3. Why do the authors of the *Appeal* urge northern women to look to English women for inspiration as they do their anti-slavery work (page 59)?
4. What are the concrete actions that northern women are encouraged to take? What are the symbolic or spiritual tasks?
5. The *Appeal* directly addresses northern racism, though without using that modern term. What suggestions do the writers offer for how northern women can combat their own "prejudice" against African Americans?
6. On page 61, the *Appeal* asks African American women to be patient with northern white women as they learn to become less prejudiced. Can you draw parallels between this argument and debates on race and racism today?

Document 3: History of Pennsylvania Hall

Pennsylvania Hall Association. *History of Pennsylvania Hall, which was destroyed by a mob, on the 17th of May, 1838* (Philadelphia : Printed by Merrihew & Gunn, 1838). PHS Call number: F 158.8 .B83 P4 1838

**See especially pages 123-126, "Speech of Angelina E.G. Weld."*

Source note: Angelina E. Grimke Weld (1805-1879) was born to a slaveholding family in South Carolina but became an influential leader in the Abolition Movement. She delivered this speech (pages 123-126) to attendees of the second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, and as she spoke, a mob was attacking the building where she spoke, Pennsylvania Hall. Weld and her older sister Sarah Grimke, who was also an ardent abolitionist, became the first two female agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. Their speaking tours and publications drew praise from many abolitionists and immense criticism from pro-slavery politicians, much of the press, and many churches. Weld and Grimke's work highlights the tension that many contemporary women felt between the moral obligation to work toward abolition, and the societal expectation of women to remain in the domestic sphere.

Historical Context: Pennsylvania Hall was a large, public building located in downtown Philadelphia on 6th Street south of Race Street. Financed through a joint-stock company by abolitionists and other prominent citizens of the city, it was designed as a meeting place for abolitionists and other groups and had a mission to promote free speech. The first floor had a lecture hall and a small bookstore, and the second floor had another large hall with a stage, over which was written the motto "Virtue, Liberty and Independence." The building was dedicated on May 14, 1838, and after just four days of dedication ceremonies and meetings of the 1838 Anti-slavery Convention of American Women, an anti-abolition mob of mostly white men burned the building to the ground. Firefighters arriving at the scene only sprayed water on the neighboring buildings. The mob continued on after destroying Pennsylvania Hall to terrorize African American neighborhoods and damage African American-owned buildings.

Reading questions:

1. On page 124, why does Weld distinguish between "happiness" and "mirth" with regards to the emotional state of enslaved people?
2. Weld uses the raging mob outside the building where she's giving her speech as a rhetorical tool (page 124). How does she use the mob, and what effect do you think this tactic had on her audience?
3. Weld says that she came up out of South Carolina to Pennsylvania hoping to find strong support for anti-slavery efforts. What did she find instead?
4. Just by attending this meeting, Weld argues, the audience is doing important work to end slavery (page 125). How do the stakes of attending such a meeting

differ for white anti-slavery activists, versus African American anti-slavery activists?

5. Besides attending this very meeting, what other actions can and should women take to help the anti-slavery cause, according to Weld? See pages 125-126.

Document 4: Sarah Grimké

Grimké, Sarah Moore. *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States* (New York: s.n., 1836).
PHS Call number: PAM HT 913 .G75 1836 c.2

Source note: Sarah Moore Grimké (1792-1873) was the daughter of a prominent slaveholding family from Charleston, South Carolina. While living in Philadelphia with her father in 1819 and then after his death that same year, Grimké met Quakers who introduced her to the faith, especially through the writings of the abolitionist Quaker John Woolman. She moved permanently to Philadelphia in the 1820s and became a Quaker. Grimké's younger sister Angelina joined her in 1829 in Philadelphia, and the two became active in the anti-slavery movement. Sarah and Angelina became the first two female agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. Their speaking tours and publications drew praise from many abolitionists and immense criticism from pro-slavery politicians, much of the press, and many churches.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this document? Do you think it is a reliable source of information for this topic?
2. Why does Grimké specifically address the southern clergy on the subject of abolition (page 2)?
3. What argument does Grimké make, using the Bible as evidence (pages 3-5)?
4. Why purpose does Grimké have for quoting McDowell from his speech before the Virginia House of Delegates in 1832 (page 6)?
5. What is Grimké's rebuttal to the common argument at the time that "the Africans are a divinely condemned and proscribed race" (page 8)?
6. What religious argument for abolition does Grimké make based on the work of the committee from the synod of Georgia and South Carolina (pages 12-14)?
7. What reasons does Grimké give for rejecting a gradualist approach to abolition (page 16)?
8. Based on this document, what do you think were Grimké's views on the Catholic Church? Do you think these views were common or unusual at the time?
9. What rebuttal does Grimké make from the Bible to the common argument that slaveholders simply inherited the system passed down from their parents and other predecessors and therefore should not be obliged to abolish it (pages 18-19)?

Document 5: Angelina Grimké

Grimké, Angelina Emily. *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (s.l.: American Anti-slavery Society, 1836).
PHS Call number: PAM HT 871 .G75 1836

Source note: Angelina Emily Grimke (1805-1879) was born to a slaveholding family in South Carolina but became an influential leader in the Abolition Movement. Angelina had a dynamic personality and became a charismatic and effective speaker on the subjects of abolition and women's rights. According to historian Gerda Lerner, while Sarah Grimké generally wrote and spoke about theology and morality, Angelina focused on political and organizational aspects of the anti-slavery movement. Angelina and Sarah's work and lives highlight the tension that many contemporary women felt between the moral obligation to work toward abolition, and the societal expectation of women to remain in the domestic sphere. In 1838, Angelina married fellow abolitionist Theodore Weld and thereafter retreated to a more private life, though she continued to write and advocate for progressive causes until the end of her life.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this document? Who was their intended audience?
2. What are some major problems and inconsistencies with pro-slavery arguments that Grimké points out on page 2?
3. What similarities do you see between Angelina Grimké's arguments in this document and Sarah Grimké's arguments in *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States*? How much do you think the sisters' ideas were influenced by each other?
4. For what purpose does Grimké list the six ways that people became servants under Hebrew law, and the rules that protected Hebrew servants (page 5-8)?
5. How does Grimké invoke the golden rule (treat others as you wish to be treated) to support her argument for immediate emancipation (pages 13 and 14)?
6. What are Grimké's seven propositions, and what are the four things that her fellow southern Christian women can do to help end slavery (pages 16-18)?
7. For what purpose does Grimké describe the actions of heroic women in the Bible and in history who defied the laws of their land or people in power (pages 21-23)?
8. Why does Grimké claim that "prejudice against color, is the most powerful enemy we have to fight with at the north (page 30)"?
9. What evidence does Grimké provide in favor of immediate, rather than gradual, emancipation (page 35)?

Document 6: Salerno Secondary Source

Salerno, Beth. *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).

**See especially Chapter Four: Internal Divisions, 1837-1840, pp. 79-118*

Source note: Beth Salerno is a professor and the department chair of American History at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire. Her research focuses on the antebellum era, and she is currently writing a biography of New England anti-slavery activist Mary Clark.

Reading questions:

1. What reasons did some women have to join the American Anti-Slavery Society? What reasons did some women have to join the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society? Why did many women choose to stay in their female anti-slavery societies?
2. Why were there more African American delegates and attendees at the 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women than at the 1837 convention?
3. Why did some women object to having a mixed meeting with both female and male speakers (page 82)?
4. What reason did dissenters give for not approving Sarah Grimke's resolution stating the duty of female anti-slavery activists to refute prejudice by interacting socially with African Americans and treating them as social equals?
5. Why was 1840 a crucial year in the Women's Anti-Slavery Movement (page 118)?
6. How does the Women's Anti-Slavery Movement start to overlap with a nascent Women's Rights Movement (page 118)?

Document 7: Brown Secondary Source

Brown, Ira V. "Cradle of Feminism: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833-1840." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 102, No. 2 (April 1978): 143-166.

Source note: Ira V. Brown (1922-2012) was a professor of history at Penn State University from 1947 to 1987. Much of his research and writing focused on abolitionism and civil rights in Pennsylvania. In addition to writing several books, his work was frequently published in history journals, including the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, a publication of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? What perspective might this author bring to the subject?
2. What is the author's main point, the thesis, of this article?
3. How do the arguments in this source differ from those in the other secondary source, Beth Salerno's *Sister Societies*? What are the similarities between these two sources?
4. In what ways does this source clarify or contextualize the primary sources in this set?