



# The Religious Roots of the Abolition Movement

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**An Online Professional Development Seminar**

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*from the* National Humanities Center



## GOALS

- To better understand the role of religious beliefs and institutions in the battle to end slavery
- To understand the different audiences for abolitionist arguments
- To offer primary documents from a variety of participants
- To better understand how to use documents with students in class



## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- With limited time to teach about the power of the abolitionist movement, how best can a teacher choose who and what to teach?
- How did slaveholders and abolitionists in this country react to the news that Britain had closed the African trade in 1806?
- Are there any data to illustrate the diversity of the abolition movement, material like information on subscribers to *The Liberator*, contributions to anti-slavery societies, or information on those who submitted anti-slavery petitions?
- Was the abolitionist movement a result of or simply an extension of the Second Great Awakening?
- How did the abolitionist movement relate to women's suffrage movement and other reform movements of the era?



## FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Why did Protestant churches come to see slavery as an evil that needed to be eradicated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?
- What religious arguments did abolitionists use to make their case?
- How did abolitionists use religious strategies and sentiments to appeal to other Christians—black and white, northern and southern, male and female?



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Research Interests: African-American religion;  
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history of the American West; Mormonism

*Setting Down the Sacred Past:  
African American Race Histories*  
2010

*Religion and Society in Frontier California*  
1994



## The Big Shift:

How do Christians come to see slavery as something that needs to be abolished?



# The Bible on Slavery

- “Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, **which thou shalt have**, shall be of **the heathen** that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children **of the strangers** that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, **to inherit them for a possession**; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.” [Leviticus 25:44-46]
- “**Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling**, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” [Ephesians 6:5-6]
- “Let slaves regard their masters as worthy of all honor.” [1 Timothy 6:1-2]





## Reasons had to come from elsewhere:

### Case I: The Quakers

Who were they and what did they believe?

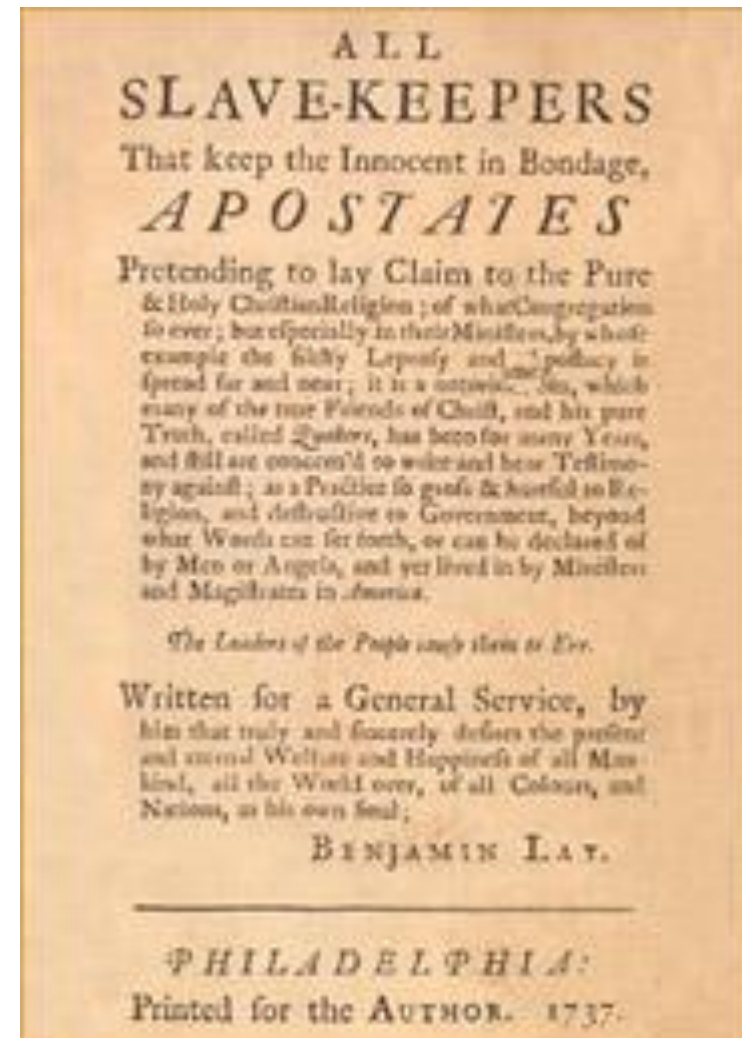




# The Religious Roots of the Abolition Movement



Benjamin Lay, 1681 - 1760



Benjamin Lay's 1737  
address to fellow Quakers



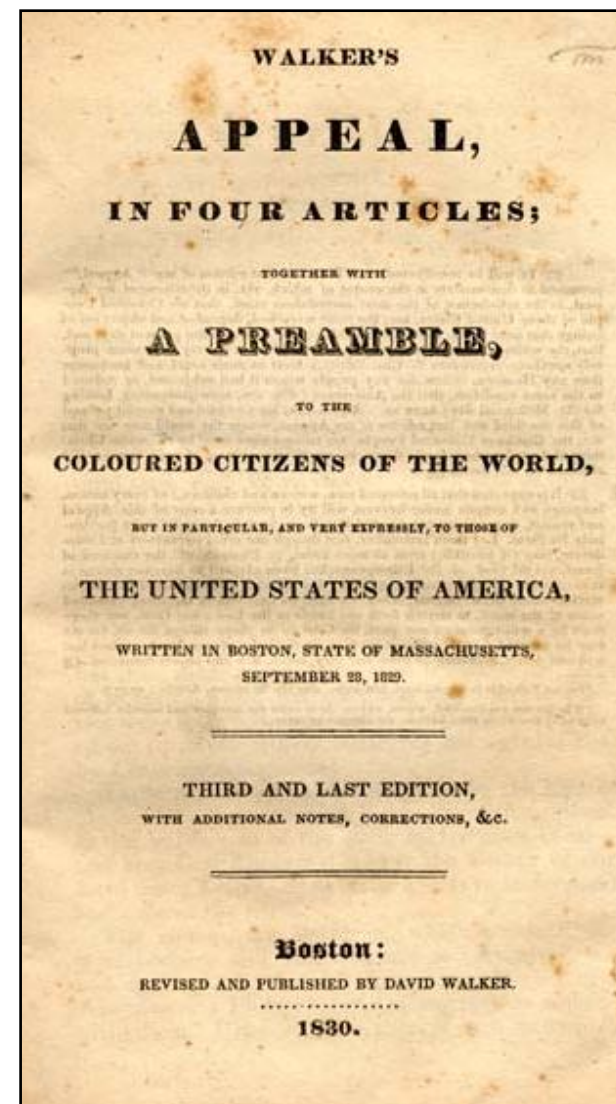
## Case II: Independent Black Churches

- Situation of free blacks in northern states led to religious organizing
- Had access to education, print, and had their own biblical interpretations
- Served as proof to whites that African Americans could become educated, Christianized



# David Walker, 1785 – 1830

- Born free in Wilmington, North Carolina.
- Settled in Boston where he ran a clothing store during the 1820s.
- Agent for *Freedom's Journal*, a New York-based weekly abolitionist newspaper.
- His works were banned in several states and were instrumental in initiating slave escapes and insurrections.





## David Walker, *Appeal*, “Preamble” (1830)

The fact is, the labour of slaves comes so cheap to the avaricious usurpers, and is (as they think) of such great utility to the country where it exists, that those who are actuated by sordid avarice only, overlook the evils, which will as sure as the Lord lives, follow after the good. In fact, they are so happy to keep in ignorance and degradation, and to receive the homage and the labour of the slaves, **they forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors; for although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring other destructions upon them--**for not unfrequently will he cause them to rise up one against another, to be split and divided, and to oppress each other, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand.





## David Walker, *Appeal*, “Preamble” (1830)

How many millions souls of the human family have the blacks beat nearly to death, to keep them from learning to read the Word of God, and from writing. And telling lies about them, by holding them up to the world as a tribe of TALKING APES, void of INTELLECT!!!!!! incapable of LEARNING, &c.

Yes, I have known small collections of coloured people to have convened together, for no other purpose than to worship God Almighty, in spirit and in truth, to the best of their knowledge; when tyrants, calling themselves patrols, would also convene and wait almost in breathless silence for the poor coloured people to commence singing and praying to the Lord our God, as soon as they had commenced, the wretches would burst in upon them and drag them out and commence beating them as they would rattle-snakes—many of whom, they would beat so unmercifully, that they would hardly be able to crawl for weeks and sometimes for months. **Yet the American minister send out missionaries to convert the heathen, while they keep us and our children sunk at their feet in the most abject ignorance and wretchedness that ever a people was afflicted with since the world began.**



## Case III: Second Great Awakening

- Revivals among white evangelicals (Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians) beginning in 1800
- Moved slavery to a central place in American Protestant life



# Revivals and Reforms

- Shift of consciousness of slavery as a bad system with potentially harmful consequences to something even more corrosive.
- Tied to new series of revivals in 1820s and 1830s that stressed social reform as a mark of salvation .
- Northern Evangelicals increasingly associate slavery with sinfulness. It is a malum in se.
- Led by revivalist Charles Finney and William Lloyd Garrison, a well-known abolitionist, who called for complete and immediate abolition of slavery.



William Lloyd  
Garrison



Charles Grandison  
Finney





How to bring the issue of slavery home  
to Americans?

Send out cool looking bad boys with fire  
in their eyes: a generational shift



## Theodore Dwight Weld, 1803 – 1895

- Trained as a youth with Charles Finney's "holy band" of revivalists, preaching salvation and temperance in western states.
- Helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society with William Lloyd Garrison.
- Dismissed from Lane Seminary in 1834 for preaching abolition.
- Married Angelina Grimke in 1838.
- Later ran interracial, coed schools, championed equal rights.





# Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery, 1837*



SLAVERY seeks refuge in the Bible only in its last extremity. It seizes the horns of the altar in desperation, rushing from the terror of the avenger's arm. **Like other unclean spirits**, it “hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest its deeds should be reproved.” [John 3:20]

Goaded to frenzy in its conflicts with conscience and common sense, denied all quarter, and hunted from every covert, it vaults at last into the sacred inclosure and courses up and down the Bible, “seeking rest, and finding none.” [Matthew 12:43]



How to bring the issue of slavery home  
to Americans?

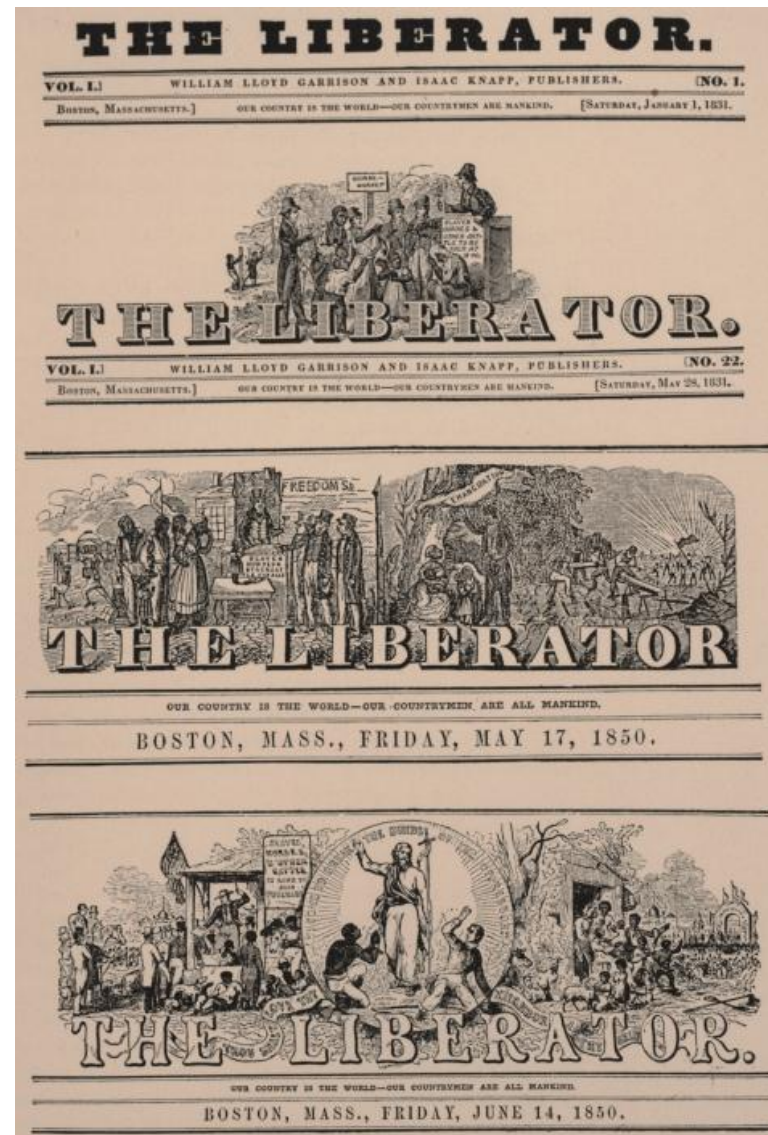
Saturate the media, reach diverse audiences



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Importance of the rise of religious publishing as a way to spread the word

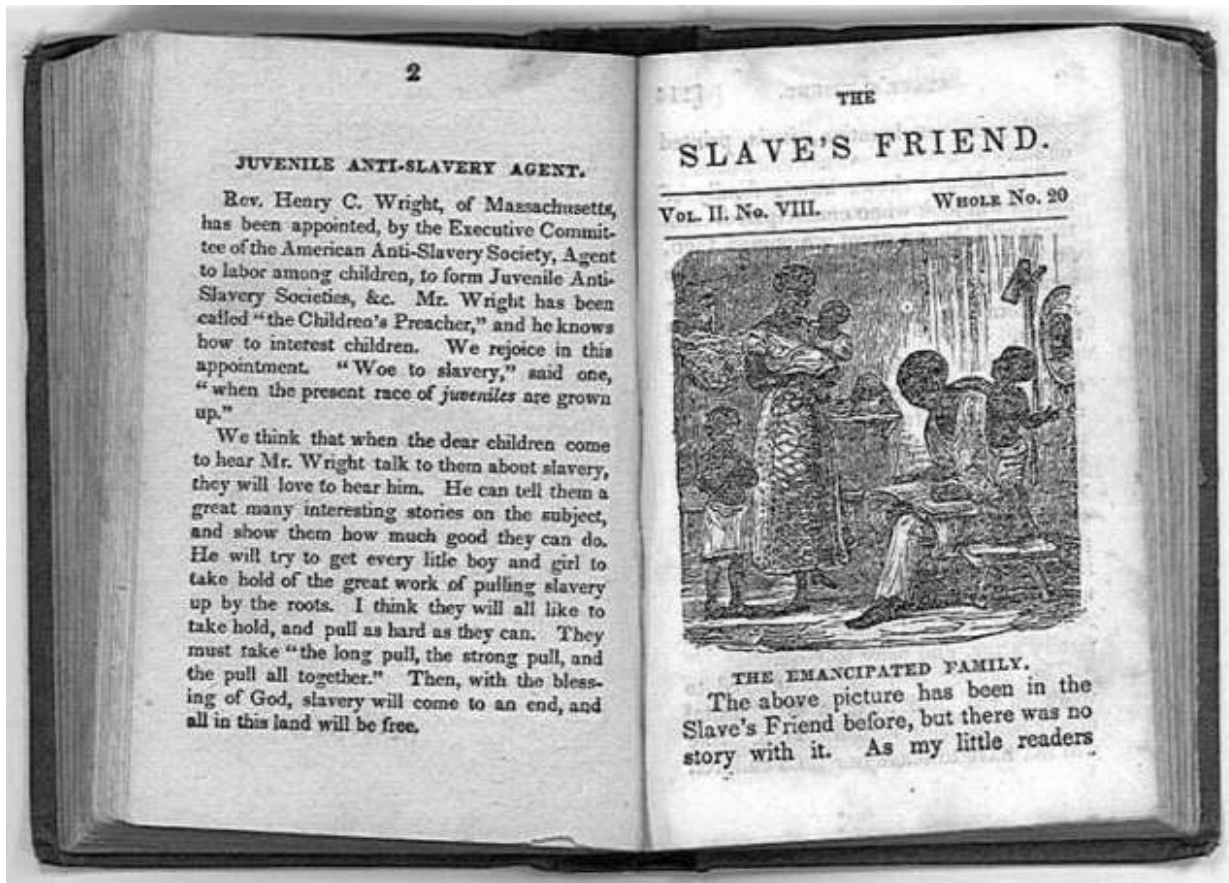
Different mastheads of  
*The Liberator*







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Anti-slavery publication for children from the American Anti-slavery society (1836)



How to bring the issue of slavery home  
to Americans?

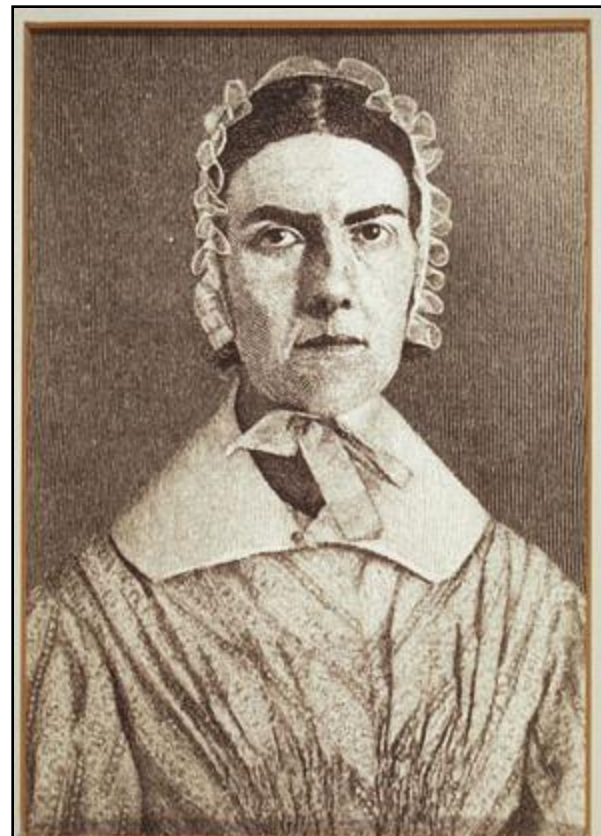
Appeal to southern, Christian women





# Angelina Grimke, 1805 – 1879

- Born in Charleston, South Carolina into a prominent family.
- Leaves South Carolina in 1829 and moves to Philadelphia, where she becomes a Quaker.
- Joins Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1835.
- Through association with William Lloyd Garrison becomes major abolitionist speaker.



Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University  
Copy of Engraved Portrait of Angelina Grimke, ca. 1845. From Woman's Rights Collection, 1853-1958; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.



# Angelina Grimke, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*



“But there are other Christian women scattered over the Southern States, a very large number of whom have never seen me, and never heard my name, and who feel *no* interest whatever in *me*. ‘But I feel an interest in *you*, as branches of the same vine from whose root I daily draw the principle of spiritual vitality—Yes! Sisters in Christ I feel an interest in *you*, and often has the secret prayer arisen on your behalf, Lord ‘open thou their eyes that they may see wondrous things out of thy Law’—It is then, because I *do feel* and *do pray* for you, that I thus address you upon a subject about which of all others, perhaps you would rather not hear any thing; but, ‘would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly, and indeed bear with me, for I am jealous over you with godly jealousy.’”



# Angelina Grimke, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*

“I know that this doctrine of obeying God, rather than man, will be considered as dangerous, and heretical by many, **but I am not afraid openly to avow it, because it is the doctrine of the Bible; but I would not be understood to advocate resistance to any law however oppressive, if, in obeying it, I was not obliged to commit *sin*.** If for instance, there was a law, which imposed imprisonment or a fine upon me *if* I manumitted a slave, I would on no account resist that law, I would set the slave free, and then go to prison or pay the fine. *If* a law commands me to sin I will break it; if it calls me to *suffer*, I will let it take its course *unresistingly*. **The doctrine of blind obedience and unqualified submission to *any human* power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is the doctrine of despotism,** and ought to have no place among Republicans and Christians.

...

Slavery must be attacked with the whole power of truth and the sword of the spirit. **You must take it up on *Christian* ground, and fight against it with *Christian* weapons,** whilst your feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. And you are now loudly called upon by the cries of the widow and the orphan, to arise and gird yourselves for this great moral conflict, with the whole armour of righteousness upon the right hand and on the left.”



How to bring the issue of slavery home  
to Americans?

Bring it into churches, stores, and homes

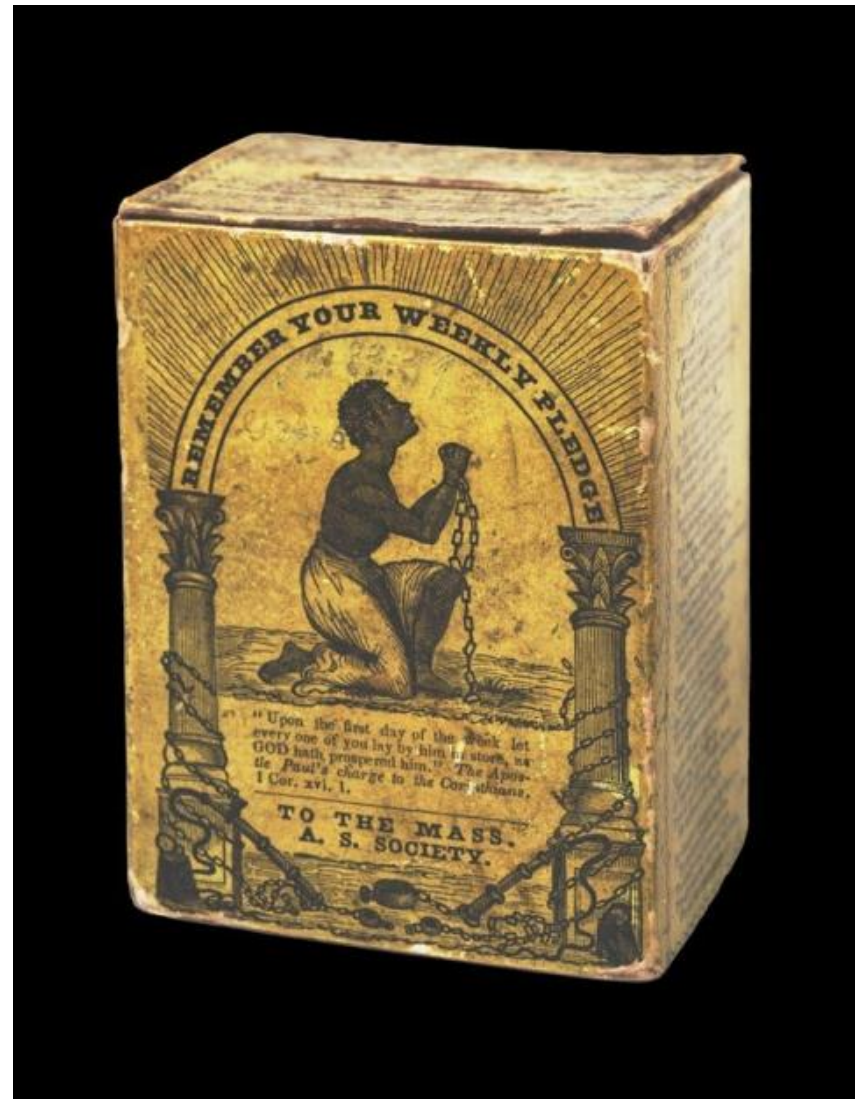


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“Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.”

The Apostle Paul’s Charge to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. xvi, 1.

A contribution box, used to gather pennies, other coins, in support of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society







How to bring the issue of slavery home  
to Americans?

Employ eloquent ex-slaves to speak of  
their personal experiences.



# Frederick Douglass, 1818 – 1895

- Born into slavery in Maryland.
- Primarily self-taught.
- Escaped to the north in 1838.







# William Lloyd Garrison, Preface to 1845 edition of *Douglass' Narrative*

I shall never forget his first speech at the convention—the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind—the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise--the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever. **There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in soul manifestly “created but a little lower than the angels” —yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave, —trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the American soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards, for the love of God and humanity! Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being—needing noting but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race—by the law of the land, by the voice of the people, by the terms of the slave code, he was only piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal, nevertheless!**



## Frederick Douglass, “The Relation of the Free Church to the Slave Church”

“There is a law above all other enactments—it is the law written by the finger of God upon the heart, that man shall not hold property in man. . . . Slavery exists because it is popular. We have to make it unpopular. What would be thought of the man who said he was diametrically opposed to slavery, while he went and took the money which was wrung from the blood, bones, and sinews of the slave, to build his church and pay his stipend? We would say he aided and abetted slavery. If you hold fellowship with slaveholders, you virtually say to the world that a man can be a follower of the meek and lowly Jesus, although he be, at the same time, the vilest sinner. But whether it be assumed by others or not, I know it to be true, **as truth can have no concord with lies, so a free church cannot hold fellowship with a slave one. No quarter is given to slavery by true freedom.**”



If slavery is a sin, is violence against it ever justified?

- Nat Turner and the slave revolt
- John Brown and the armed insurrection



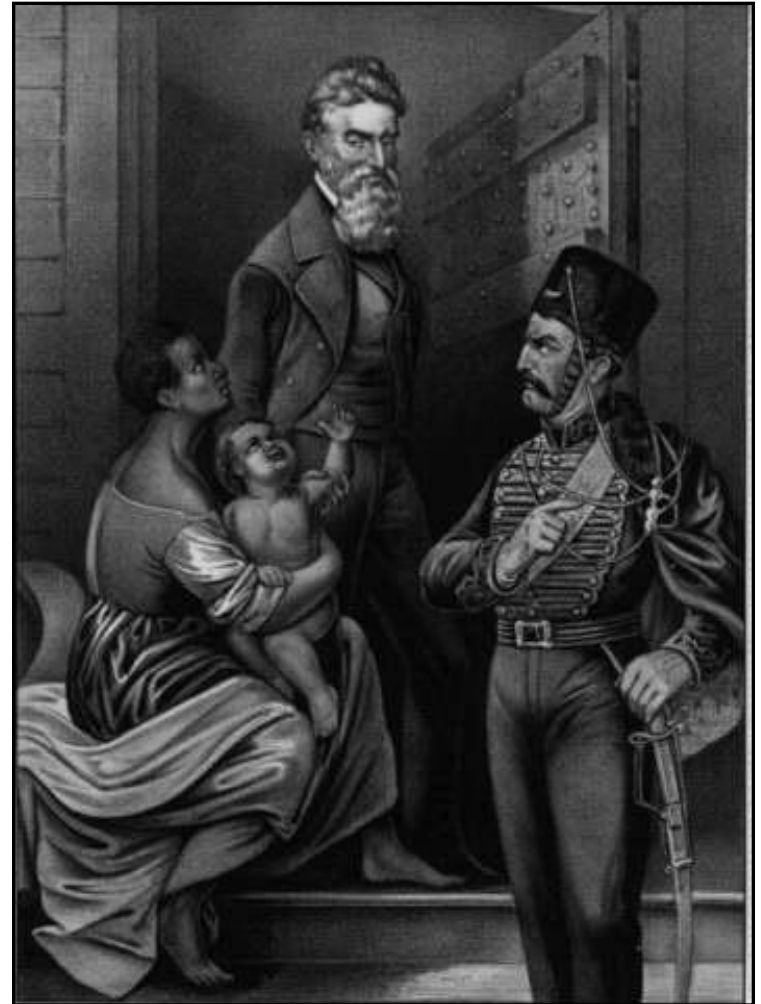
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“The bloody harvest of Harper’s Ferry was ripened by the heat and moisture of merciless bondage of more than two hundred years. That startling cry of alarm on the bank of the Potomac was but the answering back of the avenging angel to the midnight invasions of Christian slave-traders on the sleeping hamlets of Africa. The history of the African slave-trade furnishes many illustrations far more cruel and bloody.”

Frederick Douglass, 1881

John Brown, The Martyr  
New York: Currier and Ives, 1870





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Thank You**