

Section 4

Black Abolitionists

Black Abolitionist Women

Black women, of course, joined black men in opposing slavery. When considering their role, we need to remember that the United States in the early nineteenth century was a society with a rigid gender hierarchy. Law and custom proscribed women from all political, professional, and most business activities. Those women deemed by black and white Americans to be respectable—the women of wealthy families—were expected to devote themselves exclusively to domestic concerns and to remain socially aloof. Church and benevolent activities were one of their few opportunities for public action. Even in these arenas, custom relegated them to work as auxiliaries of men’s organizations.

This was certainly true of the first *formal* abolitionist groups of black women. Among the leaders were Charlotte Forten, the wife of James Forten, and Maria W. Stewart, the widow of a well-to-do Boston ship outfitter. Charlotte and her daughters Sarah, Margaretta, and Harriet joined with other black and white women to found the **Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society** in 1833. A year earlier, in 1832, other black women had established in Salem, Massachusetts the first women’s anti-slavery society. Women of the black elite were also active in the education of black children, which they hoped would overcome the white prejudices that supported slavery.

Stewart’s brief career as an antislavery orator was far more striking and controversial than those of the Fortens or other early black female abolitionists. Influenced by Walker’s *Appeal* and encouraged by William Lloyd Garrison, Stewart in 1831 and 1832 became the first American woman to address male audiences in public. Although she directed some of her remarks to “Afric’s daughters” and to “ye fairer sisters,” she—as had Walker before her—pointedly called on black men to actively oppose slavery. “It is true,” she told a group assembled at the African Masonic Hall in Boston in 1833, “our fathers bled and died in the revolutionary war, and others fought bravely under the command of [General Andrew] Jackson [at New Orleans in 1815], in defense of liberty. But where is the man that has distinguished himself in these modern days by acting wholly in the defense of African rights and liberty?” Such remarks from a woman cut deeply, and Stewart met

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What role did black women play in the abolition movement?
- ▶ What was the Baltimore Alliance and what role did it play in the abolition movement?
- ▶ What was David Walker’s *Appeal* and why was it important?
- ▶ What was the significance of Nat Turner’s revolt?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, p. 267
- ▶ practical abolitionists, p. 268
- ▶ *The Liberator*, p. 271
- ▶ expatriation, p. 271

▶ Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher’s Resource Manual*.

▶ Recommended Reading

Shirley J. Yee. *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992. Concentrates on the period after 1833, but it is the best place to start reading about black abolitionist women.

► Living Words Audio Clip

Track 8

What If I Am a Woman?, speech by Maria W. Stewart; read by Ruby Dee

such hostility from the black community that in September 1833 she retired as a public speaker. Henceforth, she labored in more conventional and respectable female ways for the antislavery cause.

Many African-American women (as well as many white women), however, did not fit the early nineteenth-century criteria for respectability that applied to the Fortens, Stewart, and others in the African-American elite. Most black women were poor. They lacked education. They had to work outside their homes. Particularly in the upper South, these women were **practical abolitionists**.

PROFILE ❖ Maria Stewart

Maria W. Stewart had a brief but striking career as an abolitionist, feminist, and advocate of racial justice. She was born Maria Miller in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803 to free parents, and she was orphaned at age five. Raised in the home of a minister, she had little formal education until she began attending “sabbath schools” when she was fifteen. In 1826 she married James W. Stewart, a successful Boston businessman who died in 1829.

In 1830 Maria W. Stewart determined to dedicate herself to Christian benevolence. In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison published her pamphlet *Religion and Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, in which she advocated abolition and black autonomy. The following year, Garrison published her second and last pamphlet, which dealt more narrowly with religion.

Meanwhile, Stewart began speaking to black organizations. In early 1832 she addressed Boston’s African-American Female Intelligence Society. She noted that the world had entered a revolutionary age. She called on African-American women to influence their husbands and children in behalf of the cause of black freedom, equality, education, and economic advancement in America. In regard to African colonization, she said, “before I go, the bayonet shall press me through.”

When in February 1833 she addressed Boston’s African Masonic Lodge, Stewart over-

played her role as a prophet. She invoked the glories of ancient Africa as well as black service in the American Revolution in order to chastise black men of her time for not being more active in behalf of the liberty of their people. By claiming that black men lacked “ambition and requisite courage,” she provoked her audience to respond with hoots, jeers, and a barrage of rotten tomatoes.

Daunted by this stunning rejection, Stewart determined to leave Boston for New York City. In her farewell address of September 1833, she asserted that her advice had been rejected because she was a woman. Nevertheless, while acknowledging that black men must lead, she called on black women to promote themselves, their families, and their race.

During the rest of her life, Stewart sought to fulfill that role in a less flamboyant manner. In New York she joined the Female Literary Society and became for many years a public school teacher. She moved to the slaveholding city of Baltimore in 1852 to start a school for black children. During the Civil War, with the assistance of black seamstress Elizabeth Keckley, she organized a black school in Washington. Later she worked as a matron at that city’s Freedmen’s Hospital and organized a Sunday school for poor black children. She died at Freedmen’s Hospital in December 1879.

From the revolutionary era onward, countless anonymous black women, both slave and free, living in such southern border cities as Baltimore, Louisville, and Washington risked everything to harbor fugitive slaves. Other heroic women saved their meager earnings to purchase freedom for themselves and their loved ones. Among them was Alethia Tanner of Washington, who purchased her own freedom in 1810 for \$1,400 (about 16,000 current dollars). During the 1820s she also purchased the freedom of her sister, her sister's ten children, and her sister's five grandchildren. During the 1830s Tanner purchased the freedom of seven more slaves. Meanwhile, according to an account written in the 1860s, "Mrs. Tanner was alive to every wise scheme for the education and elevation of her race."



Reading Check What role did black women play in the abolition movement?

The Baltimore Alliance

Among the stronger black abolitionist opponents of the ACS were William Watkins, Jacob Greener, and Hezekiah Grice, associates in Baltimore of Benjamin Lundy, a white Quaker abolitionist who published an antislavery newspaper named the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. By the mid-1820s, Watkins, a schoolteacher, had emerged, in a series of letters he published in *Freedom's Journal* and in Lundy's paper, as one of the more articulate opponents of colonization. Greener, a whitewasher and schoolteacher, helped Lundy publish the *Genius* and promoted its circulation. Grice, who later changed his mind and supported colonization, became the principal founder of the National Black Convention Movement, which during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s became a forum for black abolitionists.

In 1829 in Baltimore, Watkins, Greener, and Grice profoundly influenced a young white abolitionist and temperance advocate named William Lloyd Garrison, who later became the most influential of all the American antislavery leaders. Lundy had convinced Garrison to leave his native Massachusetts to come to Baltimore as the associate editor of the *Genius*. Garrison, a deeply religious product of the Second Great Awakening and a well-schooled journalist, had already decided before he came to Baltimore that *gradual* abolition was neither practical nor moral. Gradualism was impractical, he said, because it continually put off the date of general emancipation. It was immoral because it encouraged slaveholders to go on sinfully and criminally oppressing African Americans.

Garrison, however, tolerated the ACS until he came under the influence of Watkins, Greener, and Grice. They set Garrison on a course that transformed the abolitionist movement in the United States during the early 1830s. They also initiated a bond between African

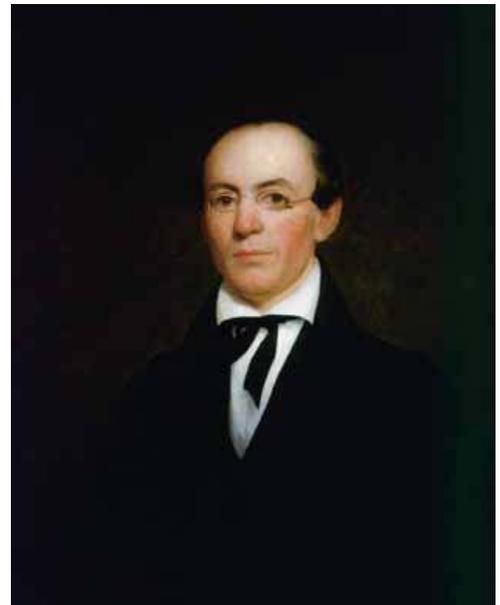
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8-8 A Black Feminist Speaks Out in 1851

Having addressed the first National Women's Rights Convention in 1850 at Worcester, Massachusetts, Sojourner Truth was met with hisses by the women at the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention the following year. The women were afraid of getting involved with the abolitionist movement and confusing their own women's issues. However, after Sojourner's speech, she was met with applause and accolades from the audience.

► Reading Check

The first formal abolitionist groups of black women operated within norms of elite respectability. They were active in education, making speeches, and furthering the abolitionist cause. Otherwise black women were active as practical abolitionists, working in a variety of informal ways—harboring and helping escaped slaves, saving to purchase freedom for themselves and others and furthering the cause of emancipation and equal rights.



William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) sat in 1833 for this oil portrait by renowned artist Nathaniel Jocelyn.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS . . .

A Black Woman Speaks Out on the Right to Education

Historians generally believe the antebellum women's rights movement emerged from the antislavery movement during the late 1830s. But as the following letter, published in *Freedom's Journal* on August 10, 1827, indicates, some black women advocated equal rights for women much earlier:

Messrs. Editors,

Will you allow a female to offer a few remarks upon a subject that you must allow to be all-important? I don't know that in any of your papers, you have said sufficient upon the education of females. I hope you are not to be classed with those, who think that our mathematical knowledge should be limited to "fathoming the dish-kettle," and that we have acquired enough of history, if we know that our grandfather's father lived and died. . . . The diffusion of knowledge has destroyed those degraded opinions, and men of the present age, allow, that we have minds that are capable and deserving of culture. There are difficulties . . . in the way of our advancement; but that should only stir us to greater efforts. We possess not the advantages with those of our sex, whose skins are not coloured like our own, but we can improve what little we have, and make our one talent produce two-fold. . . . Ignorant ourselves, how can we be expected to form the minds of our youth, and conduct them in the paths of knowledge? I would address myself to all mothers. . . . It is their bounden duty to store their daughters' minds with useful learning. They should be made to devote their leisure time to reading books, whence they would derive valuable information, which could never be taken from them. . . .

MATILDA

What Do You Think?

- ▶ How does MATILDA use sarcasm to make her point?
- ▶ What special difficulties did black women like MATILDA face in asserting their rights?

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 7 vols. (1951; reprint, New York: Citadel, 1990), 1: 89.

▶ Document

8-6 *Angelina E. Grimké, Appeal To The Christian Women of the South, 1836*

▶ Recommended Reading

Benjamin Quarles. *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969. A classic study that emphasizes cooperation between black and white abolitionists.

▶ What Do You Think?

- MATILDA uses sarcasm to make her point by asking whether female knowledge should be limited to that of dish kettles and knowing when their grandfather's died.
- Women like MATILDA had three strikes against them in asserting their rights: they were black, female, and largely uneducated.

The Radical Turn in the Abolition Movement

JULY 1829	William Lloyd Garrison joins Benjamin Lundy in Baltimore as associate editor of the <i>Genius of Universal Emancipation</i> .
SEPTEMBER 1829	David Walker's <i>Appeal</i> is published in Boston and then circulated in the South.
NOVEMBER 1829	William Watkins's anticolonization letters first appear in the <i>Genius</i> .
JUNE 1830	Garrison is sentenced to jail in Baltimore for libeling a slave trader.
AUGUST 1830	Walker dies of tuberculosis in Boston.
JANUARY 1831	Garrison begins publication of <i>The Liberator</i> in Boston.
AUGUST 1831	Nat Turner's revolt occurs.

Americans and Garrison that—although strained at times—shaped the rest of his antislavery career. That bond intensified in 1830 when Garrison was imprisoned in Baltimore jail for forty-nine days on charges he had libeled a slave trader. While in jail, Garrison met imprisoned fugitive slaves and denounced—to their faces—masters who came to retrieve them.

In 1831 when he began publishing his own abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, in Boston, Garrison led the antislavery movement in a new, more radical direction. Although Garrison had called for the *immediate*, rather than the *gradual*, abolition of slavery before he arrived in Baltimore, he was not the first to make that demand or to oppose compensating masters who liberated their slaves. What made Garrison's brand of abolitionism revolutionary was the insight he gained from his association with African Americans in Baltimore: that immediate emancipation must be combined with a commitment to racial justice in the United States. Watkins and Greener were especially responsible for convincing Garrison that African Americans must have equal rights in America and not be sent to Africa after their emancipation. Immediate emancipation without compensation to slaveholders and without **expatriation** of African Americans became the core of Garrison's program for the rest of his long antislavery career.

David Walker's Appeal

Two other black abolitionists shaped Garrison's brand of abolitionism. They were David Walker and Nat Turner. This chapter begins with a quote from David Walker's *Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which Walker published in 1829. As historian Clement Eaton commented in 1936, this *Appeal* was "a dangerous pamphlet in the Old

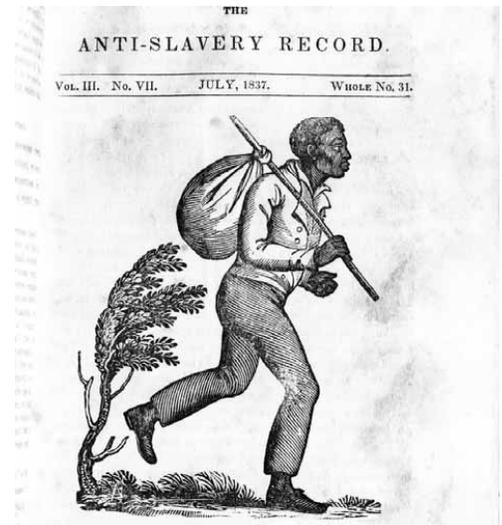
► Document

8-4 Abolitionist Demands Immediate End to Slavery, 1831

This document is the prospectus which appeared in the first issue of the *Liberator*.

► Recommended Reading

Peter P. Hinks. *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. The most recent biography of Walker, which places him within the black abolitionist movement and attempts to clarify what little we know about his life.



Well before this illustration of a man escaping from slavery appeared on the cover of *The Anti-Slavery Record* in 1837, fugitive slaves helped shape the development of the sectional controversy over slavery.

8-3 An African American Advocates Radical Action in 1829

This account, from Walker's pamphlet *An Appeal to Blacks* illustrates a small rebellion that Walker proposed for the entire South. Fear by slaveholders in the South brought the banning of the pamphlet, and even the closing of black churches for fear the slaves would hear Walker's ideas and take them to heart.

South." In aggressive language, Walker furiously attacked slavery and white racism. He suggested that slaves use violence to secure their liberty. "I do declare," he wrote, "that one good black can put to death six white men." This especially frightened white southerners because Walker's *Appeal* circulated among slaves in southern ports.

The *Appeal* shaped the struggle over slavery in three ways. First, although Garrison was committed to peaceful means, Walker's aggressive writing style influenced the tone of Garrison and other advocates of immediate abolition. Second, Walker's desperate effort

PROFILE ♦ David Walker

David Walker was born free in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1796 or 1797. We know nothing of his early life except that he learned to read and write. As a young man, he traveled widely. According to his *Appeal*, he spent time in Charleston, South Carolina, where he attended a religious camp meeting in 1821. This has led historians to conjecture that Walker knew something about Denmark Vesey's conspiracy or if he was still in Charleston in 1822 that he may even have participated in it.

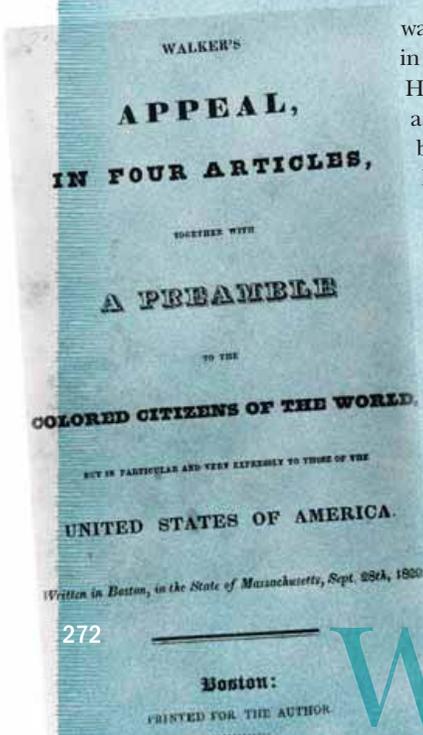
By 1825 Walker was in Boston dealing in secondhand clothes. He had his own shop, and lived in the city's black neighborhood. He was married and had a daughter and a son. At a time when many occupations were closed to African Americans, Walker was doing relatively well. He associated with well-established local black people, including Thomas Paul, an abolitionist minister, and

William C. Nell, a foe of Boston's segregated public schools. During the late 1820s, Walker served as a circulation agent in Boston for John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish's *Freedom's Journal*.

Walker also wrote for the *Journal*. He was as conscious of the legal disabilities African Americans faced in Boston as he was of the oppressiveness of slavery. In December 1828 he addressed the Massachusetts General Colored Association on the topic of black cooperation with white abolitionists to improve the conditions of free black people and to liberate the slaves.

Not long after this, Walker became more radical. He wrote his *Appeal* and in September 1829 implemented a clandestine method to circulate it among slaves. He had black and white sailors, to whom he sold used clothes in Boston, take copies of the pamphlet to southern ports and distribute them to African Americans.

When white southerners discovered that slaves had copies of the pamphlet, southern officials demanded that the mayor of Boston stop Walker from publishing. When the mayor refused, rumors circulated that a group of white southerners had offered a reward for Walker, dead or alive. It was not surprising, therefore, that when Walker's daughter and then Walker himself died during the summer of 1830, many assumed they had been poisoned. The most recent biography of Walker, however, indicates that they both died of tuberculosis.



to instill hope and pride in an oppressed people inspired an increasingly militant black abolitionism. Third, Walker's pamphlet and its circulation in the South made white southerners fearful of encirclement from without and subversion from within. This fear encouraged southern leaders to make demands on the North that helped bring on the Civil War.



Reading Check What was David Walker's *Appeal* and why was it important?

► Reading Check

David Walker's *Appeal* was a pamphlet that aggressively attacked slavery and white racism. The *Appeal* influenced the tone of future abolitionists. It inspired an increasingly militant black abolitionism. And, it raised intense anxieties among white southerners.

Nat Turner

In this last respect, Nat Turner's contribution was even more important than Walker's. Slave conspiracies had not ended with Denmark Vesey's execution in 1822. But in 1831 Turner, a privileged slave from eastern Virginia, became the first African American actually to initiate a large-scale slave uprising since Charles Deslondes had done so in Louisiana in 1811. As a result Turner inspired far greater fear among white southerners than Walker had.

During the late 1820s and early 1830s, unrest among slaves in Virginia had increased. Walker's *Appeal*, which was circulating among some southern free black people by late 1829, may have contributed to this increase. Meanwhile divisions among white Virginians encouraged slaves to seek advantages for themselves. In anticipation of a state constitutional convention in 1829, white people in western Virginia, where there were few slaveholders, called for emancipation. Poorer white men demanded an end to the property qualifications that denied them the vote. As the convention approached, a "spirit of dissatisfaction and insubordination" became manifest among slaves. Some armed themselves and escaped northward. As proslavery white Virginians grew fearful, they demanded further restrictions on the ability of local free black people and northern abolitionists to influence slaves.

Yet no evidence indicates that Nat Turner or any of his associates had read Walker's *Appeal*, had contact with northern abolitionists, or were aware of divisions among white Virginians. Although Turner knew about the successful slave revolt in Haiti, he was more of a religious visionary than a political revolutionary. Born in 1800 he learned to read as a child, and as a young man, he spent much of his time studying and memorizing the Bible. He became a lay preacher and a leader among local slaves. By the late 1820s, he had begun to have visions that convinced him God intended him to lead his people to freedom through violence.



Despite their knowledge of slave resistance and revolt, white abolitionists in particular tended to portray slaves as peacefully begging for deliverance.



A nineteenth-century engraving shows Nat Turner talking with his men.

► Reading Check

Turner's revolt of 1831 was the first large-scale slave uprising since 1811. The bloodshed that accompanied the revolt inspired general revulsion. White southerners accused abolitionists of inspiring Turner. Abolitionists asserted their commitment to nonviolence, but nonetheless respected Turner. This ambivalence about violence against slavery characterized the abolitionist movement of the next thirty years.

► Document

8-5 *The Confessions of Nat Turner, 1831*
As details of Nat Turner's Rebellion in August 1831 became known, southern white people shudder in fear at the prospects of slave uprisings. David Walker's *Appeal*, and growing northern threat against the South's peculiar institution only added to southern apprehension. Turner's Rebellion led to increased slave patrols. Across the South, state legislatures met in special sessions to deal with a possible emergency. Even the Virginia legislature would soon consider abolishing slavery. Many states fortified their Slave Codes. In this excerpt, Turner explains the motivating factors that led the uprising.

After considerable planning, Turner began his uprising on the evening of August 21, 1831. His band, which numbered between sixty and seventy, killed fifty-seven white men, women, and children—the largest number of white Americans ever killed by slave rebels—before militia put down the revolt the following morning. In November, Turner and seventeen others were found guilty of insurrection and treason and were hanged. Meanwhile panicked white people in nearby parts of Virginia and North Carolina killed more than one hundred African Americans whom they—almost always wrongly—suspected of being in league with the rebels.

Turner, like Walker and Garrison, shaped a new era in American abolitionism. The bloodshed in Virginia inspired general revulsion. White southerners—and some northerners—accused Garrison and other abolitionists of inspiring the revolt. In response, northern abolitionists of both races asserted their commitment to a peaceful struggle against slavery. Yet both black and white abolitionists respected Turner. Black abolitionists accorded him the same heroic stature they gave Toussaint Louverture and Gabriel. Garrison and other white abolitionists compared Turner to George Washington and other leaders of national liberation movements. This tension between lip service to peaceful means and admiration for violence against slavery characterized the antislavery movement for the next thirty years.



Reading Check What was the significance of Nat Turner's revolt?