

Abolitionists

Theodore Weld, Robert Purvis, and John Brown



WHY THEY MADE HISTORY Abolitionists were people who opposed slavery, and fought to end slavery in the United States.



As you read the biography below, think about the strength it took for the abolitionists to fight against slavery.

In the United States several people owned slaves. The abolitionist movement gathered strength in the 1800s in the hopes of ending slavery. Men and women who fought for slaves' rights and to abolish slavery were known as abolitionists.

People began speaking out against slavery in the Americas as early as the 1680s. The **Quakers** voiced their opinions against slavery based on moral grounds. Later, several leaders of the American Revolution also expressed their views against slavery. These leaders included Thomas Jefferson, who was a slave owner himself, and Patrick Henry.

By 1816 several abolitionists joined together to form the American Colonization Society. This group led antislavery protests and tried to send freed slaves to Africa. Another group, the American Anti-Slavery Society, was formed in 1833. Its goal was to convince Americans that slavery was morally wrong. In 1835 the group distributed massive amounts of antislavery **propaganda**, including abolitionist literature, pamphlets, and petitions.

American abolitionists worked hard to end slavery but faced strong opposition in the South by slaveholders and people in the North who supported slavery. Many women and freed slaves joined the abolitionist movement.



© J. Paul Getty Museum

VOCABULARY

Quakers a Protestant religious sect, also known as the Society of Friends

propaganda ideas, facts, or allegations spread to further one's cause or damage an opposing cause

skirmish fight or battle

Underground Railroad a secret network that helped fugitive slaves escape into free states or Canada

Theodore Weld (1803–1895) was a well-known reformer and abolitionist. Weld is considered one of the most influential American abolitionists. He campaigned and gave many speeches in the South, as well as in New York and Ohio, to motivate people to act out against slavery. His speeches were said to unite abolitionists and convert many others who went on to be important voices of the antislavery movement. In 1839 Weld and his wife published a book called *American Slavery As It Is*. The book is said to be the inspiration behind Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the famous antislavery novel published in 1852.

Another voice in the abolitionist movement was **Robert Purvis** (1810–1898). Purvis was born to a wealthy Englishman and a free-born daughter of a slave. He experienced discrimination based on his color, which fueled him to speak out against slavery and racial inequality. His father died when Purvis was young, leaving him an inheritance of \$120,000. Purvis devoted the rest of his life to antislavery and reformist causes. Purvis earned a reputation as one of the most important voices of the antislavery movement.

Abolitionists of this time faced great opposition. Congress attempted to silence the abolitionists by instating a gag rule, which ruled that any petitions about slavery would not be considered. In the South, abolitionists witnessed the burning of their pamphlets and literature. Some people who spoke or wrote against slavery were even murdered.

In the 1850s fugitive slave laws fueled antagonism between slavery's supporters and abolitionists. In 1855 and 1856 more than 200 people were killed in **skirmishes** over whether the Kansas territory should enter the Union as a free or slave state. Radical abolitionist **John Brown** (1800–1859), who took part in several battles in Kansas, led a group of freed slaves and others in an attack on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. Brown had

hoped to seize weapons and arm slaves to revolt against slaveholders, but he was captured, tried, and hanged.

The abolitionist movement had become more and more disorganized in the 1840s. Different groups all had different ideas about how to reach their goals, and some even had different goals altogether. One cause of this change was the sudden interest in politics by some of the leaders of the abolitionist movement. These leaders remained active against slavery and used their position for influence. Often their homes became stops on the **Underground Railroad** which aided fugitive slaves in their escape into free states or Canada.

The Civil War began in 1861 and abolitionists insisted on the immediate freeing of slaves. Radical Republicans in Congress encouraged President Abraham Lincoln to take a stand against slavery. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared slaves free in most of the South. Two years later, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery completely in the United States.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was the major goal of the abolitionists?

2. **Contrast** In what ways were abolitionists and suffragettes similar?

ACTIVITY

Write a letter to President Lincoln celebrating the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. In your letter, include one fact that you learned from your reading.