

Lesson 12

The Abolitionist Movements

Objectives

- To understand the impact of the U.S. government's policies on the evolution of the abolitionist movements in the 1840s and 1850s
- To evaluate abolitionists' different approaches

AP* Correlations

Skill Type I

Skill 1: Historical Causation

Skill Type III

Skill 7: Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

Thematic Learning Objective: Politics and Power

POL-3: Explain how activist groups and reform movements, such as antebellum reformers, civil rights activists, and social conservatives, have caused changes to state institutions and U.S. society

Notes to the Teacher

The 1840s and the 1850s were key decades in terms of the federal government's involvement in the continuation of slavery. Laws of this period, including the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Fugitive Slave Act, created policies that both continued slavery in southern states and expanded it to some newly developed western states. In addition, the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case had major consequences.

At the same time, abolitionists were developing broad-based movements that aspired to end slavery and promote equality. Men and women across the country were engaged in a variety of strategies, including slave-initiated rebellions and propaganda. The use of such varied approaches created conflict among groups of abolitionists; given this tension, it may be better to consider these efforts as several movements rather than as a unified movement.

In this lesson, students examine the role of the federal government and investigate strategies used by different abolitionists. To conclude, students debate the merits and drawbacks of the four most important abolitionist approaches.

Procedure

1. Ask students to brainstorm all possible ways to end slavery, both individually and collectively. Record students' responses for discussion, and work with students to prioritize possibilities in terms of short-term strategies and long-term ones.

2. Divide the class into partner groups. Distribute **Handout 20**. Have students refer to their textbooks as needed to complete the handout.

Suggested Responses

1. *Missouri Compromise of 1820*—This development admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state; it kept the balance between slave and free states in the Senate; proslavery politicians wanted Missouri to have slaves and kept tensions among politicians in the 1840s and 1850s.
2. *Annexation of Texas of 1845*—This development admitted Texas as a slave state; it tipped the balance toward slave states; proslavery forces were well mobilized.
3. *Popular Sovereignty as used by proslavery politicians of the 1840s and 1850s*—Citizens could vote in new territories whether to have slavery; citizens in these areas tended to favor slavery, while noncitizens did not; the rhetoric of democracy limited opposition to slavery.
4. *The failure of the Wilmot Proviso of 1846*—Southern state leaders threatened to secede if this proviso (which would have banned slavery from the lands to be acquired from Mexico) passed; economic and political power of plantation owners limited a real discussion of this idea in Congress.
5. *Compromise of 1850*—This reflected an acceptance of Henry Clay's ideas: California was entering as a free state; the slave trade (not slavery) was being abolished in the District of Columbia; the citizens of the territories of New Mexico and Utah were deciding the future of slavery by popular sovereignty; a Fugitive Slave Act was being passed; slavery was continuing and potentially spreading; there was a threat to secede if specific interests were not met.
6. *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*—It became a federal crime to help runaway slaves, and escaped slaves could be arrested in free states; the federal government played a larger role in the continuation of slavery; politicians were threatened to keep certain interests.
7. *Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854*—This allowed Kansas and Nebraska to enter as states under popular sovereignty, thus ending the Missouri Compromise; slavery was now able to expand westward.
8. *Lecompton Constitution of 1857*—Kansas voters were able to decide whether more slaves could enter (not to decide on slavery itself); slaveholders' interests were protected; antislavery activists were excluded from positions of authority.

9. *Dred Scott case and Supreme Court decision of 1857*—Scott sued for freedom after the death of his owner on grounds that he had lived in a free state; the majority of the Supreme Court ruled against him, arguing that Scott was not a citizen and was property; the decision was infuriating to abolitionists.

3. Distribute **Handout 21**, and allow students time to complete it.

Suggested Responses

Document 1—Former slaves need to have their own newspaper.

Document 2—Whites should lead abolitionist movement.

Document 3—Work for freedom; spread propaganda by singing a song that can be easily taught and followed.

Document 4—Abolitionists work for slaves in a number of ways: speaking, petitioning, and organizing.

Document 5—Work to improve slaves' conditions in the United States; sending them to Liberia does not solve the problems here.

Document 6—Create safe places for escaped slaves and their supporters through use of the Underground Railroad.

Document 7—Develop a positive relationship between Christians and abolitionists.

Document 8—Use the law to help free slaves.

Document 9—Abolitionist groups developed clever ways to help slaves reach freedom.

Document 10—Images of Dred Scott and his wife illustrate their calm determination to become free people.

Document 11—Future problems will develop, given the majority opinion in the Dred Scott case.

Document 12—Abolishing slavery does not have to involve hurting people.

4. Review the divergent abolitionist approaches:

- individual (Charles Sumner, Abraham Lincoln)
- collective (John Cross, John Parker)
- white-led (William Lloyd Garrison)
- black/slave-led (Frederick Douglass, Colored National Convention)
- peaceful (John Cross, John Parker, Frederick Douglass)
- violent (result of John Brown's actions)
- legal (Charles Sumner, Abraham Lincoln)
- movement-based (John Cross, John Parker, Anti-Slavery Society, Anti-Fugitive Slave Act)

Explain that some of these positions overlap; they can be understood as a continuum with violence on one end and legal solutions on the other.

5. Organize groups of two to three students. Assign each group one of the four key approaches: legal and white-led approach that tries to work within the system; nonviolent and broad-based coalition of all those opposed to slavery; black-led movement of former slaves; and violent approaches by slaves themselves, former slaves, or white sympathizers. Allow time for debaters to prepare their positions.
6. Instruct students to prepare questions based on a role as slaves.
7. Allow time for students to debate the approaches and to answer questions. Debrief in the form of a class discussion or an individual assessment.

Government Actions

Directions: Describe each of the following developments. Then explain how each led to the continuation of slavery. Finally, discuss why abolitionists, in their efforts to end slavery, were unable to mobilize enough support against each development to limit or end slavery.

1. Missouri Compromise of 1820
2. Annexation of Texas of 1845
3. Popular Sovereignty as used by proslavery politicians of the 1840s and 1850s
4. The failure of the Wilmot Proviso of 1846

5. Compromise of 1850

6. Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

7. Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854

8. Lecompton Constitution of 1857

9. Dred Scott case and Supreme Court decision of 1857

Abolitionists and Their Strategies, 1840s and 1850s

Directions: Examine all of the following documents. Then summarize the key points in each one.

Document 1

From “Our Paper and Its Prospects,” Frederick Douglass, *The North Star* (December 3, 1847)

It is neither a reflection on the fidelity, nor a disparagement of the ability of our friends and fellow-laborers, to assert what “common sense affirms and only folly denies,” that the man who has *suffered the wrong* is the man to *demand redress*,—that the man STRUCK is the man to CRY OUT—and that he who has *endured the cruel pangs of Slavery* is the man to *advocate Liberty*. It is evident we must be our own representatives and advocates, not exclusively, but peculiarly—not distant from, but in connection with our white friends.¹

Document 2

William Lloyd Garrison in an Excerpt from a Letter to His Wife (October 20, 1847)

Is it not strange that [Frederick] Douglass has not written a single line to me, or to any one, in this place, inquiring after my health, since he left me on a bed of illness? It will also greatly surprise our friends in Boston to hear, that, in regard to his project for establishing a paper here, to be called “The North Star,” he never opened to me his lips on the subject, nor asked my advice in any particular whatever. Such conduct grieves me to the heart. His conduct [...] paper has been impulsive, inconsiderate, and highly inconsistent with his decision in Boston. What will his English friends say of such a strange somerset? I am sorry that friend [Edmund] Quincy did not express himself more strongly against this project in the *Liberator*. It is a delicate matter, I know, but it must be met with firmness. I am sorry to add, that our friend Saml. Brooke is at the bottom of all this, and has influenced Douglass to take this extraordinary step, as he thinks the *Bugle* might as well be discontinued, or merged in Douglass’s paper! Strange want of forecast and judgment!—But, no more now.²

Document 3

“I Am an Abolitionist”

(To the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”)

I am an Abolitionist!
I glory in the name:
Though now by Slavery’s minions hiss’d
And covered o’er with shame,
It is a spell of light and power—
The watchword of the free:—
Who spurns it in the trial-hour,
A craven soul is he!

*The letter is torn.

¹Frederick Douglass, “Our Paper and Its Prospects,” *The North Star*, December 3, 1847.

²William Lloyd Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume III: No Union with Slaveholders, 1841–1849*, ed. Walter M. Merrill (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1973), 532–33.

I am an Abolitionist!
Then urge me not to pause:
For joyfully I do enlist
In FREEDOM'S sacred cause:
A nobler strife the world ne'er saw,
Th'enslaved to disenthral;
I am a soldier for the war,
Whatever may befall!

I am an Abolitionist!
Oppression's deadly foe;
In God's great strength will I resist,
And lay the monster low;
In God's great name do I demand,
To all be freedom given,
That peace and joy may fill the land,
And songs go up to heaven!

I am an Abolitionist!
No threats shall awe my soul,
No perils cause me to desist,
No bribes my acts control;
A freeman will I live and die,
In sunshine and in shade,
And raise my voice for liberty,
Of naught on earth afraid.³

Document 4

Broadside from the Anti-Slavery Society (1841)

Things for Abolitionists to Do.

1. *Speak for the slave*; plead his cause everywhere, and make every body feel that you are in earnest. Get up anti-slavery discussions in debating societies, lyceums, and wherever you can get an opening, abroad and at home, in social circles and in public conveyances, wherever you find mind to be influenced, *speak for the slave*. Get others to speak for him, enlist as many as you can to take his part. Words from a full heart *sink deep*.
2. *Write for the slave*. Do you take a religious or a political paper? Write a short article for it, a fact, an argument, an appeal, a slave law, testimony as to the condition of slaves, with the name of the witness, an appeal, copy from anti-slavery papers and tracts something short and pity, a brief statement of abolition sentiments, answers to objections, anti-slavery poetry—in short, *something*, if not more than five lines, *full of liberty*, and get them into your newspaper. If every abolitionist were to do what he might in this way, our principles would be spread before more minds in three months than they have reached from the beginning of our enterprise up to now.
3. *Petition for the slave*. Begin at once to circulate petitions for the immediate abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and in Florida, against the admission of Florida into the Union as a slave state, for the prohibition of the internal slave trade, for the recognition of Hayti as an

³"I Am an Abolitionist," in *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*, comp. William W. Brown (1848; repr., Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 26–27.

independent nation, for a repeal of the unconstitutional act of 1793, and for the abrogation of that unconstitutional standing rule of the U.S. House of Representatives, adopted at the last session, which lays upon the table, without debate, all petitions, &c., on the subject of slavery. Instead of relaxing effort on account of this rule, let petitions be poured into congress a hundred-fold more than ever. Let every abolitionist bestir himself also in circulating petitions to the legislature of the state in which he lives, praying to the repeal of all laws graduation rights by the *skin*.

4. *Work for the slave.* Distribute anti-slavery publications, circulate them in your neighborhood, take them with you on journeys, take them as you go to meetings, to the polls, to the stores, to mill, to school, and every where; establish an anti-slavery library; get subscribers for anti-slavery newspapers, and collect money for anti-slavery societies; gather facts illustrating the condition of slaves; search out all who have lived in slave states, get them to write out their testimony as to the food, clothing, lodging, shelter, labor, and punishments of slaves, their moral condition, the licentiousness of slave-holders, &c., &c., and forward them to some anti-slavery paper for publication; also gather and forward all the facts in your power exhibiting the *pro-slavery* of the free states; for *remember* that just in proportion as the pro-slavery of ministers, churches, lawyers, literary institutions, merchants, mechanics, and all classes in the free states, is exposed, light breaks on the path of freedom.
5. *Work for the free people of color;* see that your schools are open to their children, and that they enjoy in every respect all the rights to which as human beings they are entitled. Get merchants to take them as clerks, mechanics, apprentices, physicians and lawyers as students: if the place of worship which you attend has a negro seat, *go and sit in it*, and testify against the impiety which thus prostitutes the temples and worship of Him who has said, "If ye have respect of persons ye commit sin."⁴

Document 5

Resolutions from the National Convention of Colored Citizens, Buffalo, New York (1843)

7. *Resolved*, That this Convention recommend and encourage agricultural pursuits among our people generally, as the surest and speediest road to wealth, influence and respectability.
8. *Resolved*, That this Convention recommend to our people the importance of aspiring to a knowledge of all the Mechanic arts of the age.
9. *Resolved*, That among the various and important measures for the improvement of our people, this Convention view the principles of Temperance as of vital import, and we urge the hearty adoption of them by our whole people. . . .
11. *Resolved*, That it *may* be possible that the scheme of American Colonization was originally established upon pure motives; but if it were, its subsequent operations show that it has been fostered and sustained by the *murderous spirit of slavery* and prejudice.
12. *Resolved*, That such being the character of the institution, it has neither the confidence or respect of the free people of color of the United States.
13. *Resolved*, That the manner in which the American Colonization Society secures its victims—to wit, by begging slaveholders to emancipate their slaves, only on condition that they will go to Liberia, shows in what low estimation it should be held by common sense, and philanthropy of the nation.⁵

⁴"Things for Abolitionists to Do" in *New England Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1841*.

⁵*Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830–1864*, ed. Howard Holman Bell (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969).

Document 6

“Rev. John Cross of Illinois” (1844)

This gentleman was arrested, indicted and imprisoned in Knox county jail, charged with having assisted a runaway slave—having, in fact, given shelter and food to a poor old negro woman. The jailor put him into the “inner prison”—the judge appeared anxious to do justice to so deserving a criminal—the attorney-general moved a continuance of the case till the next term, as the material witness was absent, and the Court admitted the motion. But Mr. Cross, wishing to come to trial, agreed to admit all this witness would testify. This was a stumper. The prosecutors made as graceful a retreat as the dignity of their position would admit, and Mr. Cross was discharged without the form of a trial. Mr. Cross, as soon as out of jail, published a flaring handbill, headed with a large engraving, representing an under-ground rail-road, with the train just plunging under the earth, loaded with passengers, while in the corner is seen a heavy wagon, with kidnappers stowed in bulk, and bound “for Texas.”

Appended to this is the following notice: LIBERTY LINE

New Arrangement—Night and Day

The improved and splendid locomotives, Clarkson and Lundy, with their trains fitted up in the best style of accommodation for passengers will run their regular trips during the present season, between the borders of the Patriarchal Dominion and Libertyville, Upper Canada. Gentlemen or ladies who may wish to improve their health or circumstances by a northern tour, are respectfully invited to give us their patronage.

SEATS FREE, irrespective of color. Necessary clothing furnished gratuitously to such as have “fallen among thieves.” “Hide the outcasts—let the oppressed go free.”—*Bible* For seats, apply to any of the trap doors, or to the conductor of the train.

J. CROSS, Proprietor⁶

Document 7

John Parker, Excerpted from His Autobiography (1840s)

Amidst this commercial activity [in Ripley, Ohio] lived and moved the little group of old-time abolitionists. They were by name Dr. Alexander Campbell, Rev. John Rankin, Theodore, Tom, and Eli Collins, Tom McCague, Dr. Beasley, [and] Rev. James Gilliland. The undoubted leader was Rev. John Rankin.

While the businessmen were not abolitionists, they were antislavery. But the town itself was proslavery as well as the country around it. In fact, the country was so antagonistic to abolitionism at this time, we could only take the fugitives out of town and through the country along definite and limited routes.

There was also very active a certain group of men who made a living by capturing the runaway slaves and returning them to their masters. These men were on watch day and night along the riverbank the year round. While they captured quite a few it was remarkable how many slaves we got through the line successfully. The feeling grew so tense Rev. John Rankin and his followers left the Presbyterian church forming a new congregation who were given over to the antislavery movement.⁷

⁶“Rev. John Cross of Illinois,” *The Liberator*, August 23, 1844.

⁷John O. Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 97–104.

Document 8

Charles Sumner, Letter to Judge Byron Paine (August 8, 1854)

My Dear Sir: I was about to suggest to you to have the opinions of the court and the arguments of counsel in the Booth case collected and published in a pamphlet when I observed that there was a pamphlet containing the most valuable portions of them. Let me ask you to do me the favor of sending me a copy of the pamphlet to my address in Boston. I congratulate you, my dear sir, upon your magnificent effort which does honor not only to your state but to your country. The argument will live in the history of this controversy. God grant that Wisconsin may not fail to protect her own right and the rights of her citizens in the emergency now before her. To her belongs the lead which Massachusetts should have taken. Believe me, my dear sir.

With high esteem,
Faithfully yours,
Charles Sumner.⁸

Document 9

Henry "Box" Brown

Born into slavery in 1815 in Virginia, Henry "Box" Brown was determined to escape to freedom. He had himself shipped to Pennsylvania in a wooden box, disguised as dry goods. The box was delivered to James Miller McKim, a member of the Underground Railroad. Brown toured New England, lecturing and reenacting his escape to earn income and gain support for the antislavery movement. In 1851, escaping from the Fugitive Slave Law, Brown left America and traveled to England where he continued to lecture, reenact his escape, and write.

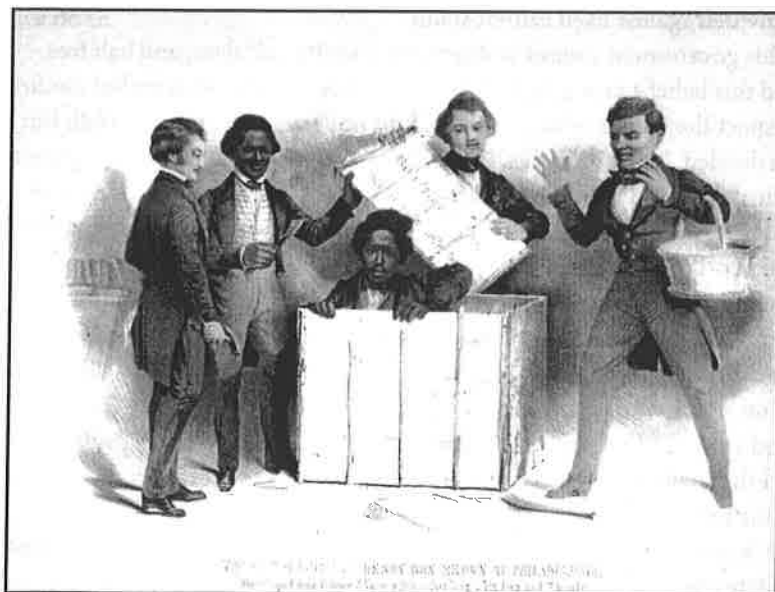


Fig. 12.1.

⁸Letter from Charles Sumner, *Letters on the Glover Incident*, <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wlhbba/articleView.asp?id=2666>> (16 February 2010).

Fig. 12.1. "The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia," 1850. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-4659

Document 10

Dred Scott and His Wife (June 27, 1857)

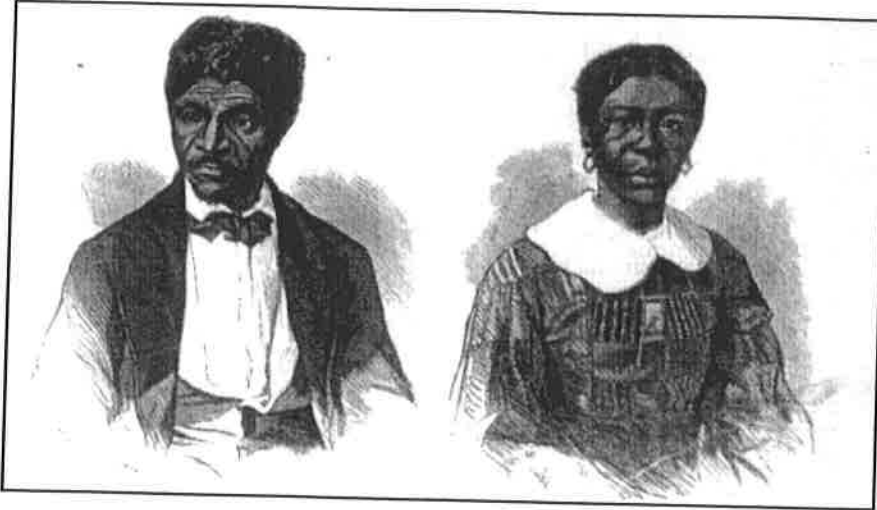


Fig. 12.2.

Document 11

Abraham Lincoln, Excerpted Notes Prior to His "House Divided" Speech, 1858

Why, Kansas is neither the whole, nor the tithe of the real question.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."

I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave, and half free.

I expressed this belief a year ago; and subsequent developments have but confirmed me.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and put it in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old, as well as new. Do you doubt it? Study the Dred Scott decision, and then see, how little, even now, remains to be done.

That decision may be reduced to three points. The first is, that a negro cannot be a citizen. That point is made in order to deprive the negro in every possible event, of the benefit of that provision of the U.S. Constitution which declares that: "The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States."

The second point is, that the U.S. Constitution protects slavery, as property, in all the U.S. territories, and that neither congress, nor the people of the territories, nor any other power, can prohibit it, at any time prior to the formation of State constitutions.

This point is made, in order that the territories may safely be filled up with slaves, before the formation of State constitutions, and thereby to embarrass the free state [sentiment and enhance the chances of slave constitutions being adopted.]

(The third point decided is that the voluntary bringing of Dred Scott into Illinois by his master, and holding him here a long time as a slave, did not operate his emancipation—did not make him free.)⁹

Fig. 12.2. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 27, 1857. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-79305.
⁹"Abraham Lincoln's House Divided Speech," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, <<http://gilderlehrman.org>> (15 September 2010).

Document 12

John Brown, Address to the Virginia Court at Charlestown, Virginia, when He Was about to Receive the Death Sentence (November 2, 1859)

I have, may it please the court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted,—the design on my part to free slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to do the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection. . . .

Let me say one word further.

I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. I feel no consciousness of my guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of any kind.

Let me say also, a word in regard to the statements made by some to those connected with me. I hear it has been said by some of them that I have induced them to join me. But the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me; and that was for the purpose I have stated.

Now I have done.